

Kant on Eating and Drinking

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Abstract

In this paper I analyze Kant's ideas about eating and drinking. First, I show that gluttony and drunkenness are considered ways to oppose to the duty to oneself as an animal being. Second, I claim that for Kant there is a healthy way of having meals, which consists in eating together with friends. Then I indicate that Kant accepts that one can drink at dinner parties but has to avoid drinks that lead to drunkenness and unsocial behavior. In this sense, he draws a classification of the various kinds of alcoholic drinks, according to their potential harm. Afterwards, I illustrate how Kant's own intimate life was a daily practice of his thoughts on dietetic conceptions and on what is better for digestion and health. To conclude, I mention the idea of a philosopher's medicine of the body and why a strict diet should be avoided.

Key words

eat, drink, Kant, medicine, digestion

What is the importance of Kant's view on eating and drinking?

Why should we care about this discussion on Kant vis-à-vis food or drink? Does it have any relation with his practical philosophy? Or does it have only biographical relevance? Does Kant's view still have any relevance for us today? Is it based on sound medicine? Should his dietetical advice be followed nowadays?

In this paper I show that Kant's remarks about the excessive use of food and drink have an importance concerning his doctrine of virtue. Gluttony and drunkenness are considered vices because they are against the duties to oneself as animal being related to the preservation of one's body.

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Kant's vision about eating and drinking also has an importance regarding the value of socialization in meals, that may lead to the improvement of social interaction and virtue. Also, his view about which foods and drinks we are to have is related to medical views. Although some are obsolete, the advice for moderation is still a valuable principle to keep one's health.

Gluttony, drunkenness, and the duties to oneself

In the §5 of the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant claims that the human being has a duty to oneself as an animal being, that consists in preserving oneself in one's animal nature. There are many different ways of acting against this duty. One is to commit suicide; another one is mutilating oneself. Mutilation can be material or formal. Material mutilation is to deprive oneself of an organic part, such as the castration of singers or selling a tooth to be transplanted in another's mouth. However, there are some circumstances under which one can cut a part of one's body and it would not be considered mutilation. Kant claims that to "have a dead or diseased organ amputated when it endangers one's life, or to have something cut off that is a part but not an organ of the body, for example, one's hair, cannot be counted as a crime against one's own person" (TL, AA 6: 423). To cut off a part of the body that is not an organ, such as hair or nails, does not count as mutilation. Also, it is not mutilation to amputate an organ that can prevent the death of the sick person.

There is another form of mutilation, a formal one, that consists in depriving oneself "of one's capacity for the natural (and so indirectly for the moral) use of one's powers" (TL, AA 6: 421). Kant classifies excessive drinking and eating as forms of formal mutilation:

Brutish excess in the use of food and drink is misuse of the means of nourishment that restricts or exhausts our capacity to use them intelligently. Drunkenness and gluttony are the vices that come under this heading. A human being who is drunk is like a mere animal, not to be treated as a human being. When stuffed with food he is in a condition in which he is incapacitated, for a time, for actions that would require him to use his powers with skill and deliberation. It is obvious that putting oneself in such a state violates a duty to oneself (TL, AA 6: 427).

Although Kant does not specify how much of food and drink count as gluttony and drunkenness, both are considered morally wrong. Excess in eating is below human dignity, since it is a passive condition that approaches the enjoyment of cattle, without any arousal of the imagination:

Gluttony is even lower than that animal enjoyment of the senses, since it only lulls the senses into a passive condition and, unlike drunkenness, does not even arouse imagination to an active play of representation; so it approaches even more closely the enjoyment of cattle (TL, AA 6: 427)

Drunkness is considered morally wrong. Even if the act of getting drunk is a free act, it is against the consistency of freedom, because it prevents the use of the capacity to make further choices. Guyer explains the Kantian meaning of this consistence:

One thing it seems to mean is that I must make free choices on particular occasions in a way that preserves and promotes my ability to make and carry out further free choices on other occasions. To use some Kant's characteristic examples, particular decisions to commit suicide or get drunk considered by themselves would certainly be free choices - instances of setting myself "any end whatsoever" - but they would not be consistent with preserving and promoting my capacity to make and carry out further free choices (GUYER 2006, p. 187).

Even if committing suicide and getting drunk seem to be acts of extreme freedom, they lead to the opposite: the restriction of the use of one's capacity to act freely.

