

# Searching for masculine identity

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THE ROOTS OF IDENTITY CAN BE APPROACHED through many disciplines, and diverse theoretical frameworks. Psychology, sociology and philosophy all contain writings on 'identity' which is a construct now increasingly the focus of interdisciplinary social science research. This article draws especially on research and critical analysis from the newly emerging men's movement.

## *Feminism and the emergence of studies on men*

As a result of the women's movement focusing attention on attitudes about gender and behaviour, a few scholars have begun to examine men and masculinity more critically. 'Men's studies' has emerged as a name for the cross-disciplinary study of these issues. Men's studies has only just begun to have an impact on research and, so far, very little has been published on men *as men*. The reason for this, it seems, is that men's studies begin from a feminist platform and aim to implement feminist ideology and praxis.<sup>1</sup> The work of other authors and editors adds to this body of new theory and research.<sup>2</sup>

The dichotomies and contradictions of this approach become clear in Pfeil's introduction to his book *White guys*. Here he is preoccupied both with maintaining his feminist credentials and with presenting a postmodernist reading of his research, arguing in obscure language that men are not the single, monolithic construct of white straight masculinity that feminism presumes. He confesses that:

To the extent to which the most hegemonic forms of contemporary American feminism posit masculinity – including and especially white, straight masculinity – as a single, monolithic, absolute evil against which an interminable struggle for turf and power must be waged, such trivialised and market friendly forms seem not only to have abandoned the most revolutionary aspirations of feminism for the human species, but increasingly to be in thrall to market-based logics of commodification and reification to which the more revolutionary feminism that preceded them was – and remains – intransigently opposed.<sup>3</sup>

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This demonstrates clearly that while the focus of men's studies is the critiquing and analysing of men, their real purpose is to advance feminist ideology and praxis. The view being put forward in this article is that this approach is insufficient to do justice to an understanding of men.

### *Gender analysis and changes in men's lives*

Some authors prefer to study the role of men, fatherhood and family in contemporary society, clearly aware of and taking into account the writers of the men's movement and feminist ideology.<sup>4</sup> They interweave this knowledge with their own empirical studies on men, masculinity, work and family. They point to possible changes to and reorganization of men's lives, but they do so by showing the structural and systemic changes to work, family and masculine identity that need to take place in order for men to have real lives for themselves and with their families.

The study of gender, Rotundo suggests,<sup>5</sup> has been derided as a woman's obsession, an intellectual plaything of feminists that would drop from consideration if not for their political pressure. However, it must be acknowledged that many of our institutions have the needs and roles of men of the past built into their foundations; so many of our habits of thought were formed by male views at specific historical points that we must understand gender in order to understand our ideas and institutions.

The sexual stereotype documented by social scientists is that, unmistakably, men form the master class in the modern world. Men make the laws, control the economy, declare and fight wars. Australia has been a maledom since colonial times, in imitation of other western societies and, until feminists win their campaign, it will continue to be a maledom. Privilege and power belong disproportionately to those who happen to have a penis.<sup>6</sup>

Mastery confers power and privilege, but it also makes demands. A man must earn mastery, first struggling out of the weakness of boyhood into the strengths of manhood, then struggling to win his place in the world of power.<sup>7</sup>

### *Becoming a man*

Subjectively and objectively, manhood is not simply an evolution, but an achievement. As an achievement it can be done well or badly. To become a man is to locate one's energies between the

poles of success and failure, always flanked by these twin possibilities and always struggling. Even if (or perhaps especially if) a man succeeds greatly and earns his success as a master, he must strive to maintain it: 'The earning goes on relentlessly. Control entails self-control. Power entails will-power against weakness.'<sup>8</sup>

The struggle may be offensive or defensive, but either way, it pushes a man into the realm of doing and out of the realm of feeling. The rules of success in the world of work call for him to put aside or put down all sorts of feelings: timidity, spontaneity, playfulness, sympathy, generosity – any of these will impede him from achieving the goal of success.

