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Conclusion: How and Why Scholarly Vices Persisted over Time

Sjang ten Hagen and Herman Paul

How and why did scholarly vice terms persist over time? Each in their own way, the eleven chapters that make up this volume have tried to answer these questions for specific vice terms, figurations of vice, or media of transmission. In these concluding pages, we would like to bring the results of these chapters together. After summarizing the main findings, we will point out how the insights reached might benefit other kinds of long-term, cross-epochal historical study. What can other historians take away from the cases explored in this volume?¹

1 Changes of Meaning

The first thing to observe is that all the vice terms and figurations of vice discussed in this volume saw their meanings change over time. Although curiosity, prejudice, dogmatism, and scholasticism (part 1) were selected as case studies because of their persistence over time, this longevity did not imply that successive generations understood the terms in similar ways, or even as denoting the same threat. “Prejudice” meant different things to Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, the twentieth-century psychoanalyst, than to Isaac Watts, the eighteenth-century logician (Chapter 3), just as the title word “scholasticism” in Lawrence Mead’s 2010 article “Scholasticism in Political Science” had different connotations than it had for sixteenth-century humanist critics of medieval Christian theology (Chapter 5). Continuity in terminology must therefore not be confused with stability in meaning: terms could stay in place even if their meanings changed.

1 This conclusion draws and expands on a Dutch-language report of the workshop out of which this volume has emerged: Herman Paul, “Pedante en vooringenomen geleerden: Een langetermijnstudie naar wetenschappelijke ondeugden,” *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 136, no. 3 (2023): 249–256.

Change, in this context, must not be misunderstood as an abrupt exchange of old meanings for new ones. If the case studies collected in part 1 demonstrate anything, it is that change in meaning often amounted to what one might call a reconfiguration of dominant and subordinate elements within an already existing range of meanings. Curiosity as discussed in Chapter 2 is a case in point. Against the conventional wisdom that *curiositas* transformed from a vice into a virtue, Richard Newhauser shows that positive and negative connotations already co-existed in the Middle Ages. While it is true that the former gradually began to outweigh the latter, to the extent that curiosity is nowadays often regarded as a scholarly virtue *par excellence*, it took very long for the negative connotations to disappear. Similarly, while dogmatism since the seventeenth century has been chiefly framed as a scholarly vice, there is an almost unbroken lineage of more positive uses of the term, as in “dogmatic medicine” and “dogmatic theology,” which helps us understand Thomas Kuhn’s appreciation of “the function of dogma in scientific research” not as radically innovative but as continuing a tradition that can be traced back via *medicina dogmatica* and *theologia dogmatica* in early modern Europe to Galen, the ancient Greek physician (Chapter 4). What these examples suggest is that vice terms could have multiple layers of meaning and that changes in how people understood the terms in question just as often amounted to a reconfiguration of these layers – a retrieval of half-forgotten meanings, a revaluation of existing connotations – than to the introduction of new meanings.

When it comes to factors triggering such reconfigurations of meanings, it goes without saying that new epistemological practices like the experiments conducted by the Royal Society in seventeenth-century England and “evidence-based medicine” as it emerged in the late twentieth century affected scholars’ standards of virtue and vice. Interestingly, however, the chapters in parts 1 and 2 also offer various examples of triggers from outside the scholarly community. As Alexander Stoeger points out, the Vatican Council (1869–1870) with its proclamation of the dogma of papal infallibility left a perhaps unexpected mark on the history of dogmatism by offering friends and foes of Darwinian biology in the 1870s and 1880s a golden opportunity to accuse each other of “pope-like dogmatism” (by which they meant: defending preconceived ideas with quasi-religious zeal). Similarly, the Cold War affected the vice of dogmatism in that it added political urgency to the pursuit of “democratic” open-mindedness and the combatting of its “totalitarian” other: the vice of closed-mindedness (Chapter 4).² Chapter 9, in turn, shows that the Mammon

2 On which see also Jamie Cohen-Cole, *The Open Mind: Cold War Politics and the Sciences of Human Nature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

metaphor as used by scientists in the twentieth-century United States was closely entangled with the rise of capitalist regimes of value.

