

## THE ETIQUETTE OF EATING

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### Abstract

This article explores and defends the idea that the etiquette conventions governing dinner parties, whether formal or informal, have moral significance. Their significance derives from the way that they foster and facilitate shared moral aims. I draw on literary and philosophical sources to make this claim, beginning with Isak Dineson's short story, *Babette's Feast*. I employ the concept of ritual from Confucius and Xunzi, as well as Immanuel Kant's detailed discussion of dinner parties in the *Anthropology*. Kant's account in particular helps illuminate how properly conducted dinners can enhance our understanding and promote moral community among the people who attend. I conclude that dinner parties play an important role in the moral life, and that the etiquette conventions governing them derive their binding force from their contribution to that role.

### Accepted Manuscript

"It was quite a nice dinner, Babette."

--Martine in *Babette's Feast*<sup>1</sup>

Isak Dineson's short story, *Babette's Feast*, culminates in an extraordinary dinner party. The party is extraordinary both because of what it served and also because it brings about powerful moral transformation in the participants. Moreover, those two features that make the dinner party extraordinary are related to each other; the shared aesthetic experience transforms the participants by expanding their moral sensibilities and enabling them to relate to each other in a wholly new way. Most meals do not, of course, produce dramatic moral conversions. And yet, even a very humble or informal dinner gathering can contribute in important ways to our shared moral life. Conducted properly, dinner parties have the power to improve the participants as individuals and as members of a moral community.

In this essay, I will explore what it means for a dinner party to be conducted properly in the way described. Any dinner party, regardless of the level of formality, is governed by an array of etiquette conventions. Those conventions, I will argue, create a structure in which the participants can collectively participate in these potentially morally transformative activities. The structure consists of rules, practices, and norms for behavior that bind the participants to behave in certain ways. Etiquette conventions thus set the terms on which the guests will interact with each other over the course of the meal and surrounding experiences. Although dinner parties vary widely in their specifics, I will focus on two defining features of any dinner party—the communal experience of eating and the conversation among the guests. The experience of eating good food is both physically satisfying and aesthetically pleasing. This is valuable in itself, but the shared nature of the experience at a dinner party facilitates engagements and interactions that bring new moral dimensions to the gathering. In order to see these moral dimensions more clearly, let us take a closer look at *Babette's Feast*.

### A transformative feast

The story is set in a remote Norwegian village in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> The protagonists are two sisters who are dedicated to living out the stern, religiously-motivated asceticism that they inherited from their minister father. Martine and Philippa agree to take in a French refugee whose life in Paris has been shattered by violent political conflict. The refugee, named Babette, spends a dozen years quietly working as a cook for the sisters. Unexpectedly, she wins a large sum of money in a lottery and she asks the sisters for permission to prepare a special dinner for them.

What the sisters do not know is that Babette had been the chef at one of the finest restaurants in Paris, and her dinner will prove to be a culinary masterpiece. The self-denying Martine and Philippa are horrified by the extravagant preparations and fear for the effects of its sinfulness on their souls. They are, however, too kindhearted to interfere with Babette's plans, and their sympathetic guests agree among themselves that they will refrain from saying anything about the food and drink at the meal. But one guest, a visitor to the village named General Loewenhielm, realizes what he is eating and cannot contain his astonishment. Although the other guests deliberately refuse to engage with his wonder over the food, they are nevertheless drawn into conversation and eventually into a shared transformative experience:

Of what happened later in the evening nothing definite can here be stated. None of the guests later on had any clear remembrance of it. They only knew that the rooms had been filled with a heavenly light, as if a number of small halos had blended into one glorious radiance. Taciturn old people received the gift of tongues; ears that for years had been almost deaf were opened to it. Time itself had merged into eternity. Long after midnight the windows of the house shone like gold, and golden song flowed out into the winter air.<sup>3</sup>

The transformation is portrayed in the story as primarily religious, but it is evident that their religious transformation has moral dimensions as well. Long-simmering quarrels are forgotten, lost loves are acknowledged, and human sympathies are restored and deepened. Babette's artistic genius (with the help of some exceptional wine) generates space in which moral renewal and expansion can take place. Although the story of *Babette's Feast* focuses on the aesthetic dimensions of the food, the transformative effects of the meal travel primarily through the conversations that occur over the course of the feast.

## Philosophers around the table

Dinner parties have a long philosophical history, with Plato's *Symposium* as perhaps the most notable example. Although it's unlikely that Plato himself would have found much of moral significance in the material aspects of dinner gatherings, the philosophical discourse of the *Symposium* is obviously facilitated by its setting around a table, and of course, by the wine consumed at that table. Confucius and his follower Xunzi paid far greater attention to the rituals surrounding meals themselves, granting those rituals foundational importance in the cultivation of virtue. Within the western tradition, one of the more robust defenders of well-conducted dinner parties was Immanuel Kant. This may come as a surprise to readers who picture Kant locked up in an ivory tower writing obscure treatises, but Kant's *Anthropology* contains a quite specific and subtle commentary on the proper way to hold a dinner party. As we will see, both the Confucians and Kant believed that shared meals are a crucial setting for the moral cultivation of individuals and their communities.

The idea that philosophers have been (and I will argue, should still be) concerned with dinner parties is less startling when we consider that in just about every culture, shared meals have tremendous social, political, and often religious significance. State dinners are among the most important diplomatic occasions for any government that hosts them. Feast days, both secular and religious, populate every calendar. Thanksgiving dinner in the United States is widely (although not always uncontroversially) celebrated. Muslims mark the end of Ramadan by feasting during Eid al-Fitr, while Passover Seders and Sukkot gatherings are central celebrations in Judaism. Christian denominations often center their worship rituals around a Eucharistic liturgy modeled after the Last Supper. Less formally, shared meals are very much the

axis around which human social life revolves. After all, everyone has to eat, and when we can, we often deliberately choose to eat with others.<sup>4</sup>

We might wonder why this clearly necessary activity of consuming sufficient calories for survival carries so much more weight than other, equally necessary activities. We all breathe, but we do not think of breathing alongside others as a shared pursuit in any sense. Of course there are aesthetic dimensions to eating that are not present in other cases, and moreover, the work of bringing delicious food to the table certainly requires significant human effort. But there is more to our practices of sharing meals than this. Through eating with other people, we create, sustain, reinforce, and occasionally demolish social bonds and connections. As Aristotle put it in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, potential friends “cannot know each other before they have shared their salt.”<sup>5</sup> Those who would become friends must live together, and a crucial part of living together is sharing meals.

