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## Review of: Archival Virtue: Relationships, Obligation, and the Just Archives by Scott Cline

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**Scott Cline. *Archival Virtue: Relationship, Obligation, and the Just Archives*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2021.**

A thoughtful meditation on the archival endeavor, Scott Cline's *Archival Virtue* is timely and much-needed, offering a philosophical approach to many questions that archivists are grappling with in our profession—including social justice, equity, and contingent employment. That the book directly incorporates interdisciplinary perspectives into archival theory strengthens Cline's outlook and informs many of the considerations examined in the text. In the introduction, he also explicitly acknowledges that the book was influenced by COVID-19 and the American reckoning on race that began in 2020.

In that same introduction, the author qualifies that much of the book focuses on Western philosophy, as that is the origin of many parts of American archival theory. In addition to working with Western philosophers, Cline often draws on Christian and Jewish theological thought. There are occasional citations to philosophers and community approaches to virtue from African countries and East Asian philosophical perspectives, but the exclusion of Islamic theological thought is disappointing, as is the very brief mention of Native and Indigenous perspectives in the final third of the book. Acknowledgment and incorporation of Native approaches to knowledge and memory throughout would have strengthened some of the book's points, as would including discussion of Islam's understanding of the written word.

The structure of *Archival Virtue* works well. It is broken into three parts: "Archival Being," "Archival Citizenship," and "Archival Spirituality." Each section includes an introduction before breaking the concept down into smaller constituent parts, which allows Cline to weave dense elements together.

Part 1, "Archival Being," focuses on Cline's assertion that there is an "existential posture that archivists assume in the world and in the province of relationships in all their complexity," which is expressed through specific components (12). He relies heavily on Emmanuel Levinas's understanding that the concept of being is broadly the "self with other," that is to say, there is something more important than your life which is the life of another person, and that relationships are a core part of our existence (21). Archival being is made up of constituent, inextricably linked elements: faith, radical self-understanding, intention, integrity, commonality, and connectedness. Faith is the base layer for archival being, which is decoupled from any particular religious connection and suggests instead "a faith in our continued existence" and faith that our work is worth doing because the records matter to future generations to whom we are accountable (22). That sense of future and accountability in turn connect to radical self-understanding. Relying on Joshua Heschel to delve into our intellectual selves and the choices we make as archivists, Cline suggests that "radical self-understanding requires a genuine and deep exploration of the profession's *why* and *what* questions" (26).

Radical self-understanding links with intention in Cline's view. Here, he invokes the Jewish concept of *kavannah*, directing the mind toward doing a thing with meaning and purpose. In archives, this translates into understanding the implications of our actions at every level, from removing paperclips to the metadata we assign to the descriptive information we write. Making

these choices and being mindful of intent is in turn a power and a virtue that we exercise as professionals.

The final three parts of archival being are integrity, commonality, and connectedness. Cline's understanding of integrity comprises two elements. The first is the quality of a person's character, the second the pursuit of moral purpose. Commonality focuses on the characteristics and values all archivists share regardless of job title, specialization, or institution. What we have in common connects us, and in that connection there is the knowledge that all of our actions, great and small, link us.

The second chapter of part 1 focuses on the archival covenant, which Cline defines as "personal and professional values and ideals, emanating logically . . . from a developed sense of archival being that opens our minds and hearts to relationship, duty, and service to others" (26). This covenant concept informs a sense of obligation at both the individual level of the archivist and the collective level of the profession as a whole to do right by the archives we care for, the subjects of those collections, donors, researchers who access the material, and the community as a whole.

This chapter follows the same structure as the previous one, with all of the component pieces of the concept under discussion clearly laid out and explored. Cline's archival covenant concept consists of moral commitment, genuine encounter, sacred obligation, and piety of service. Moral commitment is "an affective responsibility towards those with whom we develop archival relationships," ranging from creators and subjects to donors and all those who are involved in our work (39). This sense of commitment leads to a genuine encounter—mutual respect, response, and reciprocity that strives to avoid self-centeredness. The moral commitment to care for and offer respect to all stakeholders creates a sense of sacred obligation—service and care for the records and the greater community. Moreover, Cline points out that this sacred obligation must acknowledge the inherent power the archivist holds as an arbiter of the records. This sense of obligation creates what he calls a piety of service. While service is a core part of archival work at almost every level, Cline's understanding of piety comes from a combination of the ideas of Gottfried Leibniz and Baruch Spinoza. Cline leans especially hard on Spinoza's connecting piety "with love and knowledge, arguing that it motivates one to perform acts of justice," discussed later in the book (47).

