THE RITUALS OF DINNER

The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners

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Learning to Behave

Polite behaviour is ritual performed for the sake of other people, and for the sake of our relationship with other people. Its purpose is to please and soothe them, especially where a rough passage is to be feared; to recognize and supply their need for esteem and comfort; to get one's way with them without arousing resentment. "Arousal" and "roughness" are avoided; smoothness and lubrication are what is sought. A polite person is polished (from the French poli; words to do with etiquette tend to derive from French).

Men are polished, through act and speech,
Each by each,
As pebbles are smoothed on the rolling beach.

Being made "smoother" by others' insistence, by "rubbing up against each other," we become easier to deal with and better able to handle other people. By an odd coincidence, "politeness" sounds like "politics," which comes from the Greek word for a city (polis),
just as "civilized" and "civil" come from Latin civis, a dweller in cities. It is often the assumption that "polished," "civil" people are to be found where many other people live; they are probably in an urban environment, which renders them "urbane."

Politeness forces us to pause, to take extra time, to behave in preset, pre-structured ways, to "fall in" with society's expectations. It is therefore the object of education, both by our parents when we are small and by society later. Other people inevitably make demands on us and inhibit us, partly in order to make room for themselves; we learn that it is in our best interests to play the game, because we also require the freedom which other people's restraint allows to us. But nothing about being polite is simple: the "polish" intended to help people interact with one another can be used to prevent real contact from occurring at all. It can also become itself a barrier, keeping the "unpolished" beyond the pale.

Mark Twain spoke of the cauliflower as "nothing but cabbage with a college education." We immediately see what he means: cabbages are simple, round, and lowly; but cauliflowers erupt into a sort of solid flower, elaborate, white, delicate, and somehow refined." "Training is everything," Twain concludes—although, in his own metaphor he uses, he draws attention to cauliflower's original cabbage "background," which the vegetable can never entirely transcend, no matter how much success its college degree might signify. But the cauliflower has complicated itself; it has put on embellishment. And in doing so it has prepared itself to move in the best circles."

**Bringing Children Up**

It is not enough that a child must grow up; he or she must "be brought" up as well. The verb is passive—the bringing is done to the child—and the implication is that the road travelled leads to a higher level.

Babies cannot be treated as though they were adults. They are utterly dependent on adults for their survival; they cannot walk or talk or eat or control their bowels. People have often thought of babies as not quite human—feeding off their mothers like little cannibals, impossible to discuss things with or explain things to, unruly, messy, demanding, "untamed," and rowdy. The ancient Romans believed that baby bears were born not only helpless but shapeless as well: mother bears (who had presumably been seen from a distance cleaning their newborns with their tongues) were thought actually to lick their offspring into the shape of little bears after their birth. We think of human children as needing, culturally speaking, to be "licked into shape"; fitted to be "one of us."

The process begins as soon as possible, with nursing. Mothers can be indulgent nurses, or let their babies cry to be fed; the infant soon experiences the degree to which it, or its mother, determines the feeding schedule. The mother's attitude in this regard, as in so much else, tends to be culturally induced. In most of the societies anthropologists have studied, mothers show enormous indulgence in feeding their babies, tending on the whole to feed them as soon as they show the slightest sign of wanting to be fed. In many cases women are not allowed any sexual relations while nursing. Sooner or later—very often because her husband demands it—the mother must wean her child. Renewed sex is desired, a new sibling has arrived, the woman's labor and unremitting attention are required in other fields. The baby, like its mother, has no choice but to fit in with these claims, suddenly laid by other people.

Every human being without exception must pass through this rite of passage, being forbidden the motherly breast or the bottle and taught to eat solid food. The child must learn for most of its meal-times to give up sucking, the skill with which it was born. The area inside the cheeks of small children is well provided with taste buds, which adults' cheeks are not; babies taste not only with their tongues but with their cheeks. This is thought to be why they like packing their mouths with food. They must be made to take less at a time. Chewing itself has to be learned, by trial and error. Hunger—direct, physical, and individually experienced, the natural necessity to which every one of us submits—now truly enters the social domain. It will continue to be teased, delayed, diverted, interpreted, and manipulated by other people until the day we die.

The growing child is educated in, and becomes accustomed to, the food of its culture (the English word "wean" originally meant
“to accustom,” as in one’s “wont”). If adults commonly eat powerful substances like chili peppers or fermented fish, the child will have become accustomed even before it is weaned to the smells of these, and even to their taste, through its mother’s milk. Foods like these are usually culture-specific; they may function as distinguishing marks of the society that learns from childhood to eat them. Other people, who have not been taught as children to like them, find the consuming of them incomprehensible. They might mock the chili-eaters and the swallower of smelly fish by jeering at their weird tastes—but even in so doing they are forced to recognize the identity of the group. So the Germans are nick-named “Krauts,” the French “Frogs,” and the Inuit “Eskimo” (from an Indian word meaning “those who eat meat raw”). It is well attested that people continue to enjoy as adults the food they learned to like as children. They grow up loving, say, curries and chutneys, or pasta and tomatoes, olives, sharp cheeses, and bitter herbs, and this food seems normal to them. Other people seem to them to eat very poorly indeed by comparison. The language one first learns to speak, and the food one is accustomed to eat in childhood, are two of the most fundamental preservers of an adult’s social and racial identity.

Many adults are extremely conservative about what they eat. This attitude, which is known as neophobia, “the fear of the new,” has the important biological function of guarding us from eating unknown, possibly poisonous substances: people all have a tendency to be fussy about what they put into their mouths. Children who are first learning to eat solid foods will try (or resign themselves to) almost anything; solidity itself is enough of a problem to get on with. But this is a temporary phase; they soon “lock in” to a set of expectations about what to eat and what to refuse. These are derived from a combination of their own personal experiences with food and the prevailing cultural pattern. They become extremely finicky as they learn to differentiate, deciding what to choose and what to reject from the vast numbers of possibilities in the world, which have been made available to them by the weaning process itself.

There is another, totally different attitude towards food, which is neophilia, “the love of the new.” Human beings are capable of seeking variety, almost in itself. They will try new ways of cooking, new ingredients, new combinations of tastes. They hunt through books describing the food of cultures very different from their own, searching for new things to eat, new flavours and textures to try. Such people have usually had occasion to conquer and break out of their “fear of the new” through contact with other cultures and the availability to them of a wide assortment of “strange” foods. We admire and envy such people, and feel we should try to imitate them, thinking how sophisticated, knowledgeable, and broad-minded they are. Yet neophilia, in fact, is a typical human reaction to eating. Our own culture is experiencing at the moment a strong bias, or perhaps more specifically a pull exerted by the trend-setting “upwardly mobile” classes, towards neophilia.

