

THE ULTIMATE KANTIAN EXPERIENCE: KANT ON DINNER PARTIES

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As one would expect, Kant believes that there is a tension, and even a conflict, between our bodily humanity and its ethical counterpart: “Inclination to pleasurable living and inclination to virtue are in conflict with each other.” What is more unexpected, however, is that he further claims that this tension can be resolved in what he calls an example of “civilized bliss,” namely, dinner parties.¹

The good living which still seems to harmonize best with virtue is a good meal in good company (and if possible with alternating companions) . . . this little dinner party . . . must not only try to supply physical satisfaction—which everyone can find for himself—but also social enjoyment for which the dinner must appear only as a vehicle. (*Anthropology*, 186–187 [7:278])

Dinner parties are, for Kant, part of the “highest ethicophysical good,” the ultimate resolution of the conflict between our physical body and our moral powers, which consists in finding the right proportions for the “mixture” between our partly “sensuous” and partly “ethicointellectual” nature.²

The aim of this paper is not only to explain Kant’s account of the ideal proportions of ethicophysical good in dinner parties, but also, and more importantly, to argue that dinner parties are in fact the ultimate experience for us, human beings.

1. THE EMBODIED DIMENSION OF DINNER PARTIES

(i) Bodily Pleasures

As hinted at in the passage on good living, one of the primary purposes of a dinner party is to supply physical satisfaction. Insofar as it belongs to the domain of the sensuously agreeable, this physical satisfaction is problematic, for there are no universal rules that guide its realization.

Tastes in food and drink vary amongst people, even within the same culture, and it is a matter of private sense. However, Kant suggests that if universal validity cannot be reached, a comparatively universal validity can be found if “the host makes his decisions with the tastes of his guests in mind, so that everyone finds something to his own liking; such a procedure yields a comparatively universal validity.”³ The procedure is thus to inquire about the guests’ taste and to make sure that the diversity of food and drink on offer satisfies it.

(ii) Bodily Helps and Constraints

Insofar as bodily needs are an essential part of the dinner party experience, Kant has to take into account the fact that their satisfaction has not only an impact but a constraining effect on the operations of the mind: “because reasoning is always a kind of work and exertion of energy, this finally becomes difficult after eating rather copiously during the dinner.”⁴ But far from being presented as a difficulty, this suggests that bodily constraints have to be integrated into the regimen of the dinner party. For instance, the rules that determine the flow of conversation recommend that if reasoning is appropriate, and even beneficial, at the early stages of the dinner, it is not so at the later stages, when “the conversation turns naturally to the mere play of wit.”⁵ And thanks to Nature’s good planning, we find a satisfying coordination of the body’s needs (digestion) and the mind’s cultivation (humor):

Such laughter, if it is loud and good-natured, has ultimately been determined by nature to help the stomach in the digestive process by moving the diaphragm and intestines, consequently contributing to the physical well-being. Meanwhile the participants in the dinner . . . fancy that they have found culture of the intellect . . . in the purpose of Nature. (*Anthropology*, 189 [7:281])⁶

Bodily pleasures are not merely a source of constraints, they provide invaluable helps to the mind’s wonderings. Firstly, insofar as the satisfaction of bodily needs is the condition of possibility of the continuation of the experience as a whole, the “first appetite” has to be satisfied at the outset. But this is not the only bodily contribution. Once bodily needs have been addressed and the following stage of the dinner party turns to the mind’s pleasure through conversation, “a dispute arises which continues to whet the appetite for food and drink.” Here, we find once again the continual interaction between mind and body, but also the beneficial effects produced by the body on the mind. For “in proportion to the liveliness of the dispute and the participation in it, the food is felt to be beneficial.”⁷ Kant does not specify the actual benefits of the food, but we can suppose that it has to do with tempering the disputes, lightening the tone of the conversation and thus making the experience

as a whole more cheerful and pleasant. Bodily pleasures through food and drink remind the guests that the experience is about enjoyment and that disagreements should not be taken too seriously.⁸

As a result, the attainment of a harmony between our physical body and our rational powers consists in finding the right proportions for their mixture—the ideal structure for their harmonious interaction—rather than ignoring one for the benefit of the other.

(iii) The Ethical Constraints on Bodily Pleasures

Unsurprisingly however, the diversity of food and drink offered at a dinner party has to be restricted by certain ethical rules. For their ingestion has an impact not only on our bodily functions, but more importantly on our self-mastery.⁹ And since, unlike animals, we have the ability to choose what we consume, it is crucial to eat well and appropriately to our bodily needs as well as to the circumstances and the demands they make on us.¹⁰ In particular, we know from experience that certain drinks are intoxicating and hinder our ability to think and control ourselves. Thus, the consumption of alcohol should not lead to extreme drunkenness, for “All stultifying drunkenness, such as comes from opium or brandy, that is, drunkenness which does not encourage sociability or the exchange of thought, has something shameful about it.”¹¹ More precisely, the excessive ingestion of food or drink, which leads to a significant weakening or a loss of the capacity to use one’s powers, goes against the duties to the self.

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 skills and deliberation.—It is obvious that putting oneself in such a state violates a duty to oneself. (*M.M.*, 551 [6:427])

According to Kant, human beings have two types of duties to the self: the development of one’s talents, and one’s moral perfection.¹² Insofar as these duties require, as their condition of possibility, consciousness and self-control, anything that impedes these capacities becomes a vice and an indirect violation of the duty to the self: “The vices that are here opposed to his duty to himself are . . . such *excessive consumption of food and drink* as weakens his capacity for making purposive use of his powers.”¹³ Moreover, these excesses lead to a loss of humanity that entails that we are bereaved of our right for respect: “A human being who is drunk is like a mere animal, not to be treated as a human being.”¹⁴ This is because what makes a human being properly human, and thus worthy of respect, is precisely his capacity for reason and autonomy. By relinquishing them through drunkenness however, he automatically gives up the right these capacities entitle him to, namely respect.

