

Archival Ideals and the Pursuit of a Moderate Disposition

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ABSTRACT

This article posits that archivists are inspired by broad, grand, and even transcendent ideals that guide their work, but that those ideals are beyond their grasp. The inability to attain these ideals sets archivists up to experience frustration and disappointment. By developing a *moderate disposition*,¹ archivists can productively cope with disappointment and still be guided by their ideals to create great value through their work. The article focuses on three concepts or virtues of self-examination—enlarged thought, gratitude, and reverence—that can help archivists cultivate a moderate disposition.

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KEY WORDS

Archival Theory and Principles, Ethics, Writings about Archives

In an 1859 speech at Faneuil Hall, immigrant journalist and politician Carl Schurz proclaimed, “. . . ideals are like stars; you will not succeed in touching them with your hands. But like the seafaring man on the desert of waters, you choose them as your guides, and following them you will reach your destiny.”² His address, titled “True Americanism,” asserted the doctrine of liberty and personal responsibility inherent in republican democracy and concluded that the banner of American glory should read, “Liberty and equal rights, common to all as the air of Heaven—Liberty and equal rights, one and inseparable!”³

Schurz did not equivocate. His polemical avowal of American exceptionalism and America’s moral leadership in the world was modified only by his understanding of human limitations that found voice in those two short sentences regarding ideals. This brief passage communicates three vast, related ideas. First, ideals are elevated, and in his language, even transcendent, dreams that can neither be reached nor grasped by human hands. Second, they are guides on our life’s journey; they inspire us to act, even as we know our perfect aspirations will remain unfulfilled. And, finally, despite their unattainability, if we keep true to our ideals and doggedly pursue them, we can achieve goals that are reasonable and worthy. Schurz’s ideas, I believe, represent a useful model for archival thinking and archival doing.

Discussions with colleagues over the years support my belief that archivists are motivated by personal and professional ideals. These ideals may differ from person to person based on social or cultural orientation, institutional setting, or political or philosophical predisposition, but they are in the aggregate part of an archival calculus whose equations describe the profession as a whole. Nevertheless, like Schurz, I suggest these ideals, in any real sense, are beyond our grasp and that this fact can be a source of deep frustration.

This article defines the concept of *ideals* from an archival perspective and explores a particular mechanism for overcoming the potential disappointments provoked by our inability to achieve those ideals. That mechanism was described by philosopher of education Deborah Kerdeman as the cultivation of a “moderate disposition.” A moderate disposition requires recognition that although ideals are beyond our grasp, they still allow us to dream big and thus are integral to our professional work. Kerdeman suggested that ideals are apart from us while being a part of us.⁴ This article will outline Kerdeman’s proposition and then suggest three concepts (or virtues) of self-examination that can help us cultivate a moderate disposition: enlarged thought, gratitude, and reverence.

Ideals Defined

I want to begin with a working definition of *ideals* and to suggest what they are and what they are not. When the terms “ideal” or “ideals” are used in archival literature, more often than not they refer to what might be called

“product-based” ideals, or they are employed in relation to best practices. This sense of the terms might be associated with statements such as “we hope to create the ideal EAD finding aid” or “our storage area has the ideal temperature for mixed media.” Additionally, the concept of *relative ideals* identifies the best example in a set of things: “This is the best EAD finding aid we have produced; it is the ideal for all of our other description.”⁵ There is nothing inappropriate or inaccurate in the usages noted here. However, this is not what Schurz was contemplating, nor what I am proposing, in the application of the concept.

For the purposes of this article, I define *ideal* as “a conception of something that is perfect, especially that which one seeks to attain; a person or thing considered to represent perfection; something existing only as an idea.”⁶ The three significant elements in this definition—ideals as perfections, the act of seeking perfection, and their corporeal nature—map closely to Schurz’s dictum that opened this article. Ideals in this sense, as standards of perfection in the archival profession, exist at the nexus of values, ethics, and theory, thus residing in the realm of philosophical examination.

Ideals as animating forces—as moral road signs—exist because we have the ability to imagine perfection. The human capacity for imagination allows us to externalize phenomena such as ideals that exist only in our consciousness as images; in other words, they are phenomena that we have created through the agency of imagination.⁷ As such, they are expansive assertions that inspire us, perhaps that led us to enter the profession, or certainly to remain in it. They are not pedestrian goals, certainly not objectives, nor should they generally be equated with best practices.