Human beings are omnivorous, which means far more than being able to live on flesh, or vegetables, or both. They can survive either on a very monotonous diet (if only a few things happen to be on hand) or, if that small but satisfying range of foods becomes scarce, they can leave for new pastures and search for other things to eat. This physical capability, and the openness to experimentation which it allows, was as important for our successful evolution as was neophobia. Both tendencies inhabit all of us. The philosopher Wittgenstein hated being confronted with a change in his diet: he regarded the effort involved in adapting to it a waste of his energy. He once made it clear to some friends with whom he was staying that it did not much matter to him what he ate, so long as it was always the same. He settled during those months for an almost unvarying diet of Swiss cheese and rye bread.

Fast-food manufacturers and other mass producers of foodstuffs love and encourage the neophobia in us: the acceptance of, even preference for, hamburgers or pizza day in, day out, served always in the same way, in similar surroundings, and with always the same small range of trimmings; the eternal steak or lobster because these are the “best,” the “most unadorned,” the “most expensive”; the constant comforting presence on the table of the same brand-name sauce to lend a predictable taste to everything. A place in our lives for the monotonous is assured in any case, because people under stress always settle for eating what they are used to. We reject, for instance, anything fancy for breakfast, feeling fragile and unadventurous just
after the little daily trauma of getting out of bed. Similarly, sick people are not usually tempted by strong-tasting, constantly changing, or "inventive" food.

Nowadays there is tremendous encouragement to develop the neophiliac tendency in ourselves. In parts of the world where people already have plenty to eat, "more" can only mean "more expensive" and "more various." Adventurousness has become an aspect of consumerism; it is in addition a cultural expression of one of the cardinal principles of modern ideology, which is mobility. It is a response to the increasing pluralism of modern society, and the unavoidable contact into which we are flung, with new ideas and different tastes.

"Love of the new" has come to seem a hallmark of experience and awareness, a sign of competence and a willingness to accept cultural enrichment—part, in short, of the modern middle-class image. "Ethnic" food was once regarded as a sort of obstinate hangover from the past, clung to by simple folk who ought to have learned how to eat better. Nowadays, smart restaurants set out to tempt smart mobile people with the richly various products of all the traditions. We are exhorted to try not only French and Italian ideas about food, but also Thai and Japanese—or Afghan, Ethiopian, or Sri Lankan.

Neophilia receives strong backing from the health craze. Dieticians tell us to eat a wide variety of foods, plenty of vegetables, fish, meat, cheese, fruit. Parents are convinced for many reasons that what their children need is variety. And so the battle begins, as children, having only just learned to be neophobic, confront tremendous parental and cultural pressures to "eat well," that is, variously. Parents are trying to do what they are convinced is best; children often resist. They learn quickly that refusing food is a sure way of gaining attention, of upsetting the person who has bought and worked to prepare a meal according to the best modern advice.

It is impossible for us, given our whole background, to let children do without their food; if they refuse to eat, we feel acutely unhappy. Preventing children from eating (sending them to bed without any supper or without any dessert) was a common punishment for bad behaviour until only very recently. Adults themselves used regularly to fast or abstain from luxury foods, for reasons having to do with autonomy in its original sense, "self-control." The idea of fasting for most Western people has undergone a mysterious change: self-control where food is concerned now means control of one's shape, in conformity with the convention that people should look narrow rather than wide. Children (who must get bigger) cannot be "on a diet" except for strictly medical reasons; children, unlike adults, must obviously eat. If they (often like adults themselves) refuse to eat much, or want to eat only certain things, adults must try to change their ways.

In France, parents traditionally insist that it is good manners for children to "try a little of everything." The rule prepares small French people to accept the variety that is offered by French cuisine; it is one reason why the French have withstood the modern onslaughts of sugar as well as they have. North American parents impose no such rule of manners; their insistence has to do entirely with health. Food manufacturers infinitely prefer "health" to "manners" as a guide to behaviour. Manners are matters of self-control and a semi-moral guide; they cause people to make up their minds before commercial interests have a chance to assert themselves.

"Health" is vaguer, more scientific and less human, and far less attainable as an ideal. Into the breach between this abstract goal and our hesitations about how to achieve it leap the purveyors of foods and of technology.

They love giving advice to parents on how to persuade children to eat a healthy diet. The promoters of microwave ovens, for instance, put out a whole line of "microwavable" foods which come to us in small, crumb-coated pieces. The advertising of such products suggests that children be allowed to eat these crumbed, "bit-sized" pieces with their fingers, "because this might persuade the child to try different foods." Microwave ovens happen to manage small pieces best, and in addition the manufacturers capitalize on the "neat, clean, separate" symbolism so precious in our culture generally. Ready-yellowed coatings are designed to look appetizing even as they cover awkward food colours and shapes, and disguise the raw look which customers are said to object to, even if the food is raw. The promoters also strengthen and "package" their contents for easier transport and longer shelf life. If you buy your broccoli bits
crumbed (that is, disguised) and then microwave them, you will make your life a lot easier; and your child just might be seduced by the novelty, and by not having to use knives and forks, into eating, for once, "something green."

It is very common for the difference between adults and children to be underlined by food distinctions. Many societies decide that there are foods children must not eat. Often the reasons given are half-physical, half-moral ones. Chaga children were told, "Don't eat the mouthparts of any animal, especially its tongue: it causes you to quarrel"; "Don't eat the animal's head—it makes you stubborn." So adults attempt to assure children that bad moral behaviour can be "turned down" as an option, just as food can be relegated to the "not eaten" category. In our own culture, where taboos are underpinned less by moral than by health rules, children are prevented from eating and drinking what is "bad for them"—but all right for adults. It is our way of finding some respite from our demanding offspring: while we are drinking our unhealthy tea or coffee, children cannot be admitted to the party. They must go away and play together, or drink something "safe"—like soft drinks. Finally being admitted to coffee- and tea-drinking, then, is a minor initiation rite: you are old enough to "take it," and by that time you are also likely to know how to "behave."

We also provide "children's food," which we ourselves rarely eat; children may be allowed to eat substances like peanut butter (now almost forbidden to adults for slimming reasons) whenever they feel like it. In precisely the same way, an African tribe, otherwise quite fierce in matters of child discipline, decided that adults do not much like ripe bananas. Bunches of them would be kept under the eaves of the houses, so that children could help themselves whenever they felt like it. The tactic reminds us of the way in which milk has in most human societies been always for children, and not "grown-ups'" food.