Since the 1980s signs have begun emerging that something positive and new was about to happen in the lives of men. The change has come gradually because its proponents were not academics or TV personalities, but quiet thinkers and talkers. Robert Bly and Keith Thompson produced articles on the 'Liberation of men' which were passed among friends and reprinted in many publications. Bly's *Iron John* received a mixed response. Biddulph claims that some women bought multiple copies, while others were scathing about even the idea of positively valuing masculinity, fearing that encouraging men's self-esteem would bring back the worst chauvinism all over again.<sup>9</sup> The unspoken question, he suggests, was 'How dare men like themselves?' Today, thousands of men are engaging in the rituals and encounters of the men's movement, while many other men (and women) have read the key texts of the movement, Bly's *Iron John* and Sam Keen's *Fire in the belly*.

### *Social construction of genders*

Craig, in *Men, masculinity and the media*, points out that manhood has a history and has been shaped and reshaped by the human imagination. It is not a social edict determined from above and enforced by law. As a human invention, manhood is learned, used, reinforced and reshaped by individuals in the course of life. On the basis of biological differences, peoples in all places and times have invented elaborate stories about what it means to be male or female. Each culture constructs its own version of what men and women are and ought to be.

Social scientists distinguish between sex and gender. Sex refers to the biological dimorphic division of male and female, whereas gender refers to the cultural meanings that are attributed to those bio-

logical differences.<sup>10</sup> If gender is seen as being socially constructed, then the definitions of masculinity and femininity are the products of the interplay among a variety of social forces. Gender can also be understood to vary spatially (from one culture to another); and temporally (within any one culture over historical time). Different groups within any culture may also define masculinity and femininity differently, according to sub-cultural definitions, i.e. race, ethnicity, age, class and region of a country.<sup>11</sup>

From this perspective, it is more appropriate to speak of 'masculinities' and 'femininities' than to adhere to a single monolithic gender construct. However, there are some basic sex/gender-typing behaviours that men and boys never recover from. A boy learns to perform years before he learns what the performing is for; both parents teach boy babies to perform rather than cry, by picking up the male less frequently than the female infant when he cries. The result is that by thirteen months boys who have been picked up less are already more likely to 'tough it out' and refrain from crying.

Keen points out that preparations for the male ritual of work begin very early, even before the age of schooling. Very early on, he will be asked by well-meaning adults 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' Wanting to be a horse, Keen suggests, is not a suitable answer; they want to know what boys plan to do, what job, profession, occupation they have decided to follow. Boys are taught early that they are what they do.<sup>12</sup>

The games that make up what is called physical education and sport, such as football and basketball, are all mini-battles that teach boys to compete in the game of life. Pre-game pep talks parallel salesmen's meetings. For many boys, making the team provides the ritual form of combat that is central to male identity.<sup>20</sup>

### *Contents difficulties for men*

The reality, says Biddulph, is that men do not have a life – they have just learned to pretend; that a boy's spirit begins to shrink very early in life until he loses touch with it completely. By the time he becomes a man, he is confused and numb, with huge energies untapped – 'He feels there must be more, *but does not know what that more is*'.<sup>13</sup> So he pretends to be happy – to himself, his friends, his family. Sometimes there is a breakthrough: there is a taste of what life could be like, or he experiences moments of real passion and glory in being alive.

Too often, men's and boys' friendships and networks are awkward and oblique, lacking in intimacy and often short term. Boys and young men do not know the inner world of older men, so they each make up an 'image' based on the external behaviour, attempting to 'prove' being a man. (This is called self-initiation or peer group initiation by Bly.) This façade may take on the role of the 'sensitive New Age guy' or the 'John Wayne/tough guy' image, but either way, boys and young men are equally unhappy, clinging desperately on to the façade of 'I'm fine', but having disastrous consequences in their wider lives.

While the gender debate has raged for years, most participants have not woken up to the fact that 'men are not winners'; that very few men are happy; and that men and women are co-victims of a pattern of living that is in drastic need of revision. Simply blaming men does not change anything.

