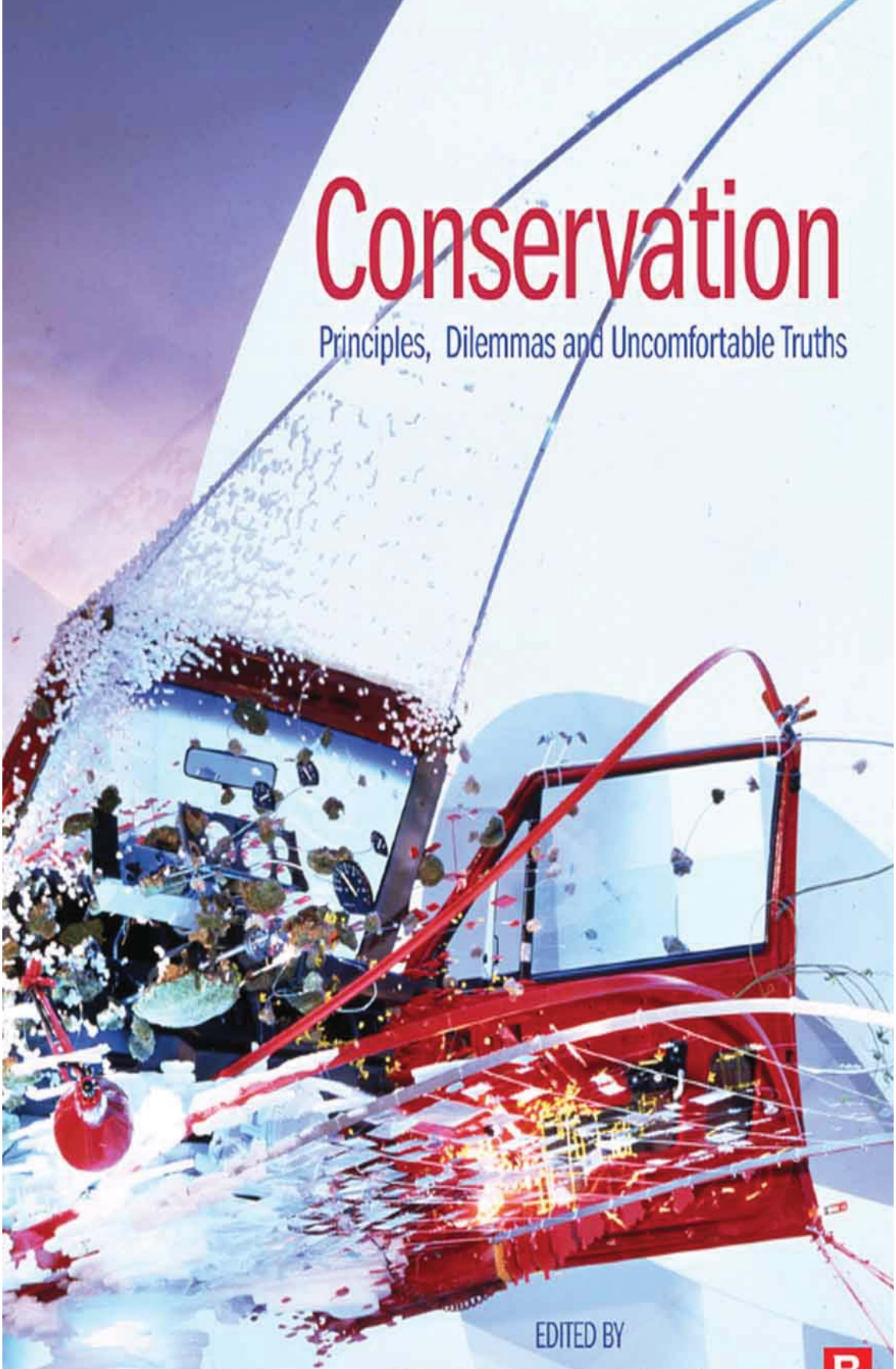
Conservation

Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths



EDITED BY

Alison Richmond • Alison Bracker

BH

Conservation
Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths

Edited by
Alison Richmond and Alison Bracker

Published in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum London


ELSEVIER

AMSTERDAM • BOSTON • HEIDELBERG • LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD
PARIS • SAN DIEGO • SAN FRANCISCO • SINGAPORE • SYDNEY • TOKYO
Butterworth-Heinemann is an imprint of Elsevier

