ARTICLES

"Dust Clouds of Camels Shall Cover You": Covenant and the Archival Endeavor

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Abstract

Archivists engage in a series of relationships with donors, users, colleagues, and others characterized by respect, reciprocity, obligation, and trust. This article argues that these relationships are covenantal in nature. While they inform the creation of professional associations and allow archivists to promote mutually defined ends, covenant is particularly powerful in the realm of interpersonal relations. There is no formal archival covenant; nevertheless, archivists can forge covenant by internalizing concepts that are integral to it: genuine encounter, sacred obligation, and piety of service. Employing these concepts, archivists situate themselves to act morally, ethically, and justly in pursuit of the archival endeavor.

Early in the action film *The Bourne Identity*, the heroine and soon to be love interest, Marie Helene Kreutz, faces the dilemma of either surrendering to the authorities to save herself or continuing to flee with Jason Bourne from both the police and rogue CIA assassins. As the Paris gendarmes converge on their parked car, Bourne offers Kreutz a last chance to avoid becoming a fugitive. She replies by silently pulling her safety belt across her shoulder and inserting the clasp in the buckle, thus signifying that she has coupled her fate with Bourne.[1] A pact of loyalty and devotion is formed. A heroine antecedent who makes a similar pact is the biblical Ruth. The recently widowed Ruth emotionally casts

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[1] *The Bourne Identity*, directed by Doug Liman, produced by Doug Liman, Patrick Crawley, and Richard N. Gladstein, distributed by Universal Studios, 2002.

her lot with her mother-in-law, Naomi, through the poetic phrases, "wherever you go, I will go, wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."[2] Although Ruth encounters no mayhem or brainwashed killers and Kreutz's journey poses no theological implications, at some level, they performed the same act. Kreutz fastening the seatbelt, although eminently practical in the face of the ensuing high-speed chase, is a symbolic gesture signifying fidelity to a mutual cause; Ruth publicly declaring her devotion to Naomi enters a relationship of moral commitment. The actions of Marie Kreutz and Ruth are common ceremonial or ritual manifestations of covenant.

The expression of covenant is as old as the human ability to form relationships. Perhaps the simplest definition of covenant is "a pact . . . of mutual obligation."[3] Although accurate in its way, this definition approaches neither the complexity of the concept nor the intensity of its binding nature. In modern contexts, *covenant* has been likened to *contract*; but there is a critical difference between the two—the difference between a transaction and a relationship. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks makes the simple, but elegant distinction: " . . . a contract is about interests. A covenant is about identity. It is about you and me coming together to form an 'us.' That is why contracts benefit, but covenants transform."[4] While contracts are concrete agreements of limited duration, covenants are enduring relationships of infinite aspirations and obligations.[5] In Rabbi Sacks's formulation, the language of covenant includes words such as *dignity*, *integrity*, *trust*, *love*, *faithfulness*, *cooperation*, *morality*, and a host of other psychologically pleasing and affirming terms that describe a coming together of partners to achieve and to share.

[2] Ruth 1:16. This translation is from *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985), 1420.

[3] Louis Jacobs, "Covenant," *The Jewish Religion: A Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 103–4.

[4] Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, "Exposition of the Hebrew Scriptures: The Relationship between the People and God—the Covenant" (address, Lambeth Conference, 28 July 2008), http://ocrweb.trci.com/ReadArtical.aspx?id=1097, accessed 24 December 2008. While this is the basic position I take in discussing covenant, it should be noted that covenant has had negative applications both in legal and political settings. Prior to the passage of fair housing laws in the United States, it was common for urban neighborhoods to impose *restrictive covenants* that excluded minorities from owning property. Examples of restrictive covenants in the Seattle, Washington, area can be viewed on the Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project, "Racial Restrictive Covenants," http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/covenants.htm, accessed 1 May 2011. According to some scholars, the Afrikaner Covenant, declared before the battle of Blood River in 1838, was the basis of Afrikaner nationalism and thus the root of apartheid. See for instance, Bruce Cauthen, "The Myth of Divine Election and Afrikaner Ethnogenesis," in *Myths and Nationhood*, ed. Geoffrey Hosking and George Schopflin (London: Taylor and Francis, Inc., 1997), 107–31.

[5] Shai Held, "Core Issues in Theology: On Walking in God's Ways and the Path of Lovingkindness" (lecture at Mechon Hadar, New York City, 12 May 2010). Video and podcast available at http://www.mechonhadar.org/web/guest/online-learning/Mahshavah, accessed 1 May 2011. Held argues that individuals can relate to one another in an infinite number of ways and thus have infinite aspirations for the relationship.