Children take years and years to train; for a long time they simply cannot be expected to "behave" like adults. The Indian anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has remarked that children in his culture are treated "like gods"—in that they cannot be expected to follow human rules; they have, like beasts, gods, and prophets, "no manners." They, like the gods, eat before everybody else does. Serious attention has to be paid to their tastes. The food they leave on their plates is not degraded or polluted as left-overs generally are in Hindu religion: like the food which is offered to the gods but "left over" by them and distributed to the worshippers, children's left-over food is edible, especially by their mothers.

Until children can "behave," they may have to eat away from the adults, who have learned not to be able to bear watching someone spill food down their front, splash in their drink, or suddenly yell with delight. It is in our society still a common punishment for bad behaviour to be sent away from the table, to eat alone elsewhere. Mothers, whose job it mostly remains to teach children their manners, often feed the children early in the evening—children "need" to eat early—and have them in bed and out of the way so that parents can eat together later, in peace. Parties, in upper-class western European and North American practice, are now either for children only, or they are wholly adults' night-time affairs, at which alcoholic drinks are served, and spicy, "original" food which is officially unsuitable for children. Other people, for example, the English working class, give parties which are largely for the family, and the children are welcome. The sociologists N. Charles and M. Kerr speculate that this may be because non-professional people are less likely to move away from home because of their jobs. They keep in much closer contact with family and old friends while they are having their children, and in any case their dinner parties tend to be given more for family than for friends. Food is served which is not exotic, nor "too strong," "too spicy," or "indigestible." Everybody, without regard to "generation gap," can come to the party. What is being celebrated here is the clan, which includes the children; whereas the "Young Urban Professionals" kind of party strongly accentuates the difference between adults and children.

It is very often rude to take food without asking first. The anthropologist Bambi Schieffelin tells us that this rule is especially carefully instilled among Kaluli children in Papua New Guinea, in a society with a strong cultural preference for explicit verbal communication. If people stare at food, it means they want some—and very small Kaluli children are taught not to annoy others by "asking with the
eyes.” A right to the food requires that one ask for it; if one has no right, one does not look. Staring at somebody else's plate during dinner is very effectively discouraged in our own culture; for us it forms part of our insistence on spatial boundaries, which are observed at every meal as they are in many other areas of our lives.

African children at dinner must watch their elders serve themselves first; important adults might take whole spoonfuls of relish from the central dish, while the children themselves are only allowed a little—perhaps merely to dip their porridge (the staple of the meal) into the pot. From medieval times in Europe, children have been warned, "Ask not for anything, but tarry till it be offered thee." "Not asking" might be part of a further rule, enjoining silence upon children: even if social rules permit adult conversation at dinner, all good children should be "seen and not heard." These are, of course, children old enough to "behave," and therefore old enough to be silenced: license might be given to the youngest child ("as to a god") to talk, run around, or ask for food from adults’ plates. But it is important that children, though "not heard," should nevertheless be "seen": they must be scrutinized by grown-ups as they learn to behave. Surveillance and control is part of the reason for their admittance to the group of their elders. "Every meal," goes a proverb popular with the Victorians, "is a lesson learned." Reaching adulthood often means a relaxation of regulations, rather than a tightening, and old people may be allowed special privileges at dinner.

It is clear from European paintings of family meals, and from injunctions such as the following, that children often stood to eat their food when at the table with adults.

Look thou be courteous standing at meat
And that men giveth thee, take and eat,
And look thou neither cry nor crave,
Saying, "That and that would I have!"
But stand thou still before the board
And look thou speak no loud word.

This was partly a function of their size—a standing child could reach the top of the table more easily, and not everyone possessed small chairs or high ones for the use of children only. (Children in seventeenth-century Britain seem sometimes to have sat apart from the table for meals, using stools for tables and footstools for seats.) But standing, in the language of European etiquette, also quite certainly signified lower status. There may also have been a "health" reason invoked. It was believed that eating food while upright facilitated digestion: to this day Scots like eating their porridge standing up. In other cultures, children have been expected to remain outside the circle of adults, either sitting on the floor or standing behind the seated group; they would then either wait to be fed until the adults were finished, or be passed food as and when their parents felt it was appropriate.

Rules of this sort (there are many variations), ancient and still common as they are, sound strange to many in our own culture today. In a tiny modern family it seems absurd to expect any members of the group to keep quiet. Children, especially those from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, are deliberately encouraged to talk at table, to ask questions—even to ask why they should follow any of the rules of etiquette. Parents who are so busy that they are coming to wonder whether they should go on "staging" family meals at all often continue the tradition almost entirely because they feel that children need these meals: they must learn how to converse. Our cultural tradition expects us to bring up children to ask why; and where people's lives are lived so separately, dinner-table conversation becomes a unique opportunity for the family to find out what all its members are thinking and doing.

Many of the rules of etiquette which children absorb at mealtimes will be important throughout their lives, and in spheres beyond that of the dinner table. In European culture, saying "thank you" is one of the first lessons children learn. British English provides a special word ("ta") to serve as both "please" and "thank you," because the lesson is expected to be learned as children first find out about giving and taking—that is, when they are just beginning to learn to talk, and before they can even pronounce "thank you." Thanking people properly is still one of the most important rules of etiquette; in the English study by Charles and Kerr, in which mothers were asked to rate the importance of what children learn at table, saying
"please" and "thank you" was at the top of the list. Following it came the correct use of utensils, not bringing books and toys to table, not making a noise while at table, and asking permission before leaving.

An African child may have to become accustomed to using both hands when receiving anything. What more appropriate place to learn this essential gesture than when sharing a family meal, with all the solemn "serving" that goes on? In many cultures, accepting in both hands means appreciation of the generosity of the donor: the idea is that one hand would not be sufficient to hold the symbolic value of the gift. Stretching out only one hand to receive shows lack of gratitude, and might be interpreted as contemptuous behaviour. (A Malawian riddle gives us an idea of the shock experienced when white people would accept proffered objects in one hand. Question: "Even the European respects this. What is it?" Answer: "A peanut: even they always hold it in both hands"—that is, in order to shell or peel it.) If food is given to a child by a relative, however, the giver may not expect to be thanked: thanking in its fullest, or its verbal, expression may be regarded as due only in transactions with strangers, people who have no obligations to each other. The anthropologist Audrey Richards reports the explanation given her of a child's apparently ungrateful behaviour: "He doesn't thank because they are his own people. If it had been an outsider, he would have said, 'Thank you, Sir,' because it would have been from pity they gave to him. To one's own people one does not thank, not at all!"