If this suggests (somewhat obviously) that scholarly vice terms cannot be studied apart from the economic, political, moral, and religious contexts in which they were invoked, a more important insight is that they cannot be understood in isolation from each other. While this is true for single vice terms, it is perhaps even more evident for the figurations of vice featured in part 2: the pedant, charlatan, Mammon, and *idola mentis*. Marian Füssel, for example, argues that the relationship between the charlatan and the pedant was constantly being renegotiated. While some authors lumped the two figures together, others carefully distinguished between the charlatan's intentional deceit and the pedant's blissful ignorance of his own vices (Chapter 7). The histories of "prejudice" and Francis Bacon's "idols of the mind" also turn out to be intertwined. As Sorana Corneanu argues in Chapter 2, Bacon's theory of the idols had a major influence on the seventeenth-century discourse on prejudice. At times, the notions of idols and prejudices were even used interchangeably, as was the case with dogmatism and scholasticism (Chapter 5). This implies that historical studies focusing on the vicissitudes of individual virtue or vice terms take a certain risk: they easily ignore or underestimate the interplay between scholars' virtues and vices, the cross-references in their vocabulary, or the interconnectedness of virtues and vices.³

One may wonder: To what extent did this embeddedness in networks of virtue and vice terms contribute to the long-term persistence of certain individual vice terms? Reflecting on what Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung calls "the fluidity of the vices tradition,"⁴ philosopher Ian James Kidd has drawn attention to the evolutionary benefits of promiscuity. "Promiscuous vices," which Kidd defines as vice terms that easily liaised themselves to other virtues, vices, or "newly emerging values, concerns, and life-projects," seem to have a heightened ability to persist "throughout contextual changes (social, religious, intellectual)."⁵ Could one analogously hypothesize that the long-term survival

3 Some other benefits of a more comprehensive, integrative study of scholarly virtues and vices are discussed in Herman Paul, "Virtue Language in Nineteenth-Century Orientalism: A Case Study in Historical Epistemology," *Modern Intellectual History* 14, no. 3 (2017): 689–715. See also Christiaan Engberts, *Scholarly Virtues in Nineteenth-Century Sciences and Humanities: Loyalty and Independence Entangled* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

4 Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009), 26.

5 Ian James Kidd, "A Case for an Historical Vice Epistemology," *Humana Mente* 14, no. 39 (2021): 69–86, at 77.

chances of scholarly vice terms were related to the degree to which they were integrated into wider networks or “moral economies”?

2 The “Why” Question

This hypothesis brings us to the twofold question that has been guiding this volume: *How* and *why* did scholarly vice terms persist over time? Starting with the “why” part, we notice that many chapters have pointed to the *functions* that vice terms fulfilled. Scholarly vice terms proved useful to the extent that they served as a vocabulary for two overlapping purposes: (1) making people aware of character flaws or attitudinal defects hampering the life of the mind, including especially the pursuit of knowledge, and (2) accusing people of displaying such flaws and defects, thereby calling their knowledge claims into question, sometimes even disqualifying them as members of the scholarly community.

Warnings against unvirtuous intellectual habits are a red thread through the chapters on prejudice, scholasticism, charlatantry, and pedantry. Early modern scholars often used these concepts in telling cautionary tales on how not to think, act, or behave as a member, or aspiring member, of the Republic of Letters. Similarly, the chapters by Sari Kivistö and Anne Por in part 3 show that dissertations and student advice literature were genres in which concepts of vice were evoked primarily to make readers aware of temptations lurking around the corner (including, as Por argues, the ill of wasting time and money in studying inefficiently, without a plan or purpose). In such educational contexts, centuries-old vice terms were attractive insofar as they pointed to dangers to which students or scholars could still fall prey. Moreover, insofar as these warnings derived authority or legitimacy from citing classical authors, the use of time-honored language could add to the credibility of moral advice. Drawing on Ineke Sluiter’s concept of “anchoring,”⁶ Chapters 8 and 9 develop this argument specifically for Bacon’s idols and the Biblical image of Mammon – tropes that even twentieth-century scholars continued to invoke if they felt a need to imbue their warnings against vicious research practices with an aura of solemnity or ancient wisdom.

Vice terms could also serve other aims: they could be used against particular groups or individuals, be it in evaluative settings (book reviews) or polemical

6 Ineke Sluiter, “Anchoring Innovation: A Classical Research Agenda,” *European Review* 25, no. 1 (2017): 20–38.

contexts (controversies).⁷ In Chapter 3, Corneanu notes that “prejudice” was marshaled for such purposes only in the second instance, after logicians and other scholars had analyzed and warned against the vice for several centuries. Only in the nineteenth century, with the emergence of academic disciplines and the border conflicts that accompanied this process, polemical uses of prejudice began to surpass pedagogical warnings. In terms of periodization, this finding corresponds to Sjang ten Hagen’s observation, in Chapter 11, that nineteenth-century historians of science were eager to discredit medieval scholars and their work in terms of vices. Also, it fits Stoeger’s finding that nineteenth-century scientists used dogmatism as a rhetorical weapon, both in the context of establishing academic disciplines (separating professionals from amateurs) and in their demarcations between science and religion. Was the nineteenth century, more than earlier periods, an age of “vice-charging”?⁸ Although an unambiguous answer to this question cannot be given, it is worth noting that the academic institutionalization of learning in this period, combined with the hegemony of a moral idiom to which notions of virtue and vice were central,⁹ encouraged polemical uses of vice terms – even if this vice-charging was, of course, often less than virtuous itself.¹⁰