Ideals in Archival Thought

Although examples of the explicit discussion of ideals (as I have defined them) in archival literature are scant, the few authors who have articulated archival ideals leave little doubt what their ideals are. Hilary Jenkinson, for instance, wore them on his sleeve. He believed that archives preserve “Truth” and that archivists are “Truth’s” greatest protectors; he argued that the archivist’s mission is objective and neutral custodianship. Jenkinson’s *A Manual of Archive Administration* includes a section titled “Moral Defence of Archives” that describes archivists’ responsibilities toward their records. He argued that the archivist is the “servant of his Archives first.”⁸ Truth, objectivity, neutrality, and servitude in defense of the archival record is an exceedingly clear statement of his ideals.

Postmodern notions of ideals appear in the works of contemporary authors such as Rand Jimerson, Joan Schwartz, Eric Ketelaar, Terry Cook, and others who portray the archives as the seat of a particular kind of power and

argue the archivist's responsibility to employ that power for the benefit of user communities. Others evoke accountability and transparency in conceptualizing archives as essential components of modern democracy.⁹ In a recent Society of American Archivists' presidential address, Elizabeth Adkins spoke of the spirit of diversity and the "ideal of embracing multiple viewpoints and lifestyles."¹⁰ Nevertheless, many authors have spoken about archival ideals without suggesting what those might be. A former *American Archivist* editor argued that a profession with "a body of basic literature which expresses for the individual the history, traditions, philosophy, standards, and ideals of the profession"¹¹ stays strong. Unfortunately, he did not say what those ideals are.

In early 2012, I asked a handful of colleagues to identify the ideals that motivate them as archivists.¹² Unsurprisingly, there were as many different suggestions as archivists who answered. Among those responses were comments such as

- Archives serve as our cultural and corporate memory.
- Archivists strive to collect those records that tell a complete, accurate, and authentic story of the past.
- Archives, when considered as part of the fabric of democracy, are both a bellwether of intellectual freedom and a little understood bastion against tyrannical oppression.
- Archivists strive to . . . ultimately obtain the wisdom to understand our universe and all the species in it.

Although a few of the other responses fell more in line with a best practices definition, most comments, like those above, deepened my conviction that archivists hold wide-ranging, often divergent, archival ideals that excite and inspire their work.

The proposition that ideals are beyond our reach is not entirely new in archival thinking. Over a half-century ago, SAA president Morris Radoff, addressing the need for strength in numbers and in the creation and mastery of a body of archival knowledge, spoke of unattainable ideals—although, again, what ideals Radoff was referring to is not clear.¹³ And Rand Jimerson, fifty years later, argued that Jenkinson "set an unattainable ideal of the archivist as one who served researchers but never engaged in interpretation of the records."¹⁴ Still, these are exceptions in the literature. In general, this concept of ideals being beyond our reach has not engendered much discussion. Although the point of this article is corrective, my intent is not to create a statement of archival ideals, as SAA has in relation to our professional Core Values.¹⁵ Nor am I interested in compiling a roster of all the possible ideals that we cannot attain. Rather, I want to explore how we can contend with our limitations and our inability to achieve our ideals, while still providing value through our work, and how we can respond when our ideals bump up against real-world obstacles.

Archival Anguish

If we are to take our ideals seriously—as I think we must—we need to recognize that they are not empirical facts, but are transcendent guides that, like the stars, are beyond our reach. Reflection on the notion of ideals as unattainable raises a number of questions. Does our inability to attain them manifest itself as professional failure? Is it possible that our response might be frustration or disillusionment? In response, might we be tempted to lower our expectations? If we can't achieve our ideals, do we become susceptible to a kind of archival anguish?

The existentialists speak of the “anguish of freedom”—perhaps better characterized as the “anguish before the necessity of choosing.” Anguish derives from the brute fact that one must make choices in life at every turn. Jean Paul Sartre suggested that this consciousness of freedom—of having to make difficult choices—makes us uncomfortable because every choice is a choice of finitude since every choice involves elimination of other options.¹⁶ Appraisal and selection provide the starkest archival examples (though not the only ones) of choice as elimination. When we select records for preservation, we also abandon others to destruction. In a very real sense, we make the choice—in our particular universe of records—of what will be remembered and what will be forgotten. The appraisal archivist is, in existential language, “condemned to be free,” to be in a perpetual state of choosing and rechoosing and thus experiencing the anguish of freedom.

To be sure, American archivists are reasonably good at making choices; it is a corollary to our eminently practical natures. That is our great strength—and our great weakness. What do we sacrifice when we make those practical choices? Do we tend to adopt practical solutions and build theory around them? In rendering real-world decisions, do we give up on our ideals? When we make these sorts of choices, do we accept anguish as a real consequence of our work?