The importance of a meal in a good company

In *Anthropology*, Kant claims that "the good living that still seems to harmonize best with true humanity is a good meal in good company" (Anth, AA 7: 278). At a dinner party, people enjoy not only food and drinks, but mutual company. Although there is this general idea that Kant was a lonely man, and even a misanthrope, his comments on the importance of banquets shows the opposite:

Eating alone (*solipsismus convictorii*) is unhealthy for a scholar who philosophizes; it is not restauration but exhaustion (especially if it becomes solitary *feasting*); fatiguing work rather than a stimulating play of thoughts. The *savouring* human being who weakens himself in thought during his solitary meal gradually loses his sprightliness which, on the other hand, he would have gained if a table companion with alternative ideas had offered stimulation through new material which he himself had not been able to track down (Anth, AA 7: 280).

Solitary meals debilitate men because they lack the stimulation of a lively discussion at the table. In accepting this important feature of a social meal, Kant asks if one can be justified in accepting the invitation for a banquet, since it is also an invitation to the use of wine, a drink that "enlivens the company conversation and in so doing makes them speak more freely" (TL, AA 6:428).

Although a banquet is a formal invitation to excess in both food and drink, there is still something in it that aims at a moral end, beyond mere physical well-being: it brings a number of people together for a long time to converse with one another. And yet the very number of guests (if, as Chesterfield says, it exceeds the number of the muses) allows for

only a little conversation (with those sitting next to one); and so the arrangement is at variance with that end, while the banquet remains a temptation to something immoral, namely intemperance, which is a violation of one's duty to oneself- not to mention the physical harm of overindulgence, which could perhaps be cured by a doctor (TL, AA 6: 428).

A banquet may be an invitation to intemperance, but at the same time it is an occasion for people to get along and have social intercourse, which is a good way to develop social virtues. There remains a casuistic question, if one should or not accept these invitations: "How far does one's moral authorization to accept these invitations extend?" (TL, AA 6: 428). Should we accept or not the invitation for the dinner parties and consequently the temptation to excess in food and alcoholic beverages? It is not clear if Kant would recommend temperance in eating during the banquets, but he would certainly advise to drink but not to get drunk, because as one reads in *Anthropology*: "Drunkenness is the unnatural condition of inability to order one's sense representation according to the laws of experience, provided that the condition is the effect of an excessive consumption of drink" (Anth, AA 7:166).

The classification of drinks

Is Kant criticizing the excess of drinking or the consumption of any alcoholic beverage? In *Anthropology*, he makes a distinction among the many beverages: "All silent intoxication has something shameful in it; that is, intoxication that does not enliven sociability and the reciprocal communication of thoughts – of which opium and brandy are examples" (Anth, AA 7:170).

Here it seems that consumption of spirits and drinks that derive from narcotics such as opium deserves the strongest reprobation. In *Doctrine of Virtue*, when referring to the vice of drunkenness, he claims that this debasement, "below even the nature of an animal, is usually brought about by fermented drinks, but they can also result from narcotics, such as opium and other vegetable products" (TL, AA 6: 427). These drinks are not welcome, because while they are seductive and make men dream that they are happy for a moment, they are also followed by a bodily and mental weakness, and in the case of narcotics, by addiction.

While he is undoubtedly critical of the use of narcotics and fermented drinks, the consumption of wine is the object of a certain doubt, since it is consumed at dinner parties that have the end of bringing about moral sociability: "The use of opium and spirits for enjoyment is closer to be a base act than the use of wine, since they make the user silent, reticent and withdrawn by the dreamy euphoria they induce. They are therefore permitted only as medicines" (TL, AA 6: 428).

The acceptance of alcoholic beverages is based on their potential for bringing about social interaction. If we were to approve some sort of intoxication, be it for the purpose of sociability:

Wine, which merely stimulates, and beer, which is more nourishing and satisfying like a food, serve as social intoxication; but with the difference that drinking-bouts with beer make guests dreamier and more withdrawn, whereas at a wine party the guests are cheerful, boisterous, talkative, and witty (Anth, AA 7:170).

Between wine and beer, Kant prefers the use of wine, not only because it fosters social interaction, but also because it could strengthen virtue. At least in two texts, Kant cites Horace's praise to Cato, *virtus eius incaluit mero*, "his virtue was strengthened by wine". (TL, AA 6: 428, Anth, AA 7: 171) Apparently, he admits that could be the case.

