Archival Virtue

Praise for *Archival Virtue*

"Drawing from the writings of philosophers, religious scholars, progressive activists, historians, poets, and archivists—to name a few—Scott Cline weaves together a compelling argument for why archivists need to deploy the multi-layered idea of virtue into their everyday work. In this way, he challenges archivists to use whatever area of archival administration in which they work to continually and conscientiously embrace a framework of faith, integrity, truth, duty, wisdom, trust, and justice . . . all for the common good."

— Louis Jones, *Wayne State University*

"Building on his *American Archivist* articles as well as extensive reading of philosophers, theologians, archivists, and other thought leaders, Scott Cline challenges his fellow archivists to be thoughtful about grounding our practice in things moral, ethical, just, and faithful. At a time when the profession is addressing issues of justice and power, *Archival Virtue* provides us with important new ways to frame our work into the future."

— Margery Sly, *Temple University Libraries*

"What do concepts of faith, radical self-understanding, intention, integrity, and covenant have to do with archives and the work that archivists do? Everything! In Scott Cline's seminal book, these concepts are not merely terms you would encounter in the study of ethics, philosophy, and theology, but are inextricably interwoven with the individuals and archivists who perform the everyday tasks and decisions that must be accomplished for the archival collections which affect those who encounter them."

— Vince Lee, *University of Houston*

"Weaving together ideas from philosophy, religion, literature, and history with personal reflection and practical experience, Scott Cline charts a brave and bold path for archivists to contemplate the deeper meanings of our work to preserve and provide access to archives—what it means to be an archivist, what our work means in the world, what it means for others. *Archival Virtue* is at once an invitation to connect with the spiritual elements of our work as archivists as well as a powerful invocation of the spirit that infuses the mind and the matter of archives, breathing life and meaning into archival work. Whether we dive deep or dip our toes into this book, the experience will offer new insights and bigger views for imagining and practicing archives with purpose in our current moment."

— Jennifer Meehan, *Penn State University Libraries*

Archival Virtue

Relationship, Obligation, and the Just Archives

Scott Cline

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We know that the letters of the alphabet are neutral and meaningless until they are combined to make a word which itself has no significance until it is inserted into a sentence and interpreted by those who speak it.

— Isabel Wilkerson

Introduction

This is a book about virtue—specifically, what I call *archival virtue*. This nascent exploration of virtue theory in the archival endeavor suggests those virtues that afford power and moral order in archivists' work. What, then, do we mean when we talk about virtue? Virtue is defined etymologically as moral excellence.[1] French materialist philosopher Andre Comte-Sponville describes virtues as forces for good; he claims that "virtue is good itself" and imbues humans with the power to act well. Indeed, virtue is what makes us human. He argues, "The virtues are our moral values, but not in any abstract sense. They are values we embody, live, and enact. . . . Good is not something to contemplate; it is something to be done."[2] Similarly, Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye notes that much of African ethics focuses on character that is acquired through moral action. When the Akan of West Africa say of an individual, *he is a person*, it means *he has a good character*. Further, "a profound appreciation of the high standards of the morality of an individual's behaviour would elicit the judgment, *he is truly a person* (oye onipa paa!)."[3] In other words, virtues are practical characteristics that

speak to good moral character. This book, then, explores specific archival virtues and, thus, the moral character of archivists, but only so far as those virtues are catalysts for moral action.

Virtue: Redeeming an Idea

Before engaging the discussion of virtue theory, I want to briefly dispose of two potential criticisms of a virtue approach and suggest how this book should be read. The first identifies virtues with one group's assertion of superiority over another; the second is the question of vocational awe and the powerlessness in considering virtue as its own reward.

The concept of virtue is horribly misused when one group claims it at the expense of another. Sociologist Michèle Lamont, writing about racism in America and France, argues that "racist beliefs arise from the moral frameworks that people use to evaluate one another" and that racists believe people of color "fail to meet these moral standards."[4] The groups in America that Lamont studied claim certain virtues to develop a sense of self that erects barriers against others; they formulate categories such as "people like us," a designation that cannot be breached. In this way, virtues are used to condemn others who are perceived as "falling short."[5] The *othering* manipulation of virtue insults the concepts explicated by Comte-Sponville and Gyekye. My arguments draw on the essence of their definitions as well as the observation of Kenyan-born scholar Dismas Masolo, who, writing about ethics, notes that virtues "are perhaps the most celebrated aspects of African communitarian practices and ideals."[6] In the following pages, I suggest a fusion of these ideas for archivists: virtue embraces the development of moral character by the individual in order to fulfill their obligation to community.