Butterworth-Heinemann is an imprint of Elsevier
Linacre House, Jordan Hill, Oxford OX2 8DP, UK
30 Corporate Drive, Suite 400, Burlington, MA 01803, USA

First edition 2009

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN: 978-0-7506-8201-5

For information on all Butterworth-Heinemann publications
visit our web site at http://books.elsevier.com

09 10 11 12 13 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

6

Practical Ethics v2.0

Jonathan Kemp

Introduction

The title of this chapter alludes to Peter Singer's 1979 book, *Practical Ethics*.[1,2] Singer's version of applied ethics (in his case, preferential ethics) has antecedents in Jeremy Bentham's Utilitarianism, roughly defined as being that an action is good if it creates the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Bentham conceives of an algorithmically based calculus for judging whether an action is good or not. However, the calculus can only work in a commensurable and closed system, that is, in a state of being self-defined and isolated from environmental influence (as in, for example, a dictionary, which is a closed system in that it defines each word in terms of other words, all of which can also be found in the same dictionary). Thus environmental influences, *vis à vis* incommensurability, present challenges to any ethical theory that contends that the right thing to do is the action that promotes the most overall good. Any disagreement about the commensurability of values, as, for example, in contemporary notions of 'stakeholder consensus' or 'interpretative community,' means that any Bentham-like utilitarian calculus is not even theoretically possible.

Thus, as codes of ethics can only be successfully applied in a closed system and, as with many human agencies, conservation generally operates to a lesser or greater degree in open-ended systems, then all conservation actions are bound to fail when measured against any one version of the ethical codes of conservation. This chapter considers the execution of ethical behaviour in both present and future settings with the offer of a beginning to the resolution of this inherent contradiction.

Terminal beach[3]

With many artifacts there is a pronounced instability in identifying particular components as sites of authenticity in the sense of 'original material,' traditionally one aspect of an object charged by the assignation of a 'truth-value' that legitimizes

some aesthetic experiences. It is because of this particular notion of authenticity that conservation has lain down its principles on the bedrock of scientific analysis, outwardly assimilating those methodologies into its own ethical codes and practice.

One consequence is that attributions of authenticity are always open to modulation by the development and availability of this or that scientific technique to narrow down probabilistic error.[4] As the methodologies of material science have become the most authoritative means of object description then, concomitantly, they have also become the authority for legitimizing much of conservation practice. And in so doing they ensure their own transmission, and that of their essentialist epistemology, through the preservation of the material object.[5]

Flip[6]

What does authenticity have to do with ethics?

Attempts have been made to pull this predominant focus of conservation away from its perceivably narrow concentration on the material condition of an object. Notions of an object being an actor within a social network and conservation as a social process engaged in the production of cultural objects have been discussed as framing any concern with an object's material safeguard and presentation. However, from within conservation the narrower focus remains dominant in binding authenticity to ethics, as summed up by Frank Matero: 'Implicit is the notion of cultural heritage as a physical resource that is valuable and irreplaceable – an inheritance that promotes cultural continuity.'[7]

So conservation practice is well rooted in privileging the retention of the physical integrity of the object through the minimizing of loss. Any restorations are viewed as potential un-tetherings of the object from a state of authenticity, in intent or condition, and a state against which any difference, ultimately, can be quantified scientifically. If inauthentic expressions (viz. restorations) somehow deceive, then additions to compensate for loss cannot, under this rubric, be original or authentic. This has led to the current practice to cue additions, where they are necessary, so as to be discovered as inauthentic, and thus to allow people to have an impression of the object *qua. object* but to become aware of just where and what is unoriginal.