Statistics on men's health, happiness and survival show that the idea that it is a man's world is simply not true. It is argued that our whole way of life has become inadequate for men and so toxic to men's needs that every man is damaged, or, as Thoreau put it 'the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation'.<sup>14</sup>

Kimbrell has reported widespread conditions for men of poor physical and mental health, economic and social crises, and high rates of involvement in the criminal justice system. He notes the extent of untreated post-war trauma in men, extensive unemployment and, for those with jobs, the experience of conflict between the demands of their job and their desire for time with their families.<sup>15</sup> While Kimbrell clearly reflects statistics for the United States, similar statistics have been reported by Biddulph for Australia, and so it would seem a pertinent reflection for the western world.<sup>16</sup>

One statistic omitted by Kimbrell and cited by Biddulph is that 'One in seven boys will experience sexual assault by an adult or older child before the age of eighteen'. Added to this list, Corneau cites O'Neill who claims that:

During their childhood and adolescence, men are more likely [than women] to suffer from slow mental development, a short attention span due to 'hyperactivity', behavioural problems, 'hyperanxiety', schizoid difficulties, transient or chronic spasms, stuttering, functional enuresis and encopresis [involuntary urination and defecation], sleepwalking and nightmares, autism, as well as persistent and specific developmental problems such as dyslexia. As adults,

men make up a significant percentage of those who present personality disorders related to paranoia and compulsive or anti-social behaviour – men also far outnumber women in the frequency of transsexuality and sexual perversions.<sup>17</sup>

### *The challenge ahead*

Clearly, this challenges us to make sense of boys' and men's sex/gender-typing, socialization and social constructs. Many writers within the men's movement respond to this challenge from a masculinist perspective. Keen leads through this masculinist territory in *Fire in the belly*. One of the most striking aspects of this book, and others written from a similar perspective, is the complete lack of anger, revenge or vindictiveness towards or against women, contrasting starkly with some feminist writing. 'The literature of the men's movement seeks to address the inaccurate and sometimes prejudicial philosophies with an honest critique of the abuses of power.'<sup>18</sup>

Since men have held the great predominance of power as we know it for the last two centuries, it is inevitable that male domination is studied when studying recent gender history. Men often acted thoughtlessly, sometimes viciously and nearly always for their own advantage in dealing with women as a sex. So it is easy to study gender and portray men as faceless oppressors. But this does not help us to understand how gender operates as a cultural and political force, nor how to negotiate a viable future for all. Neither does it do justice to the varieties of male behaviour or the complexities of inner motive.

Rohr and Martos assert that living in a material world, with a physical body, and in a culture of affluence which rewards the outer self, it is both more difficult and more necessary for men to know their spiritual centre.<sup>19</sup>

### *Renewal of spirituality*

Male estrangement from spirituality in Western Christianity is an old and complicated phenomenon. It is based within the intricate web of historical factors encompassing psychology, sociology and economics. As men are largely responsible for this alienation from their natural religiosity, so it is they who must do the bulk of the hard work in reconciling this division.

The Church as an institution must also bear some of the responsibility because it has failed to understand men and to speak to them

in a language that they can comprehend. Except for isolated persons, few Christian ministers seem to have a sympathetic idea of 'what makes men tick', an empathy for their unique problems or any idea how to solve those problems. If men are to find a way spiritually, they will need help from mentors who have already blazed their own trails and learned the delights as well as the hazards of the road.<sup>20</sup>

Spirituality, then, 'is not about the esoteric and recondite secrets of an unattainable world, but the very real concerns which touch our deepest selves in our lives: identity, valuing; relationships with ourselves, others and God'.<sup>21</sup>

The movement of men toward spirituality is a revolutionary development overthrowing the legacy of several centuries of culturally indoctrinated hostility to spirituality begun by the Enlightenment, nurtured in the Industrial Revolution and brought to term by materialistic consumerism. These cultural movements have not *enthroned* men, as the critics of patriarchy would claim; rather they have evicted men – out of the house and out of themselves. 'Modernity has created generations of men who cannot really feel their own experiences, let alone articulate them.'<sup>22</sup>

Capitalism and consumerism have both shrunk men's emotional size and spiritual capacity. In the West, they have become merely utilitarian, programmed to create capital; while in the East, they are conditional to serve the state. Inevitably, there is triggered in men a corresponding hunger for something more, a desire for the transcendently great. As a power force, this hunger is not always well directed. In many areas it acts as fuel for the worldwide phenomenon of fundamentalism (found both in major religious traditions and in secular ideologies): a strongly male-oriented phenomenon that could be regarded as a form of spiritual disease.