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This article argues that *covenant* is a foundational idea in archives, framed in personal and professional values and ideals. It informs individual and collective responsibility and obligation in our work. The following section offers a more detailed definition of covenant from the arena of political theory and illustrates its application in the formation of professional archival associations. The primary focus of the article, however, is the very personal nature of covenant in the lives and work of individual archivists and the exploration of three concepts that are central to *archival covenant* and implicit in the archival endeavor—*genuine encounter*, *sacred obligation*, and *piety of service*.[6]

Defining Covenant

Rabbi Sacks expresses a lyrical contour of covenant, but a more fully formed definition is required to shape the concept for our purposes. What, then, do we mean when we talk about covenant? Since ancient times, covenants have fashioned important religious, political, and social constructs such as treaties between sovereigns and compacts between peoples and their gods. The oldest known formal covenants are the Hittite vassal treaties in which inferior rulers of independent tribes or small kingdoms pledge fealty to a superior king who in response promises to protect the vassals.[7] In Western traditions, the most common definitions of covenant extend from theology, especially, but not solely, from the Hebrew scriptures, and entail a people's adherence to divine law and a deity's promise of protection. Whether political or theological in nature, covenant in its earliest manifestations was an agreement between unequal parties that entailed obligation, not special privilege.

As the idea of covenant evolved, it also assumed the egalitarian character of a compact between equal partners who forge a relationship to achieve shared goals. These might be treaties between entities of equal status or personal bonds between individuals. In all cases, a covenant defines the relationship between the parties and lends that relationship an enduring quality and sense of commitment and obligation. Political philosophers and theorists such as John

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[6] I don't claim that these are the sole concepts in formation of covenant, but I do believe they are essential, powerful determinants of individual or personal covenant psychology.

[7] Daniel J. Elazar, *Covenant and Polity in Biblical Israel: Biblical Foundations and Jewish Expressions,* vol. 1 of *The Covenant Tradition in Politics* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1995), 1–19; David L. Lieber, "The Covenant and the Election of Israel," in *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 1416–19; Trevor Bryce, "The 'Eternal Treaty' from the Hittite Perspective," *BMSAES* 6 (2006): 1–11, http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/bmsaes/issue6/bryce.html, accessed 9 June 2011.

Locke and Thomas Hobbes would later articulate covenant as a central theme in their conceptions of state building.[8]

Political scientist Daniel Elazar, the most prolific exponent of covenant as political theory, argues that it is a core idea in the development of the modern liberal republican state. He makes the case that covenant prefigures the formation of modern constitutionalism, particularly with its emphasis on the voluntary limitations of power accepted by all participants. He calls these limitations "willed concessions." He argues that covenant is

> a morally informed agreement or pact based upon voluntary consent, established by mutual oath or promises, involving or witnessed by some transcendent higher authority, between peoples or parties having independent status, equal in connection with the purposes of the pact, that provides for joint action or obligation to achieve defined ends (limited or comprehensive) under conditions of mutual respect, which protect the individual integrities of all the parties to it.

Covenant binds people together in relationships that allow the individual to remain and live freely, but correspondingly fosters mutual respect and natural duty to community, polity, and civil society.[9] While Elazar draws this definition largely from a biblical context, he articulates the substance of almost all forms of covenant from the Hittites to modern republican constitutionalism to the sacred bonds between close friends and lovers.[10] Elazar's definition productively

[8] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, part 2 of *Common-Wealth* (New York: Macmillan, 1962; originally published in 1651), see especially chapter 18, "Of the Rights of Soveraignes by Institution"; John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1956; originally published in 1689). Covenant, then, is an ideal of the Enlightenment philosophes who advocated for the rule of law, constraint on arbitrary exercise of power, fostering accountability by governing authorities, the extension of individual freedom, reciprocity under the law, and a commitment to reform experimentation. As Stephen Eric Bronner argues, "Enlightenment universalism . . . presumes to render institutions accountable, a fundamental principle of democracy, and thereby create the preconditions for expanding individual freedom." *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Toward a Politics of Radical Engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 1–16. The quotation is on page 9.

[9] Elazar, *Covenant and Polity,* 1–29. The quotation is on pages 22–23. For Elazar's extensive exploration of covenant in political theory, see also *Covenant and Civil Society: The Constitutional Matrix of Modern Democracy*, vol. 2 of *The Covenant Tradition in Politics*; *Covenant and Constitutionalism: The Great Frontier and the Matrix of Federal Democracy*, vol. 3 of *The Covenant Tradition in Politics*; Elazar and John Kincaid, eds., *The Covenant Connection: From Federal Theology to Modern Federalism* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2000).