#### The moral point of etiquette rules

The claim that sharing meals is an important human activity is not likely to spur controversy or debate. But my further claim, that etiquette conventions form the essential structure of that activity, may seem more dubious. Why should the form or rituals of those shared meals be important? If we want to have dinner with our friends, does it really make any difference whether we’re sitting on the couch with a box of delivery pizza or dining around an inlaid mahogany table, attended by footmen in livery? Even if we grant that shared meals have moral value, it hardly follows that the etiquette practices around those meals are contributing to that value. Indeed, one of the more compelling arguments in favor of pizza on the couch is precisely that it is relaxed and intimate, requiring little skill or etiquette know-how. There is a

reason why formal dining rooms and footmen are now relegated to Jane Austen novels and episodes of *Downton Abbey*. It is not simply that few people have the means to field a staff of trained footmen (not to mention the supporting cooks, scullery maids, and other workers.) It is also that the elaborate etiquette rituals of formal dining no longer seem to have any kind of point or purpose in the modern world.

I do not plan to argue in favor of formal dinners per se, but I do plan to argue that the etiquette rules and rituals that are so evident in those settings are important. Their importance does not arise from the mere fact that they are complicated and formal. Informal meals are governed by etiquette rules as well, even when it's pizza on the couch (e.g., be careful with long cheese strands, try not to get pizza stains on the pillows, don't take the last piece without checking with the others). The etiquette rules governing a meal, whether a fancy dinner or a casual pizza party, are important because they give an occasion its shape. By that I mean that when the participants in the party abide by the relevant etiquette norms, they thereby constitute the party as a particular kind of occasion with specific aims and goods to be achieved. The etiquette conventions attached to dinner parties enable us to do morally valuable things together.

Elsewhere I have argued for the general moral significance of etiquette conventions.<sup>6</sup> Abiding by the etiquette conventions operating in one's environment is a way of communicating important moral attitudes, such as respect and consideration, to others in one's surroundings. These conventions enable us to accomplish morally important tasks by providing us with tools we can employ to carry them out. It would be a mistake to relegate etiquette to the sidelines as unimportant or irrelevant to morality because etiquette just *is* part of morality.

This is not, of course, how people standardly think of etiquette. If asked to define morality, most people would say that it is about how we treat other people. If asked to define

etiquette, those same people are likely to mention forks. The looming spectre of a table full of mysterious forks contributes to a widespread tendency to be at once anxious about and dismissive of etiquette. How is anyone supposed to tell a fruit fork from a fish fork? Why do oysters get their own special fork, and why does that fork live with the soup spoon on the right side of the plate?

Now few people encounter this many forks on a routine basis, and probably those people already know the difference between a fruit and a fish fork.<sup>7</sup> If fork placement were the only, or even main concern of etiquette, then it would certainly not be something worth much time. But this is a mistaken assumption, and perhaps also a dangerous one, given Judith Martin's exasperation with what she calls "The Great Fork Problem":

If Miss Manners hears any more contemptuous descriptions of etiquette as being a matter of 'knowing which fork to use,' she will run amok with a sharp weapon and the people she attacks will all be left with four tiny holes in their throats as if they had been the victims of twin vampires.<sup>8</sup>

Once the prospect of stabbing people with forks looms, it becomes clear that we are talking about both etiquette rules and moral rules. (There is no fork designated by etiquette as the correct one to employ for stabbing a guest.) Martin's point, though, is that the focus on forks takes away from the much more fundamental part of etiquette which, like morality, is about how we treat people. It is a mistake to think that etiquette concerns itself solely with table settings. It is also concerned with what happens at the table.

For many people, fork angst is a result of feeling inadequate or ignorant in social environments. Certainly it's true that etiquette conventions have long been used as a way of enforcing class boundaries and distinctions. This, though, is not so much a problem about the conventions themselves as it is a problem about the purposes for which they are being employed.

Attempting to shame or humiliate people via excessively complicated table settings is disrespectful and hence, rude.<sup>9</sup>

Earlier I described social conventions as tools with which we accomplish various moral aims, such as communicating attitudes of respect and consideration to other people. To take a straightforward example, when I go to the end of the line at my local Starbucks, rather than pushing my way closer to the counter, I exhibit my regard for my fellow coffee-drinkers as moral and social equals. By contrast, if I were to cut in line, I would be expressing the attitude that I am superior to them, that my own caffeine-related needs are more important than theirs, and that I need not attend to them as fellow members of my moral community.<sup>10</sup> (Of course this is true only in cultures where queuing is standard practice and widely followed.)

Cutting in line is hardly a major moral offense, although I would argue that it is not exactly trivial either. But the moral implications of line-jumping are relatively straightforward. We can readily see that it matters whether someone jumps in line and also *how* it matters. Line-jumping directly insults and inconveniences other people. And as we start to get into this territory, we start getting close to what nearly everyone recognizes as moral concerns. We owe people respect as a matter of moral obligation. Insofar as our actions and behaviors communicate disrespect, they seem to be wrong. This is what makes it wrong to use etiquette rules as a way of enforcing objectionable social hierarchies. And insofar as etiquette rules enable us to convey and communicate our respect for those same others, we have good reason to follow them.

None of this, however, provides much basis for thinking that forks can be conducive to anything of moral significance. How does one convey respect or disrespect by using a particular utensil during the salad course? Even if it is true (which it is) that etiquette is concerned with a much wider array of social interactions than what takes place at dinner parties, there's no



denying that it also has rules about forks. My suggestion is that forks matters insofar as they form part of a broader setting. The point of using an elaborate table setting is to create a certain kind of occasion. It is the occasion, and what is achievable in that occasion, that matters from a moral standpoint.

### Proper dining: Emily Post and classical Confucianism

The 1942 edition of Emily Post's famous etiquette manual (sometimes simply called the "blue book") includes a chapter on formal dinners that is over fifty pages long.<sup>11</sup> There are separate chapters for less formal dinners, luncheons, breakfasts, and teas; these fifty pages are entirely about a very specific kind of social gathering. Although Post does include diagrams showing the proper procedure for guests to walk into the dining room, much of the chapter focuses on the duties of the hostess, host, and guests. Hosts and hostesses are required to attend equally to each guest and take pains to make everyone feel comfortable. Introductions to fellow guests are to be informative without being excessively personal or overly focused on social status. Guests seated at the table are strictly forbidden from talking only to the person on one side. Indeed, refusing to "turn the table" and talk to one's other table neighbor is grounds for social banishment. Post cites an anecdote about a woman who, when seated next to a man she despised, took turns reciting multiplication tables with him.<sup>12</sup> Behaving properly at a formal dinner requires far more knowledge than can be acquired by memorizing pictures of forks.