Arnold says that 'While fundamentalism's fanaticism may be feared, its authoritarianism loathed or its simple mindedness disclaimed; its anguished claim that something (spiritual) has gone wrong with global culture cannot be easily dismissed'.<sup>23</sup>

The new men's spirituality is not another roadblock on the way to women's liberation – in some ways it is an outcome of it. The far-reaching changes that feminism creates necessarily demand corresponding spiritual work by men to free themselves from their own oppressiveness, numbness and unconsciousness.

### *A challenge for the Church*

Despite the extensive work on feminist spirituality recently, a major barrier to the development of a genuine men's spirituality is the still widespread unawareness in religious as well as cultural circles that one's gender is important in spiritual matters. Feminist writers have already shown convincingly how deeply relevant sexuality is to women's religiosity.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the most beneficial by-product of this exciting new work is the deepening of the realization that the human relationship to self, others and God is strongly affected by gender and sexuality.

But the implications of Platonism have also had insidious consequences for men in the Christian mystical tradition in a surprising and mostly unrecognized way. This explains the paradoxical fact that, while the Church's political structure is clearly patriarchal and male-oriented, its spirituality is both heavily directed toward females and is often quite alienating to men. So many men get a strong unconscious message that involvement with Christian spirituality requires a kind of emasculation – 'that Christian life is for men who are odd, asexual, nerds, very old and "out of gas"'.<sup>25</sup> With some guilt and regret, most men simply go their own way.

Though men are still attracted by the gravity and reality of God, they stay in a kind of 'high orbit' around a seemingly religious 'black hole'. That is generally where men are to be found today: on the fringes of involvement, in the back of the church, on the edges of faith. The paradox is that while patriarchal in its structure, Western Christianity is dominantly feminine in its heart and soul.

Men who work actively in the profane world of business or politics relate to the world of prayer and worship primarily through the saving feminine presence in their lives (wife/mother) or occasional contact with a real spiritual man, a priest or minister, or occasional visits to church.

This is the heritage of Christian Platonism: the unconscious impression that women are *naturally* religious while men, by virtue of hormonal, chemical or genetic defect or simply mean-spiritedness, are carnal, interested only in the material world and its benefits.

Applying the gospel lesson to the male-female antagonism, we have to conclude that men, the supposedly dominant group, are in as great or greater need of salvation when compared to women. They think they have power, but they are mostly powerless. They think they have freedom, but they are largely unliberated. They



think they are lords, defining reality, but in fact they are trapped – trapped by success, and performance.

According to the gospel, the fulfilment of humanity is not found in domination, but in partnership, not in power-wielding but in power-sharing. The message that liberation comes through the sharing of power has many implications for society, such as the need for community, co-operation and communication between otherwise opposed social groups, wealth-sharing between first and third worlds, resource-sharing between developed and underdeveloped countries, power-sharing between majority and minority ethnic groups.<sup>26</sup> The implications for personal spirituality are analogous to this.

### *Theological androgyny and its problems*

While recognizing that human beings are a complicated mix of masculine and feminine characteristics, and that purely 'masculine' men or 'feminine' women do not exist, this perspective urges that dominant masculinity and femininity in people be suppressed and that there be a balancing of both male and female psychological qualities. It is demanded that this proposed gender equilibrium be reflected in society's institutions, laws, customs and values. A scriptural basis is found in St Paul's 'There is no such thing as Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; you are all one person in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28).

Theological androgyny intends to stress the humanity and equality of all people before God and to undermine ecclesiastical structures and social roles that tend to oppress women and deny them full human rights. It promotes full ministerial equality between men and women; inclusive liturgical language, sex-neutral God-talk and the deconstruction of patriarchal authority. Its insistence that religious institutions accord full human rights and equal participation at every level of ministry and administration to both men and women would seem to be a matter of fundamental human justice. Its assertion that humans are composed of a complex mixture of male and female physical, emotional and psychic elements helps free people from simplistic notions that 'men are all alike' or that 'women are basically the same'; and that male and female legal rights, career interests, social and family roles and religious sensibilities should not be regarded as a function of genitalia or gender.

