

Perspective

Et Tu Schellenberg? Thoughts on the Dagger of American Appraisal Theory

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Abstract: Luciana Duranti's article, "The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory" challenges the very foundations of American appraisal practice. Duranti believes that through several fundamental errors American archivists have embraced a unique body of appraisal thought that "betray[s] archival accountability." This article examines Duranti's arguments and finds them unpersuasive. The article accepts the idea that there is a discontinuity with European appraisal theory; however, American appraisal practice reflects faithfully the American records and cultural environment. Operating within its own cultural context, American appraisal is as valid and legitimate as traditions emanating from other cultures and other times.

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LUCIANA DURANTI'S ARTICLE, "The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory," is breathtaking in both its stated and implied conclusions. In a carefully reasoned but impassioned argument, Luciana Duranti comes to the conclusion that appraisal as it is understood and practiced by archivists in the United States, to "attribute different values to archival documents and to destroy those of less value,"¹ is in fundamental conflict with traditional archival theory and with the very nature of archives. Duranti believes that through several errors, mainly attributable to Theodore Schellenberg, American archivists have embraced a unique concept of archives which cannot co-exist with traditional archival theory. If Duranti is correct, almost a half-century of archival thought is not only irrelevant, it actually "betray[s] archival accountability."²

Before embracing a sweeping repudiation of its own heritage, the American archival community should carefully examine both the arguments put forth by Duranti as well as the underlying premises that support those arguments. Although carefully reasoned, clearly presented, and embossed with a patina of "universal" archival theory and the "eternal" nature of archives, many of the premises upon which her arguments rest are founded on less than universally accepted ideas.

An examination of the article makes clear the discontinuity between the practices of many archivists who work with contemporary records and previously established theoretical constructs regarding archives. Because the American record environment has been among the twentieth century's most dynamic, it is not surprising that American archivists would be among the first to feel the tension between pre-existing theoretical constructs and contemporary reality.³ Duranti demonstrates that there is a fundamental discontinuity between classical European archival thought and the reality of recordkeeping and archival practices in an increasingly post-industrial American society. At issue is how to interpret this difference and what actions this difference might lead archivists to take.

"The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory" divides itself into several arguments, the three foundations of which are:

1. Fundamental, and presumably eternal, archival principles were established in the law of the Roman Empire.
2. Hilary Jenkinson has persuasively articulated these fundamental archival principles through four ideas: impartiality, authenticity, naturalness, and interrelationship.
3. Theodore Schellenberg chose to ignore Jenkinson and instead defined archives in a unique and flawed manner, one result of which is a fundamentally flawed American appraisal practice.

In each of these three critical assertions, Duranti's argument in favor of European archival theory is ineffective and unpersuasive. In the end, Duranti's article does not so much point out the error of American ways as it reminds us why the American archival community has chosen to follow a path not traveled by some Europeans, but fundamentally true to the role played by archives in the United States.

¹Luciana Duranti, "The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory," *American Archivist* 57 (Spring 1994): 336.

²Duranti, "The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory," 342.

³For the purposes of this article, "American" archivists refers to archivists in the United States of America.

The Truths of Rome

Duranti reminds us that the Roman Empire established two legal concepts regarding archives which continue to have significance today. Roman law established archives as places of "perpetual memory" and "public faith."⁴ Duranti defines perpetual memory as a consistent, enduring, and stable documentation of past events. She defines public faith to mean entrusting the documents that recorded this perpetual memory into reliable hands, generally a state-run archives.

That these concepts exist, and that the concepts continue to have importance, is a point of some significance. But Duranti's further statements, that Roman law, including these two archival concepts, "constituted the core" of medieval legal writing, entered the statutes of "most" medieval states, eventually became the "common civil law" of all Europe, (and one assumes North America as well), and ultimately formed "the basis for [European] spiritual and cultural unity" stretches an interesting observation about archival history beyond reasonable interpretation.

The centrality of Roman archival concepts to classical archival theory is debatable. Duranti herself allows that heretofore most scholars have traced the origins of classical theory to "juridical writings of the eleventh century"⁵ rather than to Rome. Still others have argued that ancient Athens produced a contradictory but equally important classical archival tradition.⁶ Even granting a groundbreaking role to Roman archival law, the implications for modern archival practice are less compelling than Duranti asserts.