[10] Elazar, *Covenant and Polity*, 1–19; Lieber, "Covenant and Election," 1416–17; Bryce, "The 'Eternal Treaty,'" 1–11; and David Hartman, *A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 4. See also Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) and William L. Holladay, *Long Ago God Spoke: How Christians May Hear the Old Testament Today* (Minneapolis: Augsberg Fortress, 1995). Gottwald and Holladay contain brief passages regarding ancient vassal treaties and their influence on biblical texts regarding covenant. The covenant idea is also prevalent in the American liberal political tradition as seen in many of the founding documents of the republic. Diane Ravitch, ed., *The American Reader: Words that Moved a Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990) includes a sampling of these: the Mayflower Compact, the Declaration of Independence, and A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia are examples.

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aligns covenant with what I believe is an archival ethos built on relationships of moral commitment and obligation.

Associational Covenant

The language and actions around the formation of the Society of American Archivists in 1936 were, perhaps, not as exciting as high-speed car chases and less poetic than the Book of Ruth, nevertheless we can distinguish elements of covenant in its founding. SAA's Constitution affirms that archivists have come together "to promote sound principles of archival economy and to facilitate cooperation among archivists and archival agencies."[11] This organizing language signifies voluntary relationship formation by otherwise autonomous beings to achieve an overriding goal, to form an "us," to create a means for accomplishing ends; it is fully conversant with Elazar's formulation of covenant theory. One year later, in the Society's first presidential address, Albert Newsome concluded: "A hospitable Providence [Rhode Island] was the place of the Society's birth. May a kindly Providence bless and immortalize its career."[12] This appeal to a higher power is a common feature of covenant ratification. More important than Newsome's invocation of the divine, SAA's creation was a voluntary compact of individuals to form a whole forged by mutual interest and for achieving agreed-upon goals. In the past seventy-five years, we have witnessed this repeated again and again in the formation of regional and local associations, affinity groups, consortia, and other professional alliances.

Covenant, as a republican ideal, is a political mechanism for coalescing individuals in pursuit of agreed-upon ends. Associational covenant is vital in forming a unity that can exert influence and power on behalf of the archival record, advocate for the profession, organize disparate institutions and professionals in a universal service, and collectively support the "greater good" by sustaining the construction of social memory, fostering accountability, and bolstering cultural stability. These structured connections bring us into contact with others who share the same professional values and common ethical perspectives. The creation of educational offerings, the development of standards, and the issuing of position statements are all products of professionals uniting to achieve collective goals endemic to the covenant relationship.

However, the power of archival covenant reaches well beyond the weaving of the professional fabric of archival mission, collegiality, and association building. It is when the individual archivist internalizes a covenant psychology and extends it to interpersonal relationships that covenant truly becomes

[11] J. Frank Cook, "The Blessing of Providence on an Association of Archivists," *The American Archivist* 46 (Fall 1983): 376.

[12] Cook, "The Blessing of Providence," 399.

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transformative. The balance of this article will explore covenant on the personal, human level and its impact on our daily work lives.

Commonality and Moral Commitment

The fact that archivists seem to have a penchant for forming associations and affinity groups suggests the existence of some essential commonality among members of the profession.[13] Despite working in varied settings under disparate influences, archivists share exemplars that support broad assertions about archival commonality. Archivists in multifarious environments share a common concern for the documentation of society (or, at the very least, their slice of it), the preservation of the historical record, providing access to records in their care, and fostering accountability based on preserved evidence. The archival perspective and what I elsewhere have called *archival being* exist on the most fundamental level and shape a common view of the broad strokes of the archival endeavor.[14] The ethic of preservation and access is a determinant of a strong service orientation, whether focused on a broadly defined public or merely within a narrow corporate structure, forming the heart of an archival culture that leavens our professional relationships. The archival service ethic is the basis for an archival commonality expressed most clearly through the idea of archival covenant.

Covenant is firmly rooted in the locus of moral philosophy, ethics, and personal and professional values. James O'Toole, in visualizing theology and faith as a theoretical basis for archives, raises a series of questions that interrogate the moral, ethical, and social justice dimensions of our work. He asks:

[13] I use the term *essential commonality* to both express the opinion that there is some essential nature to archives and to avoid using the unpopular philosophical notion of *essentialism*, which is generally discredited among modern thinkers. For example, Stephan Fuchs argues that essentialism is a binary, black or white theory: "Operationally, essentialism is the failure to allow for variation. Where nothing is allowed to vary, nothing can be explained. . . . Allowing for variation means dissolving natural kinds and their essential properties into relationships and forces." Stephan Fuchs, *Against Essentialism: A Theory of Culture and Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 15.