This focus on material authenticity underpins the preferred notion of disclosure embodied in current codes of ethics: that which is altered is documented in the object itself and is detailed in the accompanying record.[8] Thus, when a work is addressed, its condition of authenticity can be evaluated through the legacy of a practical 'instruction manual' constituted by its documentary record (where it exists) and in its own physical record when its component-on-component relations are decipherable and understood within the then prevailing modes of practice and codes of ethics.

Subsequently, when the work is next addressed, the process of conservation then privileges a particular version of its authenticity instantiated by the dominant

zeitgeist as described in any code of ethics then circulating, whilst the instructions as embodied in this manual are interpreted. This assumes, of course, that codes can be rigorously applied in a closed system, and that the physical notation and material conventions of the work can be understood by successive generations of conservator-restorer-scientists.

Flop

So are things simply authentic or not?

A common model of conservation is represented here as a triadic graph[9] (Figure 6.1).

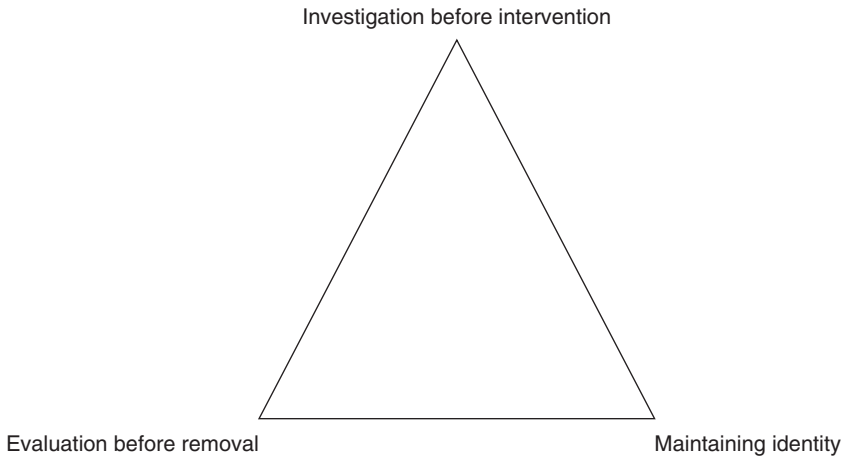


Figure 6.1 *Diagram representing the core ideas that determine Conservation Actions.*

This diagram fairly well represents the dynamics involved in designing and executing conservation actions, with each corner more or less representing a core idea in current conservation methodology:

- **Investigation before intervention**: the injunction to perform research on, and documentation of, all relevant evidence before and after any intervention.
- **Evaluation before removal**: the injunction to respect the process of history in its cumulative record of activity reflected in the object and identified as denoting varying cultural beliefs, values, materials, and techniques executed over time.
- **Maintaining identity**: the injunction to safeguard authenticity – herein understood as an epistemologically relative term associated with the material and material process in an object and its authorship or intention – co-joined with the obligation to execute minimal physical intervention to help re-establish structural and aesthetic legibility and meaning whilst allowing future treatment options.

Put different kinds of objects in the frame and it becomes a pretty rugged plane of (in)consistency, with the idea of material authenticity tugged at from all sides. For example (though perhaps arguably), the objects of ethnographic conservators will tend to bunch around the lower and left side of the triangle, as their material changes are seen as the attrition of an authentic history, whereas those of conservators working in design museums tend to cluster more to the right side, as a 'return' to some sense of an original state is the curatorial objective. And where some conservation practice seeks to maintain the current condition of an object – or at least the illusion of it – other work, for example, some architectural conservation, seeks to establish continuity through controlled alteration, thereby spreading itself into the lower right of the triangle.

