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*Agayns glotonye is the remedie abstinence*

Chaucer

FAT PEOPLE ARE NOTHING NEW. Fat women, especially, have appeared in art and artefacts across the centuries: one of the earliest found examples of figurative art and a representation of an immensely fat woman is the Hohle Fels Venus. Dug up not long ago in Germany, the Venus is a carved mammoth ivory figurine estimated to be about 35,000 years old. There are even earlier hominid figures that could be said to represent obesity: it is thought that the Venus of Berekhat Ram, which was discovered in the Golan Heights, could date from sometime between 230,000 and 500,000 BC; and the Venus of Tan-Tan, from Morocco, is also said to be a relic of this period. If this is so, then neither piece would have been the work of Homo sapiens, but of Homo erectus. The question is whether the large breasts and rolls of fat on the bellies and thighs of the figurines reveal the shape some women actually were, or whether they are stylised, symbolic forms, perhaps of fertile, pregnant or lactating women or, even, it has been suggested, interestingly in the light

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of our present-day Western obsession with thinness, of ancient pornography.

Some anthropologists and medics say that these prehistoric artefacts are too few and far between to argue that there has always been a natural and apparently widespread propensity to become very fat, while others believe that they are not at all a rare or surprising phenomenon. As long ago as 1939, R. Hautin wrote his essay, *A Historical Framework for the Development of Ideas About Obesity* agreeing with the latter suggestion, saying that, 'the women immortalized in stone age sculpture were fat; there is no other word for it. Obesity was already a fact of life for palaeolithic man – or at least for palaeolithic women.' Images of obesity have recurred over the ages. It is possible that fatness became more common as agricultural settlements began to take over from hunter-gatherer tribes some 12,000 years ago. Queen Hatchepsut, who became pharaoh in Egypt in around 1479 BC and who is regarded as one of the most successful rulers, might have been particularly fat as evidence of 'pendulous breasts' was found in her mummified remains and a contemporary wall painting shows her as, without doubt, a very big woman.

The insults that are often used against fat people – the secret, and often not so secret, moral and physical judgements that we all make – also have ancient and deeply tenacious roots. The old disease of polysarcia, the pathological condition of too much flesh, was thought to indicate a lazy, phlegmatic, stupid person who just could not control themselves. Those reprobates, 'who are uncommonly fat', would also, according to the ancient Greeks, 'die more quickly than the lean'. Like our modern medical profession, however, the ancients were no strangers to contradiction, and they also believed that, 'in all maladies, those who are fat about the belly do best; it is bad to be thin and wasted there'.

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The Greek word *diata*, from which our word 'diet' derives, described a whole way of life rather than referring to a narrow, weight-loss regimen. It provided an all-round mental and physical way to health, basic to one's very existence and success. Greek and Roman physicians knew that how the body functioned was largely dependent on what an individual ate, and that different foods could affect people in different ways. The whole foundation of Western medical science relied on *diatetika*, the fundamental healing therapy of a regimen of certain foods. Being too fat, or too thin, was therefore seen as a sure sign of an unhealthy body, an imbalance of its essential 'humours' (of which there were four: black bile, yellow bile, blood and phlegm). Fat women, for example, were said to find it difficult to conceive, and recent medical studies have confirmed this. Fat men were believed more likely to die earlier, and modern cardiological science has again shown this to be true.

The Greek philosopher and physician Hippocrates (c.460– 370 BC) relied on experience and philosophy to discern the truth about human frailties and was as uncompromising about our bodies as he was rational about his prescriptions. His *Corpus Hippocraticum* recommends the observation of nature and the study of evidence in the search for causes of disease. There were two main areas to study: alimentation (the nourishment of life) and the environment we inhabit. Hippocrates understood that the underlying principles of health were food and exercise, or work, and that a high food intake meant that a lot of hard work was needed for it to be properly assimilated. A failure to balance an excess of either would upset the body's metabolism and disease would surely follow. 'Man,' he wrote, 'cannot live healthily on food without a certain amount of exercise.' Walking was considered a natural exercise and, even though it 'partakes somewhat of the violent kind', if you did it after eating it would prevent the accumulation of abdominal fat, especially if you walked extra

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fast. More 'violent' exercise, including running long distances and gradually increasing your exertions, helped to burn off excess food in the body and was thought 'suitable for people who eat too much', along with the 'induction of vomiting' which he considered especially beneficial.

