SECTION III

VIRTUE, HEALTH AND THE STATE
CHAPTER ELEVEN
DEADLY SIN: 
GLUTTONY, OBESITY AND HEALTH POLICY

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There are eight principal vices that attack humankind. The first is gluttony, which means the voraciousness of the belly, the second is fornication; the third filargyria, which is avarice or the love of money; the fourth is anger; the fifth sadness; the sixth is acedia, which is anxiety or the weariness of the heart; the seventh is cenodoxia, which is boastfulness or vainglory; and the eighth is pride.¹

—John Cassian (360–430 CE approx), ‘The Conference of Abba Serapion: On the Eight Principal Vices’ (Translated and Annotated by Boniface Ramsey)

Should obesity be blamed on gluttony, sloth, or both?²


John Cassian, writing for monks in the fourth century, was to bring the ‘eight principle vices’, today known as the ‘seven deadly sins’, into the western Christian canon from the oral traditions of the Egyptian desert fathers. Strangely, two of these ‘sins’ are replicated in the British House of Commons Report on Obesity (2003–04), some 1600 years later. The purpose of this chapter is to argue that the linking of the language of Christian sin to obesity demonstrates that social understandings of fatness are far more complicated than the medical terms in which obesity usually finds expression. This chapter sets out to explore how and why patristic theological ideas, intrinsic to the ascetic practice of ancient Christian monks, are being used in health rhetoric surrounding the twenty-first century obesity epidemic. The chapter will initially focus on how these terms (gluttony and sloth) are being