Any consideration of Roman law should begin with an analysis of why the Romans created the concepts that Duranti has invested with mythic quality. Such an analysis suggests that the Roman Empire developed the concepts of perpetual memory and public faith not because the Caesars desired to identify eternal verities to guide future civilizations but because the Romans had several pragmatic problems they needed to resolve. As Duranti herself relates, the Romans had a practical civic need for "a device...to freeze the fact occurring in the present before it slipped into the past, and the document, as embodiment of the fact, had the function of converting the present to the permanent."⁷

Put less philosophically, the Romans needed a way to preserve accurate copies of basic legal documents. Lacking a printing press through which to widely distribute true and accurate copies of these basic documents, the Romans struck upon the reasonable expedient of creating a place where true documents could be retained and preserved, a place that Duranti has retrospectively chosen to define as the forerunner of modern archives.

The difference, however, between how the Romans treated their unique copy of a basic document and the way in which contemporary American society treats its "archival" copy of basic legal documents makes clear the difference between Roman and American society. The Constitution is preserved in the Archives of the United States just as Roman legal documents were preserved in Roman Archives. However, the difference between a Roman archives and the National Archives in Washington is found in the purpose for keeping the document and in its use. The National Archives displays the Constitution

⁴Duranti, "The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory," 331-32.

⁵Duranti, "The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory," 331.

⁶See, for example, Angelika Menne-Haritz, "Appraisal or Documentation: Can We Appraise Archives by Selecting Content?" *American Archivist* 57 (Summer 1994): 530-31, who traces the origins of Western archival theory to Athens. See Duranti's footnote 7 (331) for citations to articles which trace the origins to the Middle Ages.

⁷Duranti, "The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory," 331.

primarily as an object of civic devotion rather than as a preserved legal text. It is a piece of parchment that symbolizes the Republic itself and the public is invited to view the Constitution, along with the Declaration of Independence, in a basilica-like setting, suitable for the symbolic freight these documents carry. This is a place of national dedication, not a legal reference library where Supreme Court justices pop by just to be sure their copy of Article IX is accurate, or where the guard next to the two venerated documents watches each tourist carefully to be sure someone does not corrupt the text. In truth, the Constitution displayed with such circumspection and preserved at tremendous expense is not even the law of the land. Except for the Bill of Rights, the “archival” copy of the various amendments to the Constitution are not on display, despite the fact that those amendments profoundly affect the organic legal framework of the United States.⁸

The example of the Constitution demonstrates how contemporary American society has relieved modern archives from practical legal obligations for maintaining public law, replacing this practical responsibility with a largely symbolic role. In modern society, particularly in modern democratic societies, perpetual memory is achieved not through engrossed parchment in helium-filled display cases designed to withstand a nuclear assault, but, rather, through wide publication, dissemination, and preservation of laws and other critical texts. Likewise, public faith is given to documents not because there is an “archival” copy tucked away in Archives II, but because of a system of open government, free press, and general access to those widely disseminated documents. If the National Archives (as well as every state archives) were obliterated tomorrow, the perpetual memory and public faith inherent in the American legal system would not be affected. Thousands of printed copies of the nation’s fundamental and statutory laws would maintain the memory and faith of the legal system.⁹

Similarly, contemporary society has eliminated the need to deposit private documents in a depository of record through the development of alternate legal devices. Private contracts in today’s world are validated not through deposit in a public place but through notarized photocopies distributed to all those concerned with the contract. A judge, requested to resolve a dispute arising from a particular contract, would ask not for the “archival” copy but the notarized photocopy.

⁸James M. O’Toole, “The Symbolic Significance of Archives,” *American Archivist* 56 (Spring 1993): 234–55, explores the difference between the legal and symbolic nature of archives in greater depth and with more nuance than we can do here. For a different take on the same subject, see Anne MacDermid, “The Essence of Archival Communication,” in *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor*, edited by Barbara L. Craig (Ottawa: Association of Canadian Archivists, 1992).

⁹This can be approached from two complementary angles. On the one hand, cultural memory is not dependent upon original documents so much as on the information contained in them. See James M. O’Toole, “On the Idea of Permanence,” *American Archivist* 52 (Winter 1989): 10–25, who argues that “Refocusing [archivists’] attention on the permanence of the information in records rather than on the documents themselves will restore a broader view and will reemphasize the possibilities and the usefulness of preserving information in formats other than the original” (24).

On the other hand, cultural memory is not dependent solely on material in archives, because many institutions are charged with preserving culture. Kenneth E. Foote, “To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture,” *American Archivist* 53 (Summer 1990): 378–92, reminds us that “Each particular institution [museums, archives, libraries] may sustain a *representation* of the past quite specific to its institutional mandate, but these representations can be interrelated. The value of such a point is that it guards against assuming that collective memory is invested in any single type of human institution, such as the archives” (380; emphasis in original). This point was re-emphasized and extended by Richard J. Cox, “The Documentation Strategy and Archival Appraisal Principles: A Different Perspective,” *Archivaria* 38 (Fall 1994): 26–29.