So while this triad emphasizes the dynamics within conservation that attempt to maintain and transmit cultural continuity through the protection of valuable physical resources, it also highlights the problems in understanding just what material authenticity is. It is also a step along the way in exposing ethical codes as being the products of social processes mediated by a technologically based practice, with add-on values that accord with a particular custodial community's goals, as indicated above.

Lotta Continua[10]

Even if this contemporary notion of authenticity accepts the vagaries of identifying sites of original material it can still seem to call upon supporting variations on the theme of 'original intention,' and so pushes along with an essentialist model of cultural production. By this I mean that if the organization of a particular community determines the form of ideas held by the people within it, then, under the current epistemological landscape, conservation can be described as a compact social network which internalizes its values and social arrangements in collectivized representations which are thereafter treated as, in effect, essences.

As it is, codes of ethics are intended to produce agreed behaviours. Within conservation they do so not by invoking clearly defined goals, rather by providing aspirational guidelines in treatment decision-making that reflect, albeit perhaps by consensus, the guiding philosophy of the conservation constituency. As such, and without explicitly formulating it, these codes progress with an *either/or* polarity around the notions of authenticity and truth, whether in material or intention, with, for example, prompts as to what kinds of intervention are considered right or wrong (so thereby placing restoration on the pillory of reversibility).[11]

A question of re-entry[12]

The advent of variable media in contemporary cultural production is one development that has called into question both those values and the methodologies by

which custodial groups preserve, care for, and redisplay cultural artifacts. In particular, new media art has detoured notions of authorship, intention and material authenticity by making vigorous explorations in collaborative working, by way of variously plugging into interactivity, randomness, networking, and virtuality, and by mining notions of open code, open hardware, and open documentation in its own technical development. Whilst new media art might suffer from technological obsolescence (one concern of digital media preservationists[13]), these aspects, centred around hybridized, contextually-based, live or time-based productions, represent a snowballing defiance of traditional conservation methodologies rooted in essentialist-based concepts of viewer, artist, and the art object.[14]

So going back to the question, *are things simply authentic or not?*, it can be reframed by hypothetically plotting a work at any given time between three temporal axes where each axis nominally describes variables emanating from the impossible-to-return-to ground zero of an object's origin. The z-axis plots any significant change to an object's function, the y-axis any change in how the object is interpreted, and the x-axis plots any change in original material (Figure 6.2).

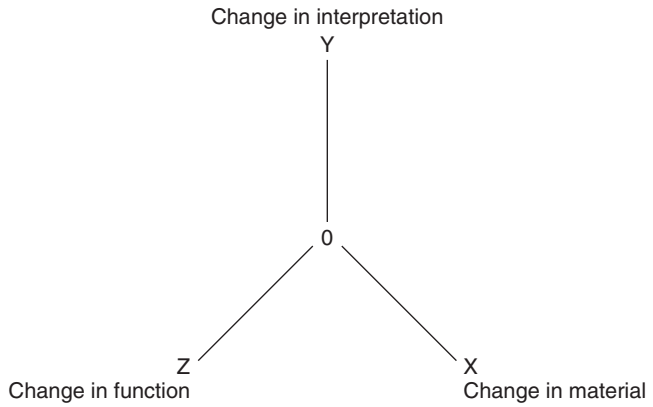


Figure 6.2 *Some variables used in determining an object's authenticity.*

Without getting bogged down in defining other relativistic states that could also emanate from ground zero, other axes worth mentioning might include changes in design and authorship. By playing around with this thought experiment it becomes more apparent that objects don't fit into *either/or* categories of being authentic or non-authentic when plotted along the given axes, and that changes along multiple axes will give each object a unique topology, with its edge nearer or further away from its ground zero. For example, a panel of stained glass described as medieval tends to comprise of little original glass, still less original lead – as restoration, namely the return to a design that is known, has been a regular conservation process until at least the 1990s – yet can still be described

as being authentic. If plotted schematically along the various axes, following the thought experiment outlined above, and with its co-ordinates joined up as an outline (its topological edge), then this shape is going to be pretty far away from the ground zero point of the panel's origin, especially when this outline is compared with one, say, drawn for a gravestone that has remained pretty much untouched in its original setting.