However, a passage from the *Anthropology* suggests that although excessive drinking ought to be avoided, moderate drinking can be morally beneficial:

Drink loosens the tongue. But it also opens the heart wide, and it is a vehicle instrumental to a moral quality, that is, openheartedness. . . . Good-naturedness is presupposed when this license is granted to a man to cross the boundary line of sobriety for a short time, for the sake of sociability. (*Anthropology*, 61 [7:171])

So perhaps unexpectedly, Kant is not an advocate of complete sobriety in the context of dinner parties. Sociability together with morality permits and even encourages slight inebriation for a short period of time as long as the drinker is good-natured and so long as it allows sincerity and sociability. This is because the “behavior [of not revealing oneself completely] betrays the tendency of our species to be evil-minded towards one another . . . [it] does not fail to deteriorate gradually from pretence to intentional deception, and finally to lying.”¹⁵ By contrast, sincerity, when associated with a good nature, is a moral quality.

In this sense, there is a classification of drinks and drugs according to their effect vis-à-vis conversation, sociability and virtue, wine being the drink that is most fitting to a successful dinner party:¹⁶

1. Wine induces merriness, boisterousness, wittiness and openheartedness. Thus it is good for conversation, sociability, and virtue.
2. Beer provides intoxication for social purposes but induces taciturn fantasies and impolite behavior. Thus it is good for conversation but bad for virtuous sociability.
3. Opium, brandy and spirits induce silence, reticence, stultifying and dreamy euphoria. Thus they contravene sociability and conversation.¹⁷

The ingestion of intoxicating foods and drinks has to be well proportioned to the demands of sociability, decency towards others, and respect of oneself as a rational being. For “What really counts . . . is the kind of relationship whereby the inclination to good living is curbed by the law of virtue.”¹⁸

2. THE ETHICS OF DINNER PARTIES

(i) The “Dress that Properly Clothes Virtue”¹⁹

According to Kant, dinner parties generate the enjoyment of “moral culture within society.”²⁰ This claim can be best understood by examining the relationship between civilized social intercourse and the cultivation of virtue—what Kant calls “the virtues of social intercourse.”

[Affability, sociability, courtesy, hospitality, and gentleness] promote the feeling for virtue itself by a striving to bring this illusion as near as possible to the truth. By all 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. (*M.M.*, 588 [6:473])

This suggests that civilized social intercourse has two functions that can be thought of as promoting, as well as helping, the realization of virtue. Firstly, it entails a self-restraint that both reveals and cultivates a capacity for “self-mastery [which] is the beginning of conquering oneself. It is a step towards virtue or at least a capacity thereto.”²¹ So if politeness is not virtue, it is a step towards it, a step that exercises and strengthens one’s self-mastery, and helps one to overcome—or at least control and refine—one’s passions.

The passion of love is much moderated through [politeness], when one plays around with the beautiful for the amenities of association and conceals the red-hot inclination, that otherwise would be difficult to suppress; the well-mannered association and the artful joke defeat the otherwise hard to overcome inclination. (*L.A.*, [25:930])

Politeness in social intercourse fosters the capacity to keep under control the passions and inclinations which are, for Kant, the main source of harm to reason and autonomy: “In regard to the inclinations, the human being must be brought under control, just as in regard to the sensations, he must be refined. The propriety which one observes in society does not come of itself and by chance, but much time must be spent on it, so that our natural unruliness can be brought under control, until we attain propriety.”²² Thus, it is because “passions do the greatest harm to freedom” that combating and controlling them through civilized social intercourse, which brings about self-mastery, is a step towards virtue.²³

The second function of civilized social intercourse is that it leads to the love of virtue: “one who loves the illusion of the good [i.e., politeness] eventually is won over to actually loving the good.”²⁴ But how can the love of the illusion of the good lead to the love of the good itself? The reason why one loves the illusion of the good seems to be quite different in kind from the reason why one might come to love the good. One way of looking at this issue is to focus on the workings of politeness itself. If one loves the illusion of the good and enacts this illusion in social intercourse, one might come to appreciate its worth and love the good itself for its own sake. Correlatively from the point of view of the spectator, loving the illusion of the good in others may encourage us to be polite in order to become lovable, which, in turn, exercises our self-mastery, leads us to control our passions and, eventually, to love the good for its own sake.

Affability, sociability, courtesy, hospitality, and gentleness (in disagreeing without quarrelling) 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. (*M.M.*, 588 [6:473])²⁵

Thus, civilized dinner parties make virtue attractive, for “everything that furthers companionship, even if it consists only of pleasant maxims or manners, is a dress that properly clothes virtue.”²⁶

(ii) Virtue’s Grubby Dress

However, civilization and politeness understood as essential parts of the art of good sociable living do not necessarily lead to virtue; that is to say, they are not intrinsic goods. For instance, “if sociable enjoyment is boastfully heightened by squander, then this false sociability ceases to be virtue, and becomes merely high living, injurious to humanity.”²⁷ This is due to the fact that if polite sociable living is used as a means in our pursuit of virtue, it becomes objectively good, as in the virtues of social intercourse; but if it turns into a means to the realization of vice, it becomes contrary to duty and thus objectively evil—as in entertainment during or after dinner, which oddly belongs to the latter category.