Ultimately, the two angles converge, because part of what libraries do, for instance, is preserve different (printed) versions of many original documents found in archives—such as the U.S. Constitution.

The point here is not simply that there is a profound difference in the way contemporary Americans and ancient Romans used an archives. More importantly, the Roman concept of archives and the archival theory that springs from that concept is grounded not in principles that form "the basis for [Europe's] spiritual and cultural unity," but, rather, concepts that served needs of a particular people at a particular moment in time.

In asserting the universality of Roman archival theory, Duranti implicitly confuses logic with nature. She speaks of the "nature" of archives as a fixed and immutable reality from which true archival theory derives. The nature of archives, however, is a human postulate, based on human assumptions and logically derived from those assumptions. These postulates, however, may vary between individuals and societies and cannot be considered an observed fact or a testable hypothesis. Although Duranti can argue that the Roman archival postulates have the weight of tradition and that these postulates logically lead to a certain set of conclusions about the "nature" of Roman and Roman-influenced archives, there is no logical support for her belief that Roman postulates are thus natural in all places and for all time. Classical Rome was not ancient Athens, nor is modern Washington a reflected vision of the Caesars.

The variability among beliefs and social institutions between individuals and societies is an idea archivists should find particularly easy to understand. Archivists, after all, routinely raise the importance of provenance and original order and argue that the peculiar contextual relationships that exist within a given set of records are of significance. Surely, if the way an individual chooses to file his or her papers can be vested with such importance, it is not hard to recognize that the peculiar and ever-changing cultural milieu of a given society will affect what archivists are expected to do, how they do it, and the concepts that underlie archival practice in a given society.

In the end, there is no inherent reason to believe that the needs of the Roman Empire or the tasks the Caesars assigned to their archives are identical, or even similar to the needs of modern polities, and the tasks modern political leaders give to contemporary archivists. Roman archival practice and principles cast an interesting light on contemporary archival ideas but Roman concepts are not a beacon guiding all future archival development. Every society establishes its own beacons, and is free to exploit or ignore the light created by its predecessors.

The Writings of Hilary Jenkinson

If the Caesars did not, by definition, create eternal archival principles, it is still possible that Duranti is correct insofar as there is sufficient overlap of mission or long-term cultural unity to allow the uses assigned to archives in Rome, as well as the theory and practice that grew out of those uses, to retain contemporary validity. To observe that societies may behave in different manners, does not document that they have chosen to do so.

To resolve this point, one's attention must turn to Hilary Jenkinson, whom Duranti identifies as the standard bearer of Roman thought among contemporary English authors. If Jenkinson is persuasive in carrying forward the Roman tradition, the pragmatic consequences of Duranti's argument holds, even if the philosophical underpinnings are inaccurate. However, Jenkinson does not persuasively make the case that the laws and ideas of Augustus can simply and directly be applied in Neville Chamberlain's England, much less Bill Clinton's America. To make this point, let us closely examine what Duranti

identifies as Jenkinson's four core concepts: impartiality, authenticity, naturalness, and interrelationship, in order to identify their shortcomings.

As Jenkinson defined impartiality, it means that a document was created in the course of business and was retained for business reasons. Because the document was needed for business purposes, it was impartial and could be relied on to accurately represent events. Jenkinson understood that any given document within this impartial record set might be extraordinarily biased and untruthful. Impartiality merely meant that the record accurately reflects what occurred—administrative cooperation as well as bureaucratic backstabbing. Any tinkering with these documents might in some way interfere with this impartiality and create a misrepresentation of the whole. Archivists received and became the ultimate custodians of records created and preserved through this creator-driven process.

Impartiality, as represented by Jenkinson, while it is an appealing concept, is flawed in that it rests on a questionable premise: that the record creator is either too naive, too uninterested, or too restrained by the day-to-day needs of business to act in a way that purposefully shapes the form and content of their material. Even if such a heinous beast were to arise and attempt to manipulate the record, Jenkinson believed that the system itself is self-correcting because everyone else would have kept accurate records.

Jenkinson's record creators appear in reality to be idealized nineteenth-century British bureaucrats running her majesty's empire without regard to how subsequent generations would view them. The late-twentieth century has less illusions about the impartiality, purposefulness, and functionality of bureaucratic behavior.