But to the extent that the androgynous programme is an attempt to impose a philosophical abstraction on the complicated paradox of human sexuality, it can only result in new oppressiveness at least as serious as that which it sets out to correct. That males and females should be regarded abstractly and treated fairly as generic 'humans' in regard to legal rights, job opportunities, wage scales and position in ministry is an obvious truth and an urgent goal. But to believe that except for superficial genitalia there does not or should no longer exist any natural emotional differences or distinctive psychological qualities is to ignore evidence from scientific investigation as well as to deny the most human instincts of the human heart.

To ignore or repress essential sexual, spiritual and psychological differences between men and women not only violates common sense and experience, but it sets the stage for more oppression in the name of abstraction, a hallmark of the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup>

The attempt to repress or obliterate sexual differences and produce the ideal androgynous person or society disguises a devastating attack on masculinity and males. In many ways, the whole phenomenon of masculinity is founded on its separation from the feminine world and is energized by its continual contrast to femininity. To eliminate sexual distinctiveness amounts to an unconscious attempt to suppress masculinity in practice and, to achieve its end, androgynous rhetoric invests heavily in mitigating male 'excesses' such as aggression and competitiveness in favour of more highly 'feminine' values, such as harmony and relationship.

### A '*distinctively male*' identity

For most males, their masculine energy thrives on the tension of sexual opposition and psychic distinctiveness. The ideological attempt to create androgynous equality between the sexes by eliminating all the relevant gender differences portends a spirituality of the lowest common denominator, an artificial ideal that values moderation, sameness and homogenization. Nelson, along with Bly and Keen, believes that there is something good, important *and distinctive* about the experience of maleness itself.<sup>28</sup> These authors believe there is a 'deep masculine' that men can find in themselves and justly celebrate.

Becoming a man, according to West, seems to be done through work, sport and a connection with older men, especially a father. Before the Second World War work was more important in defining

masculinity; fathers were strong role models as breadwinners and authority figures. Earlier generations saw an identification of masculinity with war, while younger contemporary men seem to feel inadequate in keeping up that image of strong masculinity. For many men today, work is still a way of defining themselves, so that men without work may feel a consequent lack of confidence. Many of the men in West's study, he notes, seem driven by their fear of not being masculine enough: 'It's a lot safer being labelled aggressive than being called a sissy or a poofter'.<sup>29</sup>

Keen notes that the easy part of thinking about men is to point out their disease, lament how far they have fallen from their former glory or announce that they need a new vision. 'We are much better at diagnosing pathology than reaching any commonly accepted definition of health.'<sup>30</sup> Keen goes on to ask where, other than our contemporaries (through opinion polls and surveys) and the pantheon of popular heroes, we might look for models of manhood. He suggests that in order to identify models of manhood, we must first recognize that we do commonly make moral judgements about men and the nature of manhood that go far beyond the biological facts of sex or the public opinion polls of the moment. And secondly, by looking towards 'exemplars' men realize that 'our self understanding as men is a richly layered thing made up of the portraits of those men who first brought light to some *elemental virtue* without which it is now impossible to understand ourselves'.<sup>31</sup> If this is the case, and if the changing ideals of manhood have always been shaped by historical challenges, then it could be assumed that modern manhood will also be defined by the problems and opportunities emerging today.

One of the tasks of a genuine masculine spirituality, and of developing a contemporary understanding of masculinity, is to confront male problems in a context that values and even celebrates masculinity and the graces it gives to the human spirit. A true spirituality for men will show they can come closer to God not by being less of a man, but by becoming more of a man.

