The scholarly self under threat: language of vice in British scholarship (1870-1910)

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Conclusion

Why was the category of vice so important to British scholars around 1900?

This dissertation has argued that there were two main reasons for the importance of vices in British scholarship around 1900. The first reason was that British scholars around 1900 could not answer the question to what it meant to be a scholar without referring to vices. In other words: ideals of scholarly selfhood were articulated with vices constantly in mind, because scholars agreed that the pursuit of knowledge relied on their ability to withstand vices. As such, the language of vice provided a common idiom for scholars to discuss the threats to their ideals of what it took to pursue knowledge. Vices were no abstract threats. Far from it: Victorian and Edwardian academic memory culture was riddled with telling examples of how vices could compromise the scholarly self, and the broader culture in which British scholarship was embedded was preoccupied with the threats that moral flaws could pose to civilisation and progress.

There was a second reason for the importance of vices in British scholarship, however. Although the language of vice offered common ground for scholars to discuss threats to their scholarly selves, scholars did not always agree upon the definition of good or bad scholarship. While scholars agreed about the importance of a virtuous character, they often disagreed about the exact composition of such a character. Consequently, the language of vice was not only employed to shape ideals of scholarly selfhood, but also to demarcate them from competing ideals. As I have shown in this dissertation, the language of vice was employed often in scholarly debates and controversies to discredit opponents and to attack ideals that were considered by others to be vicious. The vice charges that were employed in Victorian scholarly debates were more than pejorative tools to discredit opponents, they were heartfelt responses to moral threats.

Understanding this dual role of vice language in the shaping of scholarly selves is crucial for our understanding of British scholarship around 1900, yet this topic has received scant attention from historians. Although this period (often described as a period of discipline formation and scholarly specialisation) has been studied extensively, historians have mostly zoomed in on institutions, methods, inventions and theories.[1] The practitioners themselves and their ideals about what it took to be a scholar have been cropped out of the picture. The disciplining of scholarly selves during processes of discipline formation, institutionalisation and scholarly specialisation, in effect, has remained understudied. This dissertation has broken new ground by focusing on ideals of scholarly selfhood and the crucial role that the language of vice played in the formation and demarcation of such ideals.

To corroborate these points, let me recount the arguments made in this dissertation in more detail, before I turn to their historiographical ramifications. First of all, I have drawn attention to the role of vices as a common threat to scholars across all kinds of disciplines. In chapter 1, I have presented an analysis of vices found in scholarly obituaries. I argued that Victorian and Edwardian scholars felt their scholarly selves to be under constant threat from vices. The project of scholarship was threatened by various dangers, some even lurking within scholars themselves. Writers of obituaries highlighted six of such dangers: uselessness, enthusiasm, prejudice, money, fame, and distraction. These dangers could be sources of vice, or could be effected by them, but they had to be neutralised either way. By offering detailed descriptions of how eminent scholars withstood and fought vices, obituary writers offered instructions for dealing with the threats to scholarly selfhood. In general, scholars offered two remedies to these ills: balancing virtues, and cultivating a love of science. To withstand the dangers that threatened their pursuits, writers of obituaries thus advised fellow scholars to discipline their scholarly selves. This shows that the emphasis on virtues and desires in scholarly discourse was to some extent a

1 See the introduction, note 45.

reaction to the threat of vices. Vices, in their capacity as a common enemy, were formative of the configuration of scholarly selves in the period around 1900.

In my second chapter on the moral instruction of Edward Frankland I have further developed this argument. By tracing the moral instruction of young Frankland through children's books, advice letters, and aphorisms, I have made clear that the fight against vices was not exclusively a scholarly affair. Instead, a generic process of moral instruction prepared Frankland for the challenges of adult life: a process on which subsequent university educators such as Robert Bunsen and Lyon Playfair built. Frankland's moral instruction shows that strategies for identifying and dealing with vices such as avarice, distraction and selfishness were ideally already instilled in one's childhood. In other words: Frankland's conception of what it took to be a scholar was largely built on more generic conceptions of what it took to withstand vices as a virtuous British citizen. This suggests yet again that the fight against vices was central to the cultivation of scholarly selfhood. The fight against vices, chapters 1 and 2 show, provided scholars with a shared enemy: a common ground upon which conceptions of scholarly selfhood could be built.