[14] See for example, James M. O'Toole, "The Archivist's Perspective: The History of an Idea," in *Controlling the Past: Documenting Society and Institutions: Essays in Honor of Helen Willa Samuels*, ed. Terry Cook (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011), 329–44; James M. O'Toole and Richard J. Cox, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2006); Scott Cline, "'To the Limit of Our Integrity': Reflections on Archival Being," *The American Archivist* 72 (Fall/Winter 2009): 331–43. *Exemplification* is a useful concept for thinking about commonality. Dolf Zillmann and Hans-Bernd Brosius, *Exemplification in Communication: The Influence of Case Reports on the Perception of Issues* (Hillside, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000), argue: "It is important . . . then, to distinguish a set of features for which interexemplar similarity is required from a set of features that are free to vary. The latter features are immaterial in considering a particular instance of an exemplar . . . ." Simply stated, twenty male New Yorkers, all aged thirty-two and members of the Democratic Party may have many dissimilarities, but they share at least four exemplars and thus a certain commonality. The Zillmann and Brosius quotation is on page 2.

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> If I accept the philosophical and symbolic understandings of faith, how am I supposed to act, particularly in those areas of life that are seemingly far removed from transcendent concerns and are rooted instead in the messy business of life? What ethical standards ought I apply in my personal, family, community, economic, and political life? Which actions are right and which are wrong? What is moral and ethical behaviour in archives? In managing archival collections, do we pursue self-interest only or is there some larger community (public, professional, other) whose legitimate needs ought to affect our behaviour? How, for example, do we develop the moral sense of archivists?[15]

Although the purpose of his article is to formulate a moral theology of long-term historical accountability, he raises broader concerns. O'Toole's questions contemplate principled personal and professional relationships and ideals of conduct in human affairs.

Covering similar ground, Hugh Taylor assumes an even more expansive approach to incorporating moral authority in archival thinking and practice, calling for a return to a lost spirituality. He suggests that in imagining responses to our rapidly changing information ecology as well as achieving an honest understanding of diverse cultures, "the use of pure mind will not be enough without a spiritual awareness which stems from the ground of our being . . . ."[16] Taylor argues that the adequate documentation of our world necessitates a spiritual connectedness in our relationships to each other, society, other living systems, the planet, and the multiplicity of records and record forms we encounter.[17] Without stating it explicitly, Taylor and O'Toole surface the covenant idea and challenge us to reflect deeply on the spirit and substance of our encounters with others.

Genuine Encounter

Archival work is a series of direct and indirect existential encounters—with creators, donors, users, and colleagues; with the materials we manage and the tools we use; with the policies, procedures, and standards we employ; and with

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[15] James M. O'Toole, "Archives and Historical Accountability: Toward a Moral Theology of Archives," *Archivaria* 58 (Fall 2004): 1–19. The questions I have included here appear in various places throughout O'Toole's essay and have been collapsed into one quotation for ease of presentation.

[16] Hugh A. Taylor, "The Archivist, the Letter, and the Spirit," in *Imagining Archives: Essays and Reflections by Hugh A. Taylor*, ed. Terry Cook and Gordon Dodds (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 229.

[17] More than any other archival thinker, Taylor engages the spiritual aspects of archival work in his writing. "The Archivist, the Letter, and the Spirit" is the clearest example, but several other essays in *Imagining Archives* address or allude to spirituality, faith, and religion. See especially, "The Totemic Universe: Appraising the Documentary Future" and "Recycling the Past: The Archivist in the Age of Ecology." Terry Cook, in his *Imagining Archives* introductory essay about Taylor, presents his own argument that archives represent "a hopeful symbol of our spirituality as human beings—a means for transcending this mortal sphere. Archives touch our souls." The quotation is on page 19.

the past, present, and future. At the associational level, SAA has adopted a series of statements and positions that fashion the moral parameters of engagement and suggest aspirations for belief and behavior. Among these, the *Code of Ethics for Archivists*, the SAA Statement on Diversity, and Core Values of Archivists[18] are all covenantal declarations calculated to strengthen the bonds of relationship and obligation. They are tools archivists can internalize and employ in shaping the intention they bring to all archival encounters. The relative success of that process determines whether those encounters ascend the heights of covenant.

At the interpersonal level, covenant develops from encounters of mutual respect, response, and reciprocity—what can be called radical engagement, but more appropriately might be termed *genuine encounter*.[19] Martin Buber taught "that no encounter with a being or a thing in the course of our life lacks a hidden significance." This includes the "people we live with or meet with, the animals that help us with our farm work, the soil we till, the materials we shape, the tools we use. . . . "[20] Thus, every encounter has a potential immanent importance that we can sanction by our ability to make it genuine.

Buber communicates a model of genuine encounter articulated in his short work, *I and Thou*. He argues that there are two approaches for connecting with the world: through experience, which he calls the I-It interaction, and through encounter, the I-You. In the former, we engage a being or thing as an object (an "It") to be used or analyzed for our own benefit—for instance, viewing a researcher only as an addition to our user statistics or a donor as a notch on our acquisition belt. In the I-It experience, we are observers, apart from the person or object, separated by concern for ourselves alone. If our donor relation work focuses only on capturing a prized collection and does not recognize the "You" inherent in the donor, then we exist in the realm of experience and diminish a human being. In the I-You relationship, we become fully present and encounter occurs with our undivided consciousness. We encounter the entire

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[18] These statements, and others, can be viewed on the Society of American Archivists website at http://www.archivists.org.

