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Fat, Syn and Disordered Eating: The Dangers and Powers of Excess

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Abstract

This article draws on qualitative research inside one UK secular commercial weight loss group to show how ancient Christian suspicions of appetite and pleasure resurface in this group's language of "Syn." Following ancient Christian representations of sin, members assume that Syn depicts disorder and that fat is a visible sign of a body which has fallen out of place. Syn, though, is ambiguous, utilizing ancient theological meanings to discipline fat while containing within it the power to resist the very borders which hold women's bodies and fat in place. Syn thus signals both the dangers and powers of disordered eating.

Keywords: Fat, Sin/Syn, Order/Disorder, Weight Loss

Introduction

According to St Jerome, “the attenuation, the slenderness, the deliverance of the body from the encumbrance of much flesh gives us some conformity to God and His angels.” Apparently, the less flesh we have, the more we become like the heavenly bodies who have none. Citing this passage by Jerome in his sermon on Easter Day in 1626, John Donne (1839, 314) recommends slimness to his congregation. “The flesh that we have built up by curious diet, by meats of provocation, and witty sauces,” he teaches, is “artificial flesh of our own making.” All flesh is sinful, so the more we have the deeper we bury the soul. The soul, he instructs, does not require “so vast a house of sinful flesh, to dwell in.”

Today we may be less inclined to ponder the theological content of current day discourses about fat, but ancient Christian suspicion of pleasure displayed within the moral requirement to properly order one’s desire and foodways, continues to lurk behind contemporary cultural obsessions with size. This essay draws on qualitative research conducted inside a UK secular commercial weight loss group to explore how its discourse of “Syn” evokes ancient theological meanings, establishing fat as disordered and as a site of danger and power. Although the spelling of Syn differs from traditional Christian usage, the original spelling—“Sin”—used by the organization up until 2004 exposes its alliance with ancient theological notions of disobedience and disorder. It may be that early theologians like Tertullian encouraged fasting as a corrective to the “primordial sin” of Eden and that women ascetics starved themselves in order to orientate their desire towards a mystical encounter with Christ, but such theological calls to organize desire through the re-ordering of foodways are part of the symbolism of sin this secular group reproduces. Fat is assumed to be a physical sign of Syn and visible proof of a body which has become disordered. Syn then operates as it has always done within traditional theology, to patrol the boundaries of order through the containment of the

flesh, and female flesh in particular. Yet, this group's narrating of Syn is ambiguous for Syn is both prohibited and permitted, and it is such ambiguity that, I suggest, has the potential to rupture the integrity of the theological discourse upon which this group's suspicion of fat is founded.

Disordered eating

The language of "disorder" when set against eating raises a number of issues. Most obviously, it is suggestive of a medical gaze that clinically defines certain foodways as disordered. Feminists have long since troubled distinctions between "normal" and "pathological" eating with figures like Susie Orbach and Susan Bordo suggesting that anorexia, dieting, bingeing, and overeating are best placed on a "continuum." For Orbach, all women share the same condition of sexual oppression, "taught to see themselves from the outside as candidates for men" (1978, 17) and confined to oppressive social gender roles. Dieting, like anorexia and other expressions of "compulsive eating," is a response to women's inequality – a product of social rather than individual disorder (1986, 61). Bordo, although critical of Orbach's theorizing of eating disorders as a site of protest against patriarchy, considers dieting, rigorous exercise and anorexia as all part of the same backlash against women's autonomy. The drive towards thinness, whether through dieting or more extreme forms of self-starvation, is not a unique pathology of the individual that the therapist must seek to treat and correct, but a "*cultural disorder*" (1993, 55) reflective of the cultural demand for female thinness, constant self-monitoring, and self-improvement (1993, 57). Bordo considers that "eating disorders, far from being 'bizarre' and anomalous, are utterly continuous with a dominant element of the experience of being female in this culture" (1993, 57). It is not then that the anorectic or compulsive dieter misperceives reality but that they understand it all too well. There are no clear boundaries distinguishing eating-disordered women from those with so-called "normal" eating practices, for it is all too "normal" for women to fear food and be preoccupied with weight.

Of course, it is true that “eating disorders” like anorexia and bulimia are not out of kilter with the eating habits of the majority of women. Despite the obvious medical overtones of the terminology of “disorder,” then, I use it here not to assume certain foodways are atypical or abnormal, but because members recycle theological ideas about sin which take as their starting point assumptions about “order.” I seek to signal a similar troubling of hard and fast binaries, especially those which Christian theology has helped create and concretize between fat, disorder and sin.

Inside a secular commercial weight loss group: go forth and shrink!

The slimming group inside which I conducted research¹ belongs to a very popular UK commercial weight loss organization. It boasts 10,000 groups nationwide, a total of 3,500 trained consultants, and an intake of over five million slimmers since its inception in 1969. I spent fifteen months inside one regional group attending weekly meetings and participating as a fully paying member. I joined the group as a researcher and as a dieter, committed to losing weight and conducting ethnographic research. Like other feminist women researching fat, I was aware of the “fraught standpoint” I embodied (Heyes, 2006, 127), caught between my feminist convictions and a personal desire to lose weight.² It seemed to me, however, that seeking to rise above my own body and its contradictory desires only reinvested with new power the body/mind dualism feminists have long since tried to critique, not least within Christian theology.³ Consequently, I decided to include myself in the research as a participant.