In her article "The ultimate Kantian experience: Kant on dinner parties", Alix Cohen introduces a classification of drinks and drugs according to their relation to sociability and virtue. Wine is the first in the rank, because it induces merriness and is also good to virtue. Beer is in the second rank, because, while it is an intoxication that helps social interaction, it induces impoliteness; it is good for conversation, but bad for virtuous sociability. The worst are opium, brandy and spirits, because they "induce silence, reticence, stultifying and dreamy euphoria. Thus, they contravene sociability and conversation" (COHEN 2008, p. 318).

According to Wasianski, Kant was even more critical to beer, which he considered a "slow, but mortal drink": "he was a declared enemy of this drink, and, when a man died in the force of ages, he used to say: 'undoubtedly, he was a beer drinker'" (WASIANSKI 1985, p. 121).

The intimate Kant

Kant not only defended the importance of a good meal in a good company, he also lived according to this conception, always avoiding having his meal alone. According to Jachmann,¹ until the age of 73, Kant had lunch at a hotel, where many important people of the Königsberg society used to join him. He was also invited to private lunches by members of the Prussian government, as well as bankers and art dealers: M von Schroetter, minister of the State; Comte Henckel von Donnersmark, the General Von Brunneck, the Duke of Holsteinbeck, the Comte of Kayserling, the bank director Ruffman; the art dealer Motherby. (JACHMANN 1985, p. 44).²

¹ Reinhold Bernhard Jachmann was director of the provincial school of Conradino auf Jenkau, near Königsberg. He was a student of Kant and his secretary from 1784 to 1794. Kant asked him four years before his death to write his biography.

² In 1980, at the French *Bibliothèque Nationale*, Jean Mistler, member of the French Academy, has found three books, printed in Königsberg, written by three members of the Lutheran church, who were also students of Kant: Borowski, Jachmann et Wasiansky. They were all about Kant's life. Jean Mistler translated and published them in 1985, under the title of *Kant intime* (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1985).

After the age of 73, Kant finally moved to a house of his own and usually invited a certain number of hosts to lunch, which was the only meal Kant used to have on a daily basis. The lunch followed the rules concerning the number of guests Kant made explicit in *Anthropology*: more than the number of graces and less of the number of muses. He also tried to have interesting but light conversation during the meal, and according to his former student Wasianski they never talked about his *Critiques*. The subjects of conversation varied from physiology, medicine, the life and habits of the people, chemistry, natural history and also politics. These gatherings followed the idea of a cultivation that Kant considered important for the spirit of Enlightenment. Also, he invited many different members of what we could call the Enlightenment society: professors, students, doctors, State employees, cultivated salesmen (WASIANSKI 1985, p.65).

The lunch's menu was composed by a three-course meal, cheese, butter, and dessert. The meal was accompanied by wine, usually a Medoc, but sometimes he also had white wine, because the red one was too astringent for him (JACHMANN, 1985, p. 47). The first course was usually a fish plate and Kant's favorite was cod. He was so fond of a good meal to the point that his friend Hippel once told him that he should write a "Critique of cooking" (BOROWSKI 1985, p. 17). For him, one of the virtues of women was to prepare a good dinner to the point that he once said that "a man, even if he is a painter or a poet, would not be happy if his wife offer him a poem or a painting instead of a dinner" (JACHMANN, 1985, p.48). This was considered a sexist view, even by women of the 18th century.

Digestion, food, and health

It is easy to understand that alcohol drinks could lead to a lack of control of one's own mind and then create the conditions for the weakness of the will, but how could gluttony be a moral problem? Although it can certainly lead to diseases and to the need to ask for a doctor's help, it is unclear how this could have a moral importance.

Although gluttony is considered a vice related to a duty to oneself as an animal being, not overeating seems also to be related to Kant's concerns about health, besides moral concerns.

He was very interested in medicine and was aware of some medical theories of his time, according to which to be healthy is a consequence of the equilibrium of the vital forces. Besides reading the news about discoveries in medicine, Kant has his own thoughts about the correct way to attain this equilibrium. The fact that he used to have only one meal a day is probably an important part of his own dietetic program. Another recommendation of this discipline was not to sleep after a huge meal, in order to avoid some digestion problems. The advice not to discuss hard subjects during the meal, besides the rules of etiquette, also responded to a health concern: to aid digestion. This purpose can be seen in the proposed three stages of a meal: narration, arguing, digestion. In the first one, people should talk about light subjects, such as the news of the days. In the second part, the party becomes livelier and people dispute over many subjects.