Senior officers are keenly conscious of their place in history and are aware that the documents they leave behind will be used to define their legacy. Virtually all senior officers, be they presidents of the United States or presidents of small colleges, write with an eye toward history. Although not necessarily malevolent monsters, neither are they unselfconscious administrators. Rather, they are very conscious of their role and most interested in "playing to posterity" by shaping the record's form and content. At the same time, those same officers, as well as the bureaucrats who serve them, are quite capable of destroying documents not "in the course of business" but in a calculated manner designed to purge unpleasant truth, eliminate reference to other's accomplishments, or in a purely ahistorical manner designed primarily to "clean out the files" rather than to facilitate smooth operation or institutional memory. Jenkinson himself acknowledged these problems in the 1937 revision of his original 1922 *Manual*, although he did not speculate on the ramifications of this problem for his archival principles.¹⁰

In modern America, however, the ramifications for archivists have been made manifest through two highly publicized court cases. The 1979 dispute over the destruction of the FBI case files illustrates how unaccepted the idea of impartiality and the related notion of a custodial archives is in the United States. At issue in *American Friends v. Webster* is just what Jenkinson insists archivists must do: leave decisions about the destruction of documents to the impartial and natural recordkeeping needs of the creating agency administrators. The plaintiffs vigorously objected to allowing FBI officials exclusive right to make such decisions, arguing that this would create a far too narrow record. The federal courts agreed with the plaintiffs and directed the National Archives to cooperate with

¹⁰Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, "New and Revised Edition," (London: P. Lund, Humphries & Co., Ltd., 1937), 154–55. In her article, Duranti cites only Jenkinson's earlier version, rather than taking into account how the true magnitude of post-war records began to influence his thinking in the later edition of his work. All references to Jenkinson in this article will be to his 1937 edition.

scholars and others to define an appraisal approach that would capture files with historical as well as administrative value. Wrote the court in its opinion, "The law imposes upon the Archivist and his staff important responsibilities concerning the selection of what among the files of an agency may have permanent or continuing value for historical, research, legal rights and other purposes."¹¹ Lest Duranti and others view this case as a peculiar misinterpretation of the Jenkinsonian-defined order of things, a second federal court in a second highly publicized ruling regarding the so-called "PROFS" case has reiterated the activist role required of the archivist under American law.¹² American law does not accept the concept of impartiality and requires governmental archivists to look beyond it in making appraisal decisions.¹³

As much as Jenkinson might like to find impartial records, as he has defined the term, there were no impartial records in his Britain or in contemporary America nor can American archivists working within the American legal framework accept the principle. The archivist who labors merely to preserve impartiality has set upon a fool's errand that may well end in a hostile court order. The archivist who chooses to include impartiality as an essential characteristic of archives is of a happy and theoretical bent, preferring to ignore unpleasant and perhaps unsettling realities that exist in the real world of twentieth-century American bureaucracy and law.

Like impartiality, authenticity, as it is defined by Jenkinson, is a concept that reads well, but serves primarily as an intellectual artifice that comforts archivists and archival users rather than establishing a fundamental archival quality which archivists can obtain and users can rely upon. Here the issue is not the concept, since whether records are Roman or modern it is obvious that in an ideal world documents should not be tampered with, but rather with the meaning of the concept and the practical aspects of ensuring the unbroken chain of custody.

Clearly, what authenticity aims to do is assure all users that what they hold in their hand is a genuine document. In the Roman Empire this assurance may have been reasonable since each hand-prepared document would be individually entered into the archives. However, Jenkinson, perhaps because he realized that contemporary archivists could no longer really examine each document, defined archival authenticity in a very narrow way. For Jenkinson, authenticity authenticates not the document but the process by which the

¹¹*American Friends v. Webster*, Order and Opinion, p. 17, quoted in Susan Steinwall, "Appraisal and the FBI Files Case: For Whom do Archivists Retain Records?" *American Archivist* 49 (Winter 1986): 60.

¹²Much has been written on the PROFS case (which takes its name from the acronym of the IBM system used to create and store electronic mail in the Reagan and Bush White Houses), properly called *Armstrong v. Executive Office of the President*. The major article to discuss archival implications and issues is David Bearman's "Implications of *Armstrong v. Executive Office of the President* for the Archival Management of Electronic Records," *American Archivist* 56 (Fall 1993): 674-89, which gives an excellent overview of the relevant Federal Records Act and Presidential Records Act sections and reviews progress of the case to August 1993. As Bearman notes, "The Archivist of the United States was held to be in contempt of court (although this order was subsequently dismissed for technical reasons on appeal), because he failed to act to protect electronic records as soon as he knew they were going to be deleted," in effect acquiescing to the White House's determination that the materials in question were not really records and did not have to be preserved (685). For an update on the PROFS case since Bearman's article, see Page Putnam Miller, "NCC Washington Update," 1:46 (6 September 1995), which also summarizes a panel discussion at the 1995 SAA meeting in which attorneys from both sides of the case laid out their arguments.