During my time inside the group, I chatted informally with members and conducted thirteen semi-structured interviews with volunteers, twelve women and one man. Most defined themselves as “Christian,” although none raised faith or religion as a motivation for weight loss. Meetings took place in the hall of a local evangelical Anglican church (ironically suggestive of the theological meanings the organization resurrects) and lasted for one and a half hours. Members varied in age but the group was comprised of mostly women with only two male members,

neither of whom came regularly. While it is possible that other men joined but chose not to attend (cf. Bell & McNaughton, 2007), the products and services of this organization were clearly marketed at women. Weekly attendance averaged at around fifteen to twenty members and the majority of the group was middle class, reflecting the affluent social location of the meeting and members' ability to afford the weekly subscription of £4.95.⁴ Hevala was the only non-white, non-British woman in the group. She moved from Kurdistan to the UK when she was three years old.

The consultant, Louise, appeared to be in her mid to late thirties. She was usually involved with most aspects of the meetings, receiving members' weekly subscriptions, weighing members, and speaking to new recruits about the weight loss plan. She always led the formal meeting which would routinely begin with her welcoming new members and presenting awards to those who had reached significant "targets." She would invite each individual to give an account of their weight gain, loss, or maintenance that week, and would often intersperse such profiling with a game or talk. The meeting would always end with a raffle and with Louise commissioning the group to "go forth and shrink!"

Syn and boundary setting: permission and prohibition

The language of Syn is fundamental to this organization's approach to weight loss. Indeed, so foundational is it that the organization opposed a trademark application by *Sin and Slim* (another UK slimming company) in 2005, contesting the use of "sin" in its weight loss plan.⁵ "Syn" typically refers to foods like crisps, chocolate, ice cream, cake and alcohol that are high in saturated fats and sugar. All Syn is ascribed a "value" reflective of its nutritional value — a cheese straw: 2 Syns; a 28 gram piece of chocolate fudge cake: 5 Syns, for example. Members are instructed to consume between ten and fifteen Syns a day and are advised to keep a log of their daily intake. Syn values are calculated by "Head Office" and members are never informed about how these are decided. Instead, such values simply appear as a seventeen-page list in the weight

loss guide. Members can also discover Syn values by consulting the company's website, "Syn calculator" or by calling the "Syns Hotline."

Syn stands for "Synergy," expressing the organization's view that Syn works alongside two other food groups—"Healthy Extras" and "Free Foods"—to "optimize"⁶ weight loss. The fine detail of what constitutes each of these categories depends on which plan members follow. On the "Original plan" (which was the most popular), members observe either "red" or "green" days and must take care not to confuse the two. On red days, "Free Foods" include lean meat and poultry, fish, seafood and game. Fresh or frozen fruit, vegetables, eggs, fat-free dairy products and vegetable proteins like Quorn and tofu are also Free, technically "Superfree" because they are Free on both red and green days. All Free Food can be eaten without restriction. "Healthy Extras" are divided into Healthy Extra "a" choices and Healthy Extra "b" choices and must always be weighed. Members must choose one or two from category "a" and two from category "b". On red days, "a" choices include milk and cheese. "B" choices include vegetable pulses and pastas, oil, cereals and crispbreads, cereal bars, bread, dried, canned and cooked fruit and soups. On "green" days, "Free Foods" include vegetables and pulses, rice, pasta and grains. The same "Superfree" foods are also Free on both red and green days. Healthy Extra "a" choices include milk and cheese, but "b" choices now include meat and poultry, fish, shellfish, oil, cheese, nuts and seeds as well as cereals, crispbreads, bread, cereal bars, soups, and dried, canned and cooked fruit. All food which is not Free or a Healthy Extra is "Syn."

What constitutes Free Food, Syn and Healthy Extras then is ambiguous. Syn is, however, also ambiguous because it is both permitted and prohibited. On the one hand, members do not have to avoid Syn. Indeed, the weight loss guide instructs that Syns are the way members can enjoy the foods many diets ban "without a shred of guilt!" Syn, the guide asserts, "takes the guilt right out of eating." Members must simply decide how to spend their Syn "allowance" and so become strategic managers of their weekly budgets. The official message of the organization is that Syn is positive and flexible. Syn, though, must also be policed since any food which is not

Free or designated a Healthy Extra must be counted as part of one's Syn "allowance". Confusing or blurring the boundaries between Syn, Healthy Extras and Free Food in ways that exceed one's weekly Syn allowance always results in the kind of Syn which falls outside the permitted boundaries of the plan. Syn then emerges in this group as positive and negative, liberating and restraining, harmless and dangerous. It both bids members to eat while also insisting that they abstain.

