

manners; and culinary tradi-
 r size of portions to the order
 ds of animals it is and is
 over whether all these rules
 osher rules, are probably de-
 ner than to protect health. But
 lo make biological sense; and
 ront the omnivore's dilemma
 down to eat.

re call a cuisine, for example
 ors that on examination do a
 emma. The dangers of eating
 consuming it with wasabi, a
 spices characteristic of many
 ck to spoil, have antibacterial
 f cooking corn with lime and
 actice of fermenting soy and
 ese plant species much more
 e. When not fermented, soy

ts the absorption of protein
 corn is cooked with an alkali
 ie nutritional deficiency
 s an essential amino acid. (Ly-
 hem together and the proper
 combines fermented soy with
 writes, "[C]uisines embody
 about food." Often when one
 without importing the assoc-

they've made themselves sick
 negotiate the tension between
 . By preparing a novel kind of
 rs—by cooking it with tradi-
 s rendered familiar, "reducing

ANTHROPOLOGISTS MARVEL at just how much cultural energy goes into managing the food problem. But as students of human nature have long suspected, the food problem is closely tied to—and, well, to several other big existential problems. Leon Kass, the ethicist, wrote a fascinating book called *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfection of Our Nature* in which he teases out the many philosophical implications of human eating. In a chapter on omnivorousness, Kass quotes at length from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who in his *Second Discourse on man* draws a connection between our freedom from instinct in eating and the larger problem of free will. Rousseau is after somewhat bigger game in this passage, but along the way he offers as good a statement of the omnivore's dilemma as you're likely to find:

Nature does everything in the operations of a beast whereas man contributes to his operations by being a free agent. The former chooses or rejects by instinct and the latter by an act of freedom, so that a beast cannot deviate from the rule that is prescribed to it even when it would be advantageous to do so, and a man deviates from it often to his detriment. Thus a pigeon would die of hunger near a basin filled with the best meats, and a cat upon heaps of fruits or grain, although each could very well nourish itself on the food it disdain. Thus dissolute men abandon themselves to the excesses which cause them fever and death, because the mind depraves the senses and because the will still speaks when nature is silent.

Guided by no natural instinct, the prodigious and open-ended human appetite is liable to get us into all sorts of trouble, well beyond the stomachache. For if nature is silent what's to stop the human omnivore from eating anything—including, most alarmingly, other human omnivores? A potential for savagery lurks in a creature capable of eating any-

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thing. If nature won't draw a line around human appetite, then human culture must step in, as indeed it has done, bringing the omnivore's eating habits under the government of all the various taboos (foremost the one against cannibalism), customs, rituals, table manners, and culinary conventions found in every culture. There is a short and direct path from the omnivore's dilemma to the astounding number of ethical rules with which people have sought to regulate eating for as long as they have been living in groups.

(7)

"Without virtue" to govern his appetites, Aristotle wrote, man of all the animals "is most unholy and savage, and worst in regard to sex and eating." Paul Rozin has suggested, only partly in jest, that Freud would have done well to build his psychology around our appetite for food rather than our appetite for sex. Both are fundamental biological drives necessary to our survival as a species, and both must be carefully channeled and socialized for the good of society. ("You can't just grab any tasty-looking morsel," he points out.) But food is more important than sex, Rozin contends. Sex we can live without (at least as individuals), and it occurs with far less frequency than eating. Since we also do rather more of our eating in public there has been "a more elaborate cultural transformation of our relationship to food than there is to sex."

4. AMERICA'S NATIONAL EATING DISORDER

Rozin doesn't say as much, but all the customs and rules culture has devised to mediate the clash of human appetite and society probably bring greater comfort to us as eaters than as sexual beings. Freud and others lay the blame for many of our sexual neuroses at the door of an overly repressive culture, but that doesn't appear to be the principal culprit in our neurotic eating. To the contrary, it seems as though our eating tends to grow more tortured as our culture's power to manage our relationship to food weakens.

This seems to me precisely the predicament we find ourselves in today as eaters, particularly in America. America has never had a stable na-