

# It's All Your Fault: Kenneth Burke, Symbolic Action, and the Assigning of Guilt and Blame to Women

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*This article uses Kenneth Burke's concept of agency and, more specifically, the dialectic tension between symbolic action (SA) and nonsymbolic motion (NSM) to investigate two contemporary social controversies: obesity and sexual assault. We argue that situations involving loss of control over the body can be felt as symbolic acts and important failures requiring rhetorical solutions. The issues of obesity and sexual assault both embody linguistic choices that oppress and control women's perceptions of agency and their ability to free themselves from guilt and shame. Through our analysis of representative narratives surrounding the "sins" of appetite and desire, we reveal how the concept of agency underlies and vexes debates over obesity and acquaintance rape and complicates the allocation of blame.*

Man [*sic*] is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. ~Alisdair MacIntyre (1984)

Alisdair MacIntyre's influential treatise, *After Virtue*, was partly inspired by Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm (1987), which argues that reasoning may be discovered not only in rational argumentation but also in various, competing stories.<sup>1</sup> This article examines competing stories available for public consumption regarding issues that directly impact women's lives: obesity and sexual assault. These narratives were taken from bestselling books on weight loss and from the author's (French, 2003) research program interviewing sexual assault survivors. The obesity narratives were chosen

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based on their mass appeal in best-selling books, such as *Body for Life*, named among the Top 15 bestselling books of the past decade by *USA Today* (“USA Today,” 2004), while the sexual assault narratives were chosen for their focus on describing survivors’ perspectives on blame and guilt. These seemingly disparate narratives share similar consequences and thus work together to highlight how guilt and shame function to limit agency, particularly for women. At the same time, they reveal how the belief in agency itself can elicit guilt and shame when people experience nonsymbolic motion.

Kenneth Burke’s writings on human motivation and action provide a rich analytic framework for interpreting human stories according to the five elements of his dramatic pentad, with each element serving as a possible primary lens through which to view the others. As he argues in *Language as Symbolic Action*, in foregrounding a particular symbolic act, a given interpretation is a “reflection of reality . . . a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality” (Burke, 1966, p. 45). A foundational component of Burkean dramatism is that language is symbolic action (SA). This contrasts with Burke’s concept of nonsymbolic motion (NSM); physical processes uncontrolled by human speech or intentional acts. We contend that studies of meaning-making and narrative may be greatly enhanced through application of Kenneth Burke’s concept of agency and, more specifically, the dialectic tension between symbolic action (SA) and nonsymbolic motion (NSM), often expressed as SA/NSM.

Here we explore how the tension between SA and NSM functions in two contemporary social controversies: The issues of obesity and sexual assault both embody linguistic choices that oppress and control women’s perceptions of agency and their ability to free themselves from guilt and shame. Both debates highlight the degree to which agency (SA) is valued in Western culture and, as Crable (2003) and Hawhee (2006) have pointed out, demonstrate how the relationship between SA and NSM is one of irresolvable negotiation and dynamic tension. The debate over obesity, for example, centers on whether or not it is possible to control the contours of the body when NSM is a potential impediment; whether one blames the fat woman for failing to achieve a cultural ideal of thinness or not hinges on belief in NSM as an obstacle, either surmountable or insurmountable.

While obesity is generally viewed as under the control of the agent, necessitating guilt and shame, acquaintance rape is now widely regarded in Western culture as *not* under the control (or responsibility) of victims, who still often experience guilt and shame. These two issues revolve around the belief that an agent can and ought to manifest control over her body. Yet bodies are only partially controlled by the agent. Most people can move their arms in a circle or deliberately take a deep breath, but no one can will their body to burn calories at a faster rate or will themselves to safety. In simple terms, both SA and NSM affect bodies, but the belief in and valuing of control (SA) over bodies seems central to a Western understanding of human agency. So, when the will does not resonate with the NSM that occurs to the body (as in obesity), or the will does not resonate with the SA someone else takes against one’s body (as in acquaintance rape), guilt and shame may arise, in part, over lacking control.

Both debates are essentially about bodies, and what or who controls them, and what or who should bear responsibility for what happens to them. The concept of agency thus underlies and complicates the allocation of blame on both intrapersonal and societal levels.

Burke's theories and terminologies usefully illuminate how social acceptance of the relative powers of SA and NSM influence personal and often public linguistic representations of people's experiences with these issues. We contend that perceptions of attitude are critical in the assessment of blame and corresponding assignment of guilt. The linguistic elements that confuse and conflate SA and NSM are also of interest, as they are the rhetorical manifestations of the dynamic tension of the SA/NSM pair. Finally, our analysis reveals that belief in a superagent or divinity negates the dialectic by negating NSM.