Part 2 is entitled "Archival Citizenship." To be a citizen is to have a sense of "responsibility and a sense of duty—to one's community, to the larger and smaller polities, and to *the other*" (57). This understanding of duty includes emphasizing equality, freedom, and human dignity. In particular, Cline pulls on the concept of infinite responsibility as articulated by Emmanuel Levinas, which focuses on the ethical demand to look after the other, defined as individuals and relationships outside of ourselves (61).

Cline suggests that archival citizenship "adheres to professional archivists and their agency in employing moral judgment and taking moral actions in their work . . . driven by an inherent sense of common good and . . . directed both individually and collectively by a belief in sacred obligation" (61). This is achieved through trustworthiness, professionalism, difference, and care—all elements that have received renewed interest and discussion in recent archival literature. Trustworthiness comes from Cline's understanding of archival faith, noting that "faith is essential

to developing a personal value system of integrity and trust,” which will be demonstrated through the work the archivist performs (63). Cline acknowledges professionalism is problematic in that it runs the risk of promoting social control and allowing outdated ideals to take priority. The alternative definition Cline offers is one that incorporates the Society of American Archivists’ core values, along with a “commitment to a just archives and embracing the ever-broadening idea of what the archives is” (65).<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging differences via intersectionality and addressing systemic inequalities (using anti-oppression theory as a framework here) are inherently linked to those core values in Cline’s view. Embracing them helps us to move forward in the archival endeavor

Addressing the recent discussions in archival literature regarding intersectionality and systemic inequity, Cline notes that these conversations are a “healthy sign for an active archival citizenship” (68–69). Finally, he defines care as concern for the other in our workspace, linking it to responsibility and genuine encounter. Cline connects back to Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor’s feminist ethics of care, where the focus is on relationships and mutual obligation, again emphasizing the service orientation of our work.<sup>2</sup>

With archival citizenship thus defined, Cline asks how we might measure the health of archival citizenship, besides the previously mentioned discussion regarding intersectionality. He references Michael Schudson’s approach to measuring healthy citizenship to lay out key milestones: membership and social capital (being a part of professional organizations and informal communities), voting (selecting leaders of archival organizations), trust (as Cline previously discussed), quality of public discourse (discussions in our literature and professional communities), and justice and anti-oppression work (and whether we are communicating it outside the profession) (72). Taken together, this method of measuring archival citizenship means that we are thinking together and doing well together as a professional community. Archival citizenship is about recognizing the importance of our relationships, working together for a common good, acting responsibly, committing to pluralism, and being just, empathetic, and compassionate in our work.

Chapter 4 in part 2, “Memory as Justice,” delves into the strong and well-documented connection between archives and memory work, and how they both may be used in the pursuit of justice. Archives are essential for making sense of our past and cultivating a collective memory, which in turn is “bound by social and cultural frameworks consciously fashioned to sift through our individual and collective experience” (78). This leads into a rumination on forgetting. Cline outlines two modes of forgetting: clearance and erasure. The former is exemplified by dynastic practice in China, where once an official history of the previous dynasty was written, all other documents were destroyed. The latter is typified by the more mundane example of record destruction according to a regular schedule. In all of this, though, there is the question: “Who decides what is unworthy of remembering?” (83).

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<sup>1</sup> Society of American Archivists, Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics, <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.

<sup>2</sup> Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives,” *Archivaria* 81 (May 2016): 23–43, <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13557>.

This discussion segues into archival silences—intentional erasure that creates gaps in the record—the most commonly reviewed aspect of archival memory. Terry Cook’s work on the topic is considered here, as archival appraisal determines what is remembered and what is forgotten. After examining work done in the 1960s and 1970s, Cline notes that “this process sped up in the 2010s, leading to fresh notions of what constitutes archives, challenges to the ideas of objectivity and neutrality, and the still-developing instantiation of justice as normative archival theory” (88).

In the text to this point, justice is mentioned multiple times but without the deep dive that Cline gives to other virtues and concepts. This section is where he finally does so. Cline’s understanding of archival justice, “acting on moral values within the political and social context of civil responsibility,” is in fact only a part of a much more complex definition (95). Archival justice also includes a collective sense of rights and freedoms, and a need to extend “hospitality” to the other (90). Archivists should understand and rely on current interdisciplinary approaches being discussed in archives and in the greater public discourse to build their framework and understanding of justice. Noting that “American ideas about justice are tied too closely to the language of individualism and the concepts of freedom structured around personal will and consent,” Cline posits that archival justice should be in service of a collective, aligning with the work of archivists he cites elsewhere in the text such as Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, Terry Cook, and Rand Jimerson (92).