Furthermore, few objects will have the same co-ordinates at any given time in their history, and museum objects can never maintain the same co-ordinates. They may, however, be nearer their zero point if they were somehow made as part of the museum, as in the case, for example, of Frank Moody's late 1860s ceramic staircase at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. But even objects in their original context will change as an object deteriorates, or is re-used in some way by a subsequent user group; and within a collection the co-ordinates of an object invariably change whenever it is conserved or redisplayed.

The point of this thought experiment is to show that any sense of authenticity, loosely pinned to this schematic, is always going to be a ride along a trajectory from which, at any one point, the object will have stronger or weaker genealogical links to its origins. And once this notion of authenticity as being 'vectorized' is established and the care of an object is framed in this way, it becomes more apparent that the preferences of conservators, curators and others invariably alter the co-ordinates (and topology) at any given time. This model also seems to take on some of the aspects described by new media art, so that it begins to appear that any work exists as something like a collaborative production, only on a longer and more drawn-out timescale. Pip Laurenson, Head of Time-based Media Conservation at Tate, London, writes that she '. . . would suggest that the concept of authenticity operating in the traditional conceptual framework of conservation is appropriate for a framework in which the objects of conservation are the autographic arts but inadequate for works which are not.'[15]

The underlying suggestion in this chapter is that the traditional concept of authenticity as described by Laurenson is inappropriate for *any* work, with part of the thesis being an attempt to show that *all* autographic works actually have an allographic component as when any one work is considered at two points in its history, each iteration's qualities will necessarily be different to the other, yet each will still be considered as 'the work.'

This reframing is intended to shift any notion of assigning truth-value away from the difficult condition of material authenticity, and onto documentary notation, as authenticity becomes a matter of the (play of) accuracy with which the present cultural apparatus plots an object and provides a full commentary on how its particular interpretation relates to that of its predecessors. Another part of the thesis in this chapter calls for a methodical documentation of such cultural schemata as part of what this author sees as the necessary unveiling of cultural production.

Plot construction[16]

What does such a plotting really mean?

As discussed earlier, as a part of conservation's concern with methodological efficiency the profession has subscribed to some particular forms of disclosure nominally centred round clear documentation. In the current preferred version (of disclosure) such documentary features are designed to pin down decision-making by conservators onto the bedrock of empirical evidence, so that, for example, future custodians can reverse-engineer the present, both from the 'then' state of the object and its treatment record. So usually this documentation is where the immediate facts relevant to the object's care are recorded for (a variable) transmission amongst a close-knit community of custodians and other, sometimes undisclosed, 'stakeholders.' However, the wider interpretative, cultural, economic and political contexts for decision-making that directly affect object care are generally absent from any of these transmissions. Sometimes, and off somewhere else, they might cause a lot of localized noise, but noise from which it is pretty impossible to modulate a clear signal for the forensic reconstruction of their content.

An example helps illustrate this latter point: A monument in a museum's collection cannot be removed before the redesign and renovation of the internal architectural space surrounding it begins. Sometimes this can result in the removal of material from that object to accommodate the intervention of the new construction. The material loss will be evident in the object itself, and described in the conservation record, but invariably the policy decisions that effected the alteration or loss, or any localized opinion raised for or against those policies, will not or cannot be transmitted in any object record.

Confront the essentialist rubric of any code of ethics with something like this and attention is immediately focussed on the epistemic relativism inherent between what a code specifies and the contingencies in any execution.

But contrast this against an ideological desire to fully disclose the contexts of decision-making that shape an object's current status (another example of this might be why some restoration has not been removed), and a rich heuristic is provided for the entry of any archive as an asset into the wider knowledge economy, and conservation's longstanding commitment to disclosure positively mandates its entry into this changing economy.