¹³This is not a situation peculiar to the United States. Jan Boomgaard, "Appraisal and Destruction," *Janus* 1994, no. 2: 89, notes that in the Netherlands "the official municipal schedule for the appraisal of municipal records is based on two principles: the importance of the archives for the municipal administration itself and for those private persons who need records and files for rights and evidence[—]the so called administrative interest; historical/scientific interest, also called cultural interest."

documents came into the archives. Since, in contemporary archival practice, real guarantees regarding authenticity rest not on high-minded theory nor the signatures of senior officers transferring documents but rather on the low-level clerks who actually maintain the files prior to their transfer to the archives, authenticity in the modern era can never be stronger than the faith we choose to place in the skills of the dumbest of file clerks or the greediest of bribe seekers.

Society generally chooses to believe in authenticity because it suits our needs. Judges cannot question every document, and few people wish to verify each month's electric bill. While society generally chooses to believe in authenticity, society has also developed elaborate mechanisms to challenge it. Forgeries do appear, scam artists occasionally issue fake contracts, and society has legal tools to cope with the problems created by these actions. These legal tools, however, usually have little or no recourse to archives.

To realize the extent to which American notions about authenticity stand outside of the Jenkinsonian concept, consider the vast number of federal, state, and local records which have, at one time or another, become alienated from government custody and fallen into private hands. If recovered, these documents are treated by government officials and citizen researchers alike no differently than documents with perfect custodial pedigrees. In American custom, the fundamental concern appears primarily to be about a document's "recordness," rather than its chain of custodianship.

Although archivists should attempt to maintain authenticity and facilitate this process in every way possible, it is not logical to construe authenticity as an essential component of an archives. To include authenticity as a fundamental component of "archivalness" is to ask the archives and the archivist to do the impossible, to certify that no one has ever tampered with anything. At best, the archivist can only do what Jenkinson does, certify the authenticity of the process through which custody has been maintained. That, however, is a poor substitute for what society truly wants and what the Romans may have achieved—authentication that the document in hand is accurate and genuine.¹⁴

Jenkinson's third archival criterion, naturalness, seems closely linked to the concept of impartiality and suffers from the same shortcomings. Documents, in this view, accumulate "naturally, progressively, and continuously, like the sediments of geological stratification."¹⁵ Although to some extent this is undoubtedly true, the concept, like authenticity, is subject to significant non-business-related manipulation by those who create and destroy these layers of sediment while using a metaphor that confuses arbitrary natural processes with extraordinarily variable human activity.

Moreover, in presenting the implications of this concept, Jenkinson himself, when forced to confront the practical implications of naturalness, had to employ some extraor-

¹⁴The question of whether electronic records are of more concern from an authenticity standpoint has been raised by many archivists. We believe this issue has been exaggerated. As David Bearman has noted, if archivists "will be satisfied with the degree of evidential historicity they were able to achieve in paper based record systems,...there are very few barriers to implementing successful electronic based archival environments" ["Archival Principles and the Electronic Office," in *Information Handling in Offices and Archives*, edited by Angelika Menne-Haritz (New York: K.G. Saur, 1993), 192]. Or as Bruno Delmas has asserted even more directly: "Any technic [sic] or media for reproducing information can be falsified: paper as well as photographic or electronic records. Washing a check might not have any more of a trace than modifying an electronic file. It seems that electronic records must profit from the same presumed authenticity as other archival documents, as long as they are produced and kept in the offices with the same precautions." ["Archival Science and Information Technologies," in Menne-Haritz, *Information Handling in Offices and Archives*, 169].

¹⁵Duranti, "The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory," 335.

dinary mental gymnastics to maintain that record creators and not archivists should destroy documents.