Children learn when eating with their elders all the status and kinship patterns of their family as they watch how adults treat each other and discover their own "place." An Indian child, for instance, soon knows as many as twenty-four castes, in their correct hierarchical patterns, and how they relate to each other—through food rules, and watching who can eat what from the hand of whom. An African boy, asked who the "fathers" were in the complex kinship structure of his tribe, could reply, "The men I kneel to when I bring them water to drink." Traditional families in Europe and America which sat down to a dining-room table with Father at the head, and Mother, who had prepared everything to his liking, seated at a "lower" place at table to signify her subordination, soon taught the children, who, officially at least, wielded the real power in the group.

Every society has its store of traditional exhortations, cries of warning, proverbs, verses, and sing-song phrases which are produced whenever children's manners threaten to lapse; indeed, eating and its vital interest for the child is an important locus for language learning. Tiny babies hear words of comfort and encouragement when being urged to "bubble up" after nursing (later they will have to relearn: belching becomes taboo once solid food is normally eaten). Messy eaters soon discover the culture's sounds of disgust and disapproval. A "distinctive pharyngeo-velar friction," linguists such as John Widdowson tell us, is extremely common—and effectively memorable for the child. Praise and smiling greets the child who shows it is eating with appetite. Downers a meal is encouraged by pretending the food is a wasp and the child's mouth a cave, or the spoon an aeroplane zooming in to land; and when the plate is empty, triumphant cries like "All gone!" are given "the typical intonation of a sign-off, greatly exaggerated in pitch pattern."

In cultures rich in proverbs, riddles, and oral mnemonics, the child may be taught simultaneously its manners and how to interpret and apply quite complicated parables. In Malawi, for example, according to Margaret Read, a proverb might suddenly, in the middle of dinner, be dropped "like a stone into a pond"—"I hear the guns of the Tyanda people booming." Conversation ceases; everyone stops eating and looks at the child who has been slurping his food. The child begins "to wonder to himself: Can that be for me? No? Yes? It is me. I am ashamed." Nothing further is said, but the lesson is learned—presumably unforgettably. The child is taught as well to interpret his culture's way of uttering veiled rebukes, how to understand and accept their application to him- or herself, and also exactly how, and how much, to suffer social pressure.

Our own elders are ready with a whole litany of traditional reproaches and commands to choose from and apply to rude children. "Waste not want not!" "Hunger is the best sauce!" "All uncooked joints off the table!" "Whose eyes are bigger than their stomach?" "Think of the starving children [elsewhere]?" "Eat it—it'll
make your hair curl! [if you are a girl],” or, “it'll put hair on your chest! [if you are a boy].” There are also monsters and dire warnings, such as those popularized in Hoffmann’s horrific Struwwelpeter (1876): the “great, long, red-legged Scissor Man” who cuts off your thumbs if (having been early weaned) you won’t stop seeking comfort in sucking them; the dreadful fate of Augustus, who refused to have any soup:

He’s like a little bit of thread,
And, on the fifth day, he was—dead!

and the mortification of Fidgety Philip, who falls back on the chair he will not stop balancing, and drags the tablecloth and everything on it on top of himself.

Children are often taught when tiny not to waste food, and always to share it with others. All of a society’s manners might be summed up in the exquisitely difficult rule: Have a small appetite. The rule need not exist wholly because food is scarce. Even where there is plenty to eat, the principle of respect for food is commonly upheld; wasting it shows lack of respect for God, the earth, and each other. Children who waste food are punished, and may find their dinners given away to someone else. In a Malayan village, where children liked the expensive fish but not the inexpensive vegetables (children very quickly know which foods are prized by the community), they were firmly served very limited amounts of fish by their mothers. When they were older they could serve themselves, the reason being that “they were now of an age” to know how to hold themselves back from the expensive dishes.

European and North American anthropologists describe with astonishment the way tiny African children learn to divide any tempting morsel, such as a single piece of fruit, with everybody present; a small Malawian child “was made to unclench his fist in which he was hiding three ground-nuts and give two of them to his fellows.” Mothers who are otherwise indulgent towards their children are, in such cultures, extremely exigent in this: sharing with others, and the giving of hospitality to strangers, are both at the top of the list of rules of good behaviour. In our own culture, special attention is paid to making the strong share with the weak: “Give some to baby!” This principle, even where there is great value given to “the rights of the elder,” always operates to some extent. Where a whole family shares its dinner by taking it piecemeal from a single pot, very sophisticated timing might be going on as the dinner progresses, with rules that the bigger ones finish sooner, so that the slower ones, including the children, are left enough to satisfy them.

A Chaga mother who had prepared the family meal would be the only person present at dinner without a plate. She ate straight from the pot, and when there was little food would take nothing at all. Each child had then to leave a handful of food on his or her plate for the mother. To a child who did not do this, the mother would say, “Look, you haven’t given me any food. Don’t be astonished if I do the same to you next time!” Sharing is the foundation of civilized behaviour; it is what links individuals, families, villages, and tribes together. People should know how to share even when they are hungry: hard times may come for you, too, and you may then look with some rightful expectancy to another’s generosity.

A sociological study by R. Dyson-Hudson and R. Van Dusen of middle-class North American schoolchildren in 1972 found that a whole food-sharing “culture” existed among them. It was not just that some food items were preferred, and owners of them profited from the power they achieved by sharing some with certain others. Children were seen exchanging lunchbags without looking at the contents first, and swapping identical cookies. Food linked these particular children, but in a manner which separated the meaning of the food very firmly from its objective self. The children were discovered to insist at home on being given cookies, fruit, and candy to share with others at school; they became curious if they found none of these in their lunchboxes. Mothers who gave these useful items were helping their children to hold their own in a complex, ruthless schoolyard world, much as African mothers in the Chaga tribe would secretly send food out, via a younger sibling, to boys who had just begun their lives as herdsmen with the other males, where they were supposed officially to start finding their own food by their wits alone. It was noticed in the American study that children never shared the “central” part of their meals—their sandwiches and
milk—as adults share the entree or the roast. It was always the “extras” and “luxuries”—gum, pretzels, raisins—that could be used symbolically to create or cement friendships and alliances.

The battle waged by parents in order to teach their children manners is often itself a largely symbolic power struggle. Parents soon find out, however, that children are capable of behaving perfectly well when strangers are visiting, or when they are invited out. And this is one of the reasons why children must be taught at all costs how to behave: they soon “represent” their families to other people, especially when they are out alone; and they are capable of giving their relatives, even in our own society, a good or a bad reputation.