Radio-On[17]

Section 9.4 of the UK Museums Association's Code of Ethics for Museums (2002) urges that museums should 'develop mechanisms that encourage people to research collections, develop their own ideas about them and participate in a variety of ways in shaping the interpretations offered by the museum.'

Globally speaking this injunction is beginning to be addressed across various institutions with the development of collection-management tools for the tracking, archiving and interrogating of object documentation. As such, digital technological systems have thus enabled institutions to rethink the relationship between their information holdings and its accessibility to the public. Recent discussions in New York (2006) and London (2007) have focussed on furthering the sharing and interoperability of conservation information and platforms, both within a particular institution and in exchanges between many-to-many institutions, along with the possibilities of that wider public access.[18]

However, the extent of public access to such documentation has been seen by most to be different in kind from that of any inter-institutional exchange. The debate is currently labouring around questions of how and when such information might be shared with the public, with issues of intellectual ownership cited, including 'the risk of misinterpretation or misuse of raw, uninterpreted data … especially as they relate to proprietary authorship and to works in progress that are destined for publication but not yet adequately advanced for dissemination.'[19] Furthermore, institutional sensitivities regarding treatment policies and histories have also been raised in support of a tiered (or gatekeeper) approach to access.

Many worlds[20]

So what has this got to do with conservation ethics?

Earlier, I indicated how I thought that the notion of truth-value might be re-inscribed into documentary notation. Such a re-inscription has the potential for the creation of information free from the historical hostage taking that has traditionally reflected the privileges of the dominant cultural powers in its ordering of information into categories of intellectual property.

To transfer any sort of knowledge (especially for the benefit of those to come) it is apparent that it has to be encoded into a medium that will allow it to be transmitted and decoded successfully. Thus, the technical means of description and transmission available readily limit the scope of the transmissions permissible, and impact on the type and extent of the economy to be managed.

Slides in drawers, files in cabinets, desktops and offices (propagated in the iconography of current proprietary computer operating systems), all favour a heavily biased model of scholarly knowledge management, one of restricted levels of access and privilege centralized around a gatekeeper model of one-to-many exchange.

Technology defines practice that in turn creates theory. So in the wider context of digital technologies, the gatekeeper economy certainly begins to appear too narrow and proprietorial, with its continuing focus on the interpretative control of information. The last decades have seen the transformation of knowledge-behaviours by digital technologies including the Internet, with keys to this rapid

shift being both the advent of the free software (or 'open source') movement and Web.2.0. This shift has seen the production and distribution of knowledge moving away from being a flat one-to-many model to a model of many-to-many content-generation. This, in turn, has led to the creation of an information-rich economy in which the circulation of knowledge and exchange in cultural content is the norm.

In the United Kingdom, especially for public bodies, this economy has been at least nominally underwritten by recent legislation with the UK's Freedom of Information Act (2000), the terms of which came into full force in January 2005. In essence, the Act gave the right of access to documents and information held by public institutions. There are a number of caveats to this right (national security, commercially sensitive material, possible infringements of intellectual property rights and so on), but the kind of information covered by the Act includes all conservation records, with the right for the public to be given the information in the form in which the public institution holds it. 'If an enquirer is dissatisfied with an institution's response to an enquiry, the person has recourse to an independent commissioner for information, who is empowered to adjudicate.'[21]

In short, the digital economy is the most important ideological tool for scholarship since the printing press, and all information that can be online should be online, because that is the most efficient way to distribute material to the widest possible audience. The digital economy, including the Internet, is not just an adjunct to an existing environment; rather, it is the new environment, and looking for ways to gate the force of its distributive efficiency exposes proprietorial and territorially entrenched behaviours. Any debates around what caveats might or might not apply, whatever their merits, forgo the consequences of this economy, the principle of which manifests in the production of a cultural framing of technology in an ethic of practical benevolence. This means that, in the domain of conservation, the significance of instrumental reason is fully recognized, but tempered by the notion that human agency is not constituted solely by a disengaged rationality operating consistently or in a closed system.