[19] The term *genuine encounter* is adapted from Eugene Borowitz, *Renewing the Covenant* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991). Borowitz analyzes covenantal relationship through a postmodern analysis of the philosophies of Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and Abraham Joshua Heschel. Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment*, uses the terms *radical engagement* and *reciprocity* in a broader political sense: "Reciprocity . . . underpins the liberal idea of the citizen with its inherently democratic imperative—against all prejudice—to include the other." The quotation is on page 9. Conversely, William F. May, "Code, Covenant, Contract, or Philanthropy," in *Cross-Cultural Perspectives in Medical Ethics*, ed. Robert M. Veatch, 2nd ed. (Sudbury, Ma.: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 2000), 116–34, places the notion of reciprocity squarely in the personal and professional manifestation of covenant.

[20] Martin Buber, "The Way of Man According to the Teachings of Hasidism," in *Religion from Tolstoy to Camus*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 425–41. The quotation is on page 439.

essence of the other being—the "You"—as if it is the whole universe.[21] When genuine encounter occurs, both the "I" and the "You" are transformed by what Buber calls the "event of relation." The donor, then, is treated, in Immanuel Kant's words, "as an end also and never only as a means."[22]

Nowhere in archival literature is this expressed so well as in Linda Long's moving discussion of the death of her friend and donor Tee Corinne. What can only be defined as a covenant of love developed between the two; Long describes a relationship of reciprocity and trust. "In a combined professional relationship and friendship, we were able to develop trust in each other," Long recalls and then notes, "the experience taught me that the archivist is the keeper of someone's life. . . ."[23] This is not to suggest that donor relations should evolve to the interpersonal level that Long experienced. While friendships of enduring quality are not uncommon between archivists and donors or users, Long's experience is not the norm. Nevertheless, encountering another in an I-You relationship can lead only to mutual respect and response, which ultimately engenders trust.

Living only in the realm of experience precludes meaningful participation in the world, it entails living in a shroud of exclusive self-interest. At worst, it focuses one on the self and can lead to hyper-individualism, self-gratification, and the development of what theologian Eugene Borowitz calls "the sanctity of personal choice," which ultimately privileges "flabby ethics." It is in the construction of personal relationship, which requires positioning the self in the context of others, that we accept obligation without sacrificing selfhood and autonomy. This is the sociality of the self, the placement of the autonomous self squarely in the context of social responsibility and living in reciprocal respect.[24]

Archivists are purveyors of context; we endeavor to discern and disclose the continual making and remaking of the record. In doing so, we overlay our own biases and beliefs, which are shaped by our surroundings and experiences, by our own personal contexts. Verne Harris maintains that the only ethical response

[21] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Simon and Schuster, Touchstone Edition, 1996, originally published in 1923 as *Ich und Du*). See especially part 1. Buber expresses this idea in a slightly different manner in the following passage: "When we walk our way and encounter a man who comes toward us, walking his way, we know our way only and not his; for his comes to life for us only in the encounter." Buber, *I and Thou*, 124.

[22] The event of relation passage is found in Buber, *I and Thou*, 84; Kant's formulation is found in Walter Kaufmann, "I and You: A Prologue," in Buber, *I and Thou*, 16.

[23] Linda Long, "Experience with a Dying Donor: The Case of Tee Corinne." This essay is the second half of a larger piece—Geoff Wexler and Linda Long, "Lifetimes and Legacies: Mortality, Immortality, and the Needs of Aging and Dying Donors," *The American Archivist* 72 (Fall/Winter 2009): 478–95. The quotations are on pages 488 and 489.

[24] Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 287–92; Borowitz, *Renewing the Covenant*, 221–23, 254, 286; Robert Bellah and Phillip E. Hammond made much the same argument in concluding "Exclusive concern for self-interest is the very definition of the corruption of republican virtue." See Bellah and Hammond, "Religion and the Legitimation of the American Republic," *Society* 15 (1978): 16–23.

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to personal experiences and surroundings is the Derridean concept of hospitality—by which he means respecting *the other*, welcoming the stranger, and embracing what is beyond the limits of our cognitive grasp. And, he argues, ethics is hospitality.[25] Similarly, relating in the I-You intimacy articulates archival contextualization on an interpersonal and ethical plane. Understanding your own context[26] is developing your strong and authentic "I"; understanding the context of another is recognizing the authentic "You." Understanding and engaging both at once is *genuine encounter*.

