Chapter 9

WEIGHT LOSS IN THE AGE OF REASON

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It is typically assumed that the modern anxiety over obesity is a relatively recent phenomenon, stretching back at best no more than a century. In fact, this concern has a much longer history and the first medical discourses addressing the topic date from the seventeenth century, a time when fat was fashionable. By calling attention to the dangers of excess weight, medical professionals were to a great extent responsible for generating a nascent fear of fat. Their recommendations for weight loss are ultimately to blame for the gradual shift in meaning of the word diet from a general program of health maintenance to a regimen specifically designed to cure excess weight, which was increasingly defined as a pathological state. The various disagreements among different schools of medical thought only intensified the urgency with which they addressed the topic and losing weight eventually became fashionable, as it remains to this day.

Although Hippocrates and Galen in ancient times did address topic of obesity, among their heirs, the dietary writers of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, there was almost no interest in the topic. Excess fat was merely considered the result of the phlegmatic constitution, something with which a person was born. Naturally, the effects of this imbalance could be mitigated by alterations in diet and the other so-called non-naturals, but excessive fat was not considered a sickness. Only in the case of extreme obesity was there a definite perceived danger, and this focused primarily on the way the condition compromises movement, breathing, the circulation of fluids through the body, and reproduction. This seems to have been rare...
enough that most medical writers either never spent time discussing it, or mentioned it only as a passing curiosity, or marvel of nature.

There was, of course, a long tradition of inveighing against gluttony, both as a moral concern among theologians as well as a health issue among dietary writers. Eating and drinking too much, consuming too great a diversity of food and without any order or at the proper time, was considered the source of innumerable diseases. But revealingly, obesity was not among them. Oddly enough, most nutrition writers believed that gluttons were poorly nourished, their systems being tossed into such a state of disarray that little food would be properly processed. The surfeit of food was thought to overload and extinguish the heat that facilitates digestion.

Even among theologians, the sin of gluttony was more closely related to greed and lust than any kind of personal defilement, because it involved eating too much while others went hungry. Most exegesis focused on the glutton in Luke (16.19–31) whose real sin was not stuffing himself silly, but neglecting to perform acts of charity, which then made his sin mortal. For refusing to share his feast, he was later consigned to fast in hell. Fat itself was not conceptually linked to gluttony, even though in the popular consciousness, and especially in contemporary depictions gluttons were pictured as fat. Hieronymus Bosch’s depiction of Gula (Gluttony) in the rondel of Seven Deadly Sins is one good example. Eating too much might make you fat, but fat itself was no sin.

Why then the topic should have become of major concern after the mid seventeenth century and the subject of several dissertations, inaugural addresses and public disputations, is not entirely clear. It is tempting to suppose that this may have been the first time that there were a significant number of obese people to warrant medical attention. Perhaps it was the first time that enough people in one area had enough expendable income to seek a cure, making obesity a lucrative medical specialty and the object of medical controversy. In the physicians’ estimation, it was precisely the sheer number of fat people, particularly in Germany where most of them were writing, that demanded they address the topic. Although it is doubtful that many lay people read these disquisitions, their proliferation suggests that physicians were increasingly making treatment of obesity a regular part of their medical practice.

An equally plausible cause for the sudden interest is that the flurry of competing physiological theories in the wake of chemical and mechanical discoveries threw the whole question of how and why fat accumulates up in the air, not to mention how to cure it. In other words, the evolution of