In societies more family-conscious than our own, a great deal of trouble is taken to make children “behave” when away from home. One of the family secrets is liable to be how much food it has access to, or holds in store (it is rather like the amount Mom and Dad earn, in our own case). Households are very anxious that other people should not think they are doing badly, or going short. Very small children are therefore deceived about the family’s food stores, just in case they prattle. They may be discouraged from visiting other houses at mealtimes, where hospitality demands that they be fed: what might the neighbours think—that we haven’t enough at home? Children in traditional societies might be expected never to demand to eat while neighbours are visiting, or to gulp down their food when they are served; they must never pick up food in other houses and eat it. Indeed, one of the signs that a child is ready to appear at dinner parties when guests are present is its proven ability to conceal what is known. A well-behaved child never tells what it has found out about the family business; it has learned that family loyalty is prior even to commensal togetherness. (No doubt part of the reason for our own law of children’s silence before guests at the dinner table was the danger that a child might suddenly embarrass the family with its revelations.)

In our own culture, children are taught how to eat at an exceedingly culture-specific table. The dining table is not only the setting they will surely encounter, and need to have mastered, in life away from home; it is also a constraining and controlling device, a place where children eat under the surveillance of adults. In families which are too poor, or who live in a space too confined, to possess a table where everyone can sit down together, mothers complain that it is impossible to control their children during meals. A typical scenario, reported by Charles and Kerr, is Mother battling to keep the children eating “properly” in the kitchen, while Father is watching TV next door. Where everyone’s eating is done before the television set—that is, side by side and with the scrutiny of grown-ups concentrated elsewhere—children might never learn how to cut and chew neatly, how to notice what it is that other people need or are saying, or any of the other marks of being “well brought up.” English people can be surprisingly adamant about “Sunday lunch,” deliberately staging weekly, full-dress “proper” meals, with courses and tablecloths, where children can learn how to behave when out. One of the hallmarks of a “proper” meal has come to be “having the radio and TV turned off.”

People commonly complain—with some justification—that it is difficult to teach children any manners in the fragmented, frenetic modern world with its overworked parents, its rudimentary skills in group behaviour, and its apparent devotion to doing away with the formalities. But we do in fact have standards, which are invisible to us most of the time, but which become more obvious when we hear how people behave who have different ideas, and expectations other than our own. In the mid-nineteenth century, Osgood Mackenzie and his mother visited Harris in the Outer Hebrides, off the northwest coast of Scotland. Mackenzie described, in A Hundred Years in the Highlands, his reception at a low, damp Harris house with walls six feet thick. His hostess, he begins by saying, “had most charming manners,” like all Harris people. “She was busy preparing the breakfast, and bade us sit down on little low stools at the fire, and wait till she could milk the cow.” The cattle in the Harris long house lived under the same roof as the family. “The wife took an armful of... heather, and deposited it at the feet of the nearest cow, which was tied up within two or three yards of the fire, to form a drainer. Then, lifting the pot off the fire, she emptied it on the heather; the hot water disappeared and ran away among the cow’s legs, but the contents, consisting of potatoes and fish, remained on top of the heather. Then, from a very black-looking bed, three stark-naked
boys arose, one by one, aged, I should say, from six to ten years, and
made for the fish and potatoes, each youngster carrying off as much
as both his hands could contain. Back they went to their bed, and
started devouring their breakfast with apparently great appetite
under the blankets."

- Inhibitions -

Because table manners are drummed into us so early and so insistently,
the rules upon which they are based rarely need to be
remembered once we have grown up; we have made them part of
the way in which we habitually act and expect the world to operate.
But for this very reason, we love hearing about people who are other
than ourselves—who often seem to have no idea how to “behave”
at all. Their actions remind us that manners are not nature but—at
most—second nature; we are forced to wonder whether, if we lived
evertheless, in different conditions, our presuppositions and therefore
our behaviour might have been different.

This ancient pleasure, in contemplating other people’s odd
behaviour (nearly always, it should be noted, with at least some con-
tempt and complacency), is gradually being withdrawn from us. The
world, for many complex reasons but chiefly because of increased
communications and machine-driven standardization, is becoming
more and more homogeneous. We have to look hard for manners
that will shock us these days, not only because we have seen or heard
of most of them already, but because there are fewer and fewer vari-
eties to view. Those so disposed are prepared, however, to derive
shock value from details, and stare in disbelief if a foreign group
leaves teaspoons standing up in cups or enthusiastically toasts the
hostess before eating.

But there is one direction in which we can always turn to find
deliciously “other” behaviour—and that is to the past. It is not so
much travellers these days as historians who can satisfy our thirst for
revelations of oddity and difference. The danger with travellers’
tales was always ethnocentricity, and perhaps the condescension
which can easily arise from a mixture of ignorance and racial preju-
dice. The same kind of risk occurs when the enterprise is historical
research. History answers only the questions we put to it, and the
past has even less chance than a modern foreign tribe has of ensur-
ing that we have sufficient data to make informed judgements, of
not falling victim to the time-bound prejudices of the researcher, or
of answering back. There is always a possibility that what we see of
the past could merely be a reflection of our own beliefs and fears. If
the past ever becomes our only “other,” we shall be in dangerous
straitst indeed.

It is common knowledge (and a flattering social myth for us) that
our own ancestors used to have very different—and much cruder—
table manners from those we practise today. We have “come on,” in
other words; we have “progressed.” The simplest historical novel or
movie can make an exotic effect by presenting a scene in which din-
er guests gnaw meat straight off bones gripped in their greasy fists,
then hurl the remains into the corners of the room. These, the audi-
ence accepts without difficulty, were the manners of the past, before
we became modern and civilized. (This sense of superiority does not
prevent us from feeling proud, at the same time, of modern simplici-
ty and lack of pomp. We are as capable of despising our ancestors
for their tradition-bound complexity as for their rudimentary stan-
dards of propriety.)

Manners have indeed changed. They were not invented on the
spot, but developed into the system to which we now conform.
Since manners are rituals and therefore conservative—part of their
purpose is always conservation—they change slowly if at all, and
usually in the face of long and widespread unwillingness. Even when
a new way of doing things has been adopted by a powerful elite
group—using forks instead of fingers, for example—it may take
decades, even centuries, for people generally to decide to follow suit.
Forks had not only to be seen in use and their advantages success-
fully argued; they had also to be made and sold, then produced in ver-
sions which more and more people could afford, as they slowly
ceased being merely unnecessary and became the mark of civilized
behaviour. After the eleventh-century date of the first extant docu-
ment describing (with wonder) the sight of someone using one, the
fork took eight centuries to become a utensil employed universally
in the West.
Naturally enough, historians interest themselves in why such a change—from eating with our hands to using a metal mediating instrument instead—took place at all. In our more thoughtful moments, we no longer allow ourselves to feel, simply and happily, that what has happened is “progress,” that the eight centuries were an apprenticeship, a preparation for the attainment of our present enlightened state. Forks have placed us in a singularly distant relationship vis-à-vis our food, and, more importantly, they both express and influence our self-enclosed, fastidious attitude towards the people with whom we eat. The universalizing of the use of forks is among other things a sign of the spreading of a social attitude.