Chapter 5 focuses on the question of archival validity: what makes something logically or factually sound, and how do we determine what is true? Cline uses Ernie House’s *Evaluating with Validity* to suggest there are three core values that apply to validation: truth, beauty, and justice. To explore these values, Cline logically turns to the appraisal process. For Cline, the most important element in archival validity is truth. Is the record credible to all parties that have a stake in the record itself? This part of appraisal, in the author’s view, means dialogue with the record creators and the subjects of the records and consideration for all potential perspectives. This process of embracing plural truths in the record is a form of enacting justice and adds to the beauty of a collection.

It is at this point that Cline brings in the concept of archival wisdom, which he sees as a key part of implementing the previously discussed ideals in the book within every facet of archival work. He divides the concept into two parts: practical wisdom and moral wisdom. For the former, he cites Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe’s six points of practical wisdom, which balance conflict, paying attention to context, and understanding the needs of others. Moral wisdom, on the other hand, concerns itself with what is ultimately the right thing to do.

This chapter and the whole second section of the book conclude with consideration of the importance of listening. Here, empathy and understanding are key, as is the emphasis on the act of listening. To pay attention to someone else (a donor, a researcher, a subject of the record) is to act on the archivist’s sacred obligation to the other. This act not only helps us achieve archival wisdom but helps avoid the natural assumption that there is only one story to be told in the record. Meaning is found in multiplicity, which connects to chapter 4’s discussion about memory and justice.

Part 3 focuses on archival spirituality, where the philosophical concept of archival being meets our practical roles in the world. Cline begins this section by tying his concept of archival spirituality with the idea of transcendence. He relies on Peter Berger’s *Rumor of Angels* to explore this idea,

as Berger's own understanding focuses on five human gestures that signal transcendence: order, play, hope, damnation, and humor. This is one of the strongest sections of the book with some of its most memorable writing. Order means finding meaning and making sense of the world. For an archivist this entails making sense of the past for the present and the future. Play is not usually a concept associated with archives but Cline suggests it is best understood in the sense of joy when immersed in archival work.

The next element of secular transcendence, building off of Berger's writing, is hope, especially focused on the future. Cline takes Berger's religious conception of hope and suggests that in the archival context, it should be understood as "secular faith in humanity" (130). Discussion of damnation follows, perhaps the most religious component. Secularizing the idea, Cline returns to archives as memory institutions and their power to enact justice, asking, "When we theorize about accountability and transparency, about human rights, about reparative justice, are we not condemning the immortal, the unethical, the unjust?" (132). This, to him, is preemptive damnation.

Finally, Cline addresses Berger's understanding of humor and specifically the idea of humor as the gap between what is and what should be. According to Cline, "Archives is humor; it is a practical joke played on finitude" by allowing humanity to transcend time (133). In going beyond time and space, Cline writes, "Yes, we are mortal; we will die. But our work done well will not. We continually dip our hands into immortality by assisting the dead in communicating with the present and future. We transcend our world, and in doing so, we bracket—perhaps even defeat—our mortality. This, perhaps, is what we can call archival salvation" (134). Cline recognizes that while our collections may represent linear points in time, archivists, researchers, and creators do not always experience them in the same way. We transcend time and space, and "our engagement with order, play, hope, damnation, and humor . . . creates a blanket of responsibility to represent our work with ethical attachment" (138).

Cline then turns his attention to the spirituality of the text. Archives are largely about the written word, and Cline is writing in a text-based culture, as well as drawing on the traditions of text-based religions. It makes sense that we "reveal ourselves and our values through our relationships with others and the text," and that this includes a spiritual element (150). In exploring that spiritual dimension of the written word, Cline cites Jessica Tai, Jimmy Zavala, Joyce Gabiola, Gracen Brilmyer, and Michelle Caswell's "Summoning the Ghosts: Records as Agents in Community Archives" and their thoughtful explorations of the needs of records themselves and the impact records can have on communities, especially those who are traditionally excluded in the archives.<sup>3</sup> Cline describes the act of finding one's community or themselves as not only important but as a "joy of exploration" (151). This is a nod back to Peter Berger's approach to transcendence, specifically the gesture of play, and thus a demonstration of the spiritual nature of archives.