A Moderate Disposition

Anguish may be too bleak a proposition for most of us; even Sartre allowed that we seldom experience true anguish. However, we must be cognizant that the pursuit of ideals can lead to disappointment. It is what we do with that potential or real disappointment that determines how we live with our unrealized expectations. Deborah Kerdeman argued that we can overcome disappointment by cultivating a *moderate disposition*, writing, “Trying to live up to ideals, even as we live through disappointment, requires what I call a moderate disposition. . . . Cultivating a moderate disposition . . . is an ongoing exercise in self-examination.”¹⁷

Kerdeman contended that while most people believe that ideals are transcendent and beyond our reach, this view is incomplete and incorrect. She pointed out that ideals are both apart from us—out of our reach—but also are a part of us in constitutive ways. She argued, “Insofar as ideals are a part of us, they animate our lives in palpable ways and are susceptible to being shaped by our beliefs and actions.” But, she continued, “Ideals surpass what we already know and can do and represent aims toward which we strive but which we can never actualize completely. In this respect, ideals stand apart from our lives, even as they also are a part of our lives.”¹⁸

The failure to achieve ideals exposes our limitations, but it is these limitations that challenge us to embrace Kerdeman’s model. Understanding the “apart from/a part of” duality in ideals is central to developing a moderate disposition, Kerdeman argued. Accordingly, she said, “Moderation challenges us to live up to ideals we cherish, even as we live through and learn from disappointment.”¹⁹ Kerdeman’s definition of a moderate disposition suggests that we should not reflexively embrace the most practical or convenient actions and attitudes even in the face of real-world demands. Too easily, the practical can be a form of settling for what works, what is doable, thus negating the possibility that one’s action is driven by an elevated idea, dream, or philosophy. Nevertheless, striking a moderate disposition is complicated and challenging; it entails wrestling with value tensions, engaging in sometimes contentious debate, and respecting complexity. Moderate does not mean mediocre.²⁰

If we want to make ideals integral to our professional being, it is necessary to instantiate what we profess. Working to achieve our ideals confirms their force as moral exemplars and grants the possibility for self-evaluation and self-understanding.²¹ At the same time, we must cede that they are beyond our reach and avoid the literalist assumption that we can and must achieve ideals completely or perfectly.²² Cultivating a moderate disposition, Kerdeman concluded, means learning how to avoid taking ideals literally and, at the same time, learning how to resist “settling” when achieving those ideals proves difficult.²³

Cultivating a Moderate Disposition

Kerdeman’s conceptualization and definition of a moderate disposition are important in developing an approach to overcome the disappointment occasioned by not being able to attain stated ideals. However, her work leaves unanswered the question of how we might actually cultivate a moderate disposition; she does not provide specific guidance to that end. Nor, according to her, does any literature exist in her field (or any other that she is aware of) that addresses the topic. I want to try to fill that gap and suggest a path to follow that can lead to development of a moderate disposition. This path consists of three conceptual

stepping stones that seem to me especially well-suited to get us to our destination. These concepts are enlarged thought, gratitude, and reverence.

Enlarged Thought

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the protagonist, Atticus Finch, says to his daughter, Jem, “You see, you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view. . . . Until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”²⁴ This crucial bit of paternal wisdom is the central moral counsel that guides Jem’s development through the book; it is a call to live a life of empathy and understanding.

I want to stress here that we exist in relation to others and that the manner in which we encounter each other informs the depth and quality of our existence.²⁵ This is what Immanuel Kant called the “idea of a communal sense” in which we compare our judgments with the possible judgments of all other human beings, thus attempting to promote collective reason. He said to seek common human understanding is “to put ourselves in thought in the place of everyone else. . . .” In doing this we disregard “the subjective private conditions” of our own confining judgments and engage the universal standpoints of others. This is the notion of enlarged thought.²⁶

For Kant, enlarged thought raises us from a subjective, individualistic life and permits greater understanding of others; it is the opposite of a narrowness of spirit. Philosopher Luc Ferry suggested that learning a language is an example of moving beyond the self and entering a larger sphere, that of another culture. Enlarged thought, then, means to partake of a greater humanity, to situate ourselves in the view of those we encounter—what Ferry called the “humanizing of the human.”²⁷

I believe enlarged thought is something archivists engage in regularly. Contextual analysis of records, for example, is essentially the attempt to understand the creator and creation of records to meaningfully represent provenance to a diverse user population. To a great extent, the systematic development of collection policies and documentation strategies embraces this Kantian notion. We also engage in enlarged thought through reference processes in which we attempt to increase access to archival records by understanding the needs of user communities—communities that might be quite different socially, culturally, and politically from our own. Elizabeth Adkins’s comments on diversity, noted above, although not framed as such, clearly parallel the philosophy of enlarged thought.