The second criticism, less socially destructive, but insidious for the archival professional, is the idea that virtue equates to powerlessness. In the early 1980s, marketing researchers Sidney Levy and Albert Robles issued a report for SAA that placed the archival community in a snare of "niceness" and low professional status. The report emphasized that archival work was

virtuous, but that archivists suffered from the impotence of virtue and a belief that virtue was its own reward.[7] Corollary to this argument are bromides I have heard expressed by colleagues many times over the years: "archives is a higher calling" and "I can't believe I get paid for doing this work." This constitutes vocational awe, the supposition that information professionals have internalized assumptions about themselves and their work leading to claims that their professions and institutions "are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique." Fobazi Ettarh cautions (and she could be writing about archives), "when the rhetoric surrounding librarianship borders on vocational and sacred language rather than acknowledging that librarianship is a profession or a discipline, and as an institution, historically and contemporarily flawed, we do ourselves a disservice."[8]

Ettarh's argument is crucially right and crucially wrong. Yes, we must engage in serious critique of our professions, interrogate power, and confront injustice; and we need to stop thinking of our work as its own "moral compensation." However, I propose that we aggressively define and live our virtues as sources of power and as embedded moral characteristics that make us want to act justly on behalf of a better world. Do not mistake this for "virtue signaling," which is the self-important expression of one's moral correctness; rather, my claim for archival virtue is a call to moral action based on a belief that the instantiation of archival virtues is a form of radical empowerment that imbues the archivist with the desire to act for good itself.

Why Virtue

Othering and vocational awe misunderstand and misuse virtue. My hope is archivists will reclaim and rehabilitate the language of virtue, harness it to our obligation to the good, and restore it to a place of just power, empathy, and relationship. One's virtue, as moral philosopher Philippa Foot claims, may be judged by feelings, intentions, and actions.[9] Philosopher Lawrence Blum echoes Foot, noting that her formulation—virtues equal attitude plus

action—is compelling, and that we must make room for rethinking virtues and even creating new ones to fit modern cultural and political landscapes. Writing specifically about racism, he posits three new virtues that philosophical literature, until now, has never encompassed. Blum's racial virtues are: (1) recognition and valuing the other as peer, (2) civic racial egalitarianism, and (3) seeing others as individuals and not solely or predominantly as members of racial groups.[10] These three virtues should be recognizable, along with others, in the discussion presented in the following chapters.

Blum writes, "The strength of a virtue account is its capacity to express the range of psychic phenomena involved in forms of goodness and badness. A racist is not someone who only has bad intentions, but someone who has had bad and inappropriate feelings as well."[11] Here, I contend that Blum is citing the redemptive power of virtue in the struggle between good and evil and the extension of human dignity. Virtues express power and utilizing power for the good is our responsibility.

This conception of virtues runs deep in various global philosophical systems. Gyekye argues that almost all African ethics is character-based, and that in many African languages the word for *character* is interchangeable with *ethics* and *morality*.[12] Excellence of character is what virtue theory describes. Further, Odumayak Okpo, writing about leadership ethics, suggests six principles (virtues) of ethical leadership: integrity, honesty, service to others, justice, courage, and respect for others, all of which appear in Western lists of virtues.[13] Virtues are embedded also in the moral philosophy of Eastern cultures and the global South. Kedar Tiwari, for example, shows that in classical Indian thought the dharmic life was characterized by a list of necessary virtues;[14] while David Wong points out that in the *Analects of Confucius*, the cardinal concept of *ren* relates to moral excellence that many translations convey as the idea of complete ethical virtue.[15]

Archival literature is full of what we do and how we do it. The questions raised in these pages touch on personal and professional virtues; they grapple with who we are, and why we have chosen what we do. This exploration of the personal virtues that archivists might bring to their work argues that those beliefs and feelings should manifest through moral action.

Philosopher Paul Woodruff explains it this way: "People who do good are aware of moral rules, but so are people who do bad. The difference is virtue. Virtue is the source of the feelings that prompt us to behave well."[16] Virtue combines emotion and action with a commitment to who we want to be. This book is an attempt to construct a lexicon of archival virtue.

Virtues, as personal qualities that compel good behavior, are concerned with the common good. We exist in overlapping communities; our strengths and moral character are conceived in this social reality. Communities, to be stable and strong, rely on the virtue of their members. Therefore, just as individuals bind together in social and cultural groupings, their virtues combined can shape morally responsible communities, including archives workers.