Sacred Obligation

Two decades ago, David Gracy penned the unstartling, but important, observation that "use is the purpose for which archives are kept." He thus answers the question: what is our first obligation?[27] The core functions of appraisal and selection, arrangement and description, and preservation are performed to meet that first obligation—providing access to records. But I suggest reframing the question as "who is our first obligation?" The context in which the question is asked—whether in the research room, a classroom, the budget office, a donor's home, at the processing table—may produce different answers (some perhaps fraught with serious professional implications); nevertheless those answers should always evoke encounter and relationship. Relationship is the key to authentic covenant and, ultimately, covenant is a relationship of moral responsibility. Kant calls this the categorical imperative;

[25] See Verne Harris, "Ethics and the Archive: An Incessant Movement of Recontextualisation," in *Controlling the Past,* ed. Terry Cook, 345–62. He uses the phrase about the archivist, "She is a purveyor of context," on page 346. For more of Harris's discussion of hospitality, see *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007), especially 4–6, 76–77. The concept appears in several other essays in the book. Another useful construct is found in Brien Brothman's discussion of archives as a "gift." He reviews the concepts of *gift* and *giving* in social theory and then argues that archives represent a gift between generations, thus opening the potentially fertile issue of archival covenant with the dead and the unborn. See Brien Brothman, "Perfect Present, Perfect Gift: Finding a Place for Archival Consciousness in Social Theory," *Archival Science* 10 (June 2010): 141–89.

[26] This can be achieved through radical self-understanding. For more on this concept in the archival setting, see Cline, "To the Limit of Our Integrity." My understanding of radical self-understanding derives from Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1987) and the work of Edmund Husserl as interpreted in David Carr, *Interpreting Husserl: Critical and Comparative Studies* (New York: Springer, 1987).

[27] David B. Gracy, "Archivists, You Are What People Think You Keep," *The American Archivist* 52 (Winter 1989): 74. Appraisal has also been identified as the archivist's first responsibility upon which all subsequent work depends. See Richard J. Cox and Helen W. Samuels, "The Archivist's First Responsibility: A Research Agenda to Improve the Identification and Retention of Records of Enduring Value," *The American Archivist* 51 (Winter/Spring 1988): 28–42. This apparent dichotomy may seem problematic. The core archival functions are of a piece; together they form a whole in which each function relates to and in some way informs the others. My intent is not to imbue one function with an essential primacy, as they are all critical elements of the archival whole. My point, perhaps born of years in government service, is that access/use maintains the distinction of first among equals.

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I suggest that for archivists this is sacred obligation.[28] We can draw lessons from the language of obligation in the 1995 patient-physician covenant, which should resonate with archivists. It states:

> Medicine is, at its center, a moral enterprise grounded in a covenant of trust. This covenant obliges physicians to be competent and to use their competence in the patient's best interests. Physicians, therefore, are both intellectually and morally obliged to act as advocates for the sick wherever their welfare is threatened. . . .[29]

The covenant, drafted in response to increasing depersonalization in medical care, argues that medical professionals constitute a moral community whose practitioners cannot meet these obligations effectively without the "virtues of humility, honesty, intellectual integrity, compassion, and effacement of excessive self-interest."[30]

Christine Cassel, an author of the covenant, asserts that there is a "sacred responsibility of physician to patient" that unambiguously obligates physicians to serve those who seek medical assistance, to sublimate self-interest before the welfare of the patient, to be accountable to the broader public, to contribute to the welfare of humankind, and to represent moral and ethical values to society. She concludes that the physician's role "can and ultimately does have spiritual dimensions."[31]

I can easily imagine reading "archivist" in place of "physician" in Cassel's essay. I believe archives is "a moral enterprise," that the community of archivists is implicitly shaped by a covenantal ethics that is responsive in character, that there is a spiritual element in our work, and that archival covenant incurs prerogative through the notion of sacred obligation.[32]

The idea of sacred obligation, if not expressed in that language, still rests at the heart of archival interactions. Certainly the notions of trust and reciprocity of need are integral to the idea of a responsive covenantal ethics and responsible encounter. Mary Jo Pugh gives play to these very ideas when discussing the human dimension of reference work and the necessity for understanding

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[28] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) and *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797). I don't use the term "sacred" necessarily in its theological or religious sense, but rather have combined elements of definitions from *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* to suggest the following: "devoted exclusively to one service or use; entitled to reverence and respect; highly valued and important."

[29] Christine K. Cassel, MD, "The Patient-Physician Covenant: An Affirmation of Asklepios," *Annals of Internal Medicine* 124 (15 March 1996): 604–6. The quotation is on page 604.

[30] Cassel, "The Patient-Physician Covenant," 604.

[31] Cassel, "The Patient-Physician Covenant," 606. I believe the authors of the covenant were talking about genuine encounter with patients.