Sliding into Syn

The original spelling of "Sin" formally used by this organization is telling, for despite being permitted, Syn continues the legacy of dominant theological tradition as it is reconstituted as dangerous and named as wrong. Louise plays a vital role in establishing this. She tells us repeatedly that all foods that are not Free carry a Syn value⁷ and this serves to construct Syn and Free Food in opposition to one another. Free Foods are "safe," she advises, because they do not need regulating, thus Syn is conversely framed as unsafe and in need of tight control. Comparing a pastry sausage roll to one she has made which substitutes the pastry for wholemeal bread, she remarks that it is "scary" how many Syns are in the "proper" sausage roll: eleven to be precise. She cautions that a lax attitude to Syn places the slimmer in a "danger zone," recounting in one meeting the instance of a woman who, on Christmas day, ate seventy Syns just by not watching the food she polished off between courses.

Louise's recurring message is that our eating must be watched and watched carefully. She hands out fake eye balls to the group to place in their lunch boxes as a reminder that she is watching them and it is this eye for detail that she encourages members to develop. We must cut the rind off of our bacon she tells us, even those little bits between the bacon which are fiddly, otherwise what we think is "Free" becomes Syn and unsafe. Part of the alarm surrounding Syn then is that Free Food might suddenly mutate and tip the member into the kind of Syn which is irrecoverable. Vigilance is, therefore, crucial.

Members share Louise's unease about Syn. Sarah, for instance, tells me that it is the taste of crisps that stalls her weight loss potential:

The only thing I find hard is [the] Syns. When I have a sandwich – so that's like the bread's Syns – I just have this thing where I want to eat crisps. But we get like these velvet crisps. I don't know what they're called, what the name is, but they're like four Syns. But they're *so* tasty. Or we'll get *Quavers* and um... I just like find a sandwich with a few crisps on the side. And I have done that quite a lot and it's still worked but I know if I *didn't* have them...

Although she is still losing weight, she implies that resisting crisps would probably help her lose even more, but the taste is too irresistible. Mark similarly defines savoury food as his “downfall.” For Nicola, it is the “wine at night and just silly things that creep on without you knowing at the time, until you look in the mirror! You go to put something on and you think, oh . . . what have you done? Get the wine back out and drown your sorrows!” Syn then is dangerous because it creeps up, hides in unsuspecting foods and seduces members with its taste. It also leads to serious consequences since “little pickers wear big knickers!” warns a poster displayed in the meeting room. Syn, it would seem, can have *weighty* ramifications.

Of course, Christian theology traditionally holds that this is indeed the lesson of the fall, and it is the theological notion of fallenness which resurfaces most strongly in members' narrations surrounding Syn. Syn deceives and causes them to “slip,” “slide” or “fall.” Mark, although feeling good about his weight loss, wonders why this is not enough motivation to prevent him from “slipping.” Ruth perceives a danger with her own foodways which make it “very easy to just slide back into your wicked ways [. . .] and eat all these things which are responsible for how you got where you are in the first place.” Nicola tells me that in the last four years she has “probably gone down a slippery slide,” consuming more wine than previously and causing her to put on weight. She talked too about “not doing enough” to avoid tempting Synful foods and concluded that she was “still slipping.”

Wine, sausage rolls and crisps are all defined as Syn by this organization. By identifying their consumption with a slip or slide, members reproduce the ancient theological principle of the fall that aligns eating with moral decline and a lapse into an unintended state of estrangement from the “authentic and good self” (Ruether, 1983, 160). Syn thus comes to take on the meaning attributed to it within classic Christian thought. Augustine (354-430) has been formative in such development suggesting that Eden displayed the power of food to enslave the soul within the body. God’s holy order had been turned upside down and irrational, sensible, covetous desire placed in control of the rational soul (1887a; 2002). Adam and Eve’s eating had “wounded” human will such that humans were now unable to choose the good for themselves. Humanity was enslaved to sin and the inner struggle Paul confessed in Romans 7, which had him unable to do the good he willed, was evidence of this (1887b; 1887c). Humanity were marked by the “disease” of concupiscence (1887d: VIII. 7) —an anxious grasping which more often than not sought fulfilment in material things (like food) rather than in God (2002). The will had become divided and the soul “torn asunder with grievous perplexities” (1887d, VIII.10 & VIII.5). God’s order had become disordered.

Members inherit this sense of the frustration of Syn, speaking similarly of an inability to prevent themselves from doing the good they will. Suzanne feels “fed up” with herself when she goes to group and gains weight because she knows in her “heart of hearts” that she “could do it” but is “getting a bit too relaxed.” Wendy is frustrated because she repeats the same pattern of getting comfortable when losing weight and then eating a bag of chips to celebrate. Likewise, for the first Christians, Genesis spoke of the dangers of appetite they experienced on a daily basis. “In the midst of these temptations, I strive daily against longing for food and drink”, writes Augustine (1887d, X.47), aggrieved that he cannot simply move from hunger to satiation without passing through the “snare of concupiscence” (1887d, X.44). He detests that he frequently lusts after food rather than treating it like medicine for health as he should (1887d, X.44). The story of Eden displayed exactly this problem he thought: the power of food to drag the soul downwards

through the corruptible senses. Concupiscence signalled disordered desire or “lust” (Lane, 2006): not simply sexual lust but the lust for other earthly pleasures, including enjoyment from eating. It spoke of a profound disharmony within the soul and one that originated with Adam and/but mainly Eve’s wayward eating.