Music, dance, and games are conducive to company without conversation (because those few words which are needed for games establish no conversation which encourages a mutual exchange of thought). Some people claim that games should serve only to fill out the emptiness of conversation after dinner, but it is commonly made the principal affair. It is used as a means of acquisition by which the emotions are strongly stirred, and where a certain habit of self-interest is established in order to plunder each other with the greatest politeness. As long as the game lasts, nobody denies that complete egoism is determined to be the rule of conduct. (*Anthropology*, 186 [7:277–278]; translation modified)

The problem with artistic entertainment during or after dinner is that it prevents the exchange of thoughts.²⁸ But games are the worst form of dinner party entertainment, for not only do they prevent conversation, they also violate the union of sociability with virtue by allowing and even encouraging the pursuit of self-interest. Of course, games that encourage self-interest (we can imagine that Kant is here concerned with games involving money) should be distinguished from the ones that merely pass time (the “*passe-temps*”), which are morally neutral and culturally beneficial: “We are passing time when we keep the mind at play by the fine arts, and even in a game that is aimless in itself within a peaceful rivalry at least the culture of the mind is brought about.”²⁹ In the latter case, the game is aimless (or if it has an aim, it is simply to pass time and the culture of the mind is its by-product), whilst in

the former, the aim is the cultivation of egoism. As Kant notes, these forms of entertainment do generate some culture. However, culture is only conditionally good; if it leads to, or is governed by, self-interest, “such conversation does not further the union of social good living with virtue, and consequently, it would thereby hardly further the cause of true humaneness.”³⁰

As a result, the only form of culture that is morally worthy consists in instances when it is associated with, or at least curbed by, the law of virtue. Otherwise, instead of being the dress that properly clothes virtue, it is at best mere empty mannerism, and at worst a veil for self-interest—“virtue’s grubby dress.”

(iii) Naked Virtue

If good living and sociable enjoyment without virtue is injurious to humanity, its opposite, namely virtue without good living, is just as injurious.

The cynic’s purism and the hermit’s mortification of the flesh, without social good living, are distorted interpretations of virtue and do not make virtue attractive; rather, being forsaken by the Graces, they can make no claim of humanity. (*Anthropology*, 191 [7:282])

These zealous individuals may appear virtuous; but for Kant, they are not. This is so for two reasons. Firstly, humanity requires both good living and virtue; one without the other is not true humanity. For, as suggested at the beginning of this paper, the human being is partly sensuous and partly ethico-intellectual. Ignoring either of these dimensions amounts to denying what makes us truly human. This is of course closely connected to Kant’s conception of happiness as a necessary, natural human end. Happiness is an intrinsic good for us qua natural beings: its pursuit is morally permissible when not contrary to the moral law and its achievement is our right insofar as we are virtuous.³¹ Thus, there is something inhuman in the cynic’s purism: by renouncing his right to happiness, he denies what is a natural, and even necessary, end of humanity.

Similarly the hermit, by living in isolation, goes against human nature. As Kant writes in his *Anthropology*, “Man was not meant to belong to a herd like the domesticated animals, but rather, like to bee, to belong to a hive community. It is necessary for him always to be a member of some civil society.”³² In fact, not only does the hermit deny his natural needs as a member of the human species, but more importantly, he violates a crucial duty to the self, namely:

It is a duty to oneself as well as to others not to *isolate* oneself but to use one's moral perfections in social intercourse . . . to cultivate a disposition of reciprocity . . . and so to associate the graces with the virtues. To bring this about is itself a duty of virtue. (*M.M.*, 588 [6:473])

By isolating himself from the rest of the human species, the hermit neglects the social dimension of virtue, which is crucial to the realization of the duty of perfecting oneself morally. One cannot be truly and fully moral if one lives alone, because for Kant, the social aspect of virtue is just as important as the agent-centered one: "*The art of good living* is the proper equivalent to living well as to sociability."³³ Insofar as dinner parties provide the perfect stage for social intercourse, which is part of the duties of virtue, it is in some sense our duty to host and attend them.

The second reason why "naked virtue" (virtue without good living) is not true virtue is that it "do[es] not make virtue attractive."³⁴ As noted at the beginning of this section, the art of good living makes virtue lovable, and this is partly what makes its realization an indirect duty. By contrast, the ethical ascetics represented by the Stoics makes virtue unappealing:

Monkish ascetics, which from superstitious fear or hypocritical loathing of oneself goes to work with self-torture and mortification of the flesh, is not directed to virtue but rather to fantastically purging oneself of sin by imposing punishment on oneself. . . . [I]t cannot produce the cheerfulness that accompanies virtue, but much rather brings with it secret hatred for virtue's command. (*M.M.*, 597–598 [6:485])

By neglecting the virtues that come together with the art of good living, ascetics overlooks a crucial dimension of morality, the social dimension, which alone makes virtue lovable through social interaction.

As a result, we can now understand the full meaning of this passage: "What really counts, however, is the kind of relationship whereby the inclination to good living is curbed by the law of virtue." Human beings should not renounce either virtue or good living, for neither good living without virtue (virtue's grubby clothes), nor virtue without good living (naked virtue) is true to authentic humaneness, which is "The kind of thought characteristic of the union of good living and virtue in society."³⁵

3. THE COGNITIVE DIMENSION OF DINNER PARTIES

(i) A Refreshing Play of Thoughts

One of the crucial dimensions of dinner parties has to do with the intellectual stimulation of the understanding via conversation—what Kant calls a "refreshing play of thoughts," which consists in the discussion of the news of the day ("1. narration"), followed by "arguing back and forth"

(“2. reasoning”), and finally ending with humor (“3. jesting”).³⁶ But rather than being a fairly banal remark about the course of conversations at dinner parties, this is a significant point about the healthy way of life. To understand this claim, we should turn to a counterexample, namely the figure of the solitary diner.

Eating alone (*solipsimus victorii*) is unhealthy for a philosophizing man of learning; it does not restore his powers but exhausts him (especially when it becomes a solitary feasting); it turns into exhausting work, and not into the refreshing play of thoughts. The indulging person who wastes himself in self-consuming thought during the solitary meal gradually loses his vivacity which, on the other hand, he would have gained if a table companion with alternative ideas had offered stimulation through new material which he had not been able to dig up himself. (*Anthropology*, 188–189 [7:279–280])³⁷

The solitary diner wastes himself because, by not communicating his thoughts to others, he denies himself the confrontation of ideas that sociable dinners provide. He wastes his thoughts, but he also wastes himself because by missing out on the intellectual stimulation and the opportunities for learning new facts that others supply, he exhausts his own powers, which is unhealthy.³⁸ By contrast, since “The mind cannot be at rest long, but it must receive a new impetus[,] Social gatherings which constitute essential enjoyment are a part of this, and are a veritable medicine for the mind.”³⁹ Thus, the sociable diner is not only socially healthy, but also cognitively healthy. For through conversational interaction at dinner parties, he finds cognitive invigoration.