### **Victimage, Mortification, and Attitude**

Burke (1970) argues that purification—a ritual attempt at symbolic redemption or restoration—is required when what one believes about the world proves untrue. Experiences that are fraught with blame also require ritual purification. Catastrophic events, such as hurricanes, tornadoes, and other natural disasters, fit easily into Burke's schema as they are clearly not the result of human action. If, as we assume, most human beings acculturated in “the Western tradition” perceive themselves primarily as agents, this worldview is disturbed when NSM thwarts one's will. Two ways of achieving symbolic restoration are victimage and mortification. Burke (1970) defines them as homicidal and suicidal, respectively.

Through victimage, one is purified vicariously by offering up another. The process by which an internal turmoil is turned outward through a “sacrificial vessel” is scapegoating; through it, guilt (or its lesser form, embarrassment) is transferred to another party and thus relieved. Burke (1984) defines the scapegoating mechanism as “the use of a sacrificial receptacle for the ritual unburdening of one's sins” (p. 16). Victimage provides vicarious atonement as an individual transfers the guilt he or she feels to another party. Scapegoats may be chosen for their complicity or purity, as long as they are clearly identified with the problems created by one's imperfections/guilt. Redemption may also be achieved through mortification, which involves self-sacrifice or penance for one's guilt. Mortification is the process of inflicting mental or physical pain on oneself to regain worthiness. Burke (1970) explains mortification as “an extreme form of ‘self-control’” or self-denial (p. 190). To put mortification and victimage in a nutshell: If there is no bad guy, there must be a fall guy.

When applied to “obesity” and sexual assault, acculturation plays a key role in determining which lapses in control one considers mortifying, as well as spheres over which one presumes control/agency. Our society's paradoxical obsession with controlling appetite, desire, and consumption encourages people to consider controlling the body as an important use of the will, even while fulfilling appetites and desires is widely idealized. Similarly, our culture encourages individuals to fulfill their sexual

desires while maintaining physical safety and health. For women, threats to physical safety include unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, and abusive partners. Both issues require SA, as desires/attitudes must be regulated and bodies managed according to cultural norms. When control in such situations is wrested from, or perhaps improperly exercised by an agent, appropriate forms of victimage or mortification are negotiated by individuals within their cultures and can be instigated within or outside of the individual. Thus, you may be the cause of your mortification, or some external force may cause your mortification; either allows for or requires atonement.

With Western culture's favor of SA, attitude becomes critical when deciding between SA and NSM as causes of events and between mortification and victimage as appropriate responses. Attitude, which Burke (1989) calls "incipient action" (p. 136), can be expressed before, during, and after an act, through language, vocal expression, and/or bodily posturing. Attitude is, therefore, a primary determinant of where agents situate an event on the balance beam between SA/NSM. As perceptions of attitude waver in any narrative, so the tilt towards SA or NSM will shift. Narrative expressions of attitude, then, will determine whether mortification and/or victimage are necessary to reconcile the agent with actions. As evidenced in Davis and French's (2008) analysis of post-Katrina blame, many witnesses to events examine an agent-in-motion attitude towards NSM—how diligently one appeared to work to prevent or avoid it, for example—when determining the depth of their sympathy. Like victims of Katrina, those who claim irresistible NSM as the cause of an event may face accusations of being weak-willed, recalcitrant, or having an attitude insufficient to overcome adversity, of attempting to disguise SA as NSM. In debates where NSM could be an explanation of events, some individuals may be scapegoated for the vulnerability of all human bodies to influences other than the wills that *are supposed to* govern those bodies (where the italicized phrase means "are assumed to" as well as "should"). Essentially, the conflation of SA and NSM means that whether events happen to you because you willed them, don't will against them hard enough, or deserve the retribution of divine will, you're to blame.

#### *Why Me? Obesity*

In the debate over "obesity,"<sup>2</sup> the central issue is causality: Why are so many people categorized as "overweight" and "obese," and what, if anything, should we do, both collectively and individually? The dominant American perspective is that lean bodies are not only more aesthetically pleasing but also much healthier than ones with visible "excess" fat. Because lean bodies are evaluated as "better" than fat ones, there is social and often internal pressure to control the body's contours. Fatness is a kind of visible, physical "ethos" that is interpreted as negative, as the body seems to manifest a refusal to submit to social expectations that the individual will regulate his/her body and its appetites. The debate over whether fatness is *caused* by SA or NSM—or even which has the most power over the body—is a debate that features arguments about how much responsibility one can, or should, take for one's body and its

appearance, and therefore how morally justified society is in discrimination against fat persons.