No wonder then that early Christians named the lust of the “belly” as Adam and Eve’s original sin. Basil of Caesarea (c.330-379) considered “it was gluttony that betrayed Adam to death and brought wickedness upon the world, thanks to the lust of the belly” (in Stone, 2005, 27). Tertullian argued that Adam “yielded more readily to his belly than to God” and “sold salvation for his gullet!” (1885, 3). Both believed that fasting was a way to expiate the “primordial sin” of Eden. Similarly, members believe that Syn enters their world through food.

The trappings of Syn and the snare of pleasure

It is the *pleasure* of food and eating which is especially dangerous according to members. Ruth tells me that eating the wrong food means not eating sensibly. Speaking about the plan she remarks, “you have to say well, if that’s a sensible way of eating, what was going wrong before? And what was going wrong before was all the stuff that you ate *as well* as the stuff that you needed.” She continues to explain the problem as “eating too much of the kind of food which is very tasty.” Such food, she says, is “addictive;” it is also described by her as “garbage.” The answer, she concludes, is to locate such “wrong” foods and avoid them altogether: “if you don’t have them at all, you’re all right.” Eating the “wrong” foods, then, is not sensible because these are not foods we *need*, they are foods we eat for pleasure in excess of what we need and they are foods which hook us with their taste.

This feature of members’ Syn-talk again takes on the form of traditional theological doctrine by repeating a distinction between restraint (cast as a marker of rationality), and desire/pleasure (cast as a marker of irrationality). These features of classical Christian sin-talk are kept intact and re-inscribed with parallel meanings. Basil of Caesarea reflects such a distinction,

instructing that food ought to be approached like clothes; it should meet the practical needs of the body and nothing more: “for a man in good health bread will suffice, and water will quench thirst” (1895a, II.6, 264). Eating for health is not the same as eating for pleasure and “savage gluttony” should be met by “moderation, quiet, and self-control” (1895a, II.6, 264).

Certainly, many early Christians considered that eating for pleasure identified human beings with irrationality and with animals, much like the Greek philosophies that often informed them. Clement of Alexandria (c.150-215) cites Philippians 3:19 where Paul speaks against those whose “god is their belly” to claim that Christ “the Instructor” calls humans to eat to live rather than live to eat (2007, II.2, 242). “For neither is food our business, nor is pleasure our aim.” Humans should eat to sustain the body so that it can receive and obey the Word (2007, II.1, 237). For Clement, food should be plain, intended towards health and “conducive both to digestion and lightness of body” (2007, 2.1, 38). Over a century later and in his ninth sermon of the *Hexameron*, Basil warns that a person who degrades themselves by indulging the “passions of the flesh” becomes a “slave of thy belly” and “approachest animals without reason and becomest like one of them” (1895b, IX.2, 102).

We begin to glimpse here how slimness and “lightness of body” (to cite Clement) emerge theologically as a sign of moral purity, and fat as a sign of impurity, irrationality and disordered desire. For John Chrysostom (c.307-407), those who became fat through “luxurious living” were like animals, for “[i]t is only for brute beasts to be feeding from morning to night” (1889, XXXV, 222). He spoke of the “disgusting spectacle” of “a man cultivating obesity,” who was to be seen “dragging himself along like a seal.” Augustine too taught that the mind was “slowed down by weight” (in Nightingale, 2011, 191) and the body literally dragged down to earth/mortality by its hefty flesh. In exacerbating appetite through fasting, the soul’s hunger grew and the person became “capacious.” Lightness of body fattened the soul and made it more like the resurrected body which would rise “without blemish” and “without weight” (Augustine, 1959, 252).

Adopting the components of the classical doctrine of sin which equate sin with food and weight, members come to reach similar conclusions about fat as these ancient thinkers. Lucy sees that her bad behavior is the reason for her anticipated weight gain: “if I know I’ve been bad, well that’s my own fault isn’t it. I kind of go [to the meeting] expecting to have put weight on.” Samantha says that if she has eaten out then she will expect a gain to follow: “in the back of my head it’s ‘that’s gonna catch up with me at some point.’” Members hence assume that Syn is worn on the body *as* fat (i.e. as *excess*), and that fat is consequently a physical sign of the excessive foodways that produced it. Fat⁸ becomes synonymous with Syn, disorder and with a body that lacks restraint. In a manner reflective of Chrysostom, Ruth depicts fat as brutish and base: “you don’t want to be lurching through the town knocking people out of the way with your vast size!”