When we embrace enlarged thought, whether in relation to donors or users or the records themselves, we are forced to scrutinize and challenge our own contexts—our political predispositions, our cultural memory—in an

attempt to neutralize whatever effect they might have on the interpretation of the record. Enlarged thought is integral to this process of self-understanding, which demands that we view ourselves within the context of our experience of the world. We fail at this when we succumb to parochial traditions and learned prejudices.²⁸ Enlarged thought, then, is a mechanism for avoiding constricted ideals and for better understanding the nature of our ideals, as well as those of others.

Gratitude

Another formulation of anguish is characterized as the “anguish before the here and now,”²⁹ which raises questions of why things are the way they are. Why do I exist as an archivist at this moment instead of as a cobbler in seventeenth-century Amsterdam? Why am I writing this article rather than pumping gasoline? Why am I privileged instead of homeless? Or even one of the central questions of philosophy, why is there something rather than nothing? These may be unanswerable questions, but they do demand an existential response. My response is to live my life with gratitude.

Many theologians and philosophers perceive life as a gift for which we owe a measure of gratitude.³⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, at once suggesting humility and courage as ways of being, wrote, “What is the truth of being human? The lack of pretension, the acknowledgement of opaqueness, shortsightedness, inadequacy. But truth also demands rising, striving, for the goal [and here he means the ideal] is both within and beyond us. The truth of being human is gratitude. . . .”³¹ Writing in a similar vein, the materialist philosopher Andre Comte-Sponville argued, “Life is not a debt: life is a state of grace, and being in a state of grace; therein lies gratitude’s highest lesson.”³²

Brien Brothman has explored the notion of archives as a gift wrapped in the complex social relationships between creators, archivists, and the communities they serve. The archivist as gift-giver preserves and makes available records that have the power to strengthen communities and bind the present to past and future generations. He argued, “These offerings comprise materials for the shaping and construction of individual, community, and social time—with all their attendant ethical, political and social ambiguities and complexities.”³³ The ability to give unpretentiously is a gift itself. I would argue that the archivist should experience gratitude for the ability to give in such a way.

In turn, the creation of records, through what Brothman called “the impossible gift of writing,” entails “a giving oneself—giving oneself up—to others.”³⁴ Here I believe the sense of gratitude is even greater as the archivist experiences a bonding with past generations across both time and space. As a young archivist, I developed an intimate relationship with Rabbi Barnet Brickner through

the gift of his ideas, his associations, and his character as expressed in his writing and the records he gave to the present and an unknown future. Brickner, an important figure in Cleveland Jewish history, had died twenty-seven years before I began processing his records, however, the impact he had on me through my relationship with his records shaped much of my thinking about the archivist's connections to the past and the future.

Archivists can be grateful for many things. Not least among these is the ability to employ imagination, to conceive a perfectibility that may never come, and to be guided by it. Verne Harris articulated the most difficult and controversial of ideals in the archives, that of the call of justice. Yet, he argued that justice never comes; or to use my argument, we can never attain the ideal of justice.³⁵ Nevertheless, the very fact of our being able to imagine justice and respond to our world with justice as our ideal is a potent motivator. Indeed, it affords the opportunity to think about justice in different ways and to consider how our work fosters a justice that gives people what they need to live the good life.³⁶ We express gratitude for our ability to use our imaginations in just such a manner—and to act accordingly.

Adam Smith believed gratitude was a natural passion crucial in keeping society intact, because gratitude requires concern for the happiness and the misery of others, not just ourselves. Gratitude is a moral virtue that requires humility, acceptance of one's limits, and acknowledgment that we are not as autonomous as we might think. As noted earlier, we are free to make choices, but we do so within an understanding that choice means loss. Gratitude lies at the heart of making choices and accepting loss. Gratitude is what German sociologist Georg Simmel called "the moral memory of mankind."³⁷

Reverence

When we embrace the notion of enlarged thought, when we step beyond the self to expand our social and professional horizons, we take a huge step toward something greater than ourselves. And when we feel gratitude for our ability to imagine perfection, for our requirement to make choices, and even for our limitations, we take the next step in approaching the world and our work with a sense of awe. I suggest that this is reverence.