While perhaps the majority of the population takes for granted that leanness is physically attractive, some offer explanations of why. Evolutionary psychologists and others claim that the lean body's greater desirability lies in its signification of strength, youth, and reproductive ability. Another group, on the other hand, one growing in number, believes that slenderness is an ideal influenced by gender, social class, and ethnicity, perpetuated by media, diet industries, and other interested parties. The conflation of health and the fashionably thin ideal, this second group tends to argue, leads in some cases to poorly done medical research and to a widespread, unjustified bias against fat persons, which manifests itself in personal, economic, and political forms.<sup>3</sup> The bias itself—as well as the ubiquitous warnings of impending death and economic doom resulting from “obesity”—may cause fat people harmful stress that manifests itself in disease such as hypertension, which is wrongly blamed on fatness. Prejudice may similarly inspire unhealthful behaviors (fasting, purging, hyperexercising, taking drugs, smoking) undertaken by persons to reduce the social consequences of being fat by becoming slimmer. This second group does not believe that thinness is inherently healthier than fatness for all bodies, nor that bodily fat is the culprit for all the ills it is linked to at present (<http://www.bigfatblog.com/fat-activism-survey-results-part-iii>).

When it comes to body shape, representatives of the first group favor SA, arguing that human action can *and should* overcome NSM (biological factors such as genetic predispositions) in the case of “overweight” and “obesity.” To them, an inability to control the body *and to manifest such control by achieving a visibly lean body* suggests a lack of willpower or refusal to heed social mores, often extended beyond the body to other aspects of personality. Bill Phillips, the lead author of the book *Body for Life*, which remained on bestseller lists for four years after its publication in 1999, selling over four million copies, articulates this belief in the following passage of the book's introduction:

I firmly believe that a strong, healthy mind resides in a strong, healthy body. That, my friends, is a fact. When I see men and women who are out of shape, I see lives not fully lived. I see lost potential. I see people who need someone to help than realize they *can* look and feel better. That's what I see.

You simply cannot escape this reality . . . If [your body] is sagging, softening, and aging rapidly, other aspects of your life will soon follow suit. (Phillips & D'Orso, 1999, p. 2, emphasis original)

Thus, the body materially represents the mind and life; fatness is a result of lack of vigilance—inaction in action, the failure of SA. Indeed, NSM is generally only brought up when the evidence suggests it can be controlled or when strategies for so doing, such as “raising your metabolism,” are recommended. (Re)gaining control over the body in these stories is the classic triumph of human will over seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Stories of those who have serious illnesses or injuries demonstrate that control over fatness can be achieved despite physical limitations. *Body for Life* includes stories of an HIV-positive male who was infected when he

had a blood transfusion after a shooting accident, and a physically disabled female, both successful users of Phillips' fitness regimen (Phillips & D'Orso, 1999, pp. 5–13, 196). In other words, no excuses: No matter what “happens to” your body, you are able to be—and you should be—lean and strong.

In Burkean terms, failure to regulate the body's appearance necessitates a ritual cleansing. For example, after years of very public struggles with her body size, early in 2009, Oprah Winfrey's Website published the following “Confession”:

Oprah says money, fame and success don't mean anything if you can't control your own being. “It doesn't mean anything if you can't fit into your clothes,” she says. “It means the fat won. It means you didn't win. . . . I am mad at myself. I am embarrassed.” (“Oprah's weight loss,” 2009)

Similar confessions were published in her *O* magazine and discussed on her TV show. Winfrey, who has struggled with weight concerns throughout her life, is also so popular, especially among women, that her ideologies are influential in American culture. It is therefore impressive that both she and Phillips convey the same message about fatness to both sexes in their audiences: that fatness means that the individual, despite any other achievement, is not in control and should experience shame. Despite being diagnosed with hypothyroidism, a medical condition (NSM) that can cause weight gain, Winfrey interprets her body size as symbolizing her underlying inability to exercise control (SA). Winfrey's mortification allows people (herself included) to continue to perceive the shape of the body as something that they can—and should—control.

The standard belief that fat people lack willpower or willingness to conform so often leads to mortification and/or victimage that multimillion dollar companies, like Weight Watchers, are built on group confessions and celebrations. People practice “mortification” through dieting, purging, self-starvation, dehydration, excessive exercising, and other means, including using mealtime and cyberspace as confessionals relating what they do, should, and won't eat. These efforts at “mortification” reinforce their adherence to the social value of controlling appetite and body size even as their bodies may be perceived as reflecting the SA of recalcitrance or laziness. In other words, they act and speak in ways that indicate their adherence to social norms while their bodies indicate their inability to manifest such adherence. Such confessions of failure and guilt must be repeated unless or until an ideal body shape is achieved. Indeed, popular culture is full of bitter representations of women whose bodies do approximate or represent ideal slenderness, yet who continue mortification practices, such as fasting or communicating body dissatisfaction.