Faced in fact with the prospect of impossible accumulations..., we propose to try to *prevent the accumulations occurring at all*; to deal with the matter before documents come to the Archive state and the Archivist's custody. On the other hand, we must see that our Administrator does not revert too completely to primitive habits and destroy unreasonably.¹⁶

To ensure that the records creator did his or her duty but did so in a way that was not "primitive," Jenkinson suggested that "the line of action we [archivists] lay down for him [the administrator]" be based only on administrative rather than historical values, and that the archivist establish "a number of carefully framed regulations" to guide the administrator.¹⁷ It is difficult to understand how, if the archivist is empowered by Jenkinson to frame regulations governing destruction, whatever the theoretical underpinnings for those regulations, that ability practically or theoretically differs from the archivist actually destroying the material. Directing someone to do something is, for all intents and purposes, the same as doing it oneself. Developing schedules to tell administrators what to throw away, and, by default, what to save, is the same as doing the deed in the archives itself. In the end, the practical implications regarding the concept of naturalness forced Jenkinson to present a practical concession that voids his theoretical point.

Jenkinson's final concept is that of interrelationship, which carries with it the important corollary of uniqueness. Here Jenkinson asserts that the meaning of a single archival document is dependent upon its relationship to all the other documents of the archives. Although Duranti contends that appraisal violates all four of Jenkinson's criteria, interrelatedness is clearly the principle that is most obviously damaged. To pluck from a file documents that appear "insignificant" may upset some subtle relationship that the archivist is unaware of and which cannot be restored.

American archivists have long shared with Jenkinson the belief that interrelationships, as expressed through the ideas of provenance and original order, matter. The difference, however, is that where Jenkinson seems to envision complex documentary inter-relationships of such fragility that the removal of a single document may create havoc, American archivists see interrelationships as a concept of great vigor and vitality, which can be improved, not damaged, by judicious pruning. Why Jenkinson and American archivists see interrelatedness in such different ways may lie in the kinds of record environments which molded their thought.

Jenkinson, a medievalist by training, was schooled in an environment that was document-poor. Few documents were ever produced, and the ravages of time have reduced even this number. In such an environment, every shred of paper was needed to piece together a picture of past events. Interrelationships were indeed fragile and the loss of a single item might lose the only clue of a particular connection. Even Jenkinson, however, was not an absolutist in these matters. He wrote that the pristine context of documents "in nine cases out of ten is important, if not vital, for the full understanding of their significance," leaving skeptics to speculate regarding the remaining ten percent.¹⁸

¹⁶Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 151–52 (emphasis in original).

¹⁷Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 152.

¹⁸Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 42.

Contemporary American archivists function in an environment that is document-rich. Faced with documents in quantities never before encountered in human history, many American archivists do not believe that losing a few stray pieces of paper truly matters. Indeed, many American archivists would stand Jenkinson's dictum on its head, arguing that, in nine cases out of ten, weeding excess documents from a file makes the interrelationships clearer. For many American archivists the concept of interrelatedness is an extraordinarily robust idea. These archivists trust that the plethora of records in existence establish multiple ways to document the same interrelationship and thus the destruction of some documents can take place with little or no risk of destroying the only available evidence of a particular interrelationship.

There is no evidence-based way to determine if the American assumption, that a sea of documents creates an extraordinarily robust body of documentary interrelationships, is true. A contemporary archivist prone to worry will point out that even if robust interrelationships generally exist, in the specific case of particular records the interrelationships of those records may be every bit as fragile as those found among medieval documents. There exists here grounds for differences of opinion. But differences of opinion, while they may explain differing archival practice, are of insufficient weight to support claims to universal archival theory.

In the final analysis, Jenkinson's four concerns—impartiality, authenticity, naturalness, and cohesiveness—as well as the Roman concepts which Duranti claims underlie them, while of continuing interest, are not, in the world of modern documentation, essential characteristics of archives. The nature of modern documentation and an understanding of the life cycle of modern records limits the applicability of these concepts. Jenkinson's concepts are no longer touchstones of archival thought but rather footnotes that explain past practices and societal choices. Jenkinson's writing is not a bold reassertion of time-honored principles but rather an attempt to breathe continued life into an increasingly irrelevant tradition.

Schellenberg and the American Appraisal Experience

Duranti rightly points out that Schellenberg changed the definition of archives used by Hilary Jenkinson and by redefining archives "prepared the path for the complete divergence of American archival practice from that of the rest of the Western world."¹⁹ As Duranti herself notes, if Schellenberg's definitions are accepted then everything else he suggests, and by extension everything else American archivists have written about appraisal, is acceptable. The question, simply put, is whether or not the changes introduced into the definition of archives by Schellenberg are legitimate.