Moreover, although most conversations provide some degree of intellectual stimulation, Kant notes that certain topics, such as the discussion of anthropological facts, rank higher than others:

A great utility of anthropology consists in social intercourse, for anthropology makes us skilled with respect to it, and also gives very beautiful material for conversation. Many materials are not appropriate for social gatherings: women do not inquire about affairs of state, but nevertheless want to converse, and so one finds that certain observations about the human being please, because every human being can employ them. Because this study is so engaging and so important for everyone, it therefore must rightly be held in high regard. (*L.A.*, [25:858])

In the context of social intercourse, anthropology is a pleasant and entertaining subject. But it is also “important for everyone” because it is the discipline that is most useful for the conduct of life as “citizen of the world.”⁴⁰ Although Kant insists that dinner party conversations should not be too serious, they should nevertheless be useful whilst remaining

entertaining.⁴¹ Discussions of anthropology thus accommodate dinner party conversations the best because not only are they extremely beneficial for the participants, they also appeal to, and matter to, everyone—even women. In addition, insofar as one of the aims of anthropology itself is to improve the skills of social intercourse, including the art of conversation and dinner parties, the guests enter a virtuous circle of social improvement by discussing anthropology during dinner parties.⁴²

What should be noted, however, is that even if the conversation over dinner is not in fact very fruitful intellectually or cognitively, its thoughtlessness can nevertheless be worthy if it is lively:

Thoughtlessness is either a lively or lifeless one. The lively one is present in an individual through enjoyment and lively conversation; the lifeless one is where the individual is transposed into inaction, and it makes his condition, for the new use of his powers of mind, inanimate. One maintains oneself through lively thoughtlessness; although the conversation is not interesting, yet it cheers one up. It is not only easy to collect one's thoughts from it, but one can also reflect better and more actively. (*L.A.*, [25:540–541])

In this sense, even when it is thoughtless, lively conversation fortifies one's mental powers by keeping them animated.⁴³ By contrast, the lifeless thoughtlessness of the solitary diner is counter-productive for his mental powers because it dwindles them. So whether he is lifelessly thoughtless or wasting himself in self-consuming thoughts, the solitary diner's attitude towards his mental state is unhealthy.

(ii) The Best Guests for the Best Conversation

Although Kant examines at length the choice of appropriate topics of conversation, he refuses to discuss which types of guest provide the best conversation: "His skill in choosing guests who can engage themselves in mutual and general conversation (which is indeed also called taste, but in reality it is reason applied to taste, and yet is distinct from taste), cannot enter into the present question."⁴⁴ This is no doubt because this section of the *Anthropology* is concerned with taste strictly speaking. Yet despite the fact that this issue seems particularly relevant to his discussion of dinner party conversations, Kant never returns to it as such.⁴⁵ However, we can nevertheless attempt to determine the best dinner companions and the ideal combination of guests by examining the characteristics of the four human temperaments that he describes at length in his *Anthropology* as well as the *Lectures on Anthropology*, and in particular by selecting the qualities that are the most relevant to the proceedings of a dinner party.

According to Kant, the sanguine “is a good companion, jocular, and high-spirited”; he “is not affected; he is good company”; “He has the spirit of trifle, which is always very welcome in society. He is sociable, and is also suitable for society; he wants it, for it is his element.”⁴⁶ The melancholic “who is himself deprived of joy will hardly be able to tolerate it in others.” The choleric “is polite, but because of his emphasis on ceremony, he is stiff and affected in society”; he “often is wrong in tone, although at the same time in the thing itself he is right. As a result, he is not good company.”⁴⁷ The phlegmatic’s “fortunate temperament takes the place of wisdom. . . . By virtue of this temperament he is superior to others without offending their vanity.”⁴⁸

On this basis, we can conclude that the following hierarchy ensues:

1. The sanguine (for: good-natured, sociable, witty, and joyful; against: erratic)
2. The phlegmatic (for: wise, placid, humorous, inoffensive; against: insensible to stimuli, sometimes cunning)
3. The choleric (for: polite, easily appeased; against: hot-tempered, ceremonious, wrong in tone and affected)
4. The melancholic (for: deep-thinker; against: joyless, self-important, uneasy, mistrusting, critical)⁴⁹

Moreover, certain combinations of guests function better than others. For instance, a host should not invite two choleric together: “Two or more choleric people do not accommodate themselves well in company: for they all want to assert their judgments, and in this way a dispute often arises.”⁵⁰ And if one guest is choleric, a phlegmatic guest should be added to the company since “If the conversation gets heated (where usually the tone is to blame), and one person is angry, and where it is difficult to get into good tone again, there phelgma is preferable.”⁵¹

More generally, temperaments can either clash with or neutralize each other—the sanguine is opposed to the melancholic, the choleric to the phlegmatic, and temperaments of feeling are opposed to temperaments of activity.⁵² As a result, a host should not invite either melancholics and phlegmatics, or sanguines and choleric, together. He should rather mix up temperaments by neutralizing sanguines with phlegmatics and choleric with melancholics. And on the basis of the hierarchy presented above, the former is the best combination, since they both rank higher as guests than the latter.

(iii) The Rules of the “Sensus Conversationis”

A number of rules that guide dinner party conversations directly concern cognition. They can be summarized in the following fashion:

- (1) Not to speak dogmatically: “do not tolerate the beginning or continuation of anything dogmatic.”
- (2) To be exhaustive and comprehensive in the treatment of topics: “an entertaining subject must nearly be exhausted before one can pass on to another.”
- (3) To be consistent in topic and thought: “do not change the subject unnecessarily, nor jump from one subject to another.”⁵³

These rules are reminiscent of the rules of the *sensus communis*:

The following maxims may serve to elucidate its principles: (1) to think for oneself; (2) to think from the standpoint of everyone else; and (3) to think always consistently. The first is the maxim of an *unprejudiced*, the second of a *broadened*, the third of a *consistent* way of thinking. (*C.J.*, 160–161 [5:294])

In this sense, one could say that the cognitive rules that guide the exchange of thoughts at dinner parties are the conversational counterpart of the *sensus communis*—a “sensus conversationis.”