Victimage, on the other hand, may be practiced when feelings of fear or guilt over not being able to control one's own body result in teasing, disparagement, avoidance of, and even violence against, others, whether they be the despised 98-pound weaklings of yore or today's so-called obese. Because fatness is generally perceived as unattractive, unhealthful, and under the control of the agent, fat people are viewed as not just deserving but requiring social adversity to change their behavior. While stigmatization can fuel depression and other feelings that may actually stimulate overeating

or result in agoraphobia that limits exercise, it is still often viewed as an appropriate measure for preventing or reducing “obesity.” Consider, for example, William Saletan (2007), writing for *Slate*: “To resist a fattening norm, you need willpower. To reverse it, you need to promote responsibility, which implies blame. You almost certainly need stigma” (para. 11). The overwhelming popularity and multiple seasons of the program “The Biggest Loser,” on which fat contestants are weighed and cajoled and coached into extreme forms of exercise to lose the largest amount of weight, indicates that audiences enjoy watching the mortification process that leads fat people towards thinness. It may be that viewers also *identify with* the mortification process that the contestants undergo. Commercials during “The Biggest Loser” often promote products or services that aid in weight loss, suggesting that advertisers predict viewers will be interested in purchasing such products themselves. The televised transformations demonstrate that, however temporarily, it is possible to overcome NSM, preserve agency, and lose weight through SA.

On the other side of the “obesity” debate, fat activists and some health advisors claim that NSM is too strong for people to control permanently: If you are biologically destined to be fat, no healthy amount of willpower or activity or limiting of caloric intake will keep you lean. “Set-point theory,” first put forth in 1982 by Bennett and Gurin in *The Dieter's Dilemma: Eating Less and Weighing More*, suggests that bodies maintain particular stores of fat reserves regardless of the activity of the body or caloric intake. The putative setpoint, which may be determined by the number of fat cells present at age one, is determined enzymatically and defended by the body's raising or lowering of metabolic activity in response to caloric intake. According to this theory, one person's body may metabolize calories more quickly to defend a low setpoint, keeping the body slim, whereas another's may respond to reduced caloric intake (starvation/dieting) by metabolizing calories less quickly to defend a high setpoint, keeping the body fat. In sum, regardless of the SA undertaken by the person, the body will maintain its size.

A handout on setpoint theory available online from MIT Medical's Center for Health Promotion and Wellness suggests that “[b]ecause of this innate biological response, dieting becomes progressively less effective, and (as generations of dieters have observed) a plateau is reached at which further weight loss seems all but impossible” (Center for Health, 2007, para. 6). Gradually, the idea that some people have a “slow metabolism” has taken hold among diverse populations. The recidivism rate for weight loss is high; most people regain the weight they lose through diet and fitness programs and more, which seems to bolster the claim that NSM is more powerful than SA when it comes to controlling body shape and weight. Fat activists sometimes claim that “success stories” should feature before and after photos with an “after that” photo, showing inevitable weight regain. Setpoint theory offers a predictive narrative or plot a fat body may seem to enact when the agent sets out on a weight loss scheme.

Predictably, setpoint theory has come under fire from those who believe that high-activity levels can reset the supposed setpoint, or alternately that intense exercise can prompt the body to ignore the setpoint cues. The SA camp refuses to allow NSM

as an explanation for failing to achieve or maintain a lean body: It is “natural” to admire lean bodies and “unnatural” to be fat. Fatness for them always symbolizes a faulty agent who lacks the willpower or adequate control over appetite and activity. The agent’s failure to manifest conformity with current “health” and social mores resonates with older but still pervasive assessments of gluttony and sloth as sins.