Women and disordered eating

Of course, it is Eve who has been framed for sin within Christian thought, but women are similarly implicated in this secular context in ways expressive of classical assumptions about gender. Certainly, this organization does not officially restrict its message about the dangers of Syn to women, but women are nevertheless the assumed audience. New members are almost always women and the group is mainly female. Louise also assumes her audience is female, even when Mark is present. In one meeting she promotes the organization’s “Woman of the Year Award” (which celebrates the *member* who has achieved the most weight loss), apologizing to Mark for its exclusive nature. In another she circulates an exercise that is designed to help us fit into our “frocks” (i.e. dresses) for Christmas. It pictures a female dancer whose body has been divided into fourteen parts. Members are asked to color in one piece for every pound lost. This not only confirms that it is women who are expected to lose weight and be good at it but that it is women who must slice their bodies into pieces (Althaus-Reid & Isherwood, 2008, 1-6) and learn that “real women are thin, nearly invisible” (Hartley, 2001, 61).

Feminist theologians Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood situate Christian culture at the center of such calls for women's "dismemberment" arguing that theology and religion are "no innocent bystanders in this moulding of women" (2008, 2). Feminists have long since challenged depictions of Eve which tie women's bodies and appetites to sin (e.g. Ruether, 1983). If the tendency in Christian thought has been to frame all women as Eve, then this weight loss organization would appear to share in this tradition, assuming women as its audience and locating women once more in closer proximity to *Syn*. Of course, fat and female fat are deemed especially problematic because they symbolize bodies that will not be contained; bodies that have moved *out of bounds*⁹ and out of place and which, therefore, require discipline. Christian theology aids this organization in its attempts to offset the rebellious power and danger of fat by supplying it with a rhetorical device—*Syn*—already tied to a narrative that castigates women's eating and which works to defame fat. In this sense, theology operates—as Mary Douglas would have it—to control the *power* and *danger* of fat (or excess) by defining fat as "dirt;" as "matter out of place" (1966, 50).

Dirt and disorder: fat as dirt

Douglas (1966) contends that dirt signifies disorder, and that the alignment of certain bodies and bodily practices with dirt carry symbolic significance reflecting views about the wider social order. To understand pollution properly, "we should try to argue *back* from the known dangers of society to the known selection of bodily themes and try and recognize what appositeness is there" (1966, 150). Bodies are microcosms of the wider social world, their borders symbolic of the borders which depict social order. Applying Douglas' observations to contemporary social attitudes to fatness, Kathleen LeBesco (2004, 24) suggests that "[b]y making fat bodies 'dirty' and 'normal' or slender bodies 'pure,' we have order." In other words, the social construction of fat as "dirt" serves the purpose of imposing an organizing system upon bodies which renders fat anomalous. Order is thus maintained through the demarcation of fat as "bad," and this is

certainly a function of Syn within this group. However, Douglas is clear that there are different ways of treating anomalies – we can ignore them, condemn them, assimilate them or try to create a new order in which they can take a place. For LeBesco (2004, 24) it is this final option which is necessary, a “reconstruction of fat so that it is not considered bad or dirty.” Because fat is anomalous, it resists being absolutely equated with dirt, therefore new approaches to fat are possible she says. Equally, in this weight loss group, Syn evades absolute identification with prohibition and so resists an absolute identification with dirt. This, I now argue, threatens to upset the tidy classifications of classical theology which inform members’ narrations of Syn.

Freedom to Syn?

Syn resists as well as reproduces classical theological meanings. Louise regularly encourages members to use their Syns and reassures us that the organization does not require self-deprivation or lots of counting and measuring. Unlike diet programs, this organization welcomes members to eat! Granted the plan demands that members deploy their agency in ways which observe its precepts, but there is room for movement here as members determine how to spend their Syn and when to abstain from it. They make calculated, intentional decisions about what to eat, how and when to socialize and how best to combine foods together. This often causes members to feel a sense of ownership over their lives and to feel like they have garnered new life-enhancing knowledge: “It makes you feel more in control of your life,” says Hevala; for Ruth, it leads to “an expansion in knowledge” which helps her make more informed decisions about her foodways and to understand why she has gained weight over the years.

Women in this group embrace their capacity to Syn as an opportunity to work on the self and come to see weight loss as a form of self-accomplishment. “If I’ve lost then you feel good about yourself,” says Suzanne, “and think if I’ve done that this week I can do the same again next week.” Jane tells the group in one meeting that she has dropped four dress sizes and now fits very comfortably into a size 14. She feels good because this is something *she* has achieved.

For others, like Tracy, the awareness of Syn helps cultivate self-reflection and a kind of reflection that helps to make her feel more positive about herself, rather than encouraging a flagellation of the self. Time in group allows her to have a break from the routine of caring for her young son: “I do like to stay to group I mean partly because it’s a night off for me ... that sounds awful doesn’t it, but it’s a night just away from the bath routine and things like that.”