Still, Hippocrates' fundamental premise was right. He knew that it was impossible to prescribe a rigorously perfect regimen for all, one in which the amount of food would exactly counterbalance the amount of exercise in every individual case. People's constitutions were not all alike, and individual requirements varied according to age, climate, season, and so on. Food, too, was very variable, that is, 'there are different varieties of cheese, different varieties of wine and of all other foods in the composition of our daily intake'. Despite these varieties any sudden change in one's regimen was to be carefully avoided, and the amount of food and exercise taken had to be reduced gradually, week by week. In the summer, breakfasts ought to be 'light and food not excessive ... as much drink as possible must be taken during meals but not in between. Suitable vegetables, cooked or raw, must be had in abundance.' Furthermore, this being a way of life diet, baths should be taken lukewarm and sexual intercourse avoided whenever possible.

He observed that people who ate too much presented with all sorts of symptoms: at first they frequently fell into a prolonged and pleasant sleep at night, and even for short intervals during the day, but the fatter they got the worse their sleep became until it was 'less agreeable, more disturbed and in their dreams they struggle.' Their heavy, uncomfortable fullness, or plethoric state, produced aches and pains over part or all of the body as well as a feeling of utter fatigue which made the

sufferer believe that he or she was really tired. The danger was that they would try to relieve these feelings with rest and a good feeding but this would soon lead to further ill health. Others were recorded as suffering

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from flatulence because they were not absorbing the excess food, and a high temperature may be present along with constipation because the bowels failed to work properly 'in proportion to the food taken'. Hippocrates' patients were often found to vomit up their food the following day, undigested, with acid eructations producing 'a burning sensation up the throat and even into the nostrils', and they had bad complexions and rotten headaches. And, as for having sex, while one might experience a sense of immediate relief, beware, for the feelings of heaviness will be worse later on: 'The danger is great.' What to do? For obese people with a laxity of muscle and red complexions, Hippocrates recommended dry food to help with their moist constitution but, in general, a diet of light and emollient (soothing or softening) foods was needed to assist with the evacuation of the bowel, 'thus enabling the lower part to relieve the congestion of the upper'. Slow running, considerable morning walks, and even wrestling were to be actively encouraged. The very fat, especially 'those desiring to lose weight', were told to indulge in a spot of hard work and to eat while still panting from their efforts. Their meals were to be prepared with sesame or seasoning and other similar substances, and be of a fatty nature so that they would feel as full as possible on very little food. They should, moreover, eat just one main meal a day and take only wine with it, diluted and slightly cold. Breakfast should never be missed, and after breakfast one could perhaps have a bit of a sleep and, later in the day, one of those walks. In fact, they should walk naked for as long as possible and then sleep on a hard bed. Every morning, for the following six days, the walks and exercises should be gradually increased until, on the seventh day, a full meal was to be followed by vomiting. Vomiting, bathing and anointing were good (as long as the bath was only lukewarm), and would do instead of all the sloth-inducing sex you weren't allowed to have. And so on, all over again, for a four-week period.

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To us, this advice seems mixed, some sensible, some inadvisable if not dangerous, but it would all have made sense at the time, based as it was on contemporary knowledge and practices. Induced vomiting, for example, which might horrify us today, was popular and almost an art form, as the following attests: 'fat individuals should vomit in the middle of the day, after a running or marching exercise and before taking any food. The emetic may be half a cup of hyssop (0.15 litre) ground with three litres of water, to which vinegar and salt is added to render the drink as agreeable as possible. The whole of it is to be taken beginning with a small and gradually increasing quantity.' If enemas were prescribed for the obese they had to be thin and salty, and sea water was best of all. Vinegar was a great favourite in the treatment of excessive fat, its properties being regarded as dry and warm and so antithetical to fat bodies which were considered moist and cool.

In the classical world, what foods you ate, and how much, played an important role in ethical teachings and philosophical and political thinking, and centred on ideas of luxury and corruption.

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Food was for sustenance alone and to overindulge was morally and physically bad for you. Everyone knew that luxury would excite the passions which, once aroused, could result in an undignified slide into moral and physical degradation. To Socrates (469–399 BC) the pleasures and comforts of a civilised diet generated increasing demands for luxuries, not only for palatable delicacies but for scent and cosmetics, mistresses, the fine arts of painting and embroidery, for gold and for ivory: a really slippery slope. All these luxuries and the greed that went with them would, he cautioned, lead inevitably to wars and unjust societies. If appetite should outstrip self-control then it was not just your body that would suffer, your very soul was in danger, and civilisation would wither.