Lively discussion has also a physiological purpose, as it helps to stir up the appetite for food and drink: “a dispute arises that which stirs up the appetite for food and drink and also makes the appetite wholesome in proportion to the liveliness of this dispute and the participation on it” (Anth, AA 7: 280). After eating, mild and witty conversation should take place because arguing would take the energy that should be used for digestion:

And so, the meal ends with laughter, which, if it is loud and good-natured, has actually been determined by nature to help the stomach in the digestive process through the movement of the diaphragm and intestines, thus promoting physical well-being (Anth, AA 7: 281).

While talking about the affects that promote health mechanically Kant gives more details of the physiological process involved in laughing (Anth, AA 7: 262): the exhaling of air in laughter “strengthens the feeling of vital force through the wholesome exercise of the diaphragm” and is “a shaking of muscles involved in digestion”, in this way promoting health “far better than the physician’s wisdom would do”. Also, for elderly people, laughing is a healthful exercise. In comparing young people’s preference for drama and old people’s preference for comedy and burlesque, Kant explains why they do not appreciate the distressing and terrifying impressions of a drama:

On the other hand, with old people these impressions are not so easily blotted out, and they cannot bring back the cheerful mood in themselves so easily. By his antic a nimble-witted harlequin produces a beneficial shaking of their diaphragm and intestines, by which their appetite for the ensuing social supper is whetted and thrives as a result of the lively conversation (Anth, AA 7: 263).

Besides laughing, there are other affects by which nature promotes health mechanically. Crying and anger are among these affects that can help digestion:

Anger is also a fairly reliable aid to digestion, if one can scold freely (without fear of resistance), and many a housewife has no other emotional exercise than the scolding of her children and servants. Now if the children and servants only submit to it, an agreeable tiredness of the vital force spreads itself uniformly through her body; however, this remedy is not without its dangers, since she fears resistance by these members of the household (Anth, AA 7:261).

Kant was very concerned with digestion, not only theoretically, but also in his daily life. According to Jachmann, “he thought it was important to attain an old age, and he had a list of the older people in Königsberg and he was happy to advance in that list” (JACHMANN 1985, p. 48). In one of their last meetings, Kant told his secretary that he was very proud of what he had done to his body and “that he placed great value on what he considered a feat: having managed to maintain his health and vigor” (JACHMANN 1985, p. 51). He was extremely interested in staying healthy and having a good digestion was an important part

of that. Besides moderation in eating, he also regularly took some pills of aloes, a spoon of cinchona tincture, and a small glass of Rhum in the morning, although these last two ended up having bad outcomes. The cinchona tincture made his pulse irregular and the Rhum gave him heartburn.

Kant had a strict routine. He woke up every day at 5 am, had breakfast until 7 am, that consisted only of two cups of tea. After that, he gave courses at the University or at home. Afterwards, he worked until 12:45 in his office. He received his guests at 1 pm for lunch, and this gathering could go on until 4 or 5 pm. After lunch, he used to take a one-hour walk along the same street every day and to come home to read or prepare his courses until 10 pm, when he went to sleep. This discipline and his dietetic concerns seemed to have led Kant to attain the surprising age of 80, in a time when the expectancy of life was around 37 years old, and to remain active until nearly his last year.

In his daily routine we can find an answer to the proper use of alcoholic beverages. It is not against virtue to drink wine with moderation and use it to enliven a conversation during a meal. The criticism seems to be directed to other beverages, such as beer, besides the use of alcohol for the purpose of a lonely drunkenness.

The philosopher's medicine of the body

In the speech Kant gave in the completion of his term as a Rector of the University of Königsberg, he claims that the philosopher can have a function in treating the body through reason. While “the doctor's business is to help the ailing mind by caring for the body; the philosopher's is to assist the afflicted body by a mental regimen” (Rektoratsrede, AA 15: 939). One of the topics of this speech is how the powers of the mind could help to promote health, in particular a good digestion. Kant claims that “everyone knows how we can promote digestion by the emotions stirred in friendly but lively conversation, or by turning away from our meditations during dinner” (Rektoratsrede, AA 15: 940).

He advises that people should free their minds from any concerns and that conversation should be an enthusiastic one:

It is healthful for the body when, at dinner, the mind is not only free from care but disposed to merriment and turned away from concentrating on any one subject. What best serves the body is conversation, amiable discussion, especially mirth breaking into hearty laughter. Here the mind exerts most strongly its force in moving the body (Rektoratsrede, AA 15: 940).