[32] This assertion recognizes the common responsibilities of responsiveness and obligation shared by physicians and archivists for their respective "others." It is not meant to equate technical areas of practice between the professions. The existential stakes are obviously much higher in medical relationships.

individual needs. "Sensitivity, clarity, and a genuine spirit of public service are needed to ensure successful interpersonal relationships in archival reference work."[33] Pugh's sensibilities converge at the borders of genuine encounter and sacred obligation, even if her language does not precisely cross over.

A significant characteristic of the patient-physician covenant is the recognition that the relationship generally is between parties of unequal power. The patient seeking care is confronted by the power of the physician with expert knowledge and skill. The patient must trust that that power will be used for his or her benefit.[34] Archivists, too, exert power when we conduct appraisals, describe records, and provide access—we are controlling available evidence and memory, and thus, to a certain extent, what knowledge can be created.[35] Interpersonal covenant based in reciprocity of need and responsiveness requires cognizance of the dangers in unequal power. Mitigating this danger is possible by maintaining an unyielding awareness of sacred obligation in all we do, an essential element for inspiring trust.

Piety of Service

The construction of interpersonal archival meaning is accomplished through recognition of the other in a genuine relationship, placing one's self within the context of responsible sociality, and recognizing our moral obligations as individuals and professionals. Integrating these interhuman and cognitive lessons and stepping beyond the self to appreciate the needs of the other, we actively display fidelity to natural duty and responsibility. The authors of the patient-physician covenant adjure that sacred obligation articulates ethical duty. Similarly, for Buber the responsibility to engage others in relationship—in genuine encounter—is the paradigm for duty. If archivists integrate these notions of genuine encounter and sacred obligation and infuse

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[33] Mary Jo Pugh, *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), 27–28, 111–30. The quotation is on page 28. Wendy Duff makes a similar point: "Putting users at ease and setting the tone help build a relationship." Quotation is on page 120 of Wendy Duff, "Archival Mediation," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 115–36.

[34] May, "Code, Covenant, Contract, or Philanthropy," 116–34. May points to the need for covenant on the parts of both physician and patient despite their inherently unequal power positions: "A covenantal ethics helps acknowledge this full context of need and indebtedness in which professional duties are undertaken and discharged. It also relieves the professional of the temptation and pressure to pretend that he is a demigod exempt from human exigency." The quotation in on page 124.

[35] On archival power, see especially Randall C. Jimerson, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009); Harris, *Archives and Justice*; Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power," *Archival Science* 2, nos. 1–2, 3–4; and many of the essays in Francis X. Blouin, Jr. and William G. Rosenberg, eds., *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

them in our professional activities, then we cast archival duty as commitment to *piety of service*.[36]

Piety, as applied here, is derived from seventeenth-century philosophers Baruch Spinoza and Gottfried Leibniz. Spinoza associates piety with love and knowledge, arguing that it motivates one to perform acts of justice; Leibniz contends that piety is the highest grade of justice and that being pious means living one's life honorably.[37] Both Spinoza and Leibniz attach special warrant to the virtue of justice. Justice, then, correlates to *piety of service* and forms a critical expression in the vocabulary of covenant. This raises at least two questions for our consideration. First, is justice truly an archival concern? My answer is an emphatic yes. Indeed, justice *is* the archival concern. And this leads to the second question: in the archival context, what do we mean by the term *justice*?

Generally, when we talk of justice, we mean two things—conformity to the law and the extension of equity. The former concerns legal questions—justice as fact; the latter concerns virtue—justice as morality. While justice, in its fullest sense, depends on both the legal and the moral, as it relates to archival piety of service, it communicates moral duty. French philosopher Andre Comte-Sponville maintains, "We must do our duty, . . . but never at the expense of justice or in opposition to it . . . . In fact, how could we ever simultaneously be dutiful and unjust, since duty presupposes justice—indeed duty is justice itself, in the form of requirement and obligation."[38] Archival duty, then, assumes justice is a job requirement. I recognize that for many of us this may require re-imagining justice in the archives.

Most archival discourse on justice concerns accountability, governmental transparency, individual and group rights, giving voice to the marginalized, and reconciliation. Some authors locate justice squarely in a political-archival

[36] The term *service* is defined in a broad sense to encompass all the acts of serving that form the archival occupation and its functions. It includes the concept of contributing to the welfare of others as well as the many acts of serving the past, present, and future, and the records and materials in our care. In this construction, service assumes duty and obligation. The phrase "piety of service" is adapted from Borowitz, *Renewing the Covenant,* who argues that for non-Orthodox Judaism the idea of covenant conjures notions of Jewish duty and a commitment to what he calls an "actional piety of mitzvah." See page 207.