However, both sides of the fat debate frequently locate agency within the body itself, claiming either the body “wants” to be healthy or “wants” to gain weight. Personification is a key rhetorical figure in verbalizing NSM in terms of SA. Consider the following examples: “I am not the kind of person who can eat whatever I want and still stay thin . . . I have battled with the bulge and *my body wants to be fat* so I have to bust a regular sweat to keep from expanding” (Reisbord, n.d., para. 1, emphasis added). “I had fasted all day . . . *my body wants to be fat* but I won’t let it” (Rider, n.d., para. 11, emphasis added). “*Your body doesn’t want to be fat*. There is coded into your DNA a healthy weight that your body *wants to reach*” (Parker, n.d., para. 19, emphasis in original). This personification seems a logical extension, as bodies generally can heal from minor injuries and defend against many illnesses. Obviously, many biological processes remain wholly or partially out of the control of individuals’ agency, like respiration and circulation. Bodies do not “want” to be healthy so much as people—the embodied symbol-users—want to be or at least feel (and *look*) healthy and in control over those bodies. Yet in many cases, such processes cannot be willed; though new pharmaceuticals and surgical procedures constantly challenge notions of what actions can be taken to control the body’s functions. To suggest that the body values “health” and works consciously towards it, however, is to confuse SA and NSM.

Such bodily personification often involves militaristic language, expressing fat and fat body parts, and processes that could be categorized as NSM, as enemies that must be violently defeated. Recent headlines and article titles of magazines *Men’s Fitness* and *Fitness* (geared towards women) respectively encourage readers to “Blast Belly Fat,” “Win the War on Fat,” and “Defy Your Genetics;” and “Beat Belly Flab,” go on a “Fat Resistance Diet,” and do kickboxing workouts to “Sculpt Muscle and Blast Fat.” To bolster the sense of agency, both male and female agents are encouraged to set their wills against a counteragent. The narrative of weight loss or physical transformation is not fought against NSM but against pieces or processes of the body perceived not as representing bad acts on the part of the agent but as themselves actively renegade. Similarly, “helpful” bodily processes, such as so-called fast metabolisms, are co-agents that one wants to support and “boost” to fight the common enemy of fat. In other words, most discourse aimed at people who may be persuaded to want to lose weight does not even contain a suggestion that biological processes may counter their efforts.

### *Why Me? Sexual Assault*

While the dominant discourse regarding obesity makes it somewhat easy to blame the obese for their fatness, it seems incredible that contemporary survivors of acquaintance rape would be similarly stigmatized. As opposed to the fat agent who appears to



lack control over his/her appetite, in this situation it is not the woman's bodily desire that seems to be "out of control" but instead her attacker's. Women who endure acquaintance rape might be expected to perceive themselves as "agents in motion," as the victims of another's will or SA, thus privileging the NSM side of the dialectic. Society's response to rape, however, is fraught with misconceptions, prejudices, and indifference, making the intrapersonal struggle for sense-making much more complicated. Mari Boor Tonn and her co-authors (1993) cite "a universal propensity to blame women for acts of violence visited upon them" (p. 177). Additionally, because they often identify with their attackers prior to the rape, women who are raped by acquaintances often perceive themselves as agents whose wills, and not just physical strength, misled or failed them. Again, if attitude is action waiting to happen, trusting or acting on an ill-founded attitude can be perceived as a "bad act." The perceived failure to act wisely and effectively—to trust "appropriately," thereby preventing a rape—leads to massive guilt that requires ritual purification.

While interpreting sexual assault as SA caused by the victim is clearly grotesque and inappropriate, the prospect of viewing an assault as uncontrollable (NSM) is equally terrifying for a survivor. Without an effective agency to carry out one's will *not* to be raped, how might a subsequent assault be controlled or prevented? Hence, a division: Either the survivor is at fault for having the wrong attitude towards her attacker and/or failing to prevent her rape, or she must come to terms with herself as an agent whose will is not the only force that can control her body. "Raped women speak of being guilty on the one hand and on the other hand, they speak of being 'really frightened,' even 'paralysed' [*sic*]" (Stanko, 1985, p. 43). The narratives of acquaintance rape survivors present this division between experiencing themselves as either faulty agents (SA) or agents in motion (NSM).

We wish to emphasize that we are not arguing that sexual assault survivors identify *with* their attackers. Rather, they identify with who they *thought* their attackers were and often proceed from this identification to believe that blaming their attacker, which may seem logical, is instead a form of scapegoating. This confusion over whom to blame makes sense given that Burke (1969) defines the scapegoat as being "profoundly *consubstantial* with those who, looking upon it as a chosen vessel, would ritualistically cleanse themselves by loading the burden of their own iniquities upon it" (p. 406, emphasis added). A previous identification, then, is often sustained at cost to the victim; the attacker's guilt, if she asserts that he is guilty, belongs equally to the victim through consubstantiation. In a study previously conducted by French (2003), acquaintance rape survivors recounted their assaults, continually expressing anguish as to their proper framing and interpretation. For example, one participant stated: "I know that I felt like I led this person on, 'cause I felt like I was attracted to him and maybe that's why I wouldn't let myself say that that's what happened" (French, 2003, p. 308).<sup>4</sup> This refusal of an acquaintance rape survivor to deny her own agency is all too common. This insistence on an interpretation of the assault as their own SA, rather than as the SA of a counteragent that put them as victim in NSM, reinforces their guilt and shame.

The feeling of potentially scapegoating an innocent man leads some women to even greater guilt, to which they may respond with mortification. One survivor described how, the morning after her assault, she apologized to her attacker for her behavior, because "I kinda thought that I did something too like, *I thought it was kinda my fault that he did this* and so I said I was really sorry and apologized for it." Another survivor stated:

Right after the experience I was like I'm sorry, I'm sorry, even though it was real conflicting because I was like, I'm sorry but get out of my house . . . . I think from the very beginning there's a lot of blame. I think that's because I kept thinking I invited this person into my house, I went to this, I know this, even my acquaintance with this person who would do this says something about my character.

One woman explained:

I knew that it was his fault, but I still was really afraid to kind of put all the blame on him. I felt like I had to put a lot of it on myself 'cause I'm really big into everybody taking responsibility for their actions and I felt like I was not being a responsible person that night.

Some victims perform mortification by hurting themselves physically. One survivor, who began cutting herself in an attempt to regain control, attempting to salve the pain of NSM with SA, writes: "I would cut parts of my arms so I could feel physical pain. I believed that if the physical pain was great enough, it would block out my mental anguish" (Lyons, 1995, p. 28). Consequently, women find themselves caught in a linguistic and existential bind. If a woman is to maintain agency, or control, over her body, she feels she must assume some responsibility for her rape. This leads to mortification and shame but retains her SA. Women often have trouble maintaining this position and move back and forth between self-blame and blaming the rapist.

Survivors have recounted using other forms of mortification in part as strategies to ward off future aggression. Women describe altering the way they dress, gaining or losing weight, or making other physical changes to conform less obviously with societal standards of sexual attractiveness for women. This is often accompanied by changes in social activities: "I stopped going to parties. I stopped going out on dates" (Moorti, 1998, p. 91). Thus, women punish themselves by relinquishing previously pleasurable behaviors to create a body/persona they feel presents an "attitude" that is less sexually inviting.

Mortification usually fails to successfully redeem and reestablish a survivor as an individual, perhaps because there is no SA that can guarantee avoidance of rape or other attack in the future. At least initially, for many acquaintance rape victims, the desire to mortify one's self to assuage guilt is more logical, perhaps even appealing, than admitting to being an agent "caught" in NSM and therefore necessarily subject to future potential violations. We do not mean to suggest that victims of rape *should* feel guilty. Rather, by assigning blame to themselves as faulty agents, they may forestall the necessity of reconciling themselves to being agents subject to

NSM and potentially overwhelming feelings of powerlessness. While guilt is certainly unpleasant, it may be preferable to unavoidable vulnerability and facilitate preservation of the illusion/idea of agency.

Linguistic constructions of passive tense and personification are means through which NSM can be conveyed, however imprecisely. Both rape victims and their attackers use passive constructions, which aptly convey a sense of things happening without assigning blame. Susan Ehrlich (2001) explores linguistic resources used by rape survivors when navigating our criminal court system, explaining that women often use a “grammar of non-agency” to describe their attackers (p. 38). Ehrlich argues that linguistic choices can range from explicitly connecting a man’s actions to a direct consequence for a woman, to representing instead a “static occurrence with no overt cause” (p. 39) or, in our framework, NSM. Rhetorical acts that confound, disguise, and/or deemphasize the agent, described by Ehrlich as “agentless passive” rhetorical constructions, reveal an inability to find a satisfactory location for blame. For example, in a court case, if a defendant states “at one point, all our clothes were taken off,” listeners are given little assistance in determining whose deliberate action may have caused this state of being. But an agentless passive linguistic construction still contains a whisper of an agent’s presence “lurking in the background” (p. 50) that could be interpreted as SA, an act of will on the part of the accused. However, Ehrlich also describes what she terms “unaccusative constructions,” which remove any sense of agency, leaving NSM alone. Unaccusative constructions are related to personifications that give nonagent nouns agency. They contain intransitive verbs, for example, “the door shut.” While agentless passives imply a causal relationship—someone took off the clothes—unaccusative constructions (such as “the sexual activity escalated”) seem devoid of SA on the part of any agent, be it survivor or rapist.

According to Ehrlich’s (2001) research, men on trial for sexual assault frequently use unaccusative constructions in their defense: “I laid down next to her and the intimacy began” (p. 50). These rhetorical choices highlight individuals’ sense-making strategies and also influence listeners’ understanding. Unaccusative rhetoric removes agency from the agent/rapist, turning the SA of rape into NSM. Additional research indicates that sexual assault narratives relying heavily on passive voice are interpreted by male listeners as having caused less harm to the victim; male listeners were more likely to attribute less blame to the perpetrators (Henley, Miller, & Beazley, 1995).

### Superagents in Motion

Belief in a *superagent* or divine purpose may necessitate other beliefs about and responses to NSM. In particular, the belief that everything happens for a mysterious divine purpose may oblige an audience to be unwilling to accept other causal arguments for events, including those that make use of NSM. We focus here on how women espousing a Christian worldview incorporate that worldview into their attitudes and behaviors in the two issues of obesity and acquaintance rape.

In “Terms for Order,” Burke demonstrates how belief in the supernatural complicates human interpretation of events, dismissing the question of whether or not supernatural agency exists in favor of focusing on language about the supernatural: “[R]egardless of whether the entity named ‘God’ exists outside his nature sheerly as a key term in a system of terms, words ‘about him’ must reveal their nature as words” (1970, p. 1). The rhetorical strategy of assigning events to the will of a divinity/superagent is not the same as assigning it to NSM or an analogous term. NSM can demand nothing in the way of a response, though people may feel as if it is appropriate to act to ameliorate the current occurrence and prevent recurrence; the will of a divinity, however, is perceived as demanding a response, usually a correction to align attitude and/or actions with the divine will. Both of the social debates we have focused on—obesity and acquaintance rape—demonstrate how superagency cancels out NSM as a rhetorical explanation for events.

In assimilating acquaintance rape within a larger framework of God’s will, women may seek to identify with the Christian image of Christ as both “victimized and victorious” (Burke, 1969, p. 328). Such solace in an omnipotent being who can guide them through their physical and psychological trauma may remove, circumvent, or evade the difficulty of distinguishing SA from NSM. As one survivor stated:

I know that it’s something that is not hidden from God, it’s something that God knows about, and that God knows about that guy and about me, that I was truly acquaintanced raped. I have been healed and I have been made pure in the Lord’s sight as so, it’s beautiful in that way, that God can give me such a wholeness, such a sense of peace, and to know that I am pure in the Lord’s sight. It’s something of my past, something that makes me more of who I am. (French, 2003, p. 92)

By utilizing a Christian superagent, this survivor integrates the acquaintance rape into her collection of life experiences within the larger conceptual framework of a loving God who is able to purify her. Effecting purification by superagent thereby removes the need for either victimage or mortification, rhetorically resolving the tension between SA and NSM.

Similarly, a perusal of Christian weight loss Web sites, books, and church programs reveals their focus on the need for the person who struggles with weight to submit to God’s will, largely through recognizing the signs of the body that He implanted, in order to lose weight.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, the invocation of a superagent/deity is related to the use of the personified body-as-agent used in all weight loss rhetoric: God gave people physiological signs embedded in the body that “speak” to them and should be heeded, because the body itself works towards health:

The physical principle is that we should eat only when truly hungry and stop eating before we are full. At Thin Within, we use what we call a “Hunger Scale” . . . . There are no good foods or bad foods—we simply want people to respond to their bodies’ God given signals of hunger and fullness. (“The Program,” n.d., para. 3)

In other words, the stomach that growls with hunger and the feeling of fullness that accompanies eating are not mere motions (NSM) but motions set in place by the

divine (SA). However, most Christian weight loss programs also recommend an additional submission of the will to the superagent:

Your outer transformation will be the by-product of the true transformation taking place in your spirit and soul . . . . This program is not just about food; it's about what's really going on in your spirit, soul and body. It's less about what you eat (although that's obviously important) and more about WHY you eat, because that's the heart issue. Until the Holy Spirit changes your soul—which encompasses your mind, will and emotions—you will never experience permanent weight loss or genuine health and vitality. (Partow, October 8, 2008, para. 2)

Scripture is invoked to drive home the necessity of regulating one's appetite according to God's will. Also, people are encouraged to evaluate their behavior in light of God's will: "You did not get to be "overweight" by eating healthful food in respectful portions out of thankfulness to God. That is not how He designed our bodies" ("Weight Loss," n.d., para. 7).

As these narratives suggest, the divine will—the superagent's will—negates the very notion of NSM. All things occur with the permission or as a result of the action of a superagent and the human will, to combat what appear to be obstacles, must be aligned more fully with God's own will.

### Conclusions

Through an examination of important social discourses surrounding the alimentary and sexual sins of "obesity" and sexual assault, we have demonstrated that the issue of placing blame is complicated and of paramount importance. We have shown how ideas of women's agency are affected by rhetorical manipulations of the SA/NSM dialectic, an issue we find pressing given the proliferation of methods that attempt to control/manage NSM, and therefore the proliferation of symbolizing NSM in the culture's discourse. Our research reveals that sometimes—perhaps always—persuading *oneself* that what "happened to" one was not one's own fault is problematic. To continue to believe in one's agency after experiencing traumatic NSM, sometimes an uneasy compromise must be effected, wherein one accepts blame one does not deserve in order to continue to preserve one's sense of adequate control over one's body; a perception obviously negotiated by the individual within his or her cultural framework. To assign guilt is to wonder what might negate blame; to decree someone a blameless victim is to question whether they did everything in their power to avert the NSM they suffered.

For those espousing a Christian worldview, belief in a superagent provides an opportunity for transcendence, a comforting counterstatement to blame. However, such comforts may grow thin as our increasingly secular society discourages fatalistic interpretations of events. Our analysis demonstrates Burke's widely accepted assertion that one's worldview provides a framework, or terministic screen, from which we choose our interpretation—SA or NSM. We are also intrigued by the possibilities of other worldviews and their relationships to SA and NSM. Perhaps, for example, a Buddhist worldview, which eschews personal agency, might struggle less

with guilt as a result of enduring negative NSM. Future, expanded investigations of the dichotomy of SA/NSM should certainly include alternate worldviews.

Additionally, we have explained why these domains of bodily desire prompt more ambivalence, and, perhaps as a result, more passion, than some other discourses, as both hunger and procreative desires must be satisfied to ensure the continuation of life, but both can also have deadly consequences. Contrast the need/desire for food or sex with humanity's need for oxygen, which is almost always satisfied without choice, without excess, and without harm to others. In other words, we have greater difficulty differentiating need from desire for food and sex. One may experience hunger as a motion of the body and yet eat beyond fullness; if guilt is attached to doing so, it may in part be for the failure to differentiate the motion of hunger from the action of desire. Our attitudes towards "gluttony," "sloth," and "promiscuity" may derive in part from our understanding of life as a struggle to make resources match needs: For one person to eat more means another person eating less; one person's loafing means another's toil; sexual activity carries with it the consequences of life and death, as well as a need to allocate property appropriately. Given Western culture's reverence for agency, it may be most accurate to consider that, rather than fully landing on either side of the SA/NSM divide, we ride permanently on the slash mark, here tilting heavily towards guilt, and on the other side accepting that in some cases we are agents in motion, unable to prevent NSM from occurring, and often unable to fully reconcile ourselves to either SA or NSM. As we have demonstrated, our discourse reveals the trauma of being an agent in motion.

### Notes

- [1] The narrative paradigm suggests that stories are our primary meaning-making mechanism and that we evaluate stories based on three criteria: narrative fidelity, narrative probability, and good reasons. Fidelity is an assessment of the truth value of a given story, while probability deals with the apparent consistency of the story (Fisher, 1987). Finally, Fisher's logic of good reasons casts a wide net, suggesting that the acceptance or rejection of a story need not lie solely in rational argumentation.
- [2] This term and other terms related to fatness is problematic. Doctors often use the Body Mass Index (BMI) scale to determine whether persons are deemed underweight, "overweight", obese, and morbidly obese. Without such measurements, the terms are applied loosely, and yet the BMI charts use only a height-weight ratio, not adjusting for other differences. Under BMI charts, most weightlifters would be categorized as obese because of their height-weight ratio. BMI charts do not take aerobic capacity or strength into accounts as measures of bodily healthfulness or fitness, making the terms "obese," etc., arbitrary and/or meaningless. We will, however, continue to use their terms because they are used in the debate, but in quotations.
- [3] See, for a few examples, Paul Campos, *The Obesity Myth: Why America's Obsession With Weight Is Hazardous To Your Health* and J. Eric Oliver's *Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America's Obesity Epidemic*.
- [4] Unless otherwise noted, all sexual assault narratives are found in Sandra French's "Reflections on Healing: Framing Strategies Utilized by Acquaintance Rape Survivors" (2003).

- [5] See, for a few examples, J. Ron Eaker's *Fat Proof Your Family: God's Way to Forming Healthy Habits for Life*; Paine and Gupta's *Dear God Let Me Lose Fat, Amen*; and *To God Be the Glory: Losing Weight and Gaining Power* by Yemina D. Thomas.

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