For Duranti, Schellenberg's changes are apostasy. The proof of this apostasy, however, flows not from what Schellenberg says but rather from the method by which he came to say it. "Schellenberg's definition of archives was theoretically flawed," asserts Duranti, "not because he built into it elements of value and use for research purposes, but because he arrived at it on purely pragmatic grounds."²⁰ As Duranti approvingly quotes Terry Eastwood, "[Schellenberg] was 'quite willing to accept that archivists need rules of procedures,' but not 'to base those rules on ideas about the universal properties of archives or to examine his own basic ideas about archives which he presents as self-evident

¹⁹Duranti, "The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory," 338.

²⁰Duranti, "The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory," 339.

truths.”²¹ Schellenberg’s sin was his failure to examine his basic premises, and his pragmatism, in the light of classical archival theory.

Had Schellenberg examined his premises in terms of classic archival theory he would have discovered, as Duranti so carefully documents, that what he believed was at odds with classic archival thought. This agreed upon, it does not prove Duranti’s fundamental point, that Schellenberg’s ideas are invalid simply because they are based on pragmatic observations. Rather, it raises questions about how one develops theory and specifically on the conflict between inductive and deductive systems of logic.

Duranti’s arguments are deductive in character. Through a detailed examination of Roman ideas, she establishes first principles, and from them she deduces archival methodology and practice. Schellenberg, however, in stating his “self-evident truths,” was really drawing conclusions from the observations he and his colleagues at the National Archives had made about the nature of contemporary federal documentation. His process was inductive, and because of that he needed only “self-evident” truths upon which to base his work rather than a complex body of theory. Schellenberg’s inductive process had no need to consider classic first principles of archives since in an inductive system of logic the validity of first principles rests exclusively on their ability to accommodate observed reality rather than any need on the observer’s part to explain why reality diverged from the principles.

Duranti is correct in saying that Schellenberg never took his pragmatic, methodological observations and applied them to classical archival theory. Duranti is correct in labeling Schellenberg a methodologist. But Duranti is wrong if she believes that in writing these words, in documenting that Schellenberg was “pragmatic,” that she has somehow undermined his work. For if Duranti can, from her perspective, characterize Schellenberg as a mere methodologist who failed to deal with the higher-order problems within archival theory, Schellenberg, from his perspective, could dismiss Duranti as an abstract theoretician whose quaint, classical notions regarding first principles have no grounding in the real world of contemporary archival practice.

Although no one will ever conclusively resolve the merits of inductive versus deductive logic, one might consider a cautionary tale from the Ptolemaic and Copernican systems of astronomy that Duranti mentions in her article. Classical astronomical theory, the Ptolemaic system, was an elegant construct passed down from the ancients and embossed with the patina of a classical heritage. When Galileo first gazed out at the stars through his newly invented telescope, he came upon a pragmatic, and most unsettling, observation that the heavens did not behave as Ptolemy had predicted. The solution to this problem struck upon by Galileo’s superiors and the masters of the Catholic Church, who had deduced all manner of additional “truths” from the earth-centered character of the Ptolemaic universe, was to suggest that Galileo ignore the evidence of his eyes and pay lip service to classical learning. A wise man who understood that a weekend spent with the Inquisitor would not be a fun experience, Galileo relented, but the realities he observed could not be forced to relent. Eventually Copernicus took the realities seen by Galileo and developed a new view of the universe, a better theory that more fully explained observed behavior.

Although it is always dangerous to apply observations drawn from natural occurrences to the more pliable world of human behavior, Schellenberg, like Galileo was a

²¹Duranti, “The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory,” 339.

pragmatist surveying a horizon previously unexplored. The pile of records Schellenberg observed was unlike those his European colleagues had based their concepts and theories upon. Schellenberg recorded what he saw and developed a methodology to accommodate his observations. To observe that Schellenberg was more a Galileo, a surveyor of the new scene, than a Copernicus, a theoretician to explain the new reality, may well be true, but to reject his observations simply because he failed to develop a theoretical framework through which to interpret them is wrongheaded.

The moral of the tale for archivists is that the burden of explanation falls not on the pragmatic Schellenberg for daring to point out that the world of records no longer behaves in ways congenial to classical archival theory, but on classical theorists to justify the continuing vitality of their theory in the face of evidence that classical theory is no longer valid. If Duranti wishes to invalidate almost fifty years of American thought on appraisal, she must do so not by relying on the authority of classical theory but by demonstrating how classical theory remains methodologically relevant in the light of an ever-changing record universe.

Concluding Thoughts

After having considered Duranti's article at great length we are struck with two, perhaps injudicious, closing thoughts regarding the role of theory in archives and the existence of universal archival theory.