Why Philosophy

Philosophy is the art of conception creation. The French philosopher Luc Ferry argues that we cannot make sense of the world without philosophy; that we are all products of thoughts, actions, convictions, beauty, prejudice, enlightenment, and animus developed over millennia of intellectual history; and that philosophy helps us sort out that tangle and figure out how to live life.[17] Ferry claims that the central question of philosophy relates to human finitude, our consciousness of that finitude, and how we confront its inevitability. [18] This aspect of philosophy concerns mortality and how we overcome the associated anxiety and reality of our own ultimate fate. It is the attempt to extract meaning from our short existence on earth and to determine how we live lives that honor the past and present and are remembered into the future.

Archives, like philosophy, also concerns death—we deal with records about people, institutions, and activities that have literally and symbolically passed, or are here today, but are reckoning with their own finitude. Archives is also about revelation—in the sense of revealing to view or making known—where lives and actions otherwise hidden or silenced might be revealed through archival processes. In addressing these concerns,

a philosophy of archives should illuminate theory, practice, and methodology. By this understanding, Verne Harris, Terry Cook, Brien Brothman, Eric Ketelaar, Joan Schwartz, and others joined Hugh Taylor's swim in philosophical waters. In recent years, a new cohort of authors including Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, Ricardo Punzalan, Jarrett Drake, and others have introduced to archival thinking a wide range of philosophical and critical scholarship encompassing feminist theory, critical race theory, decolonization studies, affect theory, new materialism, epistemology, and more. This profusion of ideas forms a continuum that is leading to new ways of thinking about archives, to serious critiques of archival practice, and to healthy analysis of the power structures in and through which we work. I believe that a virtue theory approach to the idea of *archival being* provides an added philosophical element to this growing literature.

The philosophers and theologians I cite are largely, though not exclusively, Western. Critics rightly point to the exclusion of non-Western thought from the Western philosophical canon and argue that it has buttressed white supremacy.[19] However, my assertion is that the philosophical ideas from the classical period to the present are, for the most part, not the problem; the development of an institutional structure of philosophical study that excluded the greater part of the world and constricted the discipline is at fault. As Isabel Wilkerson's quote heading this introduction suggests, it is interpretation and misuse of those ideas that are subject to criticism. As I have already argued for virtue, we need to reclaim the language and ideas of Western philosophy, read them with communitarian sensibilities through a duty-based lens, and apply them in pursuit of the moral good.

The controversial activist-turned-academic and prolific author Julius Lester is a case study in how to read philosophy. Lester was an outspoken Black Power advocate in the 1960s and 1970s.[20] He converted to Judaism in the 1980s, and for many years, he held joint appointments in Afro-American Studies and Judaic and Near Eastern Studies (JNES) at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst. His complex biography and personal identity[21] and his evolution as a scholar can help us understand a

different way of looking at Western philosophy. In one of his essays, Lester wrote: "My education did not confirm me as a Black man; it confirmed me as one who had the same questions as Plato and Aristotle. And my education told me that as a Black person, it was not only right to ask those questions, it was even okay to put forward my own answers and stand them next to Plato and Aristotle."[22] Like Lester, it is important that we all engage and challenge ideas, ask our own questions, contemplate the different answers we surface, and from our own authentic perspectives, measure those questions and answers alongside the likes of Plato, Confucius, Kant, Lester, Vine Deloria, Gyekye, and Hugh Taylor.

Many of the philosophical precepts of the West are also found in the philosophical discourse of global communities. A distinctive difference is that Western philosophy has been understood to focus on the individual, especially related to individual liberty, whereas, for example, the African philosophical concern is communitarianism. The latter is expressed in the sub-Saharan *ubuntu* philosophy through the maxim "I am because we are."[23] Among the main points of this book are the ideas of human dignity, humaneness, and the inextricable connectedness that places the individual in a web of community. I adhere to the definition of ethics expressed by Ghanaian Kwasi Wiredu: "The observance of rules for the harmonious adjustment of the interest of the individual to those of others in society."[24] My hope, through virtue theory, is to read Western thinkers in a communitarian manner. With this in mind, two key definitions are necessary for concepts that flow through this book: *justice* and *the common good*.

Justice

Numerous lists of virtues have been compiled since humans began considering the meaning of life; most of these lists have in common the identification of *justice* as the virtue that stands above all others. As Comte-Sponville argues, "justice encompasses all the other virtues, even though it substitutes for none." He observes, "But who could be so complacent as to think that he knows exactly what it [justice] is or that he himself is completely

just?"[25] At this point, we must ask two pertinent questions. First, is justice truly an archival concern? To daylight my personal bias, my answer is *yes*, it is a primary archival concern. Although still contested in some quarters, there is a growing consensus that justice, in its many forms, is an important principle in modern archives theory. And this leads to the second question: In the archival context, what do we mean by the term *justice*? This, by any estimation, is not a simple question.

