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 predetermined, 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 Koselleck wrote some years ago, a “zone of convergence” of the past and present. 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 domination of positivist/empiricist science, 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” 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 artifacts 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.


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7. Richard Neu, verkleidete Laster, Moos, (Köln, We, as “On Ambiguity in trans. Andrea N.
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?"

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.

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. Second, even when one is dealing with what research

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4 Ibid., 8–9.

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. 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. 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 unacceptable 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. It is something else again to find a century later that William Peralus has included a moral justification of commerce per se in the midst of treating avarice in his very popular *Summa de vitis*—intended as an aide for

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


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


composing sermons to be preached, among other congregations, to the same urban populations which provided the manpower for this now valorized commercial activity. In the practical contours of the genre of preaching aids, 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), 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

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11 William Peraldus, Summa de vitis, 4.2.4 ("De fraudibus negociatorum"), in Paris, Bibliothèque Mazarine MS. 794, fol. 52rb: "Quarto loco inter species avariae dicendum est de fraudibus negociatorum. Et notandum quem 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 one can find in Adolf Katzenellenbogen, Die Christian Times to the Thirteenth Century (Toronto, 1989). For the use of O’Sullivan, Early Medieval Glass (Boston, 2004).

17 Morton W. Bloomfield, The Religious Concept, with Special Reference to theearly Middle Ages (Hill, NC, 1967); and “The Seven Deadly Sins,” 42 (1968): 1–22.
Further adopted and elaborated upon, it makes the seven sins of the Middle Ages a complex interaction of multiple and differing historical and cultural ideas. Current scholarship about the sins in the Middle Ages has emphasized the importance of the seven deadly sins as an aspect of the complex interaction of multiple and differing historical and cultural ideas. The sins are allowed these qualities in early Christian literature and to be universal and multi-faceted, but rather as symbols of the characteristics of sin and its effects on society and desire. Parallel forms of the sins can be found in late antiquity.

The sins are often treated primarily in two different contexts: First, they are connected to Christian ideas on matters of moral and social order, as the subject of the sins (as a group of established lists of sins, or as a sub-category of the seven sins) is also discussed in the context of Egyptian and Coptic Christian literature. In proverbs and homilies, the second context, they are connected to the iconography of the use of symbols as an aspect of medieval Christian religious art and in the psychology of the prudens, such as is found in Pierre the Great's 13th-century Compendium rerum sapientarum.


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

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. Likewise, analyses of other enumerations of morality in the Middle Ages, like Casagrande and Vecchio on the sins of the tongue, or Newhauser on the nine accessory sins, 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 methodologies that open up a more diverse analysis of the results of earlier scholarship. It is also deeply invested in what we might construe as the ephemeral construction of the emotional self. It has questioned the supposed articulation in antique and medieval representations of depression through the moral categories of theological research (Patrick Boyle, in this contribution to the present volume; Richard Newhauser, in the present volume; or a general Barton, and see Susan Kallendorf, new insight into the way in which analysis with an ever-clear.

III. The Social History of the Sins

The essays from the section aim to firm and extend these insights.

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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 Boyle, Edward Peters, and see Thomas Parisi's contribution to the present volume), 29 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

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