This common ground however, as I have argued in chapters 3 and 4, was not as stable as my analysis of moral instruction and academic memory culture suggests. The landscape of Victorian and Edwardian scholarship was characterised by dissent and controversy. Although scholars agreed about the moral nature of scholarship and the importance to identify and withstand vices, they disagreed about what the fight against vices exactly entailed. This disagreement was rooted in varying conceptions of the aims, methods and ideals of scholarship.

As the controversies of Peter Guthrie Tait (chapter 3) illustrate, the language of vice was employed regularly and forcefully in debates on the use of the imagination in late Victorian physics. Tait's debates with Tyndall, Ingleby and Spencer on matters of scientific evidence, the claims

of science, the merits of metaphysics, or the value of *a priori* reasoning were fought out with constant reference to ideals of scholarly selfhood. Vices, in these debates, were often used pejoratively. Because Tait disagreed with his opponents about fundamental matters of virtue and vice — should the scholar value restraint over courage? Was carefulness more important than originality? How was the imagination to be used? — the common ground offered by the language of vice became an arena in which differing conceptions of scholarly selfhood were pitted against each other. In this third chapter, I have shown that because vices were considered to be a common enemy to scholarship, disagreements about the nature of good scholarship were fought out with constant reference to such vices. Also, I have shown that ideals of scholarly selfhood were often projected upon historical figures such as Newton, Faraday or Leibniz. By presenting a historical figure such as Newton as an epitome of restrained and disciplined scholarship, Tait crafted a powerful model of scholarly heroism that he could inhabit. At the same time, Tait created villains: the image of the lying and unoriginal Leibniz came to stand for a vicious model of scholarly selfhood, which could then be projected upon Tait's opponents. Drawing on the powerful language of vice, Tait defended his own convictions about what good scholarship was against the vicious influence of others, and the models of scholarly selfhood that they stood for.

Chapter 4, finally, zoomed in on the process of scholarly cooperation and the controversies that arose when scholars endeavoured to work together. By focusing on the case of Frederick James Furnivall and the New Shakspere Society, I found that cooperation between scholars relied heavily on ideals of gentlemanliness and social virtues. When scholars neglected or transgressed such social codes, their colleagues used the language of vice to discipline them, or to exclude them from scholarly cooperation altogether. The language of vice, especially in a field that was as unstructured as Shakespearean scholarship, served not only to fight out debates about the aims and methods of scholarship, but also to determine if and how scholarship should be professionally organised. If scholars were

to work together professionally, then it was paramount that they practiced social virtues. Although Furnivall frequently deplored the social vices in others, he ultimately found himself at the receiving end of such charges, because his own ungentlemanly behavior threatened scholarly cooperation.

The language of vice, in other words, was instrumental both in the formation of shared ideals of what it meant to be a scholar, and in the demarcation and policing of these ideals. For Victorian and Edwardian scholars, vices were the enemy of scholarship. They felt themselves to be under constant threat by them, and therefore, their ideals of scholarly selfhood were articulated by contrasting them to vices. But because multiple models of scholarly selfhood coexisted and competed, competing models were also identified as threats and actively attacked. Vices were so important to British scholars around 1900, because they were terrified of them. Scholars feared vice, built their ideals of character upon a resistance to vice, and charged anyone who did not live up to these standards, to be guilty of such vices. To answer my research question to the importance of vices can thus be summarised in one sentence: the language of vice was so omnipresent in late Victorian and Edwardian scholarship because it offered the means both to agree and to disagree about what it meant to be a scholar.

Vices in historiography

This dissertation is the first book-length study of scholarly vices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What implications do my results have for historiographical debates about scholarly virtues and vices, British scholarship and the history of scholarship in general? Let me start by pointing out how my findings fit in with existing scholarship on the notions of virtue and vice in the history of scholarship.