Our own culture, as it happens, provides us with a means of tracing this development, through the survival of books on etiquette that have appeared through the ages. These humble, mostly dully written little pamphlets can be studied and compared, so as to document shifts in table manners and etiquette in general. Manners books have supplied the sociologist Norbert Elias with data upon which he has built a coherent theory of the development of Western inhibitions since the Renaissance. Elias claims that at that point—specifically from 1530, the date at which Erasmus published his short treatise on manners, which he called de civilitate morum puerilium (On the Civility of the Behaviour of Boys)—momentous changes began in our history. The medieval concept of manners, called “courtesy” because it was practised by noblemen at court, begins to be called “civility,” a term for a wholly new system of bodily propriety, which is henceforth applicable to all citizens, not merely the elite. “Civility” governs far more behaviour than table manners. The seven chapters of Erasmus’s treatise concern body posture and facial expression, dress, behaviour in church, table manners, conversation, and comportment at play and in the bedroom.

From this point onwards, Elias claims, bodily functions came to be displayed in public less and less. People began to refrain in company from belching, farting, excretion, and spitting. Eventually, even speaking and writing about these things (Erasmus had been quite unembarrassed about mentioning them) was to be banned in polite society. As Elias puts it, “walls” of restraint and embarrassment grew up between people; where once dinner was handled by the whole group, and cutlery, dishes, and goblets passed about for all to use, now each person had his or her own implements. As time went on it was insisted that no one touch even his own food with his hands except in certain specific cases, and postures were devised which would make even brushing against another person at table as unlikely as possible.

The most interesting part of all this was that people increasingly obeyed these rules (there were fluctuations and differences among groups, and the changes came about in the course of three centuries), not primarily because they were conscious of constraints, but because they were genuinely convinced that no other ways of eating would “do.” Civilized people behaved like this: those guilty of infractions were merely showing how uncivilized they were. The new standards, which began to be introduced in the Renaissance, became gradually internalized, which means that, once learned in childhood, people took the rules for granted; they never thought about them—unless they were suddenly confronted with an action that was “unmannerly.” Then their reaction was likely to be one of disgust and revulsion, shock or laughter.

During the seventeenth century, in France, manners became a political issue. King Louis XIV and his predecessors, in collecting together the nobility of France to live with the sovereign at Versailles, instituted a sort of school of manners. At the palace, the courtiers lived under the despotic surveillance of the king, and upon their good behaviour, their deference, and their observance of etiquette their whole careers depended. If you displeased Louis, he would simply not see you the following day; his gaze would pass over you as he surveyed the people before him. And not being “seen” by the king was tantamount to ceasing to count, at Versailles. A whole timetable of ceremonies was followed, much of it revolving round the king’s own person. Intimacy with Louis meant power, and power was symbolically expressed in attending to certain of the king’s most private and physical needs: handing him his stockings to put on in the morning, being present as he used his chaise perçée, rushing when the signal sounded to be present as he got ready for bed. It mattered desperately what closeness the king allowed you—whether he spoke to you, in front of whom, and for how long.
The point about Versailles was that there was no escape: the courtiers had to “make it” where they were. The stage was Louis's, and the roles that could be played were designed by him. It was up to each courtier to fit him- or herself into one of the slots provided. The leaders of all the other towns and villages of France were made, largely through the use of etiquette, and more specifically through rudeness and judicious slighting by the tax-collecting intendants, to feel their subordination, their distance from the court. Once, the nobility had relied on strength, swagger, and vigour, even violence, personally to make their mark and uphold their honour; at Versailles, the way to success became discretion, observation, cunning, and the dissembling of one’s aims and passions. At Versailles—and at the courts all over Europe which imitated it—everything was done to make it very clear who was superior to whom; and of course, each time anyone was polite, he or she was simultaneously acknowledging rank and demonstrating who stood where.

The new manners—both the formal rules of protocol and precedence and the unspoken, more profoundly encultured rules like table manners—were seen increasingly, according to Elias, as ways in which one did not offend other people. You were controlling yourself, so as to prevent other people from being disguised or “shocked.” People lived very closely together at Versailles; everyone was watched by everyone else, and actual physical proximity helped raise some of the new sensitivity to other people’s real or imagined susceptibilities. Men were expected on the whole to give up physical force as a means of getting their way, and—as always when “the graces” are preferred over brute strength—women began to count for more. Within the aristocratic court circle, people became, in spite of the obsession with rank, far more equal. Secure in the knowledge that just being at court was the pinnacle of prestige, from which most of society was shut out, courtiers could permit themselves to respect each other.

As the bourgeoise became richer and more indispensable even at court, they demanded—and were given, by self-appointed experts who wrote manuals for them—instruction in how to behave as people did in “the best circles.” In 1672, Antoine de Courtois produced *Nouveau traité de la civilité qui se pratique en France parmi les bonnes gens* (The New Treatise of the Civility Which Is Practised in France Among Honest People). (“Honest”—*bonne*—kept its original association with honour and the opposite—but-supporting notion, shame.) De Courtin writes about manners for both hosts and guests, and advises his bourgeois readers on how they should address the nobility. The Church in France also produced handbooks of manners and taught their precepts in schools. Gradually gentility spread down from the court to the bourgeoisie, and finally trickled further down to the rest of the population.

The bourgeoisie were even stricter about standards of civility than the nobility were; having no ever-present king to enforce the rules, they imposed restraints on themselves. Being more anxious to rise, they had more to lose by making slips and gaffes; so their self-inhibiting mechanisms had to be deeper rooted, less obviously the donning of an external persona than the nobility could permit themselves. The policing of emotions became internal, and finally invisible even to themselves: they were able to think that they acted, not in obedience to power and self-interest, but for purely moral reasons.