The rule of consistency seems particularly relevant here. To have a better grasp of it, it can be useful to recall that it is analogous to the cognitive rules spelt out in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. There, Kant argues that the mind needs intellectual consistency, and that it is only produced if a thread connects the various ideas together—a thread that is in fact demanded by reason in its quest for unity.⁵⁴ So just as the progress of knowledge can only be generated through the combination of unity and variety in the thoughts of the knowing subject, the progress of conversation requires a similar combination of unity and variety: “There must however be variousness and unity in such social conversations, connection must prevail in the understanding, for otherwise it displeases everyone if no connection exists.”⁵⁵ This unity is reached through the principles of consistency and inter-connection between the various topics discussed. Kant illustrates this rule with an instructive example:

He who enters upon a social discourse must, therefore, begin with what is present and near at hand, and thus gradually lead to what is more remote as long as it can be of any interest. Thus, a good and common subject is the bad weather for a person who walks from the street into a group assembled for mutual conversation. If, upon entering a room, one begins to speak of the latest news from Turkey currently appearing in the papers, then the imagination of others

would be struck too forcibly, since they would not understand what has led him to speak of it. The mind demands a certain order in the communication of thoughts, and much depends on the general circumstances and the opening statement. (*Anthropology*, 67* [7:177])

4. THE POLITICS OF DINNER PARTIES

(i) The Rules of the “Sensus Communitis”

Kant expresses the political dimension of dinner parties in terms of the rules that regulate the topics of conversation as well as the guests’ attitudes towards each other.⁵⁶ These rules can be divided according to the matter / form distinction.

(A) Matter: the content of the conversation

- (1) Common interests: “choose topics for conversation which interest everybody.”
- (2) No private interests: “this conversation ought not to be business.”
- (3) Communal conversation: “a conversation of taste . . . must always bring culture with it, where each always talks with all (not merely with his neighbor).”⁵⁷

This first set of rules can be understood in terms of the injunction that at a dinner party, everyone should be discussing the same matters at the same time with everyone (rule 3), and that moreover, these matters should be of common interest (rule 1) rather than private interest (rule 2). Although the third rule, which prescribes communal conversation, may appear a bit excessive, it is justified by the fact that small groups within a dinner party threaten to break down the cohesion of the party. This is why Kant notes approvingly that “Chesterfield says that the number of companions must not be fewer than that of the Graces, nor more than that of the Muses”—a dinner party should have at least three guests so as to ensure that the conversation flows without being too intense, and at most nine so as to avoid a split into smaller groups.⁵⁸ Similarly, the first and second rules, which forbid talk of business and encourage topics of general interest, prevent the breakdown of the unity of the party by warning against the threat of private interests taking over the conversation. As already suggested, anthropology, arguments about moral worth and the news of the day are the appropriate topics worth discussing in such a context.

(B) Form: the structure of the conversation

- (1') Democratic: “always give everyone a chance to add something appropriate.”⁵⁹

- (2') Non-conflicting, or at least no lasting conflict: "none of the guests should go home from the company at variance with another."

- (3') Respect and self-control: "control yourself and your emotions carefully so that mutual respect and good faith always prevail."⁶⁰

The rules grouped under the heading of form crucially refer to the features of a good, just and enlightened society; namely, freedom, respect and companionship.⁶¹ Freedom is expressed through the guests' self-control, which enables respect (both towards themselves and others), which leads to peaceful companionship. In this sense, what these rules make possible is human "sociable sociability."⁶² And if we further build on the connection between the rules that govern dinner parties and those of the *sensus communis*, the political rules spelt out here could be called the rules of "sensus communitis"—for what they enable is a peaceful community achieved through social cooperation and mutual respect.

(ii) The Covenants amongst Diners

The claim that dinner parties generate a true community of diners is further supported by the fact that they are based on two implicit social contracts: the covenant of security and the covenant of trust. Firstly,

There is something analogous to the confidence between men, who eat together at the same table, and their familiarity with ancient customs like those of the Arab, with whom a stranger may feel safe as soon as he has been able to obtain a refreshment (a drink of water) in the Arab's tent; or by accepting salt and bread offered by deputies coming to her from Moscow, the Russian Czarina could regard herself as secure from all snares by the bond of hospitality. Eating together at the same table is regarded as formal evidence of such a covenant of security. (*Anthropology*, 188 [7:279])

Eating together presupposes a covenant of security, and it becomes a duty of the host to guarantee it. This is the first condition of possibility of the existence of this community.

The second condition is expressed through what Kant calls the duty of secrecy, namely the rule that indiscretion and gossip are not permissible in the context of dinner parties.

Even without any special agreement any such gathering has a certain sanctity and duty of secrecy about it in consideration of what embarrassment fellow members of the dinner party might be caused afterwards. Without such confidence the wholesome gratification of enjoying moral culture within society and of enjoying culture itself would be denied. (*Anthropology*, 187 [7:279])

The confidence involved in dinner parties should be understood in terms of trust, but this trust is of a very different kind from the one we demand from promises and truth telling. For in the latter case, and on the basis of the categorical imperative, we have a moral right to be told the truth and the corresponding duty to tell the truth and keep our promises. However, what is at stake here is rather a trust that has to do with the possibility of revealing our thoughts without fear of disclosure. What Kant must have in mind here is the danger of indiscretion he acknowledges in a passage from the *Metaphysics of Morals*:

He would like to discuss with someone what he thinks about his associates, the government, religion and so forth, but he cannot risk it: partly because the other person, while prudently keeping back his own judgments, might use this to harm him, and partly because, as regards disclosing his faults, the other person may conceal his own, so that he would lose something of the other's respect by presenting himself quite candidly to him. . . . Every human being has his secrets and dare not confide blindly in others, partly because of a base cast of mind in most human beings to use them to one's disadvantage and partly because many people are indiscreet or incapable of judging and distinguishing what may or may not be repeated. (*M.M.*, 587 [6:472])