As I have argued at length in the introduction, historians have focused primarily on the role of virtues in the history of scholarship. Historians such as Lorraine Daston, Peter Galison, George Levine, Graeme Gooday and Kasper Eskildsen have done amazing work on the virtues

of objectivity, self-abnegation, precision and accuracy.[2] Their accounts of epistemic virtue show how epistemology was thoroughly moralised in the nineteenth century, and gave rise to specific practices and theories. However, as I have mentioned earlier in the introduction, these scholars have focused primarily on singular and narrowly defined epistemic virtues such as objectivity or accuracy, while leaving vices out of the equation altogether.[3]

This dissertation makes four major contributions to the existing historiography on virtues and vices in the nineteenth century. Let me start with the most crucial point: vices. As I have argued, the category of vice was central to Victorian and Edwardian conceptions of scholarly selfhood, because Victorian and Edwardian scholars formulated and demarcated their ideals of selfhood in response to the threat of vice. If vices were fundamental to the formation of these ideals, then it is crucial that historians broaden their view, and include such vices in their analyses. In *Objectivity*, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison claim that 'it is fear that drives epistemology' and that the fear of not being able to know everything led to the rise of objectivity as a cardinal virtue – subjectivity could only be countered by objectivity.[4] This dissertation has shown that the fear of subjectivity was not the only fear that troubled nineteenth-century scholars. I have listed numerous fears, dangers and vices that Victorians and Edwardians considered threats to their scholarly selves. Understanding historical epistemology and the role of selves in the history of scholarship then also requires an account of the threats identified by historical actors, because it is to these threats that epistemic virtues offered a solution. The following three historiographical points build on this insight that vices were crucial to the self-understanding

2 Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*; Levine, *Dying to Know*; Gooday, *The Morals of Measurement*; Eskildsen, 'Inventing the Archive'. I have included more references in my discussion of the historiography on epistemic virtues in the introduction.

3 See the section on Vices in historiography: epistemology, in the introduction. Paul has made similar observations in: Paul, 'Weber, Wöhler, and Waitz', 93.

4 Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 49.

of Victorian and Edwardian scholars.

A second point that this dissertation has to add to existing historiography on virtues and vices is closely related to the first point, and concerns the focus on singular character traits. Historians, as stated above, have tended to focus their analyses on singular epistemic virtues such as objectivity, accuracy or self-discipline. My research has shown that, at least for Victorian and Edwardian scholars, historical actors themselves did not see their own character traits as isolated entities, but rather as part of a coherent and balanced constellation.[5] An understanding of the role of virtues and vices in nineteenth-century scholarship, then, needs to acknowledge the interrelatedness of these character traits. Moreover, the category of scholarly vice can only be understood properly with reference to such balanced constellations. As I have shown, vices were often the result of a disturbed balance of character traits: too much thoroughness, for example, could lead to uselessness and unproductivity, while a lack of restraint could lead to speculation and amateurishness.

Thirdly, this dissertation has shown that a narrow reading of epistemic virtues and vices (as traits that are oriented exclusively towards epistemic goods) obscures the layered meanings of virtue and vice language in Victorian and Edwardian scholarship. Virtues and vices, in the Victorian and Edwardian understanding, were never solely oriented towards epistemic goods and cannot be neatly separated from moral, social, religious or political virtues and vices.[6] Vices such as ungentlemanliness or selfishness did have epistemic layers of meaning (they made fruitful scholarly cooperation impossible, which had dire epistemic results), but not exclusively: the fulfilment of arduous academic duties relied on unselfishness, and gentlemanliness was an important socio-cultural marker

5 This point has been made earlier by Herman Paul: Herman Paul, 'What Is a Scholarly Persona?', 363-365.

6 For a broader reading of scholarly virtues, see: Creyghton, Huistra, Keymeulen, and Paul, 'Virtue language in historical scholarship'.