Justice is a pivotal framework in the following pages, informing archival virtues and dispositions, and falling within the categorization of *justice as morality*. The conception of justice that most resonates with me is the seemingly simple and profoundly elegant definition from David Wallace who argues that justice is "the demand of respect for the other."[26] An expansion on this definition frames justice as the "ideal vision that every human being is of equal and incalculable value, entitled to shared standards of freedom, equality, and respect."[27]

Wallace, of course, complicates his efficient definition by noting that a theory of justice in the archives must take account of the literature external to our profession by

> embracing ambiguity over clarity; accepting that social memory is always contestable and reconfigurable; understanding that politics and political power is always present in shaping social memory; considering that archives and archival praxis always exist within contexts of power (be it political, economic, organizational, or individual); recognizing the paradox of archives and archivists as loci of both weak social power and significant social memory shaping potential; and acknowledging that social justice itself is ambiguous and contingent on dissimilar space, time, and cultural contexts.[28]

Justice, therefore, is a complex, contested term with many dimensions and manifestations—it is plural. Caswell et al. argue that any discourse on justice is "a contribution to an ongoing conversation rather than a one-size-fits-all solution."[29] As part of that conversation, I begin with the simple idea that justice honors everyone's freedom—individually and in community—and demands everyone's obligation to cherish human dignity. And

sustaining human dignity is justice in practice. I agree with Punzalan and Caswell that justice in the archives is a worthy goal and that "as shapers of the historical record, archivists have a professional obligation to work toward a more equitable future."[30] To which I add Lae'l Hughes-Watkins' coda that it is not just an equitable future we strive for; we are obliged to work "also toward a moral one."[31] In its plurality, justice, as a preeminent virtue, assumes the form needed in specific situations. This moral engagement with justice points to another term that requires contextual clarification: the *common good*.

Common Good

Common good is also a contested term. It has recently been described as a passive and nonaccountable articulation of neoliberal thought that supports commodification of information and treats it as consumable and transactional. To counteract this co-optation by neoliberal discourse,[32] I suggest applying a lens of moral engagement to better understand what the common good is.

Robert Reich, writing about political-economy, argues that "the common good consists of our shared values about what we owe one another. . . . A concern for the common good . . . is a moral attitude." He further notes that the common good is "a pool of trust" formed over time, "a trust that most other people share the same basic ideals."[33] Adapting the common good to archival theory asks us to commit collectively to a vision for a just and equitable society, to embrace difference and change as norms, to construct relationships that obligate us to *the other*, to broker dialogue and civil discourse, and to make hospitality an archival value. This is but a partial list of what we owe to one another. Whether archivists and archives are willing or can commit to these essential actions is our central moral vector.

The common good should be recognized in its communitarian affect. It does not derive from the goods or the preferences solely of individuals, but is, according to Gyekye, "that which is essentially good for human

beings as such. . . . For the common good embraces the goods—the basic goods—of all the members of the community. . . . The pursuit of the good of all is the goal of the communitarian society. . . . A sense of the common good—which is a core of shared values—is the underlying presupposition of African social morality."[34] And, I might add, of this book.

In critiquing the common good, Hannah Alpert-Abrams et al. suggest *collective good* as a substitution; they call it "a framework that brings together theories of common good and collective action."[35] Their preferred term has compelling appeal. Nevertheless, I believe my definition of common good is consistent with their argument. I use *common good* throughout this book, but if readers choose to read it as *collective good*, I believe we will arrive at the same destination.

Context

I am writing in a time of crisis, in America and worldwide, including the existential threat of worsening climate change, political and social upheaval, ongoing protest after the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, questioning whether we are at an inflection point in reckoning with America's legacy of slavery and racism, and a virulent global pandemic. As I am completing these words, Covid-19 has struck over 32 million and killed nearly six hundred thousand in the United States alone. The official unemployment rate during the pandemic reached as high as 14.7 percent, although the real figure was probably closer to twenty percent. No one knows for sure what any of those figures will be before the pandemic is defeated.

Nevertheless, this book was conceived with a sense of optimism, in part from witnessing the heroic response to Covid-19 by first responders; but also, in microcosm, the response within our profession. Among those deeply impacted by the pandemic are many part-time, hourly, contract, temporary, term-limited, and otherwise contingent archives workers, most of whom are young colleagues, including many who are also coping with college debt. The response to this acute economic challenge speaks to