Given the physiognomy of the human species, human beings find it prudent to conceal their thoughts. By contrast, dinner parties can be thought of as an oasis of trust, a sanctuary that allows us to reveal our deepest thoughts, a haven that protects us against gossip and indiscretions.⁶³ Trust is thus the crucial condition of an “open exchange” of ideas, and in this sense it is akin to Kant's definition of public reason as the condition of the attainment of enlightenment: the scholar “enjoys in this *public use* of reason an unrestricted freedom to use his own rational capacities and to speak his own mind.”⁶⁴ In this sense, dinner parties are not merely political communities, they are “republics of diners” where the freedom of thought is guaranteed in order to produce an open exchange of ideas.

CONCLUSION

As Kant writes, the human being “is destined by his reason to live in a society of other people, and in this society he has to cultivate himself, civilize himself, and apply himself to a moral purpose.”⁶⁵ Unfortunately, these aims are merely regulative at the level of the human species.⁶⁶ But this is precisely what makes dinner parties such an extra-ordinary experience: they offer the unique opportunity to realize, and thus embody, the ideal form of humanity—if only for a blissful evening. It is in this sense that they are the ultimate Kantian experience.

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NOTES

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1. *Anthropology*, 185–186 [7:277].

Because the following works by Kant are cited frequently, they are identified by these abbreviations: *Anthropology: Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996); *C.F.*: “The Conflict of Faculties,” in *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); *C.J.*: *Critique of Judgment* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987); *C.P.R.*: *Critique of Pure Reason* (China: Palgrave, 1929); *C.Pr.R.*: “Critique of Practical Reason,” in *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); *Idea*: “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent,” in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays on Politics, History and Morals* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983); *L.A.*: *Lectures on Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); *L.E.*: *Lectures on Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); *M.M.*: “The Metaphysics of Morals,” in *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); *S.B.*: “Speculative Beginning of Human History,” in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays on Politics, History and Morals* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983); and *T.P.*: “On the Common Saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice,” in *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). For the sake of clarity in the references to Kant’s writings, I have used titles rather than the author-date system and cited the English translation, followed by a citation to the German text of the Academy edition (volume and page reference) in brackets.

2. *Anthropology*, 185 [7:277].

3. *Anthropology*, 145 [7:242]; see also *C.J.*, 56 [5:213].

4. *Anthropology*, 189 [7:280].

5. *Anthropology*, 189 [7:280].

6. For an account of Nature’s general purposes for the human species, see Alix A. Cohen, “Kant on Epigenesis, Monogenesis and Human Nature: The Biological Premises of Anthropology,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of the Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, vol. 37 (2006), pp. 675–693.

7. *Anthropology*, 189 [7:280].

8. As Kant writes, “There is nothing more ridiculous than making social intercourse wearisome” (*L.A.*, [25:487]). In this respect, it seems that women play a similar role to that of food and drink: “such social intercourse should also not be interesting, but serve as relaxation. Hence women have the good manners to put an end to the serious conversation of the men and to transform the most important matters into fun, which is very nice in society. Indeed only a

woman is enough for well-thinking men to keep them in limits in their serious discussions" (*L.A.*, [25:706]).

9. Gastronomic excesses can indeed be harmful to our bodily functions, but this is a mere matter of prudence: "The reason for considering this kind of excess [excessive use of food or drink] is not the harm or bodily pain (diseases) that a human being brings on himself by it; for then the principle by which it is to be counteracted would be one of well-being and comfort (and so of happiness), and such a principle can establish only a rule of prudence, never a duty" (*M.M.*, 550–551 [6:427]). Thus, it falls under the heading of bodily pleasures and pains, agreeableness and disagreeableness.

10. In *Speculative Beginning*, Kant in fact identifies the ability to choose between different kinds of foods as one of the specific features of humanity. Through a reconstitution of biblical history, he portrays the first steps of freedom as the discovery of a capacity to satisfy hunger by the use of new foods through cookery experiments that oppose or at least diverge from the voice of instinct (*S.B.*, 51 [8:112]).

11. *Anthropology*, 60 [7:170]. See also "Excessive social drinking that leads to the befogging of the senses is by no means becoming to a man, not only with respect to the company with whom he enjoys himself, but also from the standpoint of self-esteem, particularly when a man leaves the company staggering, or at least with an unsure step, or merely babbling" (*Anthropology*, 60 [7:170]).

12. *M.M.*, 522–523 [6:391–393].

13. *M.M.*, 545 [6:420]. As Kant writes, "Virtue requires, in the first place, governing oneself" (*M.M.*, 535 [6:407]).

14. *M.M.*, 551 [6:427].

15. *Anthropology*, 250 [7:332].

16. This is confirmed by Maugham's narration of Kant's own dinner parties: "Before each guest was placed a pint bottle of red wine and a pint bottle of white" (W. S. Maugham, *The Vagrant Mood* [London: Random House, 2001], p. 132). By doing so, Kant could encourage virtuous sociability whilst satisfying the taste of his guests. This attention to detail rightly suggests that Kant was an exceptional host—as confirmed by Friedrich Lupin, one of his guests: "What a triumph, to be asked to table by the king in Königsberg! . . . It was one of the characteristics of this great man that his deep thinking did not stand in the way of his cheerful socializing" (M. Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001], p. 357).

17. *Anthropology*, 59–60 [7:170] and *M.M.*, 551 [6:428].

18. *Anthropology*, 186 [7:277].

19. *Anthropology*, 191 [7:282].

20. *Anthropology*, 187 [7:279].

21. *L.A.*, [25:930].