in Britain around 1900.[7] Likewise, vices such as 'dictatorialness' were socially and politically unpleasant, but in the case of Furnivall, this vice also had epistemic layers of meaning. A broad reading of epistemic vice takes into account these multiple layers of meaning, while a narrow reading is needlessly restrictive. If we want to understand the role of vice language in the history of scholarship, we should not exclusively focus on the epistemic layers of meaning. Instead, like Herman Paul and Christiaan Engberts have argued, we would do best to speak of 'scholarly vices'.[8]

Fourthly, this dissertation has shown that motivations matter. Good scholarly character was not just defined by a balanced constellation of character traits, but also by a motivation towards what was considered good scholarship. Bad scholarship, likewise, was oriented towards a goal that was not acceptable to other scholars.[9] In chapters 1 and 2, I have argued that a love of truth was a crucial ingredient of the scholarly self: both in academic memory culture and in moral instruction, an orientation towards truth was presented as a major safeguard against the vices that threatened scholarship. But also in chapter 3, I have shown that in scholarly controversies, desires were at stake. Tait and Tyndall both claimed the love of truth as their own, while simultaneously accusing each other of having different motivations: Tait accused Tyndall of a craving for excitement and sensation, while Tyndall accused Tait of being motivated by a fear of error, rather than a love of truth. A wrongful orientation of a scholar's character could be a source of vice, and could make vices out of traits that would otherwise be considered virtuous. Victorian and Edwardian scholars, for this reason, emphasised the importance of a love of truth.

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7 Scholars like Jo Tollebeek and Herman Paul have argued similar points for the language of virtue in other European contexts. Tollebeek has argued that the discourse of virtue in scholarly discourse pointed to shared commitments and strong bonds between scholars, while Paul has added that virtue language could also be an important marker of disagreement: Tollebeek, 'Commemorative Practices in het Humanities around 1900'; Paul, 'Weber, Wöhler, and Waitz'.

8 For 'scholarly vices' as an alternative to 'epistemic vices', see: Engberts and Paul, 'Scholarly Vices'.

9 See also: Tanesini, 'Epistemic Vice and Motivation'.

This study's focus on vices also has implications for our understanding of British scholarship between 1870 and 1910 in general; a period that has often been described as a period of scholarly discipline formation and specialisation. In the foregoing pages, I have shown that this process of discipline formation was bound up with discussions about the scholarly self. A changing intellectual and institutional landscape led to fundamental discussions about what it meant to be a scholar and to a reconfiguration of such ideals. The language of vice was the means by which many of these discussions were conducted. Understanding the debates about processes of modern discipline formation, specialisation and the institutionalisation of scholarship at universities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, then, can be helped greatly by taking the language of vice into account. If modern epistemology was indeed rooted in fear, as Daston and Galison have claimed, then we need to understand these fears. For nineteenth-century Britain, this means that we should look beyond the fear of subjectivity (so eloquently traced by George Levine in his *Dying to Know*) and include other fears in our accounts as well.[10] Some fears felt by the Victorians and Edwardians ('uselessness' for example) even required an assertion of the self, rather than self-abnegation. Broadening our view of Victorian and Edwardian threats to good scholarship, then, helps us to understand the making of modern British scholarship.

This dissertation, finally, has endeavoured to bridge the gap between two historiographical traditions: the study of public morality in Victorian and Edwardian Britain, and the study of epistemic vices. I stated in my introduction that there is a gulf between both approaches: historians of public morality have treated virtues and vices as features of a culture that was obsessed with morality and the threats posed to progress by all kinds of dangers, while historians of epistemic virtues and vices have made very specific points about the role of singular character traits in scholarly ideals and practices. Both perspectives, I have argued, cannot explain the importance of vices to British scholars in the period around 1900: one

10 Levine, *Dying to Know*.

approach is too generic, while the other is too specific.