Cravings for strong foods, full of heat, were thought to give

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rise to sexual promiscuity, a social as well as personal danger, and literature on food began to record astonishing descriptions of feasts, of gluttony and lechery. Stories of the eating, drinking and sexual proclivities of well-known members of society abounded and could bolster or destroy reputations, whether they were based in truth or not and this has continued throughout history. The Greek Sicilian chef, Archestratus of Gela, wrote a poem, *Hedypatheia* (Pleasant Living), in the fourth century BC, in praise of the life of luxury, and was mentioned along with twenty other writers on food and cooking, by the Greek gourmet Athenaeus who wrote the *Deipnosophistae* (The Learned Banquet), a long, third-century AD account of the luxuries associated with dining. These works on eating and drinking revealed attitudes, opinions and, not least, contemporary emotions involved with food. They laid emphasis on simplicity and abstinence and so were concerned with the moral aspects of cooking and eating as well. Works such as Petronius's *Satyricon*, a first-century Roman 'novel', parodied sensual culinary excesses in its description of a feast given by the character Trimalchio. Trimalchio is an ex-slave made good, and his vulgar, flamboyant indulgences at the table end with his household and guests acting out his own funeral.

Plutarch, a Greek historian writing at around the same time, discussed the problem of obesity and health, saying that 'thin people are generally the most healthy' and drawing the conclusion that 'we should not therefore indulge our appetites with delicacies or high living, for fear of growing corpulent'. He described the body as 'a ship which must not be overloaded', and wrote that a good doctor was one who used diet rather than drugs or the knife. Scribonius Largus, first-century court physician to the Roman emperor Claudius, agreed, and summed up the stages of medical cure as, first and foremost, diet, then drugs, and lastly cautery or surgery. A good and moderate diet – no extremes or faddish behaviour – was by far the most important

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and successful way of treating disease. Caution and moderation were everything.

If diet was your route to health it was also, if abused, the way to disease and death. This meant that, in this period, responsibility lay with the individual who had it in his or her power to control their physical and mental state. Choosing how one lived was therefore a moral question; one had a duty to oneself but also to society. This sat well with the contemporary Stoic view which, simply put, stated that virtue, endurance and self-sufficiency would lead to truth, health and happiness.

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Moderation and balance were essential in all things, including one's diet, a philosophy that placed the ordinary business of eating within the moral order.

The extremely influential, second-century Greek physician Galen (c. 130–c. 200 BC), a follower of Hippocrates, produced *On the Power of Foods*, which contained an all-round explanation of the dietary habits of the Roman Empire. Good doctors, he thought, should also be good cooks and he often included recipes in his works. Recounting one of the earliest known case studies of treatment for obesity, Galen wrote that he had 'reduced a huge fat fellow to a moderate size in a short time, by making him run every morning until he fell into a profuse sweat; I then had him rubbed hard, and put into a warm bath ... Some hours after, I permitted him to eat freely of food, which afforded but little nourishment; and lastly, set him to some work.' He also cited the case of one Nicomachus of Smyrna, who was so huge that he couldn't even get up from his bed. Other commentators noted the enormous size a Roman senator had achieved, so big that he was only able to walk when two of his slaves carried his belly for him, and another, an Egyptian pharaoh whose middle was wider than the span of his slave's outstretched arms. Dionysius of Heraclea was famous for his gargantuan appetite, and got so fat that he, too, could barely move or be moved. He suffered,

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it is thought, from either apnea or narcolepsy so that he had to have people around him to prick his flesh with needles should he fall asleep on his throne. A contemporary poet recorded that Dionysius said he wanted to die 'on my back, lying on my many rolls of fat, scarcely uttering a word, taking laboured breaths, and eating my fill', a death of luxurious excess and satiation. He died at fifty-five, an object of great and general fascination because of his enormous body. Early ascetics such as Saint Anthony, who, at the end of the third century, went off to live the solitary life in the desert east of the Nile, also attracted intense contemporary attention and wonderment for quite different reasons. Their heroic abstinence and starved bodies were often the subject of exaggerated glorification. The manner in which ascetics chose to starve their bodies is unclear, but much of the surviving literature suggests a destructive dualism, a real hostility to their physical selves. This may have been in part directed against sexual desire but was more generally an aversion to the demands the body made upon the soul, demands that were feared as demonic distractions from the focus on God. Food and eating, as perfect vehicles for ritual, are central to most religions, often differentiating one sect or denomination from another.

As the anthropologist Meyer Fortes puts it, it is not so much that food is good to eat as that it is good to forbid, and Mary Douglas, the British anthropologist, has argued that food is not only a metaphor or vehicle of communication but a physical event and so a powerful and symbolic means of denial. Eating habits have social and moral components and reveal all sorts of messages about human needs, about the separation of spirit and flesh, about the physical functions of ingestion, excretion and corruption, and the guarding of orifices. Using prayer to banish fat has a long history, from St Augustine of Hippo in the third century AD to Deborah Pierce in 1960, author of *I Prayed Myself*

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*Slim*. These modern Christian weight-loss plans are heavy on the ambiguity, however, because the body is both an obstacle to spiritual growth and a tool for cultivating that growth – both eating and fasting have the same potential for sin or salvation. Such conflicting attitudes have a profound influence on people's relationships with food and their bodies.