In the meantime, according to Elias, another momentous change was taking place: “childhood” was invented, in the course of the centuries following the sixteenth. The small, eventually “nuclear” family was engendered by the need for families to become consuming, as opposed to producing, units. Children had to learn the new “civilizing” rules, and in order to do so and to build up the necessary “walls of shame” required by the new individualism and the manners that protected it, they were turned into a whole new social category, different from that of adults. They were held, as no children had been before, for a protracted period in ignorance of the private world of adults.

Twentieth-century children now have, Elias claims, “in the space of a few years to attain the advanced level of shame and revulsion that has developed over many centuries.” Today, our apparent freedom and unconcern about bodily and verbal proprieties is possible only because inhibitions are everywhere, and self-imposed. What we know is “relaxation within the framework of an already established standard.” And the table manners we teach our children at a very early age are those which in the Middle Ages adults had still to be taught.
But drawing a line separating the sixteenth century off from everything that preceded it can give a false impression, as can limiting one's perspective to that of a single culture. As we have seen, people everywhere teach manners to their children by means of precepts, riddles, and traditional proverbs, and they seem to have done so for millennia. "At the abundant dinner of the gods, do not sever with bright steel the withered from the quick upon that which has five branches," advised Hesiod about 2,700 years ago. What he meant was, "Fingernails are not to be cut at table." Didactic poetry has existed since at least the time of Ptah-Hotep's Instructions, written apparently to his son, which date to about 2000 B.C. but were almost certainly copied from another book five hundred years older. Eating behaviour has also been described ethnographically and used as a fictional device since ancient times. Aristotle wrote a treatise, which has unfortunately not survived, on the behaviour of diners at the famous Spartan communal feasts called susstia, and Roman literature includes stories of boorish behaviour, part of the intention of which was to confirm readers in their preference for their own good taste. We would reject today the excesses of people like Petronius' vulgar boor Trimalchio, and for very much the same reasons as the ancient Romans had for doing so.

Medieval manners books—at first in Latin, and later in Italian, French, German, and other vernacular tongues—had been jingles and rhyming verses, written to be easily memorized. (Books were scarce before the advent of the printing press.) An early English version was The Babees Book, composed in the fifteenth century not for what we now call "babies," but for young pages and maids-in-waiting. The English nobility educated their children by exchanging them, after the age of about eight, with the children of other aristocratic households, so that they could be disciplined outside their own homes; it was an early version of the later British institution of boarding schools. The boys would learn, among other things, how to bow, pose, carve, and wait at table; girls would be schooled in decorative feminine movements, and in serving in the women's apartments. One English manners book for pages was called stans puer ad mensam, The Boy Standing at the Table (about 1430).

Treatises written to instruct novices in monasteries, like that of Hugh of St. Victor in the twelfth century, included directions on manners. Since monks came from every social class and all had to live together for life, the learning of a common standard of manners must have been an important part of the preliminary training. There is a long tradition of ecclesiastical manners books, designed to teach priests, who often came from the lowest classes, how to behave when they suddenly found themselves dining at the local château, or having to advise and chaste their bourgeois parishioners. A late example of the genre is that by Louis Branchereau (1885).

None of the medieval books on etiquette which have come down to us offer brilliant or inspired writing; the genre neither aimed for literary excellence nor attracted gifted writers to it. People were not interested in manners that were "original." They wanted to perform well the customs that were time-honoured, and welcomed traditional, well-worn statements of what was "the done thing," and more especially (and more simply) what was to be avoided. It is therefore not entirely correct to think of medieval (or any other) manners as being always horrendous (which in this context means breaking the rules) because the etiquette books constantly repeat the old precepts. It seems likely that people did not always "fall upon the dishes like swine while eating, snorting disgustingly and smacking their lips," as the poet Tamhäuser complained in the thirteenth century, even though manners books disapprove, century in, century out, of their doing so. We should note the constant likening of rude people to animals, and remember that a universal purpose of good behaviour is to demonstrate how unlike beasts we mannerly people are. And etiquette manuals have often been addressed not only to people ignorant of "the proprieties," but also to those who consult them for esoteric details, together with satisfying reminders of what dreadful behaviour they would witness, if they were ever to associate with the sort who lack "breeding."

It seems questionable to me also that care for other people's opinions, ability to see ourselves as others must see us, and fear that gaffes and lapses in physical propriety might disgust or revolt them, only began to develop in the sixteenth century. It is true that standards of cleanliness, for instance, have risen—but other levels of the
Dedekind made him the hero of his verse satire, Grobianus (1549); he later added a female boor, Grobiana. The text derives very clearly from the table rules of Erasmus, which it gleefully inverts. Roger Bull published an English translation in 1739; two intervening centuries and a very different audience do not seem to have changed the humour, and therefore the relevance, of the "advice" offered. Bull dedicated the work to Swift, who "first Introduce'd into these Kingdoms, of Great Britain and Ireland, an Ironical Manner of Writing To the Discouragement of Vice, Ill-manners, and Folly." (In 1745, Swift was to write Directions to Servants, in which he advised the cook never to use a spoon for fear of wearing out the master's silver; he should in all things use his hands. And it was Swift whose "Modest Proposal" it had been in 1729 to deal with the problem of the poverty-stricken Irish by encouraging them to raise their children as delicacies to be consumed at table.) Bull's version of Dedekind is written in a mock-heroic style:

But do not (if to laugh be worth your while)  
Instead of Laughter substitute a Smile.  
No, no; be sure your Merriment be loud,  
Heard in the Street by all the passing Crowd.  
Extend the Gulph your Mouth, from Ear to Ear;  
Let ev'y Tooth in sable Pomp appear:  
Those Fangs, bespeckled like some Leopard's Skin,  
The Heart of each admiring Maiden win.  

You must yell for your food, fight your way to the dishes, seize the best pieces, lick the fat off your fingers, belch, come to blows with the other guests—and never worry if your nose runs:

If with your Elbow you wipe off the Snivel  
No Man alive shall be esteem'd more civil.  

Long scenes of prandial disaster are described, in the tradition of Horace or Petronius—or of the nineteenth-century Sträuwelpeter. Readers are assumed to be aware of the "manners code" such stories subvert—but they are not reading for instruction, nor even because
they are in the habit of breaking the rules. The grotesque unseemliness, even during the "refined" eighteenth century, is sufficient attraction—that, and the eternal secret underpull in all of us: the suspicion that for two pins we might let the whole thing slide and "become like animals" too.

Erasmus's little treatise, *de civilitate* (1530), stands out from all the doggerel verses that preceded and followed his contribution to the genre. For once, manners are treated by a man of genius who had travelled widely and seen much. Erasmus, who was nearing the end of his life, decided that although external decorum was the *crassissima pars* (the "crassest part") of philosophy, and only the last on his list of four aspects of a youth's training (the first being religion, the second study, the third duty), he would set out what he thought about manners, because they were important in winning good will and in "commending" the better parts of philosophy "to the eyes of men." Manners were external signs of what ought to be real virtue.