While twentieth-century scientists became, generally speaking, more reluctant than their nineteenth-century predecessors to attribute flaws of reasoning or evidence to character deficiencies, the use of vice terms for cautionary purposes persisted, especially (though not only) in metascientific texts.¹¹ Bacon’s idols, for example, continued to be invoked against the ills of modern research regimes in the humanities or the subtleties of bias in forensic science (Chapter 8). Similarly, the Mammon metaphor remained a useful reference in warnings against competitive funding schemes or market-oriented publishing houses (Chapter 9). In all these cases, explanations of persistence boil down to the argument that vice terms or figurations of vice had a chance to stay in

7 On the former, see Sjang ten Hagen, “Evaluating Knowledge, Evaluating Character: Book Reviewing by American Historians and Physicists (1900–1940),” *History of Humanities* 7, no. 2 (2022): 251–277.

8 A term from Ian James Kidd, “Charging Others with Epistemic Vice,” *The Monist* 99, no. 2 (2016): 181–197.

9 See, e.g., Mike Huggins, *Vice and the Victorians* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

10 On “vicious vice-charging,” see Quassim Cassam, “Misunderstanding Vaccine Hesitancy: A Case Study in Epistemic Injustice,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 55, no. 3 (2023): 315–329.

11 Kim M. Hajek, Herman Paul, and Sjang ten Hagen, “Objectivity, Honesty, and Integrity: How American Scientists Talked about Their Virtues, 1945–2000,” *History of Science* 62, no. 3 (2024): 442–469.

play if they (1) belonged to an established and accessible moral repertoire and (2) added rhetorical force to scholars' analysis of current-day ills.

It is possible, of course, to consider alternative explanations. One might argue, for instance, that some of the demands that learning makes on its practitioners – a commitment to understanding the world, proper respect for arguments and evidence, and a willingness to call preconceived ideas into question – change not nearly as quickly as the language that people use to talk about these demands. Even though the pursuit of learning can take on a dazzling variety of forms, well beyond the range of practices that are currently known as scholarship or science, learning always stands or falls with people committing themselves to thinking, reasoning, and communicating with others. Don't such universals help explain why distinctions between good and bad learning have been drawn across the centuries and why there is a centuries-long tradition of warnings against prejudice? Although there is much to be said for this line of argument, it postulates continuity at a different level than this volume has done. If we want to understand the vicissitudes of the *term* "prejudice" as used in scholarly texts, the explanatory potential of people's concern about the negative effects of cognitive bias is limited. While it may account for scholars' continuing need for words or concepts that allow them to talk about bias-related problems, it does not explain why "prejudice" instead of "pre-conceived opinion" became or remained a favorite term. When it comes to the persistence of vice terms – the language rather than the realities to which this language refers – rhetorical explanations of the sort provided in this volume seem more to the point. What we need to understand is the availability of vice terms in a given historical context as well as the reasons why authors made use of them.

3 The "How" Question

The availability of vice terms is central to the second guiding question of this volume: *How* did vice terms persist over time? How did they stay in play or remain sufficiently recognizable to make sometimes surprising comebacks? What sort of genres or media were instrumental in transmitting these vice terms and figurations of vice over time? And how did authors have access to them? Although this "how" question is addressed throughout the volume, it receives special attention in part 3, on media of transmission.

As Sjang ten Hagen argues in Chapter 11, histories of science were a genre that contributed its share by repeating clichéd images of, for instance, the "medieval mind." In doing so, vices associated with the life of the mind in the

Middle Ages made their way from one book to another, establishing themselves as aberrations from the path of virtue that “modern,” post-medieval men of learning were supposed to avoid. Also, several chapters draw attention to the frequency with which vice terms were traced back to classic books like Bacon’s *Novum Organum* and Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Students who had to read Bacon in class encountered his theory of the idols, just as readers of Kant’s first critique stumbled already in the preface on the philosopher’s dismissal of dogmatic thinking as epitomized by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Christian Wolff. Although these classics were not primarily read because of their pathologies of vice, it seems likely that their broad circulation contributed to the persistence of the vice terms (dogmatism) and figurations of vice (idols of the mind) that featured in their pages. To a lesser extent, something similar may apply to Michel de Montaigne’s essay on pedantry and Johann Burckhardt Mencke’s lectures on charlatanry, both of which were read and reissued long after their original date of publication.