Of all modern philosophers Susan Neiman most explicitly discussed reverence. She wrote, "Reverence is what you feel when you are overpowered, struck dumb by the realization that some things are beyond human grasp."³⁸ For the religious, this might be reverence for a particular deity; for others it might be the beauty of the natural environment; for still others, it might be the complexity of string theory and the multiverse. Neiman, in significant ways echoed Kerdeman's "apart from/a part of" model when she wrote: "reverence is the

feeling you have for something none of us will ever reach. . . . You can have reverence for God or nature, but also for ideals of justice or beauty or truth. . . . To be reverent is to be aware of the contrast between all the things you aspire to and all that can bring you down. . . .”³⁹

Archivists might feel reverence for the technical, theoretical, even philosophical beauty of our work, for its power in the individual and collective lives of our respective communities, for the elegant complexity of documented human communication, and for the ideals these represent. James O’Toole suggested this feeling in relation to records that societies revere as objects: the Domesday Book, the Declaration of Independence, and those records that any given institution might treat as revered relics.⁴⁰ However, he more closely approached the boundaries of Neiman’s definition of reverence in his discussion of archival theology, especially relating to the underlying ideas that inform archival work, why we engage in it, and what is important about it. In near reverent language, O’Toole suggested the values and ideals that inform his archival theology:

This leads us to explore the several assumptions and values that we accept as fundamental: that the documentation of human affairs has enduring relevance by providing continuity, even self-continuity; that records constitute the collective memory of individuals and societies and that this memory is essential to those societies and the people in them; that records support and sustain other important societal values. The symbolic theology of archives includes our formulation of accepted dogmas in caring for records: provenance, fonds, original order, description and representation, and so on. These are all, in their way, symbolic notions designed to express our archival beliefs, however imperfectly.⁴¹

Of all archival thinkers, Hugh Taylor purposefully crossed the boundaries to talk explicitly about reverence. Much of his writing explored the vast interconnectedness of records, nature, humankind, and the cosmos. Taylor read extensively and deeply outside the archival canon and populated his writing with ideas such as biocentric norms, pattern recognition, information ecology, cultural coding, and bioregionalism. In considering the archival weight of sacred texts, Taylor asserted they “can be made a great deal more relevant to our daily work and lives as archivists if the creational context is kept in mind and all life is seen as emergent and interconnected.”⁴² More precisely, in suggesting what constitutes a desired education for archivists, Taylor wrote, “An experience of, and reverence for, life and knowledge relating to the organic nature of society, in whatever way this is obtained, will be of great value.”⁴³ His words suggest that he recognized reverence as a life orientation that archivists should cultivate.

Reverence is perhaps a state of being, the natural result of engaging in enlarged thought and expressing gratitude. It certainly encompasses attention to the lives of others and gratitude for one’s being alive to the world. As Neiman

declared, “These are feelings that enlarge us, and make us better than before.”⁴⁴ Reverence, thus, is an antidote to anguish.

Conclusion

As I’ve argued, ideals are those things, those perfections, to which we aspire. But they (and we) exist in a world of very real obstacles and limitations that keep us from realizing those aspirations. Writing about the knowledge and skills required of archivists, James O’Toole and Richard Cox asserted, “One may identify larger intellectual concerns for archivists, but those archivists still live in the real world in which there is work to be done, collections to be acquired and organized, and users to be served.”⁴⁵ In such a real world, a moderate disposition allows us to view ideals as a process rather than an outcome.

Political theorist Bernard Crick argued that politics should be governed by certain virtues. He suggested that a virtue is an ideal that one can make into a habit.⁴⁶ Crick’s theory of ideals as process resonates with me. In likening the quest to achieve ideals to “the medieval questing for the holy grail,” Terry Cook insisted, “the journey builds character, offers insight, makes us better—it’s not the destination, but the quality of the journey toward it.”⁴⁷ A significant element of the journey is our continued critical examination of our ideals, our ability to refresh them, to keep them from becoming axioms, or worse yet, dogma. As Kerdeman maintained, “The meaning of ideals thus becomes evident in real-world institutions and is negotiated by engaging in real-world debates.”⁴⁸

I have argued that ideals, as perfect states, are grand and unobtainable. The full documentation of society, whether through the employment of documentation strategy, macro-appraisal, or some other archival construct, will never happen. That it can’t be done does not mean that it is not an ideal worth pursuing. Rather, it might be even more critical to take on the quest. Such a quest, to be meaningful, must begin with critical self-understanding that brings our limitations into focus, while at the same time stimulating our pursuit of the ideal. Developing a moderate disposition by embracing enlarged thought, gratitude, and reverence gives us a conceptual context for that pursuit.

Luc Ferry, writing about contemporary humanism (although he could very well have been writing about archival discourse), said it “sets itself to reflect upon the meaning of its own assertions, to become fully aware of them, to criticize and evaluate its own propositions.”⁴⁹ Developing and employing a moderate disposition—individually and collectively—does the same for archival ideals and the archivists who hold them. It requires us to probe the meaning of our work and interrogate our convictions and actions.