In this dissertation, I have proposed an integrated approach to understand the role of vices in modern British scholarship. I have traced the usage and meaning of vice language through various levels of generalisation and in various contexts, and have connected specific scholarly discussions about methodology, epistemology and the aims of scholarship, to broader Victorian ideals about morality. This integrated approach has shown two things. First, it has shown that scholarly attitudes towards vices were built on more generic cultural ideas about vices. The moral economy of British scholarship was built on the ambient culture of Victorian and Edwardian Britain; a culture that imagined civilization as an ongoing battle against vices and temptations. Because many scholars were first socialised into the Victorian moral universe, these ideas about vice and temptation poured over into scholarly debates about the nature of scholarship and the identity of the scholar, and were appropriated to serve more specific functions. Secondly, however, scholars around 1900 sought to create boundaries between ambient society and the realm of scholarship.[11] The language of vice, although drawn from ambient culture, was instrumental in the creation and maintenance of these boundaries, and also performed further boundary work within scholarship. A focus on the language of vice, then, helps to connect broader cultural ideas about morality to specific discussions about the scholarly self. Further research into scholarly vices, scholarly selfhood and public morality should do well to take the interactions between ambient culture and the moral economy of scholarship into account.

Limitations and future research

Although this dissertation has sought to contribute to our understanding of

11 Lorraine Daston, in her article on moral economies, has argued that moral economies of science drew their power from ambient culture, but also tended to reassert the boundaries between the two: Daston, 'The Moral Economy of Science', 24.

scholarly vices in discussions about the scholarly self, my approach to the language of vice has some limitations, too. I would like to use these final paragraphs to indicate three major limitations and to offer suggestions for further research on these three points.

First of all, my focus has been on *ideals* of scholarly selfhood and the role of vice language in the construction and maintenance of these ideals. I have researched discussions about scholarly vices and scholarly selfhood in several contexts. But how were ideals of scholarly selfhood translated into actual practice? How did scholars work their resistance to vices into their everyday routines? How exactly did they balance an array of virtues, and what did a love of science look like in practice? In chapter 2, on the moral instruction of Edward Frankland, I have pointed towards some practices (diary writing, repeating aphorisms and shorthands), but a systematic approach to the fight against vices in scholarly practices is a theme that is to be followed up. This study's reliance on case studies begs the question to how ideals of scholarly selfhood functioned in other disciplines, and an ideal follow up would therefore be to study how the practices associated with vices diverged between various scholarly disciplines, regions and spaces. Although the language of vice transcended such boundaries, the translation of scholarly ideals into practices might vary from context to context.[12]

Secondly, this analysis is limited in the attention that it gives to the category of gender. I have focused almost exclusively on men and the construction of elite ideals of male scholarly selfhood. This has limited the scope of my argument in two ways. First of all: it is not true that it were exclusively men pursuing knowledge in Britain around 1900. There are many examples of women scholars who were actively excluded from elite male

12 For an interesting study in this respect, see: Sjang ten Hagen, 'How "Facts" Shaped Modern Disciplines', *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences* 49:3 (2019) 300-337.

scholarly practices, communities and institutions.[13] My analysis of scholarly vice is thus restricted to this domain of elite male scholarship. Secondly, this study has not zoomed in on the role of gender in the construction of ideals of male scholarly selfhood. As historians like Heather Ellis have shown, the image of the male scholar as 'a completely secure masculine persona' is faulty and problematic.[14] The masculine status of the scholar was never secure in the nineteenth century. Rather, Ellis convincingly argues that we should see the nineteenth century as a battleground for different ideals of 'the male scientist'.[15] Additionally, historians have shown that the language of virtue and vice in Victorian moral discourse in general was heavily gendered.[16] Considering these two points (gendered concepts of virtue and vice, and unstable ideals of masculinity in scholarship), a promising direction for future research would be to include the category of gender in analyses of the threats to scholarly selfhood that this dissertation has identified. Although gender has not figured prominently in this

13 For accounts of these women scholars and the efforts to exclude them from male scholarship, see: Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (London: Wildwood House, 1980); Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Science and Gender* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985); Londa L. Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993); Ludmilla Jordanova, *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989); Margaret W. Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America. Struggles and Strategies to 1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984); Patricia Phillips, *The Scientific Lady. A Social History of Women's Scientific Interests 1520-1918* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990); Smith, *The Gender of History.*