It might be easy to dismiss Emily Post and her etiquette manuals as important only for a small set of people inhabiting a rarefied social sphere. That would be a mistake, both about Post herself and about the advice she gives in those manuals. Post's influence over the social culture of twentieth century United States was considerable. She was in fact setting etiquette standards

for a much larger group of people than her own social set. Moreover, Post herself was an exceptionally intelligent and interesting thinker—much more than she is often giving credit for being.<sup>13</sup>

In her emphasis on the etiquette of shared meals, however, Post is in excellent company. Few figures in the history of philosophy took mealtime rituals as seriously as Confucius seems to have taken them.<sup>14</sup> In the *Analects*, he is described as placing tremendous emphasis on the minute details of self-presentation and social behavior, from the way he walked through a doorway to the colors he chose for the trim on his clothing.<sup>15</sup> He was moderate in his appetites but fastidious about the freshness of his foods, refusing musty grain, spoiled meat, and improperly cooked food. He is said to have refused to “drink wine bought from a shop or fried meat purchases from the market.”<sup>16</sup> Perhaps most famously, he even refused to eat unless his mat was straight.<sup>17</sup>

We might just take all this to indicate that Confucius was an exceedingly difficult dinner guest, as he probably was. But this should not be regarded as an annoying personality quirk or an obsession with rules motivated by snobbishness. Confucius’s concern with these details was motivated by the value he places on ritual purity and the importance of carrying out role-specific actions in the prescribed way. His choice of colors for his robes was determined not by his own preferences, but by the significance of those colors on the particular occasion and the role he played in that occasion. Confucius was admired for his ability to adapt to his circumstances in a seemingly effortless fashion: “At court, when speaking with officers of lower rank, he was pleasant and affable; when speaking with officers of upper rank, he was formal and proper. When his lord was present, he combined an attitude of cautious respect with graceful ease.”<sup>18</sup> A mark of Confucius’s virtue is the fact that he not only knows what is required in each situation,

but that his behavior seems to flow effortlessly and seamlessly. The unexpected never seems unexpected to him; he is prepared to speak properly with whomever enters the room.

It is worth pausing here to compare Post's description of the skilled hostess at a formal society dinner:

...although engrossed in the person she is talking to, she must be able to notice anything amiss that may occur....No matter what happens, if all the china in the pantry falls with a crash, she must not appear to have heard any of it. No matter what goes wrong she must cover it as best she may, and at the same time cover the fact that she is covering it. To give hectic directions, merely accentuates the awkwardness.<sup>19</sup>

In both cases, the desired serenity of the occasion is achieved through complete mastery of the relevant social forms and the ability to maintain them in the face of unanticipated alteration.

For Confucius, performing rituals correctly, particularly those required by one's social position or role, is not slavish conformity to arbitrary rules or conventions. Rather, it is a matter of the highest spiritual importance. To get the rituals right is to respect one's place in the order of things and contribute to a common social and spiritual good. It was, quite simply, a spiritual duty to conform to ritual with as much precision as one can manage.

In classical Confucianism, adherence to rituals is also an essential aspect of character formation. This is more evident in the work of Xunzi, a third century B.C. follower of Confucius, and the author of philosophically rich texts on ritual (*li*) and its relationship to character development. According to Xunzi, human beings start out badly in need of assistance when it comes to moral cultivation. As he puts it, "crooked wood must await steaming and straightening on the shaping frame, and only then does it become straight."<sup>20</sup> We are the crooked wood and ritual is the shaping frame that straightens us and leads us on the path, or the Way. It does this by creating habits of correct behavior that eventually become part of who we are, much as Aristotelian virtues do. Practicing the rituals well, as Confucius did, inculcates moderation,

self-constraint, and consideration for others. By adhering to ritual, we shape ourselves into the proper embodiment of the Confucian ideal.<sup>21</sup>

For Xunzi, ritual instantiates the judgments of the practically wise person familiar to Western readers of Aristotle. Ritual directs us to act as the practically wise person knows to act:

Ritual cuts off what is too long and extends what is too short. It subtracts from what is excessive and adds to what is insufficient. It achieves proper form for love and respect... Thus, fine ornaments and coarse materials, music and weeping, happiness and sorrow—these things are opposites, but ritual makes use of all of them, employing them and alternating them at the proper times.<sup>22</sup>

This remark occurs in the context of an extended discussion of funeral rites and mourning, the proper performance of which was clearly very important to Xunzi and his audience.<sup>23</sup> But the various rituals and rites concerning sacrifices and meals would have been important in just the same way. They make us better by shaping our behavior in light of an ideal. By the time we have achieved that ideal (if we ever do), the behaviors have become part of our nature.

It may seem implausible to modern readers that the elaborate rituals of formal dinner parties could improve our characters in any way. Perhaps waiting for hours until the dessert course arrives helps with self-control, and we may see a certain beauty in the precision with which a formal dinner is executed. But I have claimed that the etiquette conventions about dinner parties do more than this, that they create a structure of norms and expectations of participants that make possible moral pursuits that could not be pursued in the absence of such a structure. In order to make a case for that claim, I will turn to Kant and his discussion of dinner parties in the *Anthropology*.<sup>24</sup> As we will see, Kant's view has some interesting similarities with his Confucian predecessors, but for him, the primary value of dinner parties lies in the ways in which well-conducted ones promote the important moral goods of sociability, fellowship, and the cultivation of knowledge.

### What a Kantian dinner party can do

Like Xunzi, Kant believes that human nature is in need of correction and rehabilitation—warped wood that requires straightening.<sup>25</sup> Although Kant did not place the same kind of emphasis on ritual as the Confucians did, we do see some parallels in his exhortations on behalf of the social graces. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant argues that it is a duty to cultivate social graces on the grounds that they make virtue more appealing and hence, promote its cultivation:

Affability, sociability, courtesy, hospitality, and gentleness (in disagreeing without quarreling) are, indeed, only tokens, yet they promote the feeling for virtue itself by a striving to bring this illusion as near as possible to the truth. By all of these, which are merely the manners one is obliged to show in social intercourse, one binds others too; and so they still promote a virtuous disposition by at least making virtue fashionable.<sup>26</sup>

We find a rather stronger statement of the moral importance of etiquette in both the *Lectures on Ethics* and the *Anthropology*. In the *Lectures on Ethics*, he suggests that etiquette helps us hide and eventually overcome our mistrust and dislike of others: “We try to conceal our mistrust by affecting a courteous demeanor and so accustom ourselves to a courtesy that at last it becomes a reality and we set a good example by it....Accordingly the endeavour to appear good ultimately makes us really good.”<sup>27</sup> Kant doesn’t explain how the endeavor to appear good improves our character, but it’s evident that he thinks it does. The theme reappears in the *Anthropology*, where he makes the following claim:

Collectively, the more civilized men are, the more they are actors. They assume the appearance of attachment, of esteem for others, of modesty, and of disinterestedness, without ever deceiving anyone, because everyone understands that nothing sincere is meant. Persons are familiar with this, and it is even a good thing that this is so in this world, for when men play these roles, virtues are gradually established, whose appearance had up until now only been affected. These virtues ultimately will become part of the actor’s disposition.<sup>28</sup>

The first sentence or two of this paragraph might be read cynically, as if Kant is calling us out on our hypocritical pretense of politeness. It might also be read as a criticism of someone like Confucius, who could be seen as merely acting a role insincerely, albeit skillfully. The last part, however, makes it clear that Kant has something else in mind. The playing of the social roles is the method by which virtues are established. We start out as imitators, but if things go well, we end up as the real deal. We can see this in Confucius, who is represented as a moral ideal insofar as he has internalized the rituals and made their practice part of his own character. He is modest, self-restrained, considerate, respectful, adaptable, and generally virtuous. Moreover, he has become that way through his careful performance of social roles.

This concept of etiquette as connected to playing a social role is, I think, quite important to understanding what is happening in dinner parties, particularly formal ones. A successful dinner party requires that people take up a role, usually as either a guest or a host. One's job as a dinner party guest is to be a good guest in those particular circumstances. This means knowing what the occasion demands of me and acting accordingly. For example, I should show up at an appropriate time, dressed as I am expected to dress. I should talk pleasantly to the people next to me at dinner, and I should exit at an appropriate time. Hosts have different obligations, but the role is similarly structured. In this sense, dinner is a staged production, but the staging of it is essential to achieving the moral value at which the production aims. Kant recognized this, which is why he took the specific form of a dinner party to be so important to its success.

The title of the section of the *Anthropology* in which Kant discusses dinner parties is "On the Highest Ethicophysical Good."<sup>29</sup> The title matters because it reflects Kant's constant concern with reconciling our moral and physical natures. He begins the section by reminding us that "the inclination to pleasurable living and inclination to virtue are in conflict with each other" and

suggests that one of the tasks of morality is to help us navigate this conflict successfully in our daily lives. Clearly, food is part of pleasurable living, and elsewhere in the *Anthropology*, the *Doctrine of Virtue*, and the *Lectures on Ethics*, he reminds us of the moral dangers of giving in to our desires for pleasurable bodily experiences, whether they are pleasures of food and wine, mind-altering drugs, or sexual activity. He recognizes, of course, that we must satisfy a moderate version of some of these desires simply in order to survive. The trouble, of course, comes in when those desires get out of hand, as they so often do.

This is the standpoint that Martine, Philippa, and their friends have when they are faced with Babette's feast. They are ascetics, partly from necessity but mostly from choice. They eat only unassuming foods, refrain from drinking alcohol, and generally push all forms of aesthetic pleasure and enjoyment out of their lives, believing this to be the path to holiness and moral rectitude. When Babette arrives in their village, they instruct her to prepare their food in the simplest possible way. Although they are genuinely welcoming to her, the mere fact that she is French creates some anxiety for them. France, to them, carries an aura of decadence and unrestraint. They fear it because they are well aware of the power of aesthetic experience. Martine had been, and still was, extraordinarily beautiful. Years before, her beauty had captivated a young officer named Lorens Loewenhielm, who returns to the village by happenstance on the evening of the feast. His love for her is described in quasi-religious terms, and she seems to return his affection. Alas, the young man is unable to communicate his feelings to her, and leaves the village in despair. Philippa's gift is an exceptional singing voice, which caught the attention of a visiting French opera star. Achille Pepin, who was not only French but Catholic (doubly dangerous!), trained Philippa with the hope of convincing her to return with

him to France to sing on stage. Although Philippa turned him down, he was responsible for sending Babette to them years later.

These back stories matter because Martine and Philippa are acutely aware of the genuine attractions of aesthetic value. They understand beauty all too well, which is why they are frightened of Babette's preparations and indeed, of Babette herself: "By this time Babette, like the bottled demon of the fairy tale, had swelled and grown to such dimensions that her mistresses felt small before her. They now saw the French dinner coming upon them, a thing of incalculable nature and range."<sup>30</sup> Martine and Philippa have never had a French dinner, and certainly don't know what Babette is capable of creating. It is enough that she is French; they know where that might lead.

Kant is not arguing on behalf of asceticism. Quite the contrary, he is fully aware of the transformative power of aesthetic appreciation. Like Martine and Philippa, he knows both its appeal and its dangers. The highest ethicophysical good is what we achieve when we navigate this channel successfully. As he puts it, "the good living which still seems to harmonize best with virtue is a good meal in good company."<sup>31</sup> Neither a bad meal in good company, nor a good meal in bad company, will do. In order to unite these two dimensions of ordinary human life, we must have both. But getting them to harmonize is a challenge.<sup>32</sup>

### Dinner with Kant

Kant's response to this challenge is to spell out an explicit set of requirements for a successful dinner party. He follows Chesterfield in claiming that the number of guests must be no fewer than the Graces, but no more than the Muses (that would be between three and ten, not counting the host). Too few people and the conversation falters; too many, and the guests tend to break off into small groups and there is no unified conversation. The food and drink must be



pleasant and plentiful enough to induce physical satisfaction, but not so pleasant and plentiful that guests are tempted to overindulge and render themselves unfit for conversation. (This of course requires self-restraint on the part of the guests.) Music, he thinks, is both unnecessary and distracting, and competitive games after dinner put guests at odds with each other by placing self-interest too much at the forefront. What is needed is excellent conversation, supported and maintained by all the participants. For Kant, a good dinner conversation has a very specific narrative arc. His account of that arc and the rationale for it is fascinating and worth quoting at length:

At a full dinner, where the multitude of courses is only intended to keep the guests together for a long time....the conversation usually goes through the three stages of 1) narration, 2) reasoning, and 3) jesting. A. The first stage concerns the news of the day, first domestic, then foreign, received from personal letters and newspapers. B. During the second stage, when this first appetite has been satisfied, the company gets livelier, because, in arguing back and forth, it is hard to avoid a variety of judgment about one and the same object under discussion. Since no one has a low regard for his own judgment, a dispute arises which continues to whet the appetite for food and drink; and in proportion to the liveliness of the dispute and the participation in it, the food is felt to be beneficial. C. In the third stage, because reasoning is always a kind of work and exertion of energy, this finally becomes difficult after eating too copiously during the dinner. Consequently the conversation turns naturally to the mere play of wit, partly also to please the lady in the company who is encouraged by the minor, intentional, but not insulting attacks on her sex to shine in her own display of wit. Thus the meal ends with laughter.<sup>33</sup>

Kant goes on to explain how hearty laughter aids in digestion and so improves one's physical well-being.