Of course, in an obvious way, the skills of self-reflection and self-determinism are put to work in training women’s bodies to be “subjected and practised bodies” (Foucault, 1977, 138). Yet for Tracy, time working on the self enables her to relinquish an aspect of her domestic role and causes her to place her own needs above the needs of her family. Women cultivate skills in decisiveness and come to see themselves as having the capacity to control their own bodies, capacities Cressida Heyes (2006, 146) suggests are worthy of embracing from a feminist perspective. Yet we might say that the weight loss industry recycles such feminist themes to serve marketers’ needs. For Stinson, the suggestion that slimming is an expression of self-care ties women’s empowerment necessarily to self-control and *weight* control specifically, diluting the power it produces (2001, 198). It is crucial then to ask how far women can claim empowerment and agency as “real.” If theological and patriarchal systems work in women’s bodies and lives ensuring women collude in their own oppression, then must we say that such empowerment is illusory?

Syn and the agonistic self

To address this question, we must locate the tensions between permission and prohibition displayed in this organization’s Syn-talk within the wider socio-economic tensions of consumer capitalism. The organization’s insistence that members can have all they want while simultaneously requiring them to repress their desires is reflective of the contradictory structure of economic life under capitalism. According to Susan Bordo, such a contradictory system

produces the “unstable,” “agonistic” personality – a self torn between “two mutually incompatible directions.”

On the one hand, as producers of goods and services we must sublimate, delay, repress desires for immediate gratification; we must cultivate the work ethic. On the other hand, as consumers we must display a boundless capacity to capitulate to desire and indulge in impulse; we must hunger for constant and immediate satisfaction. The regulation of desire thus becomes an ongoing problem, as we find ourselves continually besieged by temptation, while socially condemned for overindulgence (1993, 199).

For Bordo, since consumer culture conditions us to lose control at the sight of desirable products, we can only ever respond by matching the desire to consume with a desire to master our passion for consumption (1993, 201).

If then the divided self is a product of theological systems and capitalist economics, then this does question the extent to which women can really *choose* to slim. Indeed, my own personal “decision” to lose weight may appear not so much as an autonomous preference but as a product of the socio-political and religious underpinnings of patriarchal consumer capitalism. Similarly, the agency and empowerment women in this group claim to experience might be viewed as a form of “false consciousness.” Bordo certainly contends that “[t]o *feel* autonomous and free while harnessing body and soul to an obsessive body practice is to serve, not transform, a social order that limits female possibilities” (1993, 179). Like Sandra Bartky (1990), she is clear that dieting functions to produce docility among women and gender normalization (1993, 184) and that any feeling of empowerment that results is illusory, fuelling rather than resisting women’s obedience to the market driven demand for their pounds of flesh.

Others like Michelle LeWica (2009) have argued that the cultural appetite for thinness supports an entire matrix of other related privileges to do with age, race, able-bodiedness, class, sexuality and nation. She extends Bordo’s critique to show how white women’s “devotion” to the “secular religion” of thinness troubles the binary between the “religious” and “secular,”

helping establish the white western feminine ideal as normative for *all* women. This model of femininity serves to “reinforce the hierarchical position of a select few women (those who are tall, white, wealthy, and thin) above a diversity of ‘others’” (2009, 26). She is surely right. Hevala for example told me that she only came to see her body as “big” subsequent to moving from Kurdistan to the UK and after a humiliating experience at her UK primary school where she was weighed in front of her class. Her teacher’s shock and embarrassment at her weight made her see her Middle Eastern body as “obviously” big in comparison to her classmates who she described to me as being of “average” size. Arguably it is Hevala’s internalization and application of Eurocentric norms which cause her to see her body as deviant.

For Lelwica, like Bordo, dieting affords women no real agency. The power of the global media in spreading the religion of thinness around the world, even to places where the majority of people have very little to eat, is like the power of the church to indoctrinate in matters of sin and salvation; “in both cases, homogenizing images of the ideal body/soul feed the hegemony of transnational capitalism, as popular representations of the physically fit, attractive, intact ‘self’ tacitly shape people’s everyday habits, their ways of taking in or seeing the world, and their assumptions about what is natural, normal, and appropriate” (2009, 31). Like Bordo, she maintains that the desire to slim is produced by culture. Women are “indoctrinated” by the religion of thinness and it is kyriarchal capitalism that benefits while the hetero-patriarchal, colonial, racist and classist assumptions that give rise to women’s discontent remain unchallenged (Lelwica, 2009, 33).

Syn and resistance: increased capabilities

Of course, Bordo and Lelwica are right to a point. Yet, to suggest that women are entirely controlled by socio-political and religious forces implies that women are tricked by cultural messages or unconsciously subscribe to the thin ideal. This fails to authentically reflect the experiences of women inside this group. Some women *were* aware of the structural conditions

that produced the compulsion for thinness. A number of members, for example, detected that Louise tended to spend more time with those who were not “target members”¹⁰ and thought this was financially motivated. Since target members did not have to pay a weekly subscription, many believed Louise focused more on non-target members to ensure their repeat business. Others were concerned about the way cultural discourses conspired to demonize fat and were critical of the weight loss plan. Leanne, a mental health nurse, told me that she did not like the counting and measuring the plan required and found Louise’s moralizing language of “good” and “bad” judgmental. She told me that most diets don’t work, citing statistics and her own personal experience in support. She accused her workplace of being “fatist” against her and society of being prejudiced against fat people. She seemed all too aware of how social forces conspired to demonize fat. Helen questioned the ethics of the plan naming as a “problem” the way it encouraged rather than resolved her tendency to have negative feelings about her body. Although she had lost the weight she wanted to lose in time for her wedding, the plan fueled her body dis-ease such that she now looked at her wedding photographs and saw rolls of fat she wished weren’t there.