NOTES

- ¹ For the purposes of this article, *disposition* should not be confused with *archival disposition* which is defined in Richard Pierce-Moses, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, Society of American Archivists, <http://www2.archivists.org/glossary>, as “Materials’ final destruction or transfer to an archives as determined by their appraisal.” *Disposition*, as I use the term, refers to the attitude one brings to archival work, the way one thinks and feels about something, and the behavior that evolves from this orientation.
- ² Carl Schurz, *Speeches of Carl Schurz Collected and Revised by the Author* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1865), 54. The speech was titled “True Americanism” and was delivered at Faneuil Hall on April 18, 1859. It appears to be the first time Schurz used this phrasing. He recycled it in several speeches during his career.
- ³ Schurz, *Speeches of Carl Schurz*, 75.
- ⁴ Deborah Kerdeman, “Why the Best Isn’t So Bad: Moderation and Ideals in Educational Reform,” *Educational Theory* 59 (2009): 513. Professor Kerdeman graciously read this essay in an early draft, discussed it with me at length, and provided detailed feedback that helped me better understand the nuances of her argument.
- ⁵ These comments are based on findings from a search of articles in *The American Archivist*, *Archivaria*, and *Archival Science* for the terms “ideal” and “ideals.” As noted, in most cases the terms were used in the sense of best practices, but also in discussing ideals outside of the archival profession (e.g., the democratic ideals of the founders of the republic). The concept of *relative ideals* that identify the best example of a set of things—for example, the best circle in a group of circles—is perhaps best seen in Robert S. Hartman, *The Structure of Value* (Carbondale and Evansville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967).
- ⁶ *Collins English Dictionary—Complete and Unabridged*, s.v. “ideal,” <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Ideals>.
- ⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, vol. 1, *Sketch of a History of the Doctrine of the Ideal and the Real*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000). Originally published in 1851.
- ⁸ See, for example, Hilary Jenkinson, “Reflections of an Archivist,” in *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings on Archival Theory and Practice*, ed. Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, 1984), 21, originally published in *Contemporary Review* 165 (June 1944): 355–61. See also Jenkinson’s *A Manual of Archive Administration Including the Problems of War Archives and Archive Making* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), 66–106, for his section on “Moral Defence of Archives.” Jenkinson’s eccentric writing style included the use of capitals (where they normally would not be used) to emphasize his arguments.
- ⁹ A bibliography of works addressing these topics is too lengthy to cite here, but a representative sample includes James O’Toole, “Archives and Historical Accountability: Toward a Moral Theology of Archives,” *Archivaria* 58 (Fall 2004): 3–19; Randall C. Jimerson, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009); Eric Ketelaar, “Archival Temples, Archival Prisons: Modes of Power and Protection,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 221–38; Eric Ketelaar, “Archives of the People, By the People, For the People,” in *The Archival Image: Collected Essays*, ed. Yvonne Bosrops (Hilversum, Neth.: Verloren, 1997), 15–26; Terry Eastwood, “Reflections on the Goal of Archival Appraisal in Democratic Societies,” *Archivaria* 54 (Fall 2002): 59–71; Verne Harris, *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007); Elizabeth Kaplan, “Many Paths to Partial Truths: Archives, Anthropology, and the Power of Representation,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 209–20; Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 1–19; Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz, “Archives, Records, and Power: From (Postmodern) Theory to (Archival) Performance,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 171–85. See also various essays in Francis X. Blouin and William G. Rosenberg, eds., *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).
- ¹⁰ Elizabeth W. Adkins, “Our Journey toward Diversity—and a Call to (More) Action,” *The American Archivist* 71 (Spring/Summer 2008): 21–49. The published article is an expanded version of Adkins’s presidential address delivered August 30, 2007, at SAA’s 71st Annual Meeting, Chicago.