But it is not simply the digestive and lady-pleasing effects of laughter that matter to Kant. Laughter also creates a sense of playful comradery. Consider how things might go if the conversation ended at stage B instead. Guests might find themselves in heated arguments, exacerbated by wine, each convinced that he or she is correct and the others badly mistaken. Or supposing that the dinner makes it through stage C without incident, if the guests take up

competitive games, like gambling, self-interest inevitably begins to edge in. Guests who were best of friends after desert can quickly slide into becoming belligerent rivals.

When it comes to the conversation itself, Kant spells out five specific rules: a) choose topics that interest everyone and make sure that everyone is included; b) do not allow long silences; c) do not change subjects suddenly or repeatedly; d) squelch any form of dogmatism, ideally with “a jest deftly introduced”; e) in the event of serious conflict, remain controlled “so that mutual respect and good faith always prevail.”<sup>34</sup> These five rules, along with his account of the narrative arc of the dinner, help us see what moral aims Kant thinks can be achieved by well-conducted dinner parties. Although there may be multiple aims, I will consider two—the improvement of one’s understanding of important topics through rational conversation and the creation of bonds of fellowship and community. Both were important to Kant; a good dinner could not be good without both of them. Let’s start with the first aim.

Kant believed that we have a duty to ourselves to cultivate our own perfection. He distinguishes between natural and moral perfection, although that distinction isn’t important for present purposes. What does matter is that the way we cultivate our perfection is through enhancing our rational capacities and our general understanding of the world and the people in it. Conversation is essential to this task. We are limited in our ability to acquire knowledge about the world, and so we are dependent on the testimony of others to increase our own understanding. (This is, incidentally, a crucial reason why Kant was so opposed to lying. Deliberately presenting someone with a false view of the world violates not just a duty to that person, but a duty that we owe to the moral community.)

Within Kant’s narrative arc for a conversation, it is primarily stages A and B where this aim is accomplished. At the beginning of stage A, guests are still hungry. Although Kant does

not say as much, we all know that hungry people can be cantankerous. The conversation of stage A suits the physical state of the guests. They are distracted from their hunger by hearing or giving reports of the news, but they are not called upon to undertake challenging arguments or control their emotions. As the food and wine begin to flow, the conversation moves to stage B, where debate and discussion take place. Here guests can hone their argumentative skills while still listening respectfully to others. Because the topics are of interest to all, everyone can contribute their own observations, enhancing the range of opinions and perspectives available. Wine has loosened tongues without yet producing intoxication. The physical state of the guests is one of pleasant satiety, with the expectation of more pleasant food and drink to come. By the time that the wine has taken its full effects, the conversation has moved to stage C, where no one is expected to make much sense. Because Kant strictly forbids destructive gossip as a dinner topic, nothing is said at which someone might take offense or feel the need to contradict as a matter of loyalty. The mood is light and people are satisfied with their physical and mental states.

The first three of Kant's five rules also conduce to rationality-enhancing dinner conversations. As we have said, the introduction of topics interesting to everyone broadens the number of ideas and perspectives in play. The second limits awkwardness and prevents the unnecessary introduction of new, disjointed topics. Kant's third rule makes clear that a good conversation must have some sort of thematic unity, apparent on reflection. As he says, "if the mind cannot find a connecting thread, it feels confused and realizes with displeasure that it has not progressed in matters of culture, but rather regressed."<sup>35</sup> The right sort of dinner party should leave everyone with the feeling that they have both learned something and contributed to the enlightenment of others. An evening of mutual enlightenment, bolstered by the pleasant physical

sensations of a good dinner, might very well seem to deserve the title of the “highest ethicophysical good.”

The second aim of dinner parties, the creation of fellowship and community, is enhanced when the first aim is successful. When the conversation feels like a shared project, conducted in a spirit of seriousness that is yet not too serious, we find ourselves drawn together in a cohesive whole, bound by a feeling of mutual respect and affection. This is what Kant thinks we must take special care not to disrupt or disturb with overly contentious arguments, too much wine, or high stakes gambling. The final two rules are aimed at preserving the right spirit of community. As Kant says, “what counts more is the *tone* (which must be neither ranting nor arrogant), not the content of the conversation, so that none of the guests should go home from the company at variance with each other.”<sup>36</sup>

In *Babette's Feast*, Dineson says little about what was discussed over dinner, or whether the conversation flowed in accordance with Kant's directives. But we do know that the second of Kant's two aims was achieved with extraordinary success. People came to the dinner at variance with each other; they left as a community brought together by their shared aesthetic experience. The nearly miraculous, entirely unexpected exquisiteness of the meal did more than simply satisfy their physical hunger; it transformed their hearts. Although the feast undoubtedly involved more wine and decadent food than Kant would have deemed prudent, it certainly seems worthy of being called the highest ethicophysical good.

Kant's account of dinner parties illuminates the ways in which the specific rules and practices of a dinner can facilitate moral aims and achieve morally important goods. Crucially, it will only succeed if all the participants come prepared to fulfill their particular roles in the gathering. Although Kant does not draw sharp distinctions among the various roles at a dinner

party, he clearly thinks that all participants are duty-bound to live up to the moral demands of the participant role. Each person must do his or her part to sustain both the rationality-enhancing conversation and the feeling of pleasant fellowship that the dinner aims to produce. Hosts and guests alike have a duty to remain in control of their emotions and their rational capacities. They must contribute to the conversation without dominating it or misdirecting it, and they must be prepared to step in with a well-timed joke or conversational redirection.

This last element of the dinner participant role requires a considerable degree of skill. We often refer to the person with this skill as having tact. Tact, while not on most standard lists of virtues, is indisputably helpful in social settings. Indeed, Emily Post remarked that “at least half the rules of etiquette are maxims in tact.”<sup>37</sup> Tactfulness requires imaginative awareness of what other people are thinking, feeling, and experiencing, as well as the ability to create or alter circumstances that will produce a desired effect. Consider Kant’s recommendation that dogmatism be disarmed by jesting. This is challenging, even among dinner participants who know each other well. The jest has to be significant enough to produce a change in conversational tone or direction, but cannot tilt too far into the territory of insulting or humiliating the person being dogmatic. It requires just the right remark, in just the right tone, at just the right moment.