What, then, about the other genres mentioned in the Introduction to this volume, such as aphorisms, proverbs, sermons, satirical plays, and campus novels? In Chapter 10, Sari Kivistö draws attention to the importance of proverbial expressions in eighteenth-century medical dissertations. The William Osler quotes presented in the Introduction can be read as modern-day equivalents of these early modern sayings (though one might argue that the *vox populi* has become less audible than in the texts analyzed by Kivistö). While sermons do not feature prominently in this volume, theater plays make their appearance in Chapter 6, where Arnoud Visser argues that theatrical representations of the pedant played a significant role in establishing pedantry as a scholarly vice. One wonders what happened to such satirical mockery of scholars’ vicious habits at a time when novels established themselves as media for social commentary. Did college novels take over some of the functions that learned satires fulfilled in earlier periods? To what extent did campus novels or movies about the temptations faced by male and female scientists keep repertoires of scholarly vices alive?¹²

When it comes to the most recent past, Chapters 9 and 12 even suggest that online games and YouTube videos may play a part in familiarizing new generations with ancient vice terms and figurations of vice. One only needs to consult the Wikipedia entry on “Mammon in Literature, Film, and Popular Culture” to get an impression of how often the figure of Mammon as depicted in the Gospel of Matthew makes its appearance in role-playing video games (complete with

12 Two envisioned chapters on campus novels and science movies did, unfortunately, not materialize.

religious connotations, as in the fantasy game “Dungeons & Dragons,” where Mammon is the archdevil, also known as the “Lord of Avarice”).¹³ Likewise, in her chapter on student advice literature, Anne Por points to the importance of study vlogs, some of which attract hundreds of thousands of views. Even if the young influencers who post such vlogs do not literally speak the same language as eighteenth-century authors of student advice literature, their messages do revolve around morally charged do’s and don’ts, in which virtues and vices can often easily be recognized.

Admittedly, it is difficult to specify how much a single genre at a certain point in time contributed to the transmission of specific vice terms or figurations of vice. The explorations offered in this volume do not pretend to have identified the most relevant or most influential causal factors. What they do illustrate, however, is that access to old scholarly vice terms cannot be taken for granted. Repertoires of vice terms remained available only if, in one way or another, they were transmitted over time, be it through genres with a distinctly scientific profile (histories of science) or in more broadly accessible media (plays, novels).

4 Broader Implications

None of these conclusions only apply to scholarly vice terms. *Mutatis mutandis*, they can be extended to other words and concepts, to proverbs and standing phrases, to arguments and fallacies, perhaps even to ideas and images. Whenever historians study the vicissitudes of such cultural artifacts, they encounter the question of what continuity and discontinuity over time entail. While cultural and intellectual historians often have a sharp eye for changing meanings and, consequently, have little difficulty in identifying changes or discontinuities in how people made sense of their world, we believe that the insights gained in this volume may be helpful for historians who, like us, are interested in exploring the other part of the story: patterns of continuity over longer periods of time. Three insights in particular are worth highlighting.

Perhaps the most important lesson is that attending to questions of continuity does not require historians to give up their commitment to historicizing and contextualizing modes of interpretation (“always historicize”).¹⁴ Whatever

13 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mammon_in_literature,_film,_and_popular_culture (last accessed February 20, 2025).

14 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 9.

continuity can be observed in how people spoke about scholarly vices, such continuities were products of authors actively continuing a tradition, appropriating old terms for new purposes, or appealing to historical formulae to add weight to their moral exhortations. Continuity, in other words, was something that people created, intentionally or otherwise, by engaging with historical legacies – just as discontinuity was a result of people turning away from established meanings, forms, or modes of saying. From this it follows that continuity is not an anomaly for historians committed to historicizing modes of inquiry. If both continuity and discontinuity are products of human behavior, then both can be explained historically, in a contextually sensitive manner, with an eye to how people in particular circumstances chose to relate to their pasts.