22. *Anthropology*, 173 [7:266] and *L.A.*, [25:623]. Note that for Kant, women play an important role in regulating social gatherings through the art of politeness: “The women are judges of taste in social intercourse. Without them, social intercourse is unrefined, turbulent, and unsociable. In a society of nothing but men, one degenerates into conflict, [a] know-it-all attitude, and quarrelling, but that is not the case in the society of women.” (*L.A.*, [25:705]).

23. *Anthropology*, 172 [7:265]. For suggestions along similar lines, see Patrick Frierson, *Freedom and Anthropology in Kant’s Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and “The Moral Importance of Politeness in Kant’s Anthropology,” *Kantian Review*, vol. 9 (2005), pp. 105–127; as well as Robert Loudon, “Applying Kant’s Ethics: The Role of Anthropology,” in *A Companion to Kant*, ed. G. Bird (London: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 350–363.

24. *L.A.*, [25:931].

25. Of course, as Kant himself notes, the rules of social intercourse are admittedly a “play of pretences,” but these pretences are necessary insofar as they allow polite society, and even mere society itself: “Collectively, the more civilized men are, the more they are actors . . . and it is even a good thing that this is so in this world” (*Anthropology*, 37 [7:151]). For instance, insofar as all the participants of a dinner party are aware of the fact that in order for them to spend a nice evening, they have to pretend virtue or at least conceal vice, they are not being immoral but pragmatic: they pursue the purpose of a sociable interaction between the guests, and for Kant, “There are, indeed, only *externals* or by-products (*parerga*), which give a beautiful illusion resembling virtue that is also not deceptive since everyone knows how it must be taken” (*M.M.*, 588 [6:473]). As long as the pretence of virtue is taken for what it is, namely pretence, someone who pretends virtue in fact fosters polite society and peaceful companionship. For a good analysis of the distinction between pretence and lie, see Frierson, “The Moral Importance of Politeness in Kant’s Anthropology,” section III.

26. *Anthropology*, 190–191 [7:282]. And in this respect, Kant notes that French women are the best dressed of all: “Social intercourse with the French woman schools [one] highly, because they are talkative and sociable, and show off a lot with their talents. If one is to judge impartially, then we would all be bears in our social intercourse, if we would not be refined by the French. In no country is conduct as universal as in France, in which every peasant girl can very soon attain the conduct of a princess” (*L.A.*, [25: 657–658]).

27. *Anthropology*, 186 [7:277].

28. This is further confirmed by Kant’s remark on banquets: “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” (*M.M.*, 551–552 [6:428]). Social

gatherings, even if they tempt one towards gastronomic excesses, nevertheless have a moral function insofar as they encourage social interaction through conversation. However, if the conversation is limited due to the large number of guests, then the banquet acquires an immoral function insofar as it leads to intemperance. The importance of the exchange of thoughts will be discussed in the section dedicated to the cognitive dimension of dinner parties.

29. *Anthropology*, 38 [7:152]; translation modified.

30. *Anthropology*, 186 [7:277–278].

31. “*His own happiness* is an end that every human being has (by virtue of the impulses of his nature)” (*M.M.*, 517 [6:386]). He does not have a duty towards his own happiness because he pursues it naturally, by virtue of being human. But we can imagine that if this were not the case, he would have a duty to pursue it.

32. *Anthropology*, 247 [7:330]. See also “Man is destined by his reason to live in a society of other people” (*Anthropology*, 241 [7:324]).

33. *Anthropology*, 154 [7:250]. This is akin to cases of self-sacrificial altruism. For instance, “The action by which someone tries with extreme danger to his life to rescue people from a shipwreck, finally losing his own life in the attempt, will indeed be reckoned, on one side, as a duty but on the other and even for the most part as a meritorious action; but our esteem for it will be greatly weakened by the concept of *duty* to himself, which seems in this case to suffer some infringement” (*C.Pr.R.*, 266 [5:158]). As Baron writes, “That she [the altruistic person] is self-sacrificing might indicate a lack of self-respect and, more specifically, a failure to view herself as an equal” (Marcia Baron, “Moral Paragons and the Metaphysics of Morals,” in *A Companion to Kant*, ed. G. Bird, p. 340). In a similar fashion, there is a moral problem with excessive virtue without good living, since it goes against the duties to the self.

34. *Anthropology*, 191 [7:282].

35. *Anthropology*, 186 [7:277].

36. *Anthropology*, 189 [7:280]. See also *Anthropology*, 67* [7:177].

37. Melville provides an interesting Foucauldian analysis of the solitary eater in Peter Melville, “Kant’s Dinner Party: Anthropology from a Foucauldian Point of View,” *Mosaic*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2002), pp. 92–109.

38. In this sense, the solitary eater is the cognitive counterpart of the cynic’s purism and the hermit’s mortification of the flesh, which, as showed in the preceding section, are counterexamples of the union of virtue and good living. And the solitary diner is far from being a mere trope; as Maugham notes, Kant “could not bear to eat alone and it is related that once when it happened that he had no one to bear him company he told his servant to go out into the street and bring in anyone he could find” (Maugham, *The Vagrant Mood*, p. 132). In fact, for more than thirty years, Kant ate lunch (the principal meal of the day) in pubs, and according to Borowski, “he always had an agreement with the owner that he would find good and decent society there” (Kuehn, *Kant*, p. 221). When he finally set up his household in 1787, he hired a cook and began

to host dinner parties at home (although he continued to eat out on Sundays). As Hasse recounts, "Everything was neat and clean. Only three dishes, but excellently prepared and very tasty, two bottles of wine, and when in season there was fruit and dessert. Everything had its determinate order" (Kuehn, *Kant*, p. 325).

39. *L.A.*, [25:569]. Hasse recounts that following the first course, generally a soup, Kant would say "Now, my gentlemen and friends! Let us talk a little. What's new?" Kant "loved to talk about political things. Indeed, he almost luxuriated in them. He also wanted to converse about city news and matters of common life" (Kuehn, *Kant*, p. 325). Indeed, Kant was renowned for his conversational skills: "He impressed other guests not only by 'his extra-ordinary knowledge . . . which extended to the most disparate matters,' but also by his 'beautiful and witty conversation'" (Kuehn, *Kant*, p. 334; see also p. 392).