### Dinner disasters

Given how few of us can really exhibit this skill consistently, it is a helpful feature of etiquette that it often sets strict rules about what does and does not count as appropriate dinner conversation material. In one of Jane Austen’s many marvelously awkward dinner scenes, one guest starts launching excessively intrusive questions at another. In a desperate effort to keep her

dinner from turning into a social disaster, the hostess interrupts with a remark about rain. Another guest picks up her cue and continues the topic, with the result that “much was said on the subject of rain by both of them.”<sup>38</sup> This maneuver is effective because the subject of rain, however boring, is an exceptionally safe one. Everyone can discuss the rain, and no one can reasonably take offense or be mortified by anyone else’s commentary on rain. In this context, the deliberate change of topic to the weather is a way for participants to reclaim the occasion and force everyone to revert to their appropriate social roles as dinner participants. Although the rain discussion has the effect of diminishing everyone’s interest in further conversation, the dinner does at least end properly, with everyone back on good behavior.

Contrast this with another formal dinner that does end in disaster, this time at Downton Abbey. The trigger for the disaster is a guest who is not at all inclined to play the social role expected of her as a participant in this kind of dinner. The dinner is hosted by the Earl and Countess of Grantham at their estate. Most of the guests are friends and family members, and the disruptive guest, Miss Sarah Bunting, has been invited as a friend of one of the Grantham family members. Miss Bunting, who is neither a member of the Grantham’s social class nor a particular fan of the aristocracy, is given to expressing her strong political opinions whenever she sees fit. At this particular dinner, her frankness borders on the insulting, and gets the better of Lord Grantham. He storms out of the room, but not before telling Miss Bunting that she is no longer welcome at Downton Abbey.

The scene takes place in the 1920s, and the upending of established social roles is one of the primary themes of the series. Those roles have changed enough that it seems perfectly reasonable to invite a schoolteacher to dinner, but not enough to change the basic social expectations of dinner guests. Those expectations, it should be noted, have nothing to do with

forks. Although Downton Abbey has its share of snobbish dinner guests, the Granthams do not seem particularly concerned with whether their guests are able to use silver properly. The cause of Miss Bunting's banishment is her unwillingness to stay in the conversational role assigned to guests at such a dinner. Nor can she be talked down or redirected by others into safer topics; she plows ahead with her efforts to unsettle Lord Grantham, efforts which succeed. This is no small feat; Lord Grantham's own designated social role would have militated quite strongly against storming out of his own dining room in response to a guest. He had already used all the defense socially available to him; politeness had not succeeded. We might say that Miss Bunting rendered him unable to be Lord Grantham at that moment.

Formal dinners do not have a monopoly on awkwardness, of course, and they needn't be the miserable affairs that they often are at Downton Abbey. But let me suggest that one of the functions of the elaborate rituals and practices of formal dinners is to make it possible for potentially volatile groups of participants to come together in a joint activity without that activity imploding. The highly structured roles of the participants give each person a well-defined part to play, with little room for improvisation or modification. No doubt this makes formal dinners less conducive to fellowship than a group of friends roasting marshmallows over a fire, but that is not the point of such a dinner.

### The point of formal dinners

The clearest example of this is a state dinner. Such a dinner is hosted by the head of state of a country for some honored guest, usually the head of state of another country or an equally important person. State dinners, which are generally held at the residence of the home country's head of state, are about as formal as a dinner can get. They are elaborate affairs, requiring

protocol experts from both countries to participate in the plans, procedures, and expectations. Everything is planned out in advance, everyone is briefed on what to wear and do. Violations of protocol, even minor ones, can turn into international incidents if not properly managed. The symbolic significance of each handshake or toast is enormous—the wrong dress designer or a mistimed entrance can throw off the entire evening. The entire event is scripted and undoubtedly extremely stressful. It's hard to imagine how anyone has fun.

Of course, having fun is not the point. The point is the symbolism of bringing together two countries under a single roof to share a meal. It is the extension of hospitality on one side and the acceptance of it on another. When the countries already have common interests and a strong relationship, a state dinner will carry much less symbolic burden than when the relationship between the countries is marked by unease and distrust. (To take a recent example, if President Obama must accidentally talk over the national anthem of another country, it's fortunate when the country in question is the United Kingdom.) But if the two sides can get through a meal together with the appearance of good will and mutual enjoyment (of sorts), we might be more hopeful that they can get through the next round of diplomatic negotiations over climate change or nuclear testing. The strict rules of protocol make it far more likely that the dinner will proceed without incident because there is so little room for improvisation. The point of scripting everything is to ensure that no one wanders off that script. Her unwillingness to follow a script is why Sarah Bunting will never get invited to a state dinner.

Miss Bunting's tirade was focused on what she believed to be Lord Grantham's lack of concern for his servants. And yet the butler, Mr. Carson, considered her remarks as outrageous and insulting as Lord Grantham himself. Carson does not see his servant role as demeaning or degrading. Quite the contrary, he prides himself on the skill with which he performs his job.<sup>39</sup>



That job is to make the house, and certainly the formal dinners served in the house, run as smoothly and seamlessly as possible. The hallmark of excellent service for him is the invisibility of it to those who are being served. Of course, the invisibility of the servants is precisely what troubles Miss Bunting. But the invisibility, however much we may share Miss Bunting's concerns, has a function.

In formal dinners, whether at Downton Abbey or high-end restaurants, the dinner is intended to seem effortless. Obviously it is not effortless, but the experience of the guest is supposed to be seamless. A good footman or waiter serves and removes dishes in a barely perceptible fashion. Plates appear and disappear as if by magic. Those bringing in dishes walk noiselessly into rooms and blend into the background once there. Sometimes even the very doors they use are disguised from the view of the occupants. It is as if they are not there.

What is the point of such invisibility? One answer is that it makes it possible for the participants in the dinner to give their full attention to other things, such as each other or the conversation they are having. Emily Post's dinner hostess is able to maintain her calm demeanor because she has a staff of highly skilled servants working in the background. If she were jumping up every few minutes to attend to some aspect of the dinner, the dinner itself could not proceed, or at least not on those terms.<sup>40</sup>

Sarah Bunting was of course justified in her criticisms of the social hierarchy at Downton Abbey, although she was rude in her expression of them. But that has more to do with the social status of servants in that system than with the practice of invisible service itself. The point of some etiquette rules is to make possible certain things by making other things recede into the background. The fact that this is has often been done by morally dubious methods does not mean that there is something morally dubious about the entire practice.

### Creating community at the table

To see this, let us return to Babette and her dinner. Babette is a servant in the sisters' household, but she is hardly their social inferior. The sisters do not regard her that way and she certainly does not regard herself that way. Babette carries herself with a dignity and self-assurance to which the villagers respond. She quickly takes control not just of the kitchen, but of the household budget and indeed, of the well-being of many of her neighbors. Regardless of her actual job title, Babette is clearly a force to be reckoned with.