- ¹¹ Karl L. Tever, "The American Archivist: The Voice of a Profession," *The American Archivist* 15 (April 1952): 148.
- ¹² On February 21, 2012, I sent an email to thirty-six colleagues that briefly stated my premise that ideals are lofty aims and standards of perfection. I then asked, "What do you believe are the ideals that motivate archivists and the archival profession?" I received fourteen responses, all thoughtful and provocative. This inquiry should not be mistaken for a methodological survey designed to create a research sample; it was meant solely as a discussion point with a few colleagues. I would like to thank Amy Cooper Cary, Joel Wurl, Richard Pearce-Moses, Elizabeth Yakel, Martin Levitt, Diane Vogt-O'Connor, Terry Cook, Susan Davis, Elizabeth Adkins, David Horn, Maygene Daniels, Bill Landis, Hillel Arnold, and Jennifer Meehan for their generous comments. Their ideas have had a significant influence on this article, although I take full responsibility for the work as presented and any of the limitations associated with it.
- ¹³ Morris L. Radoff, "What Should Bind Us Together," *The American Archivist* 19 (January 1956): 3.
- ¹⁴ Randall C. Jimerson, "Embracing the Power of Archives," *The American Archivist* 69 (Spring/Summer 2006): 22, 29. Even Jenkinson wrote, "Naturally ideals cannot always be realized; compromise is sometimes unavoidable." See Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, xii. However, in this passage Jenkinson was writing about what I have termed product-based ideals such as not having the best environmental conditions or not being able to give a collection the perfect arrangement.
- ¹⁵ A statement titled *Core Values of Archivists* was adopted by the Society of American Archivists Council in May 2011. It is available on the SAA website at <http://www2.archivists.org/statements/SAA-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.
- ¹⁶ The most comprehensive treatment of anguish can be found in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956). A dated, but very accessible discussion of the existentialist conception of anguish is Robert G. Olson, *An Introduction to Existentialism* (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), 30–63. "Anguish before the necessity of choosing" is the term Olson applies to this form of anguish.
- ¹⁷ Kerdeman, "Why the Best Isn't So Bad," 513.
- ¹⁸ Both quotes are Kerdeman, "Why the Best Isn't So Bad," 523. Kerdeman justified her conceptualization of ideals on pages 522–23 of her article.
- ¹⁹ Kerdeman, "Why the Best Isn't So Bad," 530–531. One can argue that Kerdeman's moderate disposition is similar in feel to the cardinal virtue of prudence. For an excellent discussion of virtues, see 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), originally published as *Petit Traite des Grandes Vertus* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996). His chapter on "Prudence" is on pages 30–37. On page 32, Comte-Sponville wrote, "An intellectual virtue, Aristotle explains, inasmuch as it is bound up with truth, knowledge, and reason, prudence is the disposition that makes it possible to deliberate correctly on what is good or bad for man (not in itself but in the world as it is, and not in general but in specific situations) and through such deliberation to act appropriately. It could be called good sense, but in the service of goodwill. Or intelligence, but of the virtuous kind. It is in this respect that prudence is the precondition for all the other virtues; without it, we cannot know what use to make of the other virtues or how to attain the goal (the good) they put before us."
- ²⁰ Kerdeman, "Why the Best Isn't So Bad," 517–22. Kerdeman makes a strong argument against "settling" in the pursuit of ideals.
- ²¹ Kerdeman, "Why the Best Isn't So Bad," 528–30. Kerdeman's article is specifically about ideals in relation to education reform. See her discussion on these pages of the lessons we can learn from psychologist David Berliner's view of education reform found in "Our Impoverished View of Educational Research," *Teachers College Record* 108 (June 2006): 949–95.
- ²² Kerdeman, "Why the Best Isn't So Bad," 526–28. Kerdeman's discussion here draws on and is a response to Ken Sirotnik, *Holding Accountability Accountable: What Ought to Matter in Public Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004).
- ²³ Moderate disposition should not be confused or conflated with pragmatism. Although each, in its own way, represents "an attitude of orientation," there is a fundamental difference in their conception of ideals and principles. Pragmatism puts little emphasis or value on ideals or thoughts of perfection except insofar as they lead to practical consequences. Thus, ideas (and ideals) borrow

their meaning from their consequences and are relevant only as tools. Moderate disposition, on the other hand, embraces the belief in ideals and the notion of perfectibility, even as it recognizes that those things are not achievable. Unlike the pragmatists, I argue that practical consequences borrow their meaning from the ideals one brings to the work. On pragmatism, see William James's four lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1907; they can be found on many Internet sites (I used William James, *Pragmatism*, Authorama, <http://www.authorama.com/pragmatism-1.html>) and in several published versions. A compelling argument for pragmatism in archival practice can be found in Mark A. Greene and Todd J. Daniels-Howell, "Documentation with an Attitude: A Pragmatist's Guide to the Selection and Acquisition of Modern Business Records," in *The Records of American Business*, ed. James M. O'Toole (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1997). The authors suggested the point I make about pragmatism when they wrote, "We have avoided attempting to categorize other appraisal writing as 'theory' or 'method' . . . because the distinction does not seem to have a great deal of pragmatic value for our daily work." See Greene and Daniels-Howell, footnote 44 on page 222. The authors cited James's essays in *Pragmatism and Four Essays from The Meaning of Truth* (New York: Meridian Edition, 1974).