40. As he writes about his *Lectures on Anthropology*, anthropology shows students how to use their knowledge and talents as "citizens of the world": the course "which I [Kant] therewith advertise, belongs to an idea which I have developed for a utilitarian academic instruction, which I may term the preliminary exercise in the *knowledge of the world*. This knowledge of the world is what serves to provide the *pragmatic* [dimension] for all the otherwise attained sciences and aptitudes, so that they are usable not merely in the *schools* but in *life*. Thereby the prepared student may be introduced to the stage where he will practice his vocation, namely the *world*" (*Announcement of Kant's Lectures* (1765/6), [2:443]).

41. Kant also notes that "of all arguments there are none that more excite the participation of persons who are otherwise soon bored with subtle reasoning and that bring a certain liveliness into the company than arguments about the *moral worth* of this or that action by which the character of some person is to be made out" (*C.Pr.R.*, 126 [5:153]). Discussions of moral worth are entertaining but more importantly they exercise moral judgment and thus play a role akin to that of moral education.

42. For anthropology discloses "the sources of all the [practical] sciences, the science of morality, of skill, of human intercourse, of the way to educate and govern human beings, and thus of everything that pertains to the practical" (*Correspondence* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 141 [10:145]).

43. Yet if the conversation is thoughtless without being enjoyable, then it becomes boring: "Conversations which have little exchange of ideas are called tedious, and just because of this tiresome" (*Anthropology*, 134 [7:234]). As Maugham recounts, Kant "left one eating-house because a fellow guest talked boringly and another because he found himself expected to hold forth on learned subjects, which was the very thing he did not want to do" (Maugham, *The Vagrant Mood*, p. 135). Similarly, if the conversation halts, the enjoyment is brought to a standstill (*L.A.*, [25:569]). Thus "do not allow deadly silence to fall, but permit only momentary pauses in the conversation . . . when conversation stagnates, one must know how to suggest skillfully, as an experiment, another related topic for conversation" (*Anthropology*, 190 [7:281]).

44. *Anthropology*, 145 [7:242].

45. He merely remarks that “if possible [one should dine] with alternating companions,” and that the type of dinner party he is concerned with is “composed solely of men of taste (aesthetically united), who are not only interested in having a meal together but also in enjoying one another” (*Anthropology*, 186–187 [7:278]).

46. *L.A.*, [25:1160].

47. *L.A.*, [25:1164–1165].

48. Unless specified, all quoted from *Anthropology*, 198–202 [7:287–292].

49. Unsurprisingly, this hierarchy differs in important ways from the hierarchy of temperament in their relation to virtue. For, although temperaments, insofar as they belong to sensibility, can never lead to true virtue, some of them harmonize with it better than others. For instance, the phlegmatic is a “fortunate temperament” that “takes the place of wisdom” (*Anthropology*, 200–201 [7:289–290]); thus it is the temperament that seems most naturally well suited to virtue. However, sanguine temperaments make the best dinner party guests.

50. *L.A.*, [25:1164–1165].

51. *L.A.*, [25:1166].

52. *Anthropology*, 197 [7:287].

53. All quoted from *Anthropology*, 189–190 [7:280–281].

54. For instance, “Reason thus prepares the field for the understanding: (1) through a principle of the *homogeneity* of the manifold under higher genera; (2) through a principle of the *variety* of the homogeneous under lower species; and (3) in order to complete the systematic unity, a further law, that of the *affinity* of all concepts” (*C.P.R.*, 542 [A 657 / B 685]).

55. *L.A.*, [25:514]. See also: “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” (*Anthropology*, 190 [7:281]); “Such conversation must not change from one subject to another by violating the natural relationship of ideas, for then the state of mental distraction would break up the company because everything is confused and the unity of conversation is entirely lacking” (*Anthropology*, 103 [7:207]); “What interrupts and destroys social conversation is the jumping from a given subject to one of a quite different sort. In this case the empirical association of perceptions is only subjective; that is, one person associates perceptions differently from another, and such association is misleading and, with respect to form, a kind of nonsense” (*Anthropology*, 67 [7:177]).

56. These rules are classified as political rather than moral because they have to do with the participants’ external freedom: they regulate external behavior independently of internal motives and intentions (see *T.P.*, 290-sq. [8:289]). Note that the classification that follows is mine; Kant himself does not introduce the matter / form distinction.

57. All quoted from *Anthropology*, 189–190 [7:280–282].

58. *Anthropology*, 186 [7:278]. Kant apparently remained faithful to this rule until the end of his life—even when he started living “a much more withdrawn life than at any prior time in his life, . . . he usually invited two guests” (Kuehn, *Kant*, p. 387).

59. Kant himself does not seem to have followed this rule, for as Maugham recounts, “Kant was fond of talking, but preferred to talk alone, and if interrupted or contradicted was apt to show displeasure; his conversation, however, was so agreeable that none minded if he monopolised it” (Maugham, *The Vagrant Mood*, p. 132).

60. All quoted from *Anthropology*, 189–190 [7:280–282]. The importance of self-control has already been analyzed in section 2 with the discussion of the cultivation of self-mastery through the virtues of social intercourse.

61. Note that freedom should be restricted by respect for other guests. For instance, “There are occasions at a festive table, where the presence of ladies automatically limits the freedom of the conversation to what is polite” (*Anthropology*, 187 [7:278]).

62. This is in reference to unsocial sociability (*Idea*, 32 [8:22]).

63. In this respect, they are like a moral friendship, where the duty of secrecy is part of the contract: it “is the complete confidence of two persons in revealing their secret judgments and feelings to each other, as far as such disclosures are consistent with mutual respect” (*M.M.*, 586 [6:471]).

64. *Anthropology*, 188 [7:279] and *What is Enlightenment?* in *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 43 [8:38].

65. *Anthropology*, 241–242 [7:324].

66. For instance, *Idea*, 36 [8:26] and *C.F.*, 304 [7:88–89].