It is, therefore, inaccurate to say that members display a docile and uncritical submission to the plan or to cultural norms that promote thinness as an ideal standard. That those who question the plan and Louise’s intentions or display a critical attitude nevertheless remain committed to losing weight demonstrates how discipline and resistance accompany one another, producing contradictory attitudes about weight. Heyes (2006) explores such a tension. She is critical of feminists like Bordo and Bartky that use Foucault to establish the dieter as “the irrefutably docile body” (2006, 144). Rather than focusing on Foucault’s work on technologies of domination, she uses his later work on technologies of the self to argue that in weight loss contexts, techniques of domination operate *alongside* the growth of capabilities. Evoking Foucault’s claim that power is not something derived from a particular source but a ubiquitous relation within which different techniques of power occur, she reminds her readers that, for

Foucault, the increase of capabilities and possibilities for flourishing operate in *tandem* with the intensification of power relations. As such, she claims that women continue to diet despite high failure rates, not because they are “irrefutably docile” (2006, 144) and duped into a state of false consciousness but because they experience the process as *enabling*. She admits that the new capacities women develop are frequently recycled back into disciplinary practices, but these, she maintains, nevertheless have the potential to exceed the regime of normalization that produces them. Since power is everywhere, women who diet can and do experience increased capacities. As a participant observer in *Weight Watchers*, she sees how communities of women can be mobilized and how observing her self-destructive behaviours might be a useful practice in awareness. We may have reason to embrace these capacities, she contends, for we can welcome them without assenting to the intensification of disciplinary power they often require (2006, 127 & 146).

A similar potential is glimpsed in this group as women exercise ownership of their bodies within a disciplinary setting. Like Heyes, we might envisage that the skills of self-attentiveness and self-determinism cultivated by women in this group have the potential to be deployed in ways that resist patriarchal control, even if they cannot entirely escape it. By intentionally choosing Syn and by aligning Syn with the *good*, women begin to trouble the theological system that constructs women’s eating and excess weight as a visible sign of moral failure. Alongside the family of associations this group forge between fat, Syn and bad foodways now appear a set of associations between Syn, intentionality and the good. If fat continues to be aligned with Syn but Syn can be *good*, then an absolute identification of fat with moral weakness is ruptured and the theological foundations upon which this organization’s defamation of fat is based, destabilized. Although I would certainly want to question the assumption that fat is always expressive of an individual’s foodways, the organization’s use of this logic when employed alongside its stance that Syn is permitted potentially creates space for a more positive reading of fat.

In addition, there are times when women deploy the new skills and capabilities Syn cultivates against the plan itself. Lisa tells me that she does not stick within her milk allowance for a Healthy Extra. She likes to drink milk in her tea so refuses to measure it. She explains her deviance as a concern to avoid becoming too obsessed: “I don’t want to get too obsessed with it; it like controls your life. I’d rather it just be there. I’d rather carry on how I’m doing. I’m not in any urgency to like, suddenly lose.” This is a permanent decision Lisa makes. She does not transgress and then decide to correct her rebellion. Indeed, Lisa’s action here works to support a potentially transgressive account of fat, since she implies that her excess weight need not be eliminated, at least *not yet*. By relaxing the borders governing Syn, Lisa relaxes the requirement for weight loss. She practices the power of choice the plan permits by choosing to drink what it forbids. Ironically then, the permission Syn provides has the power to cultivate the kind of rebellion it must prevent if fat is to continue to figure as dirt.

Members also regularly choose to flout other restrictions by not counting Syn or by blending red and green days together. Such transgression is usually explained as a similar desire to reject the constraining aspects of the plan as Lucy explains:

I don’t want to live my life on a diet... a constant diet and I know everybody says “*it’s not a diet it’s a different way of eating*” [*said as an impersonation*]. Yes it is but that different way of eating... Sometimes you are a bit naughty aren’t you? And I don’t want to be saying to myself all the time, “oh, I shouldn’t be having this.” If I’m having it, I’m having it and, you know, shut up, get on with it!

Lucy identifies the way the anti-diet stance encapsulated in the organization’s positive narrating of Syn co-exists, albeit uncomfortably, alongside its theologically sanctioned and consumer driven discourse which defines Syn as “bad.” She appears to subscribe to both, refusing to restrain her eating while recognizing her rebellion as “naughty.” However, in the end, her choice to not live her life on a diet provokes her to eat what she wants. Ultimately, her choice to eat and

not abstain – a choice ironically promoted by this organization’s official stance on Syn – becomes the very grounds for her rebellion against the plan itself.