[37] Baruch Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise,* ed. Jonathan Israel and trans. Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; originally published anonymously in 1670); Gottfried Leibniz, "Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice," in *Leibniz: Political Writing*, ed. and trans. Patrick Riley, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988; the essay was originally published in 1702). While my use of the term is not in its religious sense, Leibniz, to be sure, was a devout Christian who argued piety and justice depended on two conditions: 1) that the soul is immortal and 2) that God is the ruler of the universe. I admit to some interpretive license as neither Spinoza nor Leibniz conceived of justice in precisely the manner found in the writings of Rand Jimerson, Verne Harris, and David Wallace, among others; nor, for that matter, in the general outlines I offer on the concept of justice.

[38] Andre Comte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues: The Uses of Philosophy in Everyday Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, trans. 2001), 60–85. Originally published as *Petit Traite des Grandes Vertus* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996).

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nexus.[39] I think of justice, also, as extending the archival covenant to those who may never step into our research rooms or even know what archives are, but nevertheless, are affected by the record; and to those seeking what Aristotle called the good life, the life one would like to live consonant with conscientious sociality and in full possession of political rights and responsibilities. Archival appraisal and description and ultimately access can be processes for giving people—as individuals and in the aggregate—the tools they need to reason about the common good and to cultivate civic virtue.[40] David Gracy is correct that use is the reason to keep archives; I believe promoting the common good is the reason for use. Or, argued another way, the common good is the archives' *raison d'etre*.

When we perform our archival duty and commit to piety of service, we engage in acts of justice all the time. Providing our best service, being cognizant of our obligation to equity and fairness, understanding our own biases and limitations, and being transparent in our actions are all part of acting justly and thus extending justice. This is not to diminish the concepts of universal justice noted earlier, rather it is recognizing Buber's assertion that no encounter is without its significance. We do not always know what value particular records or information might have to a researcher; whether they might be significant in building a case for righting a wrong, providing a lesson in civic responsibility, helping construct personal and familial history, or simply giving pleasure. As philosopher Susan Neiman observes, "You needn't think that knowledge of the truth can right all wrongs in order to think it can right some. . . . Simple information is never enough to change the world, but it's always the first place to start."[41]

Conclusion

The intent for this article is to explore meaning in our individual lives and how we transmit personal values to our archival work and create value through our actions. As historian Gordon Wood argues in the introduction to *The Idea of America*, "[t]he meanings that we give to our actions form the structure of our social world. Ideas or meanings make social behaviors not just comprehensible but possible. We really cannot act unless we make our actions meaningful . . . ."[42]

[39] Harris, *Archives and Justice* is the most notable example.

[40] Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2009) makes the case that justice is about determining what constitutes the common good and is served when citizens are given what they need to live the good life. Sandel draws his views on justice from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

[41] Susan Neiman, *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-Up Idealists* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc. 2008), 187–88.

[42] Gordon S. Wood, *The Idea of America: Reflections on the Birth of the United States* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011), 16.

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Covenant, by its nature, conveys meaning. We construct covenantal meaning in the archives through genuine encounter, sacred obligation, and piety of service in a common mission on behalf of the public good. We embrace it, in Buber's words, "for the sake of the work which [we are] destined to perform upon the world."[43]

The primary title of this paper—"Dust clouds of camels shall cover you"—is drawn from the prophet Isaiah. It appears with a litany of riches that will adhere to the people if they maintain their covenant with God. They will have so many camels that the dust clouds the herd creates will fill the air around them.[44] Perhaps "dust clouds" is not the best metaphor for archivists, but the covenant ideal is fertile ground for enriching our personal and professional lives. It is a means for attaining what Emil Durkheim calls "the life of a moral community."[45]

The archival profession does not have a written covenant, but I believe one is implied in the substance of our work. Like the patient-physician covenant, it is a covenant of trust; but it also is more. Let me conclude by returning to the reflections of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Addressing a convocation of Anglican bishops, he distinguished between a covenant of fate and a covenant of faith. The former is created in the face of suffering, a common enemy, or shared fears. A covenant of faith is made by "people who share dreams, aspirations, ideals. They don't need a common enemy, because they have a common hope. They come together to create something new. They are defined not by what happens to them but by what they commit themselves to do."[46] We are, I think, a profession defined by this vision of a covenant of faith and by our commitment to a broad societal good and the welfare of humankind.

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[43] Buber, "The Way of Man," 438.

[44] Isaiah 60:6. This translation is from *Tanakh: A New Translation of The Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text*, 746.

[45] See especially chapter 1 in Massimo Rosati, *Ritual and the Sacred: A Neo-Durkheimian Analysis of Politics, Religion and the Self* (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2009); Elizabeth Burns Coleman and Kevin White, "Stretching the Sacred," in *Negotiating the Sacred: Blasphemy and Sacrilege in a Multicultural Society*, ed. Elizabeth Burns Coleman (Canberra, Aus.: ANU E Press, 2006), 65–77.

[46] Sacks, "Exposition of the Hebrew Scriptures."