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NOTES

- 1 See S. Craig (ed), *Men, masculinity and the media* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1992); W. Farrell, *The liberated man* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975); R. Lawlor, *Earth honouring: the new male sexuality* (Newtown, Australia: Millennium, 1989); F. Pfeil, *White guys* (London: Verso, 1995); K. Saunders and R. Evans (eds), *Gender relations in Australia* (Sydney: Harcourt Brace, 1992); B. Williams and G. Gardener, *Men, sex, power and survival* (Elwood: Greenhouse, 1989).
- 2 See H. Brod (ed), *The making of masculinities: the new men's studies* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987); M. Kimmel (ed), *Changing men: new directions in research on men and masculinity* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1987); E. Pleck and J. Pleck, *The American man* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1980).
- 3 Pfeil, *White guys*, p xiii.
- 4 See K. Gerson, *No man's land* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); R. Griswold, *Fatherhood in America: a history* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); J. Hood (ed), *Men, work and family* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1993); R. Miles, *Love, sex, death and the making of the male* (New York: Summit, 1991).
- 5 E. A. Rotundo, *American manhood* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).
- 6 See G. Greer, *The female eunuch* (London: Granada, 1971); A. Jaegar and P. Struhl, *Feminist frameworks* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978); Saunders and Evans (eds), *Gender relations in Australia*; S. Walker and L. Barton, *Gender class and education* (Falmer Press, 1983) and Williams and Gardener, *Men, sex, power and survival*.
- 7 See P. O'Connor, *The inner man* (Melbourne: Sun, 1993); A. Phillips, *The trouble with boys* (London: Basic Books, 1994); Rotundo, *American manhood*.
- 8 P. Filene, *Men in the middle* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1981), p 90.
- 9 S. Biddulph, *Manhood* (Sydney: Finch Publishing, 1994).
- 10 D. Hamachek, *Encounters with the self* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1978).
- 11 See Craig (ed), *Men, masculinity and the media*; B. A. Shelton and D. John, 'Ethnicity, race and difference: a comparison of white, black and Hispanic men's households' in Hood (ed), *Men, work and family*.
- 12 See S. Keen, *Fire in the belly*, (NY: Bantam Books, 1991); Farrell, *Why men are the way they are*; Filene, *Men in the middle*; Y. Ornstein, *From the hearts of men* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1991).
- 13 Biddulph, *Manhood*, p 2, emphasis in the original.
- 14 Biddulph, *Manhood*; G. Comeau, *Absent fathers - lost sons* (Boston: Shambhala, 1991); S. Farmer, *The wounded male* (New York: Ballantyne, 1991); Farrell, *Why men are the way they are*; Filene, *Men in the middle*; Gerson, *No man's land*; Keen, *Fire in the belly*.
- 15 A. Kimbrell, *The masculine mystique: the politics of masculinity* (New York: Ballantyne Press, 1995).
- 16 See Biddulph, *Manhood*.
- 17 Comeau, *Absent fathers - lost sons*, pp 1-2.

- 18 D. James, *What are they saying about masculine spirituality?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p 4.
- 19 R. Rohr and J. Martos, *The wild man's journey* (New York: St Anthony Messenger Press, 1992).
- 20 See P. Arnold, *Wildmen, warriors and kings: masculine spirituality and the Bible* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).
- 21 G. Gutiérrez, *A theology of liberation* (London: SCM Press, 1974).
- 22 Arnold, *Wildmen, warriors and kings*, p 14.
- 23 Arnold, *Wildmen, warriors and kings*, p 15.
- 24 See M. Confoy, 'The procrustean bed of women's spirituality: reclaiming women's sexuality as an integral aspect of Christian spirituality' in *Pacifica* vol 10, no 2 (June 1997).
- 25 Arnold, *Wildmen, warriors and kings*, p 19.
- 26 See Gutiérrez, *A theology of liberation; We drink from our own wells* (Melbourne: Dove Communications, 1984); Segundo, *Faith and ideologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1982); J. Sobrino, *Christ at the crossroads* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1978).
- 27 See A. Giddens, *Modernity and self identity: self and society in the late modern age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).
- 28 J. Nelson, *The intimate connection: male sexuality and masculine spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988).
- 29 West, *Fathers, sons and lovers* (Sydney: Finch, 1996), p 176.
- 30 Keen, *Fire in the belly*, p 83.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p 84.