AH ANALECTA HERMENEUTICA
INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR HERMENEUTICS / INSTITUT INTERNATIONAL D'HERMÉNEUTIQUE

ISSN 1918-7351
Volume 18 (2026)

Remembering Calvin O. Schrag and the Potential of Kindness

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How does one do honor to a life that had such a profound impact on our intellectual and philosophical development? Though I knew Calvin O. Schrag for a relatively brief time, it is difficult, as many in the present volume no doubt express, to find the words that will do justice to his memory.

I used to think that I would pay him tribute in citations. That I would pile up footnote and endnote and parenthetical as one piles offerings on an alter set aside for our ancestors. But as academia slipped away and other callings took its place, I began to realize that Calvin O. Schrag represented more than just the scholarly life I once pursued. Throughout the course of his long career, Schrag accomplished many things. From his studies in post-war Germany, to his monumental efforts to establish the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, to his fabled almost-meeting with Heidegger, his trailblazing the field of philosophy and communication, his many published works and the mountains of dissertations he advised and seminars he taught, Schrag was a model scholar. And yet, the scholarly life he lived is becoming increasingly impossible and inaccessible to the up-and-coming generations of young, talented intellectuals who admire men like him.

And I realize, reflecting on Schrag's kindness, and the funny and imminently human way he dialed up a Domino's and said, "Well, there's three of us here and we'd like to order a pizza," that citations were never the way to pay my respects to the man who smiled humbly at my review of his *Radical Reflections* and insisted I was too kind,

that I understood the text too well, that I had seen him and heard him, even where we disagreed.

I could never live the scholarly life I had admired in Schrag. In 2022, I began teaching middle school. I became a public school teacher.

And, even as my distance from academia and higher education grew wider, my closeness to Schrag's way of thinking and being in the world never diminished. In fact, I often felt myself very close to him when I was working with a particularly garrulous 13-year-old, trying to help them through the long up-hill struggle of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," or translating passages of *The Iliad* into gen Z slang, or watching them smile and dance awkwardly, or talking a crying boy out of a bathroom stall because his 12-year-old heart had been broken for the first time. These moments were something more than a mark on a paper that indicated intellectual credit. These moments were the real tribute to the kindness that Schrag showed to those around him, to those he cared for, and most importantly, to those who had lost their way. And this kindness – these everyday kindnesses – were the reason Schrag wrote the things he wrote, which affected me so profoundly and influence my teaching to this day, though I'll never chair a dissertation or publish a *Being and*…

I would be remiss not to offer at least one citation.

> Let us suppose that what the times require is not a new conceptual scheme and an accompanying argument for enfranchising one or the other of the theoretically posited polar opposites (relativism contra absolutism, historicism contra universalism, and nihilism contra a priori values), but rather a recognition that the posited polar opposites rest on a bogus dichotomy that is created by the requirement of theory to lay out criteria of justification in advance of the specific practices to which such criteria might apply.[1]

Schrag wrote this in *The Self After Postmodernity*, and followed this through a line of suppositions that end with the recommendation that we "shift from theory to praxis, from antecedent rule-governed criteria to context-informed criteria, to an either/or that no longer stands in wait of a theory to swoop down from on high but instead is firmly ensconced within the everyday communicative praxis where life's decisions take place."[2]

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[1] Calvin O. Schrag, *The Self After Postmodernity*, (Yale University Press, 1997), 103.
[2] Ibid., 104.

I'm thinking of that boy, crying in the bathroom stall. Of the girl too afraid to ask for help, because her father is too ashamed to help her when she needs it most. I'm thinking of the kid who has somehow made it to the 7th grade but can barely read at a 4th grade level, or who's learning English in a state that forbids them to be taught in their native tongue, or whose school bus is a van that shuttles them to and from a group home, or whose house is nice but whose cul-de-sac is devoid of laughter because there no one there who will play with them. There is no theory to swoop down from on high to save them. There is only them and us and the space between us where together it is *we*. What we say into that space matters. Schrag taught me that.

To speak, is to act. "The self in action is a self in transcendence – moving beyond that which it has become and going over to that which it is not yet."[3] The first act of transcendence is the movement toward the future that is nothing and yet it is the nothingness that is the condition of the possibility of being anything at all. And the act of speech that carries us toward this future is the act that transforms the full totality of what *is* and what *has been* into the infinite possibility of what *might be*. The voice of love, of kindness, of care, is the first step in a transformative movement that transfigures what is into what could be—the possibility of another world. A world than can be better than the one that existed before we spoke. The word brings with it another world and Schrag's kindness taught me that this other world is both possible and that it can be a better world. Schrag reminded me that it is okay to hope.

The criterion of hope, rightfully situated between oneself and another, in the space between into which we speak, is that what we do and say makes the world better than it was before. So many words to say what is so simple in the end. But simple is not easy.

It was hard to say goodbye to Calvin O. Schrag. It is hard to think back on that last *Being and Time* seminar at Purdue University and know that that was it. And yet, it was such a privilege to be there. It is hard, now, to think of what a symbol Schrag has become of a way of life and study that is fading, that is being erased by encroaching political darkness. It is hard to feel a double loss—of the man and of what he represents.

But let us speak and write of hope in dark times. Let not the space between us become the nascent scene of cynicism and nihilism. Let our words be words of kindness that dry the tears of a crying boy, that bring solace to that scared, uncertain girl, that let a parent know that they are not alone, that they are trying, and that their best is enough, can be enough, that all we are and have is enough.

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[3] Ibid., 111.

In this way, we can honor Schrag's memory.

To follow along the path Schrag also tread is to follow a philosophy of openness to the world and to others. It is a philosophy of action—of practice—and so too it is a philosophy of habit. On the one hand, there are habits of mind that cultivate a certain attitude and posture toward the world and, therefore, toward our interactions with others. But, on the other hand, these habits of mind do not stay in the mind because they condition our actions in the world and among one another. From our posture or attitude toward the world our responses flow outwards, and the tendencies we've cultivated inform how and why we respond the way we do. Each act is not guided ahead of time as if by some utilitarian calculation but is instead a product of a practiced character who is purposeful in their cultivation of kindness. And, it seemed, kindness often came easy to Schrag. It had become, in his way, like second nature.

Although he was not a scholar of Eastern philosophy, and his heart and expertise beat with the Continental tradition, I have to say that there was something of Buddha nature to Schrag's way of doing philosophy and being in the world. These habits of character I'm describing did not come easy because they were thoughtless. Rather, thoughtfulness became easy as communication gained depth and openness. And so, that is how I am choosing to honor Schrag's legacy. Schrag called it "radical reflection."[4] It was, in part, an epistemological position, shaped by the empiricism of William James and the methods of the phenomenological tradition. But the epistemological position was more than a theory of knowledge – it was a way of life, a praxis, and its path leads to compassion, empathy, and a deliberate concern for the others with whom we share our world.

Here, in the end, is the crux of the matter. To live deliberately, and therefore to be free. To live deliberately is to choose an end for ourselves, to be freed from the caprice of history and happenstance and to choose where this choice is the basis of action. