

INTRODUCTION:
CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION AND THE VICES

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The present volume represents a selection of the research stimulated by my summer seminar on "The Seven Deadly Sins as Cultural Constructions in the Middle Ages," which was held at Darwin College, Cambridge University, July 12–August 13, 2004, and was supported by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. For the five weeks during which they lived and worked together, the fifteen participants in the seminar intensively studied and debated both a conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*) that views concepts not as pre-determined, set pieces for rote utilization, but as culturally constructed ideas partially shaped by the environments and functions in which they participate as well as by the individual choices of the thinkers in whose works they are inscribed. More specifically, the seminar dealt with the medieval development of the seven deadly sins as concrete examples of vitally-important ethical ideas which experienced new and constantly-changing definitions even as the vocabulary used to articulate them in a series of shifting communal, institutional, and individual surroundings remained remarkably stable. It is fitting to briefly introduce these areas here and to describe what will be added to previous scholarship on the vices by the essays in the present volume.

I. *Cultural Constructions*

All analysis of concepts from the past begins with the physical presence of conceptual transmission: a piece of parchment or paper (or today: the appearance of physical presence in the electronic flickering of a monitor) with text, image, and/or music; an illumination in glass, a monument of sculpture, or perhaps an entire building; actors addressing an audience, or a strip of celluloid or a DVD that preserves one or many versions of the acting ensemble's words and images. These documents or artifacts, and the range of genres of representation they

embody, both resonate with the concepts that inform them and participate in the creation and dissemination of these very concepts: there is a continuum of contemporaneity that connects them with the past and will remain palpable in the future. To understand how concepts function as constructions, then, is to comprehend how they share, as Reinhard Kosellek wrote some years ago, a "zone of convergence" of the past and present.¹ Cultural communication from the past (word, image, music) is always part of a tradition—by which it is neither wholly determined nor which it can completely discard. Every concept is a set of meanings negotiated within a cultural context as it changes through time, and this diachronic factor is joined to a synchronic one in that a concept is also given constantly new shape and new definition by the cultural uses to which it is put by the members of a society who find that concept a living, that is communicating, idea.

With great fruitfulness since at least the 1970s, and partially in opposition to the overwhelming dominance of positivist/empiricist science,² a movement in the social sciences has developed a perspective that can be of assistance to humanists in articulating the synchronic (and I would add, though perhaps some of those in the social sciences would not, also the diachronic) negotiations between concepts and culture that are involved in *Begriffsgeschichte*. "Social constructionism"³ conceives of the objects of its study (patterns of behavior, emotions, knowledge about the world) as something similar to the cultural construction of ideas, namely as artifices of communal interaction:

The terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people. From the constructionist position the process of understanding is not automatically driven by the forces of nature, but is the result of an active, cooperative enterprise of persons in relationship. In this light, inquiry is invited into the historical and cultural bases of various forms of world construction.⁴

¹ Reinhart Kosellek, "Begriffsgeschichte und Sozialgeschichte," in *Soziologie und Sozialgeschichte*, ed. P. Lutz, *Kölnner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, Sonderheft 16 (1972): 116–31; English trans. as "Begriffsgeschichte and Social History," in Reinhart Kosellek, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1985), 73–91, here 90.

² Kenneth J. Gergen, "Constructionism and Realism: How Are We to Go On?," in *Social Constructionism, Discourse and Realism*, ed. Ian Parker (London, 1998), 147.

³ For a collection of key documents in the developing articulation of this perspective in the social sciences, see *Social Construction: A Reader*, ed. Mary Gergen and Kenneth J. Gergen (London, 2003).

⁴ Kenneth J. Gergen, "The Social Constructionist Movement in Modern Psychology," *American Psychologist* 40 (1985): 267.

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Likewise, the emphasis on semantic analysis as an a priori route around what Rom Harré has termed the “ontological illusion” that something like the emotion of anger, for example, has an abstract reality that can be objectively researched translates into the philological foundation of much of the history of concepts that will be found in this volume. The contributors here consistently ask what meanings are indicated by the usage of any particular sin-designation as it was presented by an author or artist in the Middle Ages (and beyond) and what cultural function the artifact carrying that hamartiological term played as part of the cultural negotiations of the very meaning of the term. As Harré has written in dealing with emotions:

Instead of asking the question, “What is anger?” we would do well to begin by asking, “How is the word ‘anger,’ and other expressions that cluster around it, actually used in this or that cultural milieu and type of episode?”⁵

Finally, the social constructionist perspective in emotionology, in particular, has emphasized the local moral evaluation of emotions as a key element in their production—the way in which those who use the vocabulary of emotions do so within socially restricted systems of duties and rights, obligations and conventions that serve as guidelines for the moral analysis of the terminology of emotions.⁶

It is here that the cultural constructionist view of the vices represented in the present volume is more expansive than its equivalent in the social sciences. Not only the local moral orders provided direction for the usage of the lexicon of behavior (or even more, of “abnormal” behavior), but the centralized and sanctioned vocabulary of morality reveals itself in the contributions to this collection of essays again and again to have been just as sensitive to local change. This is so, first of all, because the discourse on vices and virtues in the Middle Ages contained a decisive element of ambiguity that invited, even demanded, a differentiated resolution by moral analysis, as it does now, as well.⁷ Second, even when one is dealing with what research

⁵ Rom Harré, “An Outline of the Social Constructionist Viewpoint,” in *The Social Construction of Emotions*, ed. Rom Harré (Oxford, 1982; reprint 1988), 4–5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

⁷ Richard Newhauser, “Zur Zweideutigkeit in der Moraltheologie: Als Tugenden verkleidete Laster,” in *Der Fehltritt: Vergehen und Versehen in der Vormoderne*, ed. Peter von Moos, (Köln, Weimar, Wien, 2001), 377–402; revised and expanded English version as “On Ambiguity in Moral Theology: When the Vices Masquerade as Virtues,” trans. Andrea Németh-Newhauser, in Richard Newhauser, *Sin: Essays on the Moral*

can uncover as pejorative usages in the centralized lexicon of sinfulness, the particularity of the cultural contexts in which those semantic items were found to be important demonstrates the actual flexibility of this ecclesiastically-sanctioned vocabulary. Envy, for example, has been taken by some social constructionists to be an anomaly in the common list of the chief vices in the Middle Ages.⁸ It is true that *Invidia* did not enter the generally accepted scheme of seven deadly sins until the work of Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604), but its Greek equivalent is also found, though only once, in a work by Evagrius Ponticus (d. 399), the first author to systematically examine the eight "evil thoughts" that Gregory later transformed into seven sins.⁹ Even more, envy can be seen to be the same type of culturally constructed vice as the other six normally surrounding it from Pope Gregory's work on, for it represents an equivalent type of misdirected love, to speak with Augustine. Envy fits perfectly in the list of seven deadly sins, as a cultural constructionist analysis demonstrates, because it described a socially unaccepted desire. As the contribution here by Bridget K. Balint reveals, in an academic environment in the high Middle Ages, the pleasure of envy lay in its ability to be used to describe one's rivals as harboring a sin, namely the envy of oneself and one's own intellectual reputation.

Furthermore, the flexibility of a sanctioned moral vocabulary is also demonstrated by the way in which particular genres of representation variously weigh the discourse on vices and virtues: It is one thing, for example, to find commercial activity being freed from the taint of the sin of avarice in theoretical school tracts of the twelfth century, near the beginning of the vast cultural changes to which the development of a profit economy in medieval Europe contributed.¹⁰ It is something else again to find a century later that William Peraldus has included a moral justification of commerce per se in the midst of treating avarice in his very popular *Summa de vitiis*—intended as an aide for

Tradition in the Western Middle Ages, Variorum Collected Studies Series (Aldershot, 2007), forthcoming.

⁸ John Sabini and Maury Silver, *Moralities of Everyday Life* (Oxford, 1982), 14.

⁹ Evagrius Ponticus included the term *phthonos* among the list of *logismoi* in *De vitiis quae opposita sunt virtutibus*, 1, 4 (PG 79:1141, 1144).

¹⁰ Richard Newhauser, "Justice and Liberality: Opposition to Avarice in the Twelfth Century," in *Virtue and Ethics in the Twelfth Century*, ed. István P. Bejczy and Richard G. Newhauser (Leiden, 2005), 295–316, here 311–12; Marcia L. Colish, "Another Look at the School of Laon," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 53 (1986): 7–22, here 20–21.

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composing sermons to be preached, among other congregations, to the same urban populations which provided the manpower for this now valorized commercial activity.¹¹ In the practical contours of the genre of preaching aides, a sanctioned morality's amelioration of behavior that had formerly been considered central to the definition of the sin of avarice is a valuable indicator of a widespread alteration in how *avaritia* and related words were actually being used in a cultural milieu that was directly affected by both the moral vocabulary and commerce. Though the cultural constructionism of the contributions to this volume draws on the full variety of genres communicating moral valuations in a number of cultural milieus—from sermons to Dante's cosmological allegory, from clerical drama to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, from works of monastic guidance to Bosch's meditative painting for the laity—the editor and contributors are well aware of the differentiated value of moral expression in the wide variety of genres of representation treated in the volume and of the difficulties posed to a strict comparative method by the fullness of the evidence here.

II. *Previous Scholarship on the Vices*

The seven deadly sins (pride, envy, wrath, avarice, sloth, gluttony, lust—in their most frequent order, and the one adopted by Dante to organize Mount Purgatory [see the contribution here by V. S. Benfell III]) are still sometimes thought of as inflexible categories of medieval dogma or, when they are found in examples of contemporary popular culture (such as the feature-length film *Se7en*),¹² as signifiers for something of an arcane perversion, a vehicle for an evil which is both mysterious and ancient. Such a view, of course, does not address the longevity of the idea of these seven constructs as comprehending the basic categories of evil in medieval western culture. The very fact that even as this list of seven sins was being supplemented by psychological, utilitarian, and other models of behavioral analysis it could still be adopted from

¹¹ William Peraldus, *Summa de vitiis*, 4.2.4 ("De fraudibus negociatorum"), in Paris, Bibliothèque Mazarine MS. 794, fol. 52rb: "Qvarto loco inter species auaricie dicendum est de fraudibus negociatorum. Et notandum quod negociatio bona est in se et hominibus necessaria."

¹² *Se7en*, directed by David Fincher, written by Andrew Kevin Walker (New Line Cinema, 1995).

Catholic to Protestant use during the Reformation, and further adopted for secular utilization both before and after that point, makes the seven sins a worthy object of cultural inquiry as constructed ideas. Current research in the intellectual history of moral thought in the Middle Ages has demonstrated, moreover, how nuanced and differentiated the constructs actually were that came to be known as the seven deadly sins, how much their definition depended on a complex interaction with the cultural environments in which they were enumerated. The most recent research on this topic, in other words, has allowed these seven concepts to emerge from a narrowly theological inquiry and to be seen, individually and as a series, in the same light as other historically defined objects of study. In this way, current research does not define the categories of the sins merely as theological entities, but rather as differentiated articulations of what can be called discrete forms of an interrupted actualization of socially accepted forms of desire. Parallel to this definition, the virtues can be understood as ideals of the socialization of desire.¹³

In the nineteenth and earlier twentieth century, and primarily in German scholarship, the sins were studied in three main contexts: First, they were seen as part of the history of Catholic dogma on matters of moral theology, something which appears clearly in the sub-title of the major work on the sins and dogma in this period, the monograph by Otto Zöckler.¹⁴ Second, the origins of the sins became part of the historical study of monastic spirituality in Egypt, where established lists of *logismoi*, or "evil" thoughts (later altered and reformulated as the sins) first appeared. The focus here was on the debt this aspect of Egyptian monasticism owed to both Hellenism and Early Christian literature. Stefan Schiwietz's three-volume *Das morgenländische Mönchtum*, published between 1904 and 1938, is typical of endeavors in this second context, as is the monograph by Siegfried Wibbing.¹⁵ Third, the iconography of vices and virtues formed the subject of a number of studies of medieval art, in particular in the tradition of Prudentius's *Psychomachia*, such as

¹³ Richard Newhauser, "Virtues and Vices," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages, Supplement 1*, ed. William Chester Jordan (New York, 2004), 628–33.

¹⁴ Otto Zöckler, *Das Lehrstück von den sieben Hauptsünden: Beiträge zur Dogmen- und zur Sittengeschichte, in besonders der vorreformatorischen Zeit*, in O. Zöckler, *Biblische und kirchenhistorische Studien*, 3 (Munich, 1893).

¹⁵ Stefan Schiwietz, *Das morgenländische Mönchtum*, 3 vols. (Mainz, Mödling, 1904–1938); Siegfried Wibbing, *Die Tugend- und Lasterkataloge im Neuen Testament* (Berlin, 1959).

one can find in Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *The Seven Deadly Sins: A Study in the History of the Concept* (New York, 1910), a common factor in these studies is the structural and historical analysis of the sins. The concept of the seven sins is imagined to be related to the structure of the human mind.

Much of this earlier research was done in the area of literary scholarship, most notably by Morton Bloomfield,¹⁷ who studied the sins in English, but also considered the place of the sins in the history of thought to some of the major works on the sins in response to varying cultural contexts. Bloomfield's work was highly influential in the context of the Middle Ages, but it also served as the starting point for subsequent European research on the moral thought. The publication of his study of sloth and his fundamental problems in the history of thought set the agenda for much of the subsequent work on the sins, with factors such as the place of the sins in the Middle Ages and the development of rationales for the sins in later work, such as the recent work by Vecchio.¹⁹ At the same time, the study continues to be, advanced in

¹⁶ Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *The Seven Deadly Sins: A Study in the History of the Concept* (New York, 1910); *Christian Times to the Thirteenth Century* (Toronto, 1989). For the use of the term, see O'Sullivan, *Early Medieval Glosses* (Boston, 2004).

¹⁷ Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Religious Concept, with Special Reference to the Seven Deadly Sins* (New York, 1952; reprint, 1967).

¹⁸ Siegfried Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1967); and "The Seven Deadly Sins," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 43 (1968): 1–22.

¹⁹ Carla Casagrande and Silvana Vecchio, "Il decalogo (secoli XIII–XV)," *Dictionnaire de l'histoire des idées* 331–95; "Péché," in *Dictionnaire de l'histoire des idées* 331–95; Jean-Claude Schmitt (Paris, 1999); *sette vizi capitali: Storia dei peccati ne-*

one can find in Adolf Katzenellenbogen's classic monograph.¹⁶ The common factor in these studies is a tendency to examine their subject from structural and historical perspectives in which the content of the sins is imagined to be relatively stable.

Much of this earlier research was summarized and extended into the area of literary scholarship in 1952 in the monumental monograph by Morton Bloomfield,¹⁷ which not only was the first major study of the sins in English, but also contributed a far more comprehensive view of the place of the sins in medieval culture and that was also sensitive to some of the major changes in the composition of the lists of sins in response to varying cultural factors. Bloomfield's work proved highly influential in the context of American universities, in particular, but it also served as the starting point for what is an ongoing interest among subsequent European medievalists in this aspect of medieval moral thought. The publication in 1967 of Siegfried Wenzel's study of sloth and his fundamental article in *Speculum* the next year detailing problems in the history of the sins not addressed by Bloomfield's work set the agenda for much historiographical work to come.¹⁸ As a result, factors such as the place of the virtues in the comprehension of moral thought in the Middle Ages, the influence of Aristotle, and the genesis of rationales for the sins in Scholastic thought were the focus of some later work, such as the recent studies by Carla Casagrande and Silvana Vecchio.¹⁹ At the same time, the study of individual sins has been, and continues to be, advanced in work by Lester Little, Alexander Murray, or

¹⁶ Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Mediaeval Art from Early Christian Times to the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Alan J. P. Crick (London, 1939; reprint Toronto, 1989). For the use of Prudentius' text as a school book, see now Sinéad O'Sullivan, *Early Medieval Glosses on Prudentius' Psychomachia: The Weitz Tradition* (Leiden, Boston, 2004).

¹⁷ Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept, with Special Reference to Medieval English Literature* ([East Lansing, MI,] 1952; reprint, 1967).

¹⁸ Siegfried Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1967); and "The Seven Deadly Sins: Some Problems of Research," *Speculum* 43 (1968): 1-22.

¹⁹ Carla Casagrande and Silvana Vecchio, "La classificazione dei peccati tra settenario e decalogo (secoli XIII-XV)," *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 5 (1994): 331-95; "Péché," in *Dictionnaire Raisoné de l'Occident Médiéval*, ed. Jacques Le Goff and Jean-Claude Schmitt (Paris, 1999), 877-91; and, most recently and comprehensively, *I sette vizi capitali: Storia dei peccati nel Medioevo*, Saggi, 832 (Turin, 2000).

more recently Richard Newhauser on avarice;²⁰ Mireille Vincent-Cassy on envy and gluttony;²¹ and Pierre Payer or Ruth Karras on lust.²²

Yet much scholarship of the last twenty years has also moved beyond an agenda in which the seven deadly sins are seen to function almost hegemonically in the environment of pastoral theology. John Bossy's well-known essay in 1988 articulated ways in which he felt the seven sins were seen by late-medieval culture to be inadequate, a topic which was in some regards anticipated by Bloomfield's work, but not fully realized there.²³ Likewise, analyses of other enumerations of morality in the Middle Ages, like Casagrande and Vecchio on the sins of the tongue,²⁴ or Newhauser on the nine accessory sins,²⁵ have called attention to the way in which cultural exigencies (such as the oral nature of preaching and confession) elicited a response that gives evidence of the flexibility of medieval moral thought. Likewise, one can see here, as well, the beginnings of a focus on new material on the sins largely unstudied in the past, such as texts on vices and virtues from medieval and early-modern Spain (see the essay here by Hillaire Kallendorf). But recent scholarship has also begun to address topics and use

²⁰ Lester K. Little, "Pride Goes before Avarice: Social Change and the Vices in Latin Christendom," *The American Historical Review* 76 (1971): 16–49; Alexander Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1978), chapt. 3; Richard Newhauser, *The Early History of Greed: The Sin of Avarice in Early Medieval Thought and Literature* (Cambridge, Eng., 2000); "Avaritia and Paupertas: On the Place of the Early Franciscans in the History of Avarice," in *In the Garden of Evil: The Vices and Culture in the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard Newhauser (Toronto, 2005), 324–48; and "Justice and Liberality."

²¹ Mireille Vincent-Cassy, "L'Envie en France au Moyen Age," *Annales E.S.C.* 35 (1980): 253–71; "La gula curiale ou les débordements des banquets au début du règne de Charles VI," in *La Sociabilité à table: Commensalité et convivialité à travers les âges*, ed. Martin Aurell, Olivier Dumoulin, and Françoise Thelamon ([Rouen], 1992), 91–102; and "Between Sin and Pleasure: Drunkenness in France in the Late Middle Ages," trans. Erika Pavelka, in *In the Garden of Evil*, ed. Newhauser, 393–430.

²² Pierre Payer, *The Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto, 1993); Ruth Mazo Karras, "The Latin Vocabulary of Illicit Sex in English Ecclesiastical Court Records," *Journal of Medieval Latin* 2 (1992): 1–17; and "Two Models, Two Standards: Moral Teaching and Sexual Mores," in *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace (Minneapolis, 1996), 123–38.

²³ John Bossy, "Moral Arithmetic: Seven Sins into Ten Commandments," in *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Edmund Leites (Cambridge, Eng., Paris, 1988), 214–34.

²⁴ Carla Casagrande and Silvana Vecchio, *I peccati della lingua: Disciplina ed etica della parola nella cultura medievale* (Rome, 1987).

²⁵ Richard Newhauser, "From Treatise to Sermon: Johannes Herolt on the *novem peccata aliena*," in *De ore domini: Preacher and Word in the Middle Ages*, ed. T. L. Amos, Eugene A. Green, and Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Kalamazoo, MI, 1989), 185–209.

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²⁶ *Anger's Past: The Social U* (Ithaca and London, 1998).

²⁷ Michael Theunissen, *V Mittelalters* (Berlin and New Syndrome: From an Occupat in Secularized Professional L *Evil*, ed. Newhauser, 455–76.

²⁸ Patrick Boyde, *Human V* (2000); Edward Peters, "Vir i *Garden of Evil*, ed. Newhauser

²⁹ Richard Newhauser, "V Mittelalter. Freiburger Kolloqui M. Rohde (Fribourg, CH), fo

³⁰ Ruth Mazo Karras, "Th Vices in Medieval England," E. Barton, "Gendering Ange the Eleventh and Twelfth Ce

methodologies that open the question of the cultural use of the sins to a more diverse analysis and call into question some of the assumptions of earlier scholarship. Barbara Rosenwein et al. on anger, for example, is deeply invested in what was a current debate on the use and construction of the emotions in historical research;²⁶ Michael Theunissen has questioned the supposed historical break between the melancholy articulated in antique texts, sloth in the Middle Ages, and modernity's representation of depression.²⁷ Other approaches to the delineation of the moral categories of the sins have adopted methods of psychological research (Patrick Boyde, Edward Peters, and see Thomas Parisi's contribution to the present volume),²⁸ or the findings of anthropology (Richard Newhauser, and see the essay by John Kitchen in the present volume),²⁹ or a gender studies perspective (Ruth Karras, Richard Barton, and see Susan E. Hill's essay in the present volume) to yield new insight into the ways in which cultures fill the categories of moral analysis with an ever-changing content.³⁰

III. *The Scholarship of the Present Volume*

The essays from the seminar that are selected and printed here confirm and extend these areas of scholarly analysis of the capital vices. In its widest context, the conceptual history of the seven deadly sins participates in the study of the political and social ethics of medieval communities. As Dwight D. Allman demonstrates, the construction of

²⁶ *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages*, ed. Barbara Rosenwein (Ithaca and London, 1998).

²⁷ Michael Theunissen, *Vorentwürfe der Moderne: Antike Melancholie und die Acedia des Mittelalters* (Berlin and New York, 1996). See also Rainer Jehl, "Acedia and Burnout Syndrome: From an Occupational Vice of the Early Monks to a Psychological Concept in Secularized Professional Life," trans. Andrea Németh-Newhauser, in *In the Garden of Evil*, ed. Newhauser, 455–76.

²⁸ Patrick Boyde, *Human Vices and Human Worth in Dante's "Comedy"* (Cambridge, Eng., 2000); Edward Peters, "Vir inconstans: Moral Theology as Palaeopsychology," in *In the Garden of Evil*, ed. Newhauser, 59–73.

²⁹ Richard Newhauser, "Capital Vices as Medieval Anthropology," in *Laster im Mittelalter. Freiburger Kolloquium vom 20. bis 22. Februar 2006*, ed. Ch. Flüeler and M. Rohde (Fribourg, CH), forthcoming.

³⁰ Ruth Mazo Karras, "The Lechery that Dare Not Speak its Name: Sodomy and the Vices in Medieval England," in *In the Garden of Evil*, ed. Newhauser, 193–205; Richard E. Barton, "Gendering Anger: *Ira*, *Furor*, and Discourses of Power and Masculinity in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," in *ibid.*, 371–92.