Back to the future[22]

Thus, true openness of an object's documentary record might be through exposing its different versioning in any implemented content management system. Contributors use verifiable identities, and there is some moderation of the record by, for example, the expert oversight of everyday contributors, with an institutionally authorized versioning including digitized records closed to real-time editing.

Version control (also known as revision control), is the management of multiple revisions of the same piece of information. It is most commonly used in engineering and software development and other areas where information content may be worked on by a team of people, typically blueprints, electronic components, and managing successive developments in a software application's source code.

Changes to version-controlled documents are usually identified by incrementing an associated number or letter code, the 'version number,' or, as is the case with the wiki on which this chapter is being written (a wiki is a collaborative website whose content can be edited by anyone who has access to it), a simple 'revision' number and, as an option, associated historically with the person making the change. Just now I'm logged as working on 'Revision 202 . . . 2008-03-28 13:49 UTC by jk.' And now I'm logged on as 'Revision 236 . . . 2008-04-18 15:49 UTC by i-83-67-116-113.freedom2surf.net,' as I'm working from a different computer on a different day. Anyone can compare the differences between the two versions by hitting 'View revisions' to 'rollback' to the relevant version numbers by using the 'compare' function featured on this particular wiki engine.

The most widespread example of this form of knowledge management is Wikipedia. Wikipedia is the bastard child of a failed attempt at providing a free online encyclopaedia where anyone could submit content that would be reviewed in a seven-stage process by expert editors. It was a project born out of the politics of encouragement of openness and extreme decentralization. Its model of collaborative entries is founded on the belief that entries would 'self-edit' in a series of redrafts where someone who knew more about one part would edit the original entry, while someone else would make any grammatical corrections necessary, and so on by way of interdisciplinary and creative conversations.

Several challenges are immediately apparent as, for example, the transfer of the implicitly held knowledge of individuals is not usually available. On the other hand, explicit documentation in the form of written reports, database entries and images require a heuristic from which they can be edited to maintain an optimal signal-to-noise ratio; that is, how well a receiver can recover the information-carrying signal from the transmitted version and hence how reliably information can be communicated. The British Museum's Institutional Summary for the 2006 Mellon Report states that, 'as with enquiries from other museum users, the knowledge that records may be scrutinized has the added advantage that it increases professional accountability and responsibility, and leads to improved standards of documentation.'[23]

Another challenge is that the medium used for information-storage must itself be quickly accessible and replicable, and there must be a successful transmission of its own means of production; i.e. the magnitude of the signal-to-noise ratio inherent in a communication system must be factored by the inclusion of its own manual in its transmissions.

Ogres and onions[24]

The open-ended offer of this chapter is groundwork towards defining a kit with which any user can reconstruct the sort of decision-making instruction manual

used at the particular time of the object's revision, a descriptive specification sheet derived according to whom is reconstructing the available components.

From the closed viewpoint, for those guarding information, it is the world of the slide library, not a library for the people, but the fiefdom of ownership. But in the contemporary networked landscape it is becoming readily apparent that closed knowledge loops simply cannot remain sustainable.[25] Within the context of necessarily decentralized groupings or communities, information could readily have quite different meanings attached. And from this open access angle, it is all about emergence, community and subscription to a new model of knowledge, with primarily textual solutions to ethical dilemmas as the order of the day.

Such an ethical approach is thus descriptive: the decision mechanisms and social processes through which, for example, a museum is produced are tied more closely to the care of its objects. For example, the degree of deviation from the normative (*qua* scientific) methodologies subscribed at a particular time in that object's care is openly indicated as part of the process of this disclosure (as a varied account of disengaged rationality!).