Bringing in the concept of archival culture, Cline has more questions than answers—specifically, do we have an archival culture at all? Cline does not have a firm answer here. He instead addresses previous attempts to explore this question, specifically through the work of Steven Lubar and the Archival Education and Research Institute's Pluralizing the Archival Curriculum Group. As a point of comparison, Cline turns to Native and Indigenous American knowledge systems, where

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<sup>3</sup> Jessica Tai et al., "Summoning the Ghosts: Records as Agents in Community Archives," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 6 (2019): article 18, <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol6/iss1/18>.

there are spiritual and emotional dimensions to recordkeeping. He points to the Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture and Lifeways tribal museum in Michigan, where there is space for visitors to reflect and consider the connection between what they heard and saw in the museum to ancestors of the culture. Archives are connections to the past and future and thus “embod[y] transcendence and spirituality” (155). Viewing records in a detached way, from a purely academic perspective, creates a dearth of archival culture but also implicitly suggests a return to the impossible claim that archives are or should be neutral.

Cline’s discussion of archival culture and spirituality leads to two questions: Do we have a sacred mission as archivists? Do we answer to laws of a higher order when we steward collections across generations? Cline concludes that the answer to both is yes: “If we are moved to seek meaning, authenticity, purpose, wholeness, and self-transcendence in all that we do, and to build genuine, obligatory and reciprocal relationships with those we serve, then we must seriously concern ourselves with spirituality and the culture of archives” (160).

The final chapter of the text is entitled “Moral Order.” All of the concepts Cline has discussed in the book weave together to create a moral order that we should strive to uphold in our professional lives. Morals must matter. Relationships and obligations are at the core of what we do, and doing our work well can help create a more moral and just society. That same work demands that we look critically at ourselves and engage in self-understanding. Elements of archival virtue, like justice and reparative work, are already a huge part of our professional discussions, and there is an implicit understanding of morality in those discussions. There is value in discussing morality out loud.

Writing about truth and faith in this moral order, Cline asserts that “wrestling with truth, faith, and moral order is fundamental to creating a vibrant archival future” (167). We must rely on archival virtues to determine that path forward. We must be active in this pursuit, to balance the practical demands of our work with the more theoretical ideals of our profession. Doing so commits us to a moral order, and hopefully a moral excellence built on justice. We need to associate our work with the broader effort to make the world a better, more just place. This is high-minded idealism. We may not always manage it but must try all the same.

The first time I read this book, I was particularly struck by how the philosophical approach to considering archival work feels like a meditation on the state of our professional and personal lives. Many of us feel exhausted from the ongoing fallout of the pandemic and other social and political crises. Cline’s book encourages us to consider the big picture, to frame the trends in our professional literature and discourse in a more holistic way. The focus on the greater whole was refreshing in a way I found myself in need of, because it reminded me that there is value in what I do now and in the future.

However, this valorization of archival labor runs the risk of creating a sense of vocational awe, something that Cline addresses in the introduction.<sup>4</sup> In that section, Cline makes it clear it is not

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<sup>4</sup> “The set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in notions that libraries as institutions are inherently good, sacred notions, and therefore beyond critique . . . that librarianship is a sacred calling.” See Fobazi Ettarh, “Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, 2018, <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>.

his intention to give credence to the concept. I do not know if this acknowledgment, and Cline's further suggestion that archival virtue is only one part of living a virtuous life, fully diffuses this risk. There is no discussion of archives as a calling in the book, but there is the suggestion that archival work carries an inherently noble or moral purpose, which may create skewed perceptions of archivists and our work. Likewise, this consideration of the moral elements of our profession run the risk of distorting the reality of archival work for students and new professionals. I know that early on in my own career, I might have prioritized the privilege of working on certain collections over knowing the value of my own labor. Many new professionals struggle with balancing their own best interests with the demands of their jobs. Likewise, Cline's theory of archival virtue and the focus on service could be used in a negative fashion when discussing archival labor, further encouraging the undervaluing of the work we do. Had the text spent dedicated time on humility, in relation to the self, to the records, and to the institution—a virtue alluded to but not talked about in full—I do not think I would have the same concerns.

This issue, along with concerns noted earlier in this review, do not detract from the fact that *Archival Virtue* is a well-written, thoughtful book. It offers a much-needed perspective on our field as we continue to grapple with questions of justice, equity, and making the archives better for all.