In this speech, he calls attention to the aspects underscored in *Anthropology*, as well as in *Doctrine of Virtue*: a meal should encompass a light discussion and end up with a good laugh. This is not only good for the spirit, but it helps to promote health. And again, he mentions that to help the function of the body, it is not advisable to eat alone in a quiet mood, but to have a lively conversation with friends:

It is not only when the mind is free from care and serene that it aids the vital functions of the body, but also when it is stirred up, at dinner, by the sport and jests of conversation—when, to enliven the gathering, the guests enter into a contest, and the enthusiasm and exertion of the conversationalists rises to the limits of an affect (Rektoratsrede, AA 15: 949)

The interaction of people at dinner or lunch increases the vital forces of the body by the excitement of the mind. Among the doctors of his time, Kant expressed his partiality for the system of John Brown, the Scottish doctor, whose methods, according to Mary Gregor, “are said to have killed more people than the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars combined (including its founder, who died of an overdose of his favorite remedies, opium and whisky)” (GREGOR 1992, p.191). According to John Brown, life is a forced state, resulting from the presence of exciting powers. If the exciting powers are withdrawn, the human being dies. Following this principle, diseases are classified between sthenic and asthenic diseases, the first ones resulting from the excess of excitement, the second, due to deficient excitement.

Having Brown’s system in mind, Kant will not advice strict temperance while eating. Even though Kant criticizes gluttony, he was not for a strict diet that keeps one always hungry: “It is true, he says, that the sort of intemperance that indulges the body alone is most to be avoided, and Horace in particular says: the body burdened with yesterday vices... But wisdom does not require us to cheat ourselves, in step motherly fashion, and waste away by frugality” (Rektoratsrede, AA 15: 950).

Whilst people should void gluttony, Kant stresses the importance of having a proper meal, although this could cause some stomach discomforts. Even if people have digestion problems, Kant advise them to eat for the purpose of not weakening the forces of the body: “so it is particularly relevant that someone can become, as it were, intemperate on fasting, because of certain discomforts that generally go along with a full stomach” (Rektoratsrede, AA 15: 942). Kant also had some discomforts related to digestion, according to his biographers. However, his opinion is that one has to tolerate these digestive problems, without lessening the right amount of food: “my opinion”, he says, “is that one should eat to satiety at least once a day, and put up with the resulting discomfort until the body’s strength has increased” (Rektoratsrede, AA 15:942).

Eating less than one needs is worse for the body than overeating. The body’s balance cannot be attained by an abstemiousness that makes one always hungry and sub-nourished:

So the imminent philosopher Mendelssohn was forced to observe strict temperance because of the many bodily infirmities from which he suffered. But, as we have heard, in trying to keep his mind in good shape for his studies, he went beyond temperance to such abstemiousness that he kept himself always hungry, so as to avoid the slight and usually transitory discomforts of the stomach that follow a proper meal (Rektoratsrede, AA 15: 950).

Mendelssohn died in 1786. The question of what caused his death was debated in the newspapers of Berlin and Hamburg. According to Mary Gregor, some blamed Jacobi for that, because he has criticized Lessing for being an atheist, mocker and hypocrite, and made some unprincipled use of Lessing comments on Spinoza. Mendelssohn felt obliged to refute the attack on his friend: “Mendelssohn produced his reply quickly, so as to erase the impression Jacobi had made, and the strain so weakened him that he died of a cold he caught while delivering his reply to the publisher” (Gregor 1992, p.205).

Kant was aware of this debate, but he did not impute his death to any philosophical discussion, no matter how unkind:

Eulogizers of that great man Mendelssohn put the blame for his death on one or another of the learned man who got him involved in a dispute with them. In my judgement, however, no one should be accused of such an atrocious crime. What was at fault was, rather, the very way of life of that much-lamented man (Rektorsrede, AA 15: 942)

Kant finally attributed the death of Moses Mendelssohn to a mistake in his diet, because he followed a diet based on strict temperance and abstemiousness: “By this, however, he so weakened the forces of his body, that the sort of every-day injury, that would hardly affect someone properly nourished, shattered and killed that much-lamented man, exhausted by excessive temperance” (Rektorsrede, AA 15: 951).

It is important to consider that, against excesses, Kant defends moderation, and in the case of food he rejects fasting, considering that satiety is preferable at least at one meal a day, as was his habit.

Kant’s remarks inform us about his philosophy more generally in interesting ways and help us rethinking the moral value of consumption today. He points to a wise use of food and drink, that correctly nourishes the body, without the excess of consumption, and prevent us to follow a diet that will not give enough nutrients for the body.

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