Secondly, discontinuity on the level of meaning can co-exist with continuity on the level of usage. As the preceding chapters have shown, scholarly vice terms are no exception to the rule that abstract moral concepts are multi-interpretable. Changes in meaning, however, did not prevent vice terms like dogmatism to be used in a strikingly similar manner, for polemical purposes, in ad hominem attacks on colleagues in or outside of the author's field. Likewise, while Ernst Gombrich and Itiel Dror gave different twists to Bacon's *idola mentis* (discontinuity on the level of meaning), both used this classic figuration of vice to draw attention to structural problems besetting their respective disciplines, while adopting the persona of what Edurne De Wilde calls the "courageous critic" (continuity on the level of usage). What this suggests is that changing meanings are only half of the story; the other half is the functions that concepts like vice terms fulfilled. Historians, therefore, might want to attend not only to meanings but also to usages – not only to what concepts meant but also to what authors did with them.¹⁵

Finally, continuity and discontinuity do not necessarily exclude each other. Even on the level of meaning, what seems like innovation – a new interpretation, a novel connotation – sometimes amounts to a recovery of earlier, half-forgotten layers of meaning. The opposite is true as well: while pretending to follow in the footsteps of their predecessors, authors often tweaked established terms to their own ends. To capture such dynamic interplays between the new and the old, the Introduction to this volume spoke about "repertoires" and "performances." While repertoires are shorthand for cultural "toolkits" (Ann Swidler) that provide people with instruments for saying or doing things in particular ways, performances denote the conventional or

15 Herman Paul, "The Highest Virtue of the Philologist, or: How to Do Things with Virtues and Vices," *History of Humanities* 10, no. 1 (2025): 163–187.

not-so-conventional uses that people make of these tools.¹⁶ Using these two concepts in tandem, without privileging either the repertoires or the performances, is a means for historians for capture the co-existence of continuity and discontinuity, or the enduring presence of the past in an ever-new present. Against this background, this volume is not only an exercise in long-term intellectual history but also an invitation to historians from across the discipline to examine how old repertoires enable people to do new things. This, we believe, is a key to understanding continuities-in-discontinuity of the sort that this volume has mapped for scholarly vice terms.

Another invitation is extended to historians with expertise on non-Western intellectual traditions. Despite its broad chronological scope, this book remains confined to a relatively narrow linguistic and cultural context: cases and examples from outside Western Europe and the United States are largely absent. While this limitation has facilitated the identification of continuities over time, it may simultaneously obscure global similarities and exchanges in the long-term history of scholarly vices. To uncover such additional continuities, or discontinuities, it is necessary to further examine historical vice discourses within non-Western cultures of knowledge. A particularly fruitful avenue for future research would involve comparing the findings of such studies with the results presented in this volume and exploring instances of exchange between vice discourses across the globe. For instance, to what extent were (variations in all European languages of) vice terms such as “prejudice” and “dogmatism” translated into African and Asian languages textual traditions? And which vice terms originated from within these traditions?¹⁷ Adopting such a global perspective on the long-term history of scholarly vices seems especially relevant in the current era of increasingly globalized academic knowledge. While this globalization may have fostered a convergence of vice terms across cultures, conflicting conceptions of scholarly virtue and vice may also have created tensions that hindered international intellectual cooperation.

These reflections bring us to a final theme: contemporary ways of thinking and writing about scholarly vices. The flourishing of the philosophical field of “vice epistemology” demonstrates that explicit reflection on scholarly vices has persisted, at least among philosophers.¹⁸ At the same time, the language

16 Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 2 (1986): 273–286.

17 A first attempt at a more global exploration in the historiography of scholarly virtues is made in: Herman Paul, *Historians’ Virtues: From Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

18 Ian James Kidd, Heather Battaly, and Quassim Cassam, eds., *Vice Epistemology* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

of scholarly vices also continues to surface in broader academic debates, for example in the slow scholarship movement. Advocates of this recent movement criticize the “corporate ethos of speed” that characterizes the neoliberal university and seek instead to cultivate an academic community grounded in virtues such as modesty, reflection, or indeed “slowness.”¹⁹ As we have aimed to show with this volume, these most recent chapters in the history of scholarly vices continue to draw upon and carry on a long-standing tradition.²⁰

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19 Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 11; Anne Pirrie, *Virtue and the Quiet Art of Scholarship: Reclaiming the University* (London: Routledge, 2018); Nicholas C. Burbules, “Slowness as a Virtue,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 54, no. 5 (2020): 1443–1452.

20 For more reflections on today’s discourses of scholarly vice and virtue, we refer to a series of columns written by practicing scholars and scientists, which we invited to write about 21st-century scholarly vices. Available via Herman Paul, “Scholarly Virtues and Vices in the 21st Century: Stories from the Field,” DANS Data Station Social Sciences and Humanities (2025), online at <https://doi.org/10.17026/SS/CHYXQV>.

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