Over the course of the entire feast, Babette herself never enters the dining room. Instead, she employs a boy to be a waiter. Had she appeared in the dining room, she would have disrupted the very thing she was working so hard to create—a near-mystical aesthetic experience. Babette describes herself as an artist. Her art is the dinner, and to enter the dining room would have been to ruin her own work by distracting from it. She chooses to be invisible to the dinner participants, and her choice to be invisible is an exercise of her creative authority. Martine and Philippa do not ask Babette to come into the room; probably, they realize that she would not and moreover, that she could not without destroying her work.

But it is not simply Babette herself who is absent from the dining room. Crucially, the food itself has been declared a taboo subject at the dinner, at least for all but one guest. It is, I think, an essential part of the success dinner in *Babette's Feast* that the guests are deliberately not talking about the food. As we have seen, they think their indulgence in the meal is sinful and they neither wish to exacerbate their own state of sin nor mortify their beloved Martine and Philippa by calling attention to it. So they remain silent, except for the visiting General Loewenhielm, who is understandably mystified by the appearance of such food at such a

gathering. The general, who has led a cultured life in France, is the 19<sup>th</sup> century version of a modern foodie. He knows exactly what he is eating and he cannot refrain from remarking on it. His remarks, however, are left hanging in mid-air by his dining companions. They are deliberately ignoring him, of course, but even if they were not, they wouldn't know what to say in response. They have no idea what they are eating and drinking. The general knows this as well; his remarks are really for himself. Strikingly, he never once seeks to find out how such a dinner came to be taking place. He simply enjoys it. And this is crucial to the experience of that dinner, both for him and for the others. The experience of eating an extraordinary meal in this company is sufficient. Each participant is transformed and renewed in a way that is both specific to that individual and importantly communal. The general's speech at the end of dinner falls on different ears, but it manages to unify the listeners anyway.

Not every dinner can or should be Babette's feast. The guests at the feast cannot talk about the food, because talking about the food would interfere with that particular shared aesthetic experience. But there are many different types of aesthetic experience possible at a dinner party. Many people enjoy talking about what they are eating and drinking, and indeed, dine with friends for the sheer purpose of discussing culinary matters with friends. It may enhance their sense of community rather than detract from it. (We can, perhaps, imagine Babette at dinner with friends who are also highly skilled chefs.) The relevant governing rules will depend on what the participants seek from the experience. Depending on the aim, pizza on the couch may be more effective at achieving it than the fanciest restaurant meal. But we should not mistake the informality of a delivery pizza meal for the absence of etiquette. As I mentioned earlier, there are rules about eating pizza, just as there are rules about eating oysters. And if I am

invited for pizza, my job is to follow those rules and occupy the social role of a guest at that kind of party.

This is important because as I have said, my willingness to occupy that role and follow its associated conventions and rules help define a particular occasion as an instance of a kind.<sup>41</sup> What makes a meal a picnic is that it is eaten outdoors under highly informal circumstances. Food is spread on a blanket, and eaten with the fingers or hands by people dressed in casual clothes and sitting or lying on the ground.<sup>42</sup> By contrast, formal dinners are partly constituted by the guest's adherence to certain standards of dress and behavior. Suppose I show up to a formal dinner wearing jeans and a tee-shirt. I have, by that small act of rebellion, made the dinner less formal. Of course a dinner is not perceptibly less formal if the oyster fork is placed next to the soup spoon, rather than being nestled in it. But if the hosts decide forgo the china and silver in favor of takeout containers served on the patio, they are no longer having a formal dinner at all. The alteration of the rituals has altered the nature of what they and their guests are doing.

It is, of course, not always a problem for a planned formal dinner to turn into something else entirely. Sometimes the power goes out on Thanksgiving, leaving guests with a choice between a half-cooked turkey and peanut butter sandwiches. And certainly hosts can invite people to gatherings of any form they want. Still, accepting an invitation comes with responsibilities, and the responsibilities are important. It is a role with normative implications. If I agree to be a dinner guest, I must be a good one. If I am invited to a picnic, I do not show up in heels and expect to be served delicate fish. That would be as much of a mistake as showing up for a formal dinner in jeans. I can interfere with an occasion by adding to the formality just as much as I can by diminishing it. And both would be rude.

This applies not just to attire, but to participation in the relevant activities. A guest who sat silently through one of Kant's dinner parties would be a lousy guest, since the point of such a dinner is to engage in conversation. Once the occasion has been named and its aims established, participants have an obligation to come prepared to participate in the relevant rituals and practices (learning about them if necessary) and moreover, participate in them with the right state of mind. If one accepts an invitation to a Super Bowl party, one had better be ready to eat junk food and watch football. Feigning interest in football at a Super Bowl party is permissible, but starting a loud rant about corruption in the sport during a key play is not. A person who finds football too objectionable to watch should probably decline the party invitation entirely.

The fact that the success of the dinner depends in part on whether a guest successfully execute their social role at that dinner undeniably places a burden on guests (although it alleviates burdens on hosts). That may be seen as a reason to reject being a guest at dinners that require such a performance. I have claimed that all dinners require a performance of some kind of role. Even a come-as-you-are party invitation makes demands on guests. Although it is possible to eat dinner in a fork-free zone, there is no such thing as an etiquette-free zone.

### Conclusion

My claim has been that the etiquette conventions of dinner parties get their point and purpose from the moral aims of the occasion to which they apply. In the case of a dinner party, the aims involve both a shared aesthetic experience of food and fellowship generated through conversation. In *Babette's Feast*, we see an especially transcendent aesthetic experience, one that extends the imaginations and conversational powers of the participants in unexpected ways. Although they have pledged not to speak of the food, the meal gives them an opportunity to

communicate and converse about matters deeply important to them and to leave with a sense of expanded moral understanding.

For Kant, that sense of fellowship and expanded understanding is of tremendous moral significance. On his view, it can take place only when certain constraints about that conversation are in operation. Etiquette is what provides those constraints, preventing us from behaving in ways that would undermine the community we are trying to build. It is rude to pick a fight at dinner or ignore others at the table, both because it is disrespectful and because it prevents all the participants from achieving what everyone came to experience. We might see a successful Kantian formal dinner as a kind of symphony—beautiful when each instrument fulfills its own designated role well. Informal dinners allow for more improvisation, but even that improvisation has to abide by some constraints. The ultimate aims of aesthetic enjoyment, conversation, and fellowship must continue to be possible for all participants.