The ancient way to true asceticism was through 'never giving the self its fill of bread, nor water, nor sleep, and tormenting oneself with appetite for these things, not feelings of lust'. Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*, a third-century neo-Platonist philosopher, said of his subject that he 'appeared ashamed of being in the body'. Philostratus's third-century *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* describes a regimen of five years' silence, celibacy, refusal to wear clothes and shoes made from animal products, or to eat any foods but dried fruit and vegetables, with the result that, 'even when young and vigorous he mastered the body and was in control of his passions'. The Egyptian hermit Dorotheus said, when asked about his extreme austerities, 'It [the body] kills me, so I kill it.' Theodore of Skyeon, in sixth-century Anatolia, was said to have 'nobly mortified his body, keeping it under and wearing it down, as though it were some alien thing which warred against the soul'. As a philosophical idea, self-control to whatever degree stretches as far back as Socrates and was a continuing theme through ancient philosophy, from the Stoic view that true humanity lies in controlling oneself and exercising moderation in the face of the powerful desires for food, drink and sex, to the neo-Pythagorean concept of bodily austerity as a means to spiritual insight. To philosophers, physicians and the common man alike, the physical self was an object of deservedly anxious attention, and some disgust. The human body required constant control to keep it in balance, to dry it and to achieve and maintain continence, a difficult and continuous task best done through diet.

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Early Christian ascetics, similarly, viewed the body as something apart, to be approached only with a deep sense of detached mistrust, as something to be dominated, something seen to be denied. This enactment of abstinence was almost theatrical in nature, a drama displayed before a captivated audience. As the church became established, one of the ways in which temptation and greed, those intense and selfish desires, were written on the body was in fat, obvious and showy. The ideal, slender, exiguous body had always been deemed divine and in stark contrast to the mortal and sinful body grown large and wanton in flesh.

Even St Augustine of Hippo struggled daily with his desire to eat and drink, far more than he ever did with his feelings of sexual lust. His greediness was 'not an evil which I can decide once and for all to repudiate and never to embrace again, as I was able to do with fornication'. Even regarding his food as a form of medicine, as was common, he still felt sure that the 'snare of concupiscence' awaited him. The very process of passing from the discomfort of hunger to the comfort of satiation was 'a pleasure and there is no other means of satisfying hunger except the one'. So, caught in a cleft stick, he felt himself obliged to eat, even though he knew he would suffer for it. Gluttony, far more so than the six other deadly sins, was a visible sin, embodied in opulent flesh, an outward sign of a soul sold to another God. This is Pauline philosophy: all humans are damned for their flesh. Women, being weak and pathologically corrupt creatures, were particularly susceptible to temptation and the early church fathers were especially obsessed with what they did with their bodies. When comparisons are made now between the early fasting saints and modern excessive dieting,

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the suggestion is that unusually high numbers of young female deaths in the thirteenth century might have been a response to Christian teaching, and it does not seem too far-fetched an argument. In the late 1970s and 1980s fundamentalist Christian

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groups in America were producing books which promoted rigorous weight loss for women. Habitual overeating has traditionally been regarded with the utmost distaste, and Christian notions of gluttony included not just gross indulgence, but connoisseurship. In the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great had identified several different kinds of gluttony, such as:

eating too much (*nimis*)

eating with unbecoming eagerness (*ardenter*)

eating wildly (*forente*)

not waiting until decent mealtimes (*praepropere*)

enjoying food that was too expensive (*laute*)

and being too picky (*studiose*)

All these eating behaviours were regarded as equally sinful.

Excessive picky daintiness encompassed both fussing over the preparation of food and medical or hypochondriacal concerns with it. Lust and gluttony, two of the Catholic deadly sins, were thought to complement and encourage each other, being quintessentially physical sins as opposed to the mental transgressions of pride or envy. St Thomas Aquinas was an enormously fat Catholic priest and philosopher who was so big by the time he died that his pall-bearers had trouble fitting him into his grave. In the thirteenth century he was preaching rightmindedness, part of which was the established idea that greed and gluttony were matters of the soul. If you happened to be fat, as he was, your body spoke volumes about your struggle with spiritual health. With a troubled eye on the hereafter Aquinas wrote: 'Let us not give our minds to delights but to what is the end of delights. Here on earth it is excrement and obesity, hereafter it is fire and the worm.' So early Christian attitudes to food were already complicated, involving temptation, sin and

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punitive redemption. They borrowed much from the classical Greek theory of *diatetica*, linked, as the Christian approach was, to duty and morality, but obscured it, just as it is obscured today by novelty, dissatisfaction and a fixation with celebrity culture. But *diatetica* is a deeply sensible plan for living and eating that, though relevant today, has been largely discarded in favour of the faster and more superficial approaches that have their roots in popular early modern diet regimens.