This ethic is also moderately prescriptive because its methodologies are thus to be adopted as the prevailing ethos for object care across that museum. This in turn means that the museum rigorously adopts those methodologies that it at any one time subscribes to in governing all of its technical operations. This approach also introduces commensurability, a level of agreement applicable to *all* involved in the technical care of objects, as the imperative for a preferential or utilitarian ethic to be applied successfully.

Such a conception helps for a more systematic plotting of the object along the hypothetical axes of authenticity introduced in this paper, and this reinforces the understanding that the current version of an object (or asset) is a part of its continuing history.

In summary, I suggest that an understanding of any fault-lines between the application of conservation's codes of ethics and its actions, and between the material authenticity of an object and authenticity of the observer's experience, can be neatly rounded out in the object record, a record that should become a major part of any institution's current knowledge economy, as well as a systematic transmission to the future.

Notes

1. P. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 1993.
2. The title of this chapter, '*Practical Ethics v2.0,*' was also chosen as both a version management implementation (an earlier version, "*Practical Ethics,*" was published in *V&A Conservation Journal* 56 (2008): 14–15) and as an echo of the content revision management tool employed by the wiki on which the text has been written.

3. The title of a 1964 short story by J.G. Ballard where a man goes into mental and physical decline whilst hiding in the decaying buildings of an island once used for testing nuclear weapons. This, and all other section headings, are deployed as a playful exchange made within the text, often to indicate where the author sees that a form of cultural production is rooted in particular technological developments.
4. It is well noted elsewhere how 'scientific analysis' can be successfully applied when concerned with isolated phenomena, but less able to respond when facing complexity and revealing its probabilistic nature in its specifications when matched with real world behaviours. See S. Muñoz Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2005) 121–129.
5. An essentialist epistemology suggests that how knowledge is characterized represents a key driving force of a knowledge economy. Thus, for example, the influence of the heterogeneous backgrounds of all conservators as people is insignificant when compared to their socialization into the prevalent knowledge characteristics of their discipline.
6. 'Flip' and the following 'Flop,' refer to a flip-flop device, a device capable of either one of two stable states, but not the two together, and one which underpins all computational technology. Flip-flops along the Terminal Beach.
7. F. Matero, "Ethics and Policy in Conservation", *Getty Conservation Institute Newsletter*, Volume 15, Number 1 Spring, (2000) 6.
8. See: International Council of Museums *Code of Ethics for Museums*, 2006 '2.24 Collection Conservation and Restoration: The museum should carefully monitor the condition of collections to determine when an object or specimen may require conservation-restoration work and the services of a qualified conservator-restorer. The principal goal should be the stabilization of the object or specimen. All conservation procedures should be documented and as reversible as possible, and *all alterations should be clearly distinguishable from the original object or specimen*' (Author's italics).
9. Christopher Caple's RIP Model (revelation, investigation and preservation) presents a similar triadic graph for mapping specific treatments: C. Caple, *Conservation Skills: Judgement, Method and Decision Making* (London: Routledge, 2000) 34.
10. The group name of a late 1960s Turin-based Italian autonomist movement, and its eponymous newspaper, that sought to establish a way of living within a wider community but governed by its own system of rules.
11. ICOM 2006 2.24.
12. Re-entering the discussion on authenticity with a renewed characterization, one that implicitly accepts the malaise of Rationalism, by which it is claimed, in another J.G. Ballard short story of the same title, scientific endeavour is rendered as futile.
13. 'Digital preservation combines policies, strategies and actions to ensure access to reformatted and born digital content regardless of the challenges of media failure and technological change. The goal of digital preservation is the accurate rendering of authenticated content over time.' Long Definition in "Definitions of Digital Preservation," prepared by the Preservation and Reformatting Section, Working Group on Defining Digital Preservation, ALA Annual Conference, Washington, DC, June 24, 2007 <http://www.ala.org/ala/alcts/newslinks/digipres/index.cfm> Accessed April 2008.