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Hunger, Conviviality and the Appetite for God

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Leon Kass, *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature* (University of Chicago Press, 1999).

The Hungry Soul by Leon Kass merits the exalted status of a classic, and not simply because it is now approaching twenty years since its original publication. Though many disappointed epicures were apparently numbered among its first readers, there should be no mistake. This is a work of creative and deeply humanistic philosophy, “a wisdom-seeking inquiry into human nature and its perfection,” sustained by a penetrating and often rigorous reflection on the significance of the “higher meanings of eating” (xi). A book with such ambitions will undoubtedly be many things. Indeed, *The Hungry Soul* is an introduction to the philosophy of Aristotle’s *De Anima*, updated with insights both from modern biology and from modern thinkers such as Erwin Strauss, Hans Jonas, and Adolph Portmann. It is a trenchant critique of the abstract and objectifying character of contemporary biological science. It is a profound reflection on the differences between the animate and the inanimate and between the human being and the rest of the animal kingdom. It is a journey of ascent from the metabolic activities of soul shared by all living things to the uniquely human capacity for contemplation of the divine. It is an exploration of the deeper meanings of civility. But most of all it is beautiful, and marked at every turn by the erudition and profound humanism for which Leon Kass is justly known.

The animating assumption—and the truly creative development of the Aristotelian insights which give the book its structure—is that the human relation to food discloses something essential about all of these things. Ordinary human hunger thus becomes an open window to the contemplation of a world otherwise hidden in plain sight, a world of form, civilization, and humanity inscribed into our very animal nature and reflected in our physiological structure, and stretching, through its ordered longing, toward union with God.

The chapters of the book follow this path of ascent. Chapter 1, which along with chapter 2 are the densest (and arguably the richest) chapters of the book, introduces the ancient concepts of form and soul (*psyche*) through reflection on that metabolic activity which for Aristotle characterized the nutritive powers of soul common to all living things. Even in its most primitive form, these powers indicate an appetitive relation to the world beyond the organism's own borders and thus an organismic wholeness irreducible to mere mechanism. In both of these ways, then, the primitive, appetitive relationship to food is already an intimation of a self-transcendence, an other-directedness, which increases in proportion to the other powers of soul possessed by the organism. Chapter 2 explores the peculiar powers of the *human* soul, at once animal and more than animal, and the way in which the highest of these powers, the capacity for *theoria*, is already implicit in the human frame. Included here is a profound meditation on the meaning of man's upright posture, and how it prizes sight and thus the beholding of stable forms, over the other senses. Kass explores how the omnipotent jaw and the unspecialized arm and hand, both closely related to man's omnivorous nature, enlarge his "action space," his capacity to project his intentions over great spatial and temporal distances. These powers are the precondition both for genuine social and political life and for the apprehension of eternity.

Chapter 3 continues the ascent by contemplating the humanizing transition from *fressen* to *essen*, from feeding to eating, through which man's animal nature is properly humanized. The human relation to the edible, with all the violence and ambiguity that attends it, thus becomes a source for reflecting upon the genesis of the ethical. Here Kass launches into a truly fascinating consideration of two facts of enormous significance to the ancients but which are largely forgotten to us moderns. The first is the near universal prohibition against cannibalism and the corresponding codes of hospitality which often required the feeding of strangers even before inquiring into their identity. We see this, for instance, in Homer's *Odyssey*. The second is the identification of man as the "eater of bread," announced along with the curse in Genesis 2 but found also in Homer, where man the bread-eater is juxtaposed with the bestial Cyclops. These ancient insights reveal a profound truth. "Man becomes human with eating of bread" (122); for the advent of bread, like the fermentation of the grape, marks a comprehensive transformation in his social and political life so astonishing as to have once been regarded as a divine gift.

Chapter 4 considers the meaning of "the meal" and the introduction of codes of civility as enhancing the distinctively human capacities implicit in our upright posture. Chapter 5 continues along this upward trajectory by considering the transition from eating to dining, and how the latter becomes the occasion for conviviality, true friendship, and even enlightenment. Though these chapters are to my mind slightly less compelling than those which precede them, they nevertheless contain many thoughtful insights, including a beautiful interpretation of "Babette's Feast" by Isak Dinesen.

The ascent reaches its apex in the sixth and final chapter. Here Kass seeks to show "how the activity of eating can not only be ennobled but even sanctified" such that certain exemplary customs regarding eating "would manifest a more or less true understanding of the world, including the place of man within the whole" (196). He chooses the dietary laws articulated in the eleventh chapter of the Book of Leviticus to illustrate this point. The exegesis is rich and truly fascinating, as Kass shows in great detail how the prescriptions and prohibitions of Jewish dietary laws mirror the divine action of dividing and separating which characterize the creation accounts of Genesis. And yet it is here that Catholics and other Christians will likely find the

account incomplete and find themselves longing to go beyond Kass. One suspects, first of all, that Kass's interpretation of Genesis may be overly indebted to the "progressive" interpretation of Kant, who regards the story of Adam in the Garden with a bit too much *felix* and not enough *culpa*, not as a fall from prelapsarian wisdom but as the beginning of enlightenment *tout court*. But more deeply, a Catholic cannot help but think that an account of "sanctified eating" must ultimately find its end in the Eucharist, the divine self-offering. And he cannot help but think that this end would somehow also alter various steps along the way, whether by deepening the metaphysical foundations at the beginning, or by transforming the negative conception of law as restraint which seems to haunt the book.

It would be unfair, of course, to expect this from Kass or to burden an already great work with these hopes and expectations. And Kass himself, with characteristic magnanimity, acknowledges this "incompleteness" and invites some future reader to supply the missing seventh chapter. This would be a worthy project, but anyone who undertakes to supplement this work should be warned that he faces a daunting task in creating a complement worthy of the beauty, grace, and profundity of the original.

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