I have argued that the etiquette conventions of dinner parties form the essential structure of the occasion, and hence that abiding them is a requirement for being a good guest. I have also argued that there is moral value in participating in such activities insofar as they make possible moral goods that we could not achieve alone. The conversation at a good Kantian dinner party, improves my understanding of the world, which is itself a way of fulfilling a moral duty to myself. But it also produces warm feelings of love and appreciation for my fellow human beings, something that Kant thought difficult for human beings. In this way, my efforts to constrain my behavior by the norms of etiquette can help improve my character. Insofar as etiquette norms constrain me to treat people well around the dinner table and everywhere else, they draw me into a better form of moral community than I might otherwise be inclined to inhabit.<sup>43</sup>

Dinner parties are occasions where we can join with other people in some kind of communal aesthetic and social experience. Decent food is an essential element, but far from the entire point. If it were, it would not matter whether philosophers dined alone. Kant, however, knew better. It is a good meal in good company that we seek, and when we find it, we are better for it.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Isak Dinesen, *Babette's Feast and Other Anecdotes of Destiny* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988). My references are primarily to the short story, but some of my inferences about it have undoubtedly been influenced by the beautiful film version, directed by Gabriel Axel.

<sup>2</sup> Although Dinesen's original story is set in Norway, the film is set in Denmark.

<sup>3</sup> *Babette's Feast*, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> Kant was especially troubled by the idea of philosophers dining alone: "Eating alone...is unhealthy for a philosophizing man of learning; it does not restore his power, but exhausts him...it turn into exhausting work, and not into the refreshing play of thought." *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Victor Lyle Dowdell (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), p. 189.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999) 1156b28.

<sup>6</sup> Karen Stohr, *On Manners*, (New York: Routledge, 2012). See also Sarah Buss, "Appearing Respectful: The Moral Significance of Manners," *Ethics* 109 (1999): 795-826; Cheshire Calhoun, "The Virtue of Civility," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 29 (2000): 251-275; Nancy Sherman, "Manners and Morals" in *Stoic Warriors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Peter Johnson, *The Philosophy of Manners* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1999); Amy Olberding, "Etiquette: A Confucian Contribution to Moral Philosophy" *Ethics* 126, no 2 (January 2016): 442-446.

<sup>7</sup> As a public service to any readers who experience fork trepidation, I'd like to emphasize that the fork rule is really quite simple. Pick up the outside fork and work your way in, continuing to use the outermost one as each new course is brought to the table.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Martin, *Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior* (New York: Norton, 2005), p. 154.

<sup>9</sup> This is Martin's view. See her *Miss Manners' A Citizen's Guide to Civility* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1996), p. 366.

<sup>10</sup> For more on this, see Stohr, *On Manners*, ch. 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Etiquette: The Blue Book of Social Usage* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls), 1942, chapter 16.

<sup>12</sup> *Etiquette*, p. 273. It's unclear whether Post is actually endorsing this practice, but it's clear that she believes it to be less rude than simply refusing to talk to him.

<sup>13</sup> For more about Post's life, see Laura Claridge, *Emily Post: Daughter of the Gilded Age, Mistress of American Manners* (New York: Random House, 2008). I discuss Post, including her sophisticated theory of taste, in Chapters 3, 5, and 8 of *On Manners*.

<sup>14</sup> It is common among scholars of Chinese philosophy to call Confucius by his more traditional name of Kongzi. Here, however, I will follow conventions in Western philosophy and call him Confucius. Although Confucius was concerned with behavior across a variety of settings, it's evident that mealtime rituals were of particular concern for him and for his later followers.

<sup>15</sup> Confucius, *Analects*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 2003), especially Book 10. (Slingerland's translation.)

<sup>16</sup> *Analects*, Book 10, section 8.

<sup>17</sup> *Analects*, Book 10, section 12

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<sup>18</sup> *Analects*, Book 10, section 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Etiquette*, p. 270.

<sup>20</sup> *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, trans. Eric Hutton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) 248.

<sup>21</sup> See Eric Hutton, “Xunzi and Virtue Ethics” in *The Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, ed. Lorraine Besser and Michael Slote (New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> *Xunzi*. 209.

<sup>23</sup> See Erin Cline, “The Boundaries of Manners,” forthcoming in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*.

<sup>24</sup> For a thorough exposition of Kant on this topic, see Alix Cohen, “The Ultimate Kantian Experience: Kant on Dinner Parties,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 25, No. 4 (Oct., 2008): 315-336. As will become clear, I am indebted to Cohen’s exposition of Kant on this subject.

<sup>25</sup> For more on this comparison between Xunzi and Kant and on self-cultivation more generally, see P.J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation* (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Doctrine of Virtue*, in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 474. This reference and all further references to this text employ the Prussian Academy page numbers.

<sup>27</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1963) p. 225.

<sup>28</sup> *Anthropology*, p. 37.

<sup>29</sup> *Anthropology*, pp. 185-91.

<sup>30</sup> *Babette’s Feast*, p. 25.

<sup>31</sup> *Anthropology*, p. 186.

<sup>32</sup> My understanding of Kant on this point is especially indebted to Cohen’s article.

<sup>33</sup> *Anthropology*, p. 189.

<sup>34</sup> *Anthropology*, p. 190.

<sup>35</sup> *Anthropology*, p. 190.

<sup>36</sup> *Anthropology*, p. 190.

<sup>37</sup> *Etiquette*, p. 624.

<sup>38</sup> Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923) p. 62.

<sup>39</sup> Of course it helps Mr. Carson’s sense of his dignity that he is the lord of the downstairs version of the manor. The scullery maids may (and indeed, often do) see it differently. In his novel *The Remains of the Day* (New York: Vintage, 1988), Kazuo Ishiguro draws a far more nuanced and poignant picture of a butler’s self-conception in relation to his employer and the social system in which their roles are located.

<sup>40</sup> This is evident in Post’s description of a remarkable fictional woman named Mrs. Three-in-One. As Post’s popularity grew, it became evident that her how-to chapter on hosting a formal dinner with the help of a bevy of servants had limited usefulness to much of her audience. She thus invented Mrs. Three-in-One, who simultaneously fulfills the roles of cook, waitress, and hostess. Although Post has some practical tips for those of us who manage without servants, some of her breezy advice for Mrs. Three-in-One borders on the absurd. Still, Post’s message is clear—scale back your entertaining ambitions to what you can actually manage to do.

<sup>41</sup> Cline, forthcoming.

<sup>42</sup> This is why the “picnics” of aristocrats, involving as they do tables, linens, and servants in livery, are no such thing. I thank Tyler Doggett for this reminder.

<sup>43</sup> I argue for this thesis in more depth in “Keeping the Shutters Closed: The Moral Value of Reserve” *Philosophers’ Imprint* 14, no. 23 (July 2014): 1-25.

<sup>44</sup> Many people have contributed to my thinking about dinner parties, especially Erin Cline, Andy Blitzer, and Amy Olberding. In addition, I am grateful to Anne Barnhill and Tyler Doggett for their extremely helpful comments on this essay.



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