While it is true then that the permissive side of Syn functions in this group to keep women at war with their bodies, encouraging Syn within a context that also requires the confession of it, it nevertheless is used by women to resist the boundaries of the plan to various degrees. The dangerous potential here is that the permissiveness of Syn could develop in women such a strong belief in the organization’s anti-diet stance and such degrees of self-determinism that they decide to refuse the need to watch their weight altogether. With Heyes we can say that the capacities Syn cultivates have the potential to exceed the regime of normalization that produces them.

Paying attention to the micropractices that constitute the day to day experiences of weight loss thus allows us to see that women can and do experience real opportunities for cultivating increased capabilities. Even in a weight loss setting which measures women’s worth by their appearance and size, women experience real opportunities for self-care and self-determinism. As Heyes argues, we do not cease to act even when disciplinary power affects our everyday habits (2006, 136). A similar tension between discipline and resistance is evident within various forms of Christian *askesis*. Bell (1985) and Bynum (1987) both argue that historic forms of asceticism among Christian holy women afforded women opportunities for rebellion against normalizing forces, as well as being disciplinary techniques of control. Speaking about Catherine of Siena, Bell suggests that Catherine used food as a device to order her environment in defiance of social expectations. Her extreme asceticism which had her in the end drinking only water, chewing on bitter herbs and consuming the host, despite being seen by her as an attempt to subdue her will, actually had her utilizing it to resist marriage, challenge religious authority and undertake public ministry. In so doing, he argues that she shaped her own life as well as colluding in an oppressive social system that caused her infirmity and death. Of course, the self-starvation of Catherine is not the same as the *askesis* practiced by women in this group—

Catherine's goal was never to attain thinness, only holiness—but the notion that food and flesh can function as devices which resist as well as reproduce dominant notions of order is arguably common to both.

Conclusion

Feminist and liberation theologians have long since argued that sin must be salvaged from a primary association with personal guilt and individual failure. Naming as sin a number of social structures like (hetero)sexism, racism, classism, ablism, colonialism and imperialism, such theologies have argued that systemic sin implicates everyone in different ways and to different degrees. “Individuals can either resist or collaborate with such structural sin but they are never free and innocent of it,” claims Fiorenza (2001, 110). Such a framing of sin seems to describe accurately the patriarchal and socio-economic structures that produce and sustain the thin ideal. However, if women are able to exercise freedom and power even within this disciplinary system, it is perhaps Eve's eating in the Garden of Eden that gives theological expression to this, for it is by eating that her eyes are opened, that new knowledge of good and evil is obtained (Gen 3.22). Her eating is *enabling*. Indeed, Eve and Adam become dangerously like God because of Eve's decision to eat rather than abstain, exposing the transformative power of a body that intentionally decides to eat. God may have responded in the story by expelling the “dirt” from paradise and by placing a flaming sword to protect the boundaries around the tree of life (3:24), but the dangerous power of eating is exposed. Might it be then that Eve shows us that freedom comes “when women refuse to be ‘good,’” to quote Mary Daly (1973, 65); that by choosing to eat and transgress boundaries they are able to trouble the borders which attempt to hold their bodies and fat in place? It is this danger and power that is potentially resident in this organization's ambiguous account of Syn.

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Endnotes

¹ The name of this weight loss organization has been concealed and members given pseudonyms to protect their identities. Information available in the public domain inevitably means that the company's identity can be indirectly disclosed but such a disclosure is not necessary to the nature of the research here.

² Other feminist researchers speak of similar tensions. See Bordo (1993), Longhurst (2012), Heyes (2006), Stinson (2001).

³ This is a point also made by Throsby and Gimlin (2010) in relation to their own field research.

⁴ For members like Suzanne, Jane and Ruth who had attended for over a year by the time I left the group, their weekly fees would have incurred an annual expenditure of over £250.

⁵ *Sin and Slim* have since ceased trading and the organization I joined continue to claim sin – now spelt "Syn" – as their own intellectual property. For full details of legal proceedings, see Reynolds' report (2007) and for media coverage see Murray-West's newspaper article (2006) in the *Telegraph*. The shift from "Sin" to "Syn" occurred before these legal proceedings took place.

The rationale for this change is hard to determine given any official information explaining the transition is hard to locate in the public domain.

⁶ The general approach to weight loss promoted by this organization is named as “Food Optimising.”

⁷ Healthy Extras are not exempt from having Syn values. If consumed beyond the levels permitted by the plan, Healthy Extras begin to count as Syn. Any food which is not Free Food and unrestricted always has the potential to figure as Syn.

⁸ It is important to note here that “fat” is a fluid construct. Although members seldom speak about “fat,” they use terms such as “overweight” to depict not only physical size but also their own subjectivist perception of size. Often members feel or see themselves as fat even if others do not.

⁹ This phrasing borrows from the title of Braziel and LeBesco’s edited collection on fat (2001).

¹⁰ The designation “target member” depicts a member who has achieved their “Personal Achievement Target” (PAT) and thus attained the ideal weight set by themselves.