14 Ellis, *Masculinity and Science,* 3.

15 Ibid. 207. See also: Jones, *Intellect and Character in Victorian England*, chapter 4, especially page 155.

16 John Tosh has written on the Victorian virtue of politeness as a marker of (gentle)manliness: John Tosh, 'Gentlemanly Politeness and Manly Simplicity in Victorian England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 12 (2002) 455-472. Nick Taylor has argued that the Victorian notion of 'character' was gendered in: Nick Taylor, 'The Return of Character: Parallels Between Late-Victorian and Twenty-First Century Discourses', *Sociological Research Online* 23:2 (2018) 399–415, especially 405. Mary Poovey has shown how gender, character and ideology were entwined in mid-Victorian Britain and how women were often presented as foils for male identities: Poovey, *Uneven Developments*.

dissertation, some examples in the above pages show that Victorians and Edwardians did indeed perceive the threats to their own scholarly selves in gendered terms: Furnivall's identification of 'unmanliness' as a scholarly vice is a case in point.[17] A more systematic analysis of the gendered nature of Victorian and Edwardian scholarly vices can enrich our understanding of scholarly selfhood around 1900, while our understanding of masculinity in scholarship could benefit from an inclusion of the category of scholarly vice.

Thirdly, and finally, my analysis has been synchronic rather than diachronic: I have focused on the language of vice in a period in which ideals of scholarly selfhood were being reconfigured. This has had clear benefits for my understanding of the relationship between vices and ideals of scholarly selfhood between 1870 and 1910, but the development of these ideas over time is a theme for further research. Of particular interest would be questions regarding the origins of the language of vice, and how its meaning shifted yet persisted over time. The language of vice is old and many of the specific vices that I have addressed in this dissertation (avarice, selfishness, enthusiasm prejudice, and so on) have been around for centuries. Why did Victorian and Edwardian scholars attach so much value to concepts that were so old? What were the sources of this discourse?

This also begs the question to what happened to the discourse of scholarly vice in the period that succeeded the period that I have studied here. Did the language of vice disappear with the emergence of technoscience and the stable environment of the modern research university?[18] Or did categories of virtue and vice become embedded in contemporary reflections on research ethics, just like methodological

17 Another example would be Acton's 'uselessness', which was attributed to the 'sterilizing influence' of the period by Arnold Toynbee: Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History,* vol. 1*, Introduction: The Geneses of Civilizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934) 46–47.

18 See: Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, 'Scholarship as a Way of Life: Character and Virtue in the Age of Big Humanities', *History of Humanities* 1:2 (2016) 387-397.

manuals codified nineteenth century attitudes?[19] What happened to the often masculine and western ideals of scholarly selfhood when universities became more diverse institutions?[20] How do new developments in the infrastructure of scholarship (e.g. the scholar as entrepreneur, scholarly cooperation in research consortia, the competition for grants) impact our contemporary scholarly selves?[21] And, finally, as ideals of scholarly selfhood were formulated in response to real or imagined threats to civilisation and progress: what kind of scholars do we want to be in the face of the threats of the 21st century?

19 For research ethics and the scholarly self, see Herman Paul, 'The Scientific Self: Reclaiming Its Place in the History of Research Ethics', *Science and Engineering Ethics* 24:5 (2018) 1379-1392. For methodological manuals, see: Herman Paul, 'Manuals on Historical Method: A Genre of Polemical Reflection on the Aims of Science', in: Rens Bod, Jaap Maat, and Thijs Weststeijn (eds.), *The Making of the Humanities*, volume 3 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014) 171-182.

20 See: Alison Mountz et. al., 'For Slow Scholarship. A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University', *ACME* 14:4 (2015) 1235-1259.

21 See: Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Life: A Moral History of a Late Modern Vocation* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2008). For a more practical take on our contemporary academic selves, see: Donald E. Hall, *The Academic Self: An Owner's Manual* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002).