In raising the issue of the methodological relevance of theory, a fundamental concern is presented which goes to the heart of the article written by Duranti and the most fundamental reason why it should not be taken seriously. In the last few sentences of her article, Duranti briefly discusses the question of methodology, writing, "archival methods need to be developed that allow for selection and acquisition to maintain intact the characteristics of archival documents, and this will require much study and research. But no task is impossible if its purpose is known and clear and if a reunited profession recognizes it as its...primary responsibility.... [Archivists need] a methodology driven by archival theory rather than vice versa."²² Duranti's dictum that theory must drive methodology is a recipe for disaster.

Archives is an applied discipline. The test of a theory is not its pedigree but its utility. As Terry Eastwood has written, "theory in the archivist's hands is only so good as it serves the work."²³ Records are a practical by-product of societal interaction that do not tend to themselves while archivists struggle to harness methodologies to a quest for archival theory. Rather, for records to survive, practicing archivists must ply their trade on a daily basis using methodologies that work rather than employing methodologies that are theoretically correct. To suggest otherwise is to return to the mindset of those who

²²Duranti, "The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory," 344.

²³Terry Eastwood, "Toward a Social Theory of Appraisal," in Craig, *The Archival Imagination*, 72. There has of course been much debate in the archival literature about what constitutes archival theory. Rather than re-list the relevant articles, we will point to Cox, "The Documentation Strategy and Archival Appraisal Principles," 31–32, note 2, which lists many. In this same article (p. 14), Cox provides a reasonable definition of theory. He quotes Judith A. Perolle, *Computers and Social Change: Information, Property, and Power* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1987), 30: "Theories are logically interconnected statements about the world that describe, explain, and predict the occurrence of phenomena. They are based on *empirical generalizations* about the world, which are in turn based upon analysis of our direct observations."

became wedded to the Ptolemaic universe, a mindset which implicitly believed that theory was more important than reality.

Duranti errs not only in failing to understand the pragmatic relationship between archival practice and theory, but also in arguing that there is an objective, immutable, universal concept of archives. The American archival methodology articulated by Schellenberg is not a universal archival Truth, but simply right and useful for its particular place and time. As American conditions change, so too should American archival theory evolve to reflect societal change. Ultimately, the term "archives" and the work of the archivist are not defined by those who practice the profession and define professional theory. Particularly in democratic nation-states, it is society that defines what is expected to be found in an archives and what social role an archivist plays.²⁴

American society, it has been remarked by observers from de Tocqueville on, is not strongly oriented toward history or the retention of historical information, is mistrustful of unchecked authority, and is utilitarian to a fault. In the twentieth century, that same society began to generate vast amounts of information, originally in paper format and increasingly in electronic media. The characteristics of American society have led to a set of cultural expectations that call upon archivists to do some cost-benefit analysis regarding the preservation of archives, and also see the archivist as a check and balance on the preservation decisions of records creators. Appraisal has been a critical tool in the strategies developed by American archivists as a result of the cultural role assigned to archivists by American society.

For Duranti to dismiss or denigrate American developments in the area of appraisal is therefore wrong. American thought on appraisal is not shamefully ignorant of classical theory, needing to be hidden or discarded; it is rather a pragmatic and fundamental tool available to all archivists faced with a cultural environment in which they must make choices to reconcile limited resources with virtually unlimited bodies of information. American appraisal theory and methodology is not perfect nor directly transferable to other cultures. It has evolved since Schellenberg and continues to evolve. But, by and large, it serves the American work, and serves it well.

In the end, American appraisal practice may have flaws and European thought may inform American in important and significant ways. However, no one will ever succeed in documenting these flaws nor using European theory to inform American archivists by simply invoking the edicts of the Caesars in the Americas, expecting the residents of those outlying provinces to do their duty and obey. Caesar is dead. If Schellenberg ran the dagger of American appraisal practice through the heart of Roman archival concepts, we would assert it was not because he loved theory less, but pragmatism more. American archivists, true to their society's tradition of pragmatism, ask not what is theoretically correct, but rather what works.

²⁴See Roy C. Shaeffer, "Transcendent Concepts: Power, Appraisal, and the Archivist as 'Social Outcast,'" *American Archivist* 55 (Fall 1992): 608–19, for further discussion of how and why broad societal values do and should set the context for archival appraisal. Hans Booms, "Society and the Formation of the Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources," translated by Hermina Joldersma and Richard Klumpenhower, *Archivaria* 24 (Summer 1987): 69–107, takes this argument to its logical extreme, wherein public opinion should both legitimize and dictate archival appraisal. One can agree that archivists have a social (rather than simply a narrow institutional) obligation without turning appraisal into a popularity contest.