Erasmus thinks all boys, not only noble ones, should learn these manners. The nobility have a duty to live up to the position they have inherited, but others have to "strive all the more keenly to compensate for the malignity of fate with the elegance of good manners. No one can choose his own parents or nationality, but each man can mould his own talents and character for himself." Our approval of Erasmus's charity and broad-mindedness is immediate; but we should not be too easily convinced that his attitude is new or revolutionary. True, the earlier manners books were written for young aristocrats, but that does not mean that no one outside the nobility wished, before Erasmus, to learn good manners, or had any idea of how to "behave."

Experience and confidence permitted Erasmus to decry manners he disapproved of, even if they were the habits of certain noblemen. For instance, it is not polite, he says, "to be repeatedly pursing the lips as if making a chuckling sound, although that gesture is excusable in grown-ups of high rank as they pass through the midst of a throng; for in the case of such people all things are becoming, while we are concerned with moulding a boy." A statement like this is surely addressed not so much to the boy as to adults reading the text: it is a magnificently unassailable rebuke. Literary works—and this goes for many of the medieval and later manners books—often aim "over the heads" of the audience they are supposed, by convention, to be addressing. Again, "Grasping the bread in the palm of the hand and breaking it with the fingertips is an affected practice which should be left to certain courtiers. You should cut it properly with your knife..." The courtiers' affectation was to win out in the long run and become the way we are supposed to eat dinner rolls today. But, as Elias pointed out, it is Erasmus's independence, and his preparedness to criticize even the great if they disagree with him or the tradition to which he adheres, which make his work different from most other prescriptions of civility.

The style, stature, and humanity of Erasmus, as well as the lucidity and usefulness of his observations, made his book so famous that a sixteenth-century French typeface, an imitation of handwriting, was called *civilité* after it, and manners books were set in this particular type until the nineteenth century—by which time it had become so old-fashioned as to be almost illegible. Educators for centuries killed two birds with one stone by teaching children how to read Latin through construing Erasmus on manners. The book was rewritten in dialogue and in catechism form, and done over in verse to assist in memorizing it. Gradually, examples like those of Erasmus's frankness were censored: "Withdraw when you are going to vomit; vomiting is not shameful, but to have vomited through gluttony is disgusting," and "Fidgeting in one's seat, shifting from side to side, gives the appearance of repeatedly farting, or of trying to do so." Probably schoolmasters were finding such specificity a danger to discipline in the classroom. But also discussing, even mentioning, such loss of control over the bodily orifices had become simply and generally impolite. Erasmus's *de civilitate* continued to be printed, pillaged, quoted, set on school courses, imitated, and adapted until the nineteenth century; and for the most part Erasmus on manners is as pertinent today as he was in 1530.

His treatise ends with the most important advice of all, where manners are concerned: "The essence of good manners consists in freely pardoning the shortcomings of others although nowhere falling short yourself: in holding a companion no less dear because his standards are less exacting. For there are some who compensate
with other gifts for their roughness of manner. Nor should what I have said be taken to imply that no one can be a good person without good manners. But if a companion makes a mistake through ignorance in a matter which seems of some consequence, then the polite thing to do is to advise him courteously of it in private." Erasmus would have been the first to disclaim any originality for his ideal.

It is difficult to know whether de civilitate was popular because there was a new need for manners books, or whether the recent availability of the printed word made the book affordable to people who, had they lived before this period in history, might also have liked to have access to this kind of written treatment of the subject. The fact that printed books have played such an important role in the culture of the West has given us a tool for historical research which is denied to many other cultures. Because we have a richness of documentation in this area—partial, occasional, and in need of careful interpretation though it is—we should not imagine that other cultures have not developed and elaborated their table manners just as assiduously through time. China's three great books of ceremonial, T'iehou-Li, I Li, and Li Chi, were compiled between the second century B.C. and the first century A.D., all from much older sources. The Li Chi especially has important sections on table manners. Since then, there have been no Chinese Emily Posts, or books de civilitate, although books have been written on Chinese manners as guides to Westerners. Yet Chinese table manners have been for thousands of years, and remain, strict and distinctive. No doubt these manners too have changed—and also conserved themselves—over the past two thousand years; a lack of historical documents in no way signifies a lack of history.

There is no reason to believe, either, that our society has a particular claim to shame. Other societies are not more "spontaneous" or "free"—or less "civilized"—than ours in the domain of table or any other manners. Where eating dinner is concerned, human beings all over the world call upon systems and codes which are designed to control appetite and maintain social awareness of others' needs. They have done so ever since we became human. Inhibition in every case is culturally induced, by precept, example, and social conditioning.

An anonymous Victorian manners manual (1879) calls etiquette "the barrier which society draws around itself, a shield against the intrusion of the impertinent, the improper, and the vulgar." So much for the civility of Erasmus. "Society," in this statement, means a tiny part of society, those who are distinguished from everyone else because of their manners; this group is extremely anxious—anxious enough to put on armour and enclose itself behind a barrier—because it knows that people who are not "society" are trying to break in.

Part of the reason for good manners has always been a notion of safety: standards of behaviour are imposed in order to protect us from other people's roughness and greed, and from the consequences of pandering to our own lower instincts. Restraint is required from all of us precisely because we all mix and interact. A very different principle underlies the picture of politeness, not as protecting everyone in order to facilitate encounters each with each, but as a rampart enclosing a group. This principle has probably always existed, in some degree, in all but the simplest and most egalitarian societies. In rigidly hierarchical societies, "top" people protect themselves by ensuring that it takes extraordinary will and talent to cross the barriers. But the pressure of the principle is also powerfully felt in societies like our own, where walls exist between groups, but people are encouraged to believe there are none, or that they can cross them with ease.

Even before Louis XIV contained the nobility of France at court, groups of French aristocrats had performed an important experiment in manners. They were following in the tradition of Italian Renaissance treatises on behaviour, such as Il Libro del Cortegiano (The Book of the Courtier) by Baldassare Castiglione (published two years before Erasmus' de civilitate), the Galateo of Giovanni della Casa (the word for "etiquette" in Italian is still il galateo) (1558), and La Civil Conversazione by Stefano Guazzo (1574). These works—more philosophical, ethical, and political than regular manners books had set out to be—were addressed to aristocrats only, although like Erasmus's treatise, they soon became much more widely read, translated, adapted, copied, and discussed.