- ²⁴ Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995; 35th Anniversary Edition), 33.
- ²⁵ This idea is discussed in greater depth in Scott Cline, "Dust Clouds of Camels Shall Cover You: Covenant and the Archival Endeavor," *The American Archivist* 75 (Fall/Winter 2012): 282–96.
- ²⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951), 136–37; originally published as *Kritik der Urteilkraft* in 1790. Kant wrote further, "As regards the second maxim of the mind, we are otherwise wont to call him limited . . . whose talents attain to no great use (especially as regards intensity). But here we are not speaking of the faculty of cognition, but of the mode of thought which makes a purposive use thereof. However small may be the area or the degree to which a man's natural gifts reach, yet it indicates a man of enlarged thought if he disregards the subjective private conditions of his own judgment, by which so many others are confined, and reflects upon it from a universal standpoint (which he can only determine by placing himself at the standpoint of others)."
- ²⁷ Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 248–49.
- ²⁸ Among the most important works on human experience, hermeneutics, and understanding is Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised ed., trans. and rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1998), originally published in 1960. Gadamer writes extensively on these notions of restrictive traditions and human prejudice.
- ²⁹ See Olson, *An Introduction to Existentialism*, 41–51, for an excellent brief discussion on this form of anguish.
- ³⁰ Shai Held, "Core Issues in Theology: On Walking in God's Ways and the Path of Loving Kindness" (lecture at Mechon Hadar, New York City, May 12, 2010), video and podcast available at <http://www.mechonhadar.org/core-issues-in-theology>. Rabbi Shai Held takes the further step of arguing that life is a gift within a gift. The existence of the world, of the universe, is a gift that we have done nothing to deserve and the gift of our lives, again, comes to us not because we have done anything to merit it.
- ³¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1964), 114.
- ³² Comte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*, 137. The chapter on "Gratitude" is on pages 132–39.
- ³³ Brien Brothman, "Perfect Present, Perfect Gift: Finding a Place for Archival Consciousness in Social Theory," *Archival Science* 10 (2010): 141–89. The quote is found on page 181.
- ³⁴ Brothman, "Perfect Present, Perfect Gift," 180.
- ³⁵ See Verne Harris, *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007). Most of the essays in this book deal with the "call of justice" in one way or another. See especially chapter 14, "The Archive Is Politics," 239–52.
- ³⁶ Cline, "Dust Clouds of Camels Shall Cover You," 293–95. This is an Aristotelian conception of justice that is most effectively stated in a modern context in Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2009).
- ³⁷ The Simmel quote is found in Susan Neiman, *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-Up Idealists* (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, Inc, 2008), 236–37. In the past decade, some social psychologists have studied

gratitude as a behavioral science, not as a moral virtue, and posited that gratitude makes people happier. See, for example, Robert A. Emmons, *Thanks!: How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).

³⁸ Neiman, *Moral Clarity*, 231.

³⁹ Neiman, *Moral Clarity*, 232–33.

⁴⁰ James M. O'Toole, "The Symbolic Significance of Archives," *The American Archivist* 56 (Spring 1993): 234–55.

⁴¹ James M. O'Toole, "Archives and Historical Accountability: Toward a Moral Theology of Archives," *Archivaria* 58 (Fall 2004): 1–19. The quote is on page 8.

⁴² Hugh A. Taylor, "The Archivist, the Letter, and the Spirit," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 8. Terry Cook and Gordon Dodds, eds., *Imagining Archives: Essays and Reflections by Hugh A. Taylor* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2003) brings together fifteen of Taylor's essays, many of which include his ideas on spirituality, reverence, and the sacred in relation to archives. The volume includes the essay cited here and in the following note.

⁴³ Hugh A. Taylor, "The Discipline of History and the Education of the Archivist," *The American Archivist* 40 (October 1977): 397.

⁴⁴ Neiman, *Moral Clarity*, 235.

⁴⁵ James M. O'Toole and Richard J. Cox, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2006), 112.

⁴⁶ Bernard R. Crick, *In Defense of Politics*, 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), originally published in 1962. Crick argued that "Ideals are valuable as ideals and not as plans for a new order of immediate things. And ideals should not be confused with the means to their attainment." Quote found on page 136.

⁴⁷ Terry Cook, email to author, February 27, 2012.

⁴⁸ Kerdeman, "Why the Best Isn't So Bad," 524. Charles Taylor argued that an axiom is "something one doesn't challenge but also never expounds." *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 17. Taylor is quoted in footnote 23 in Kerdeman, 529.

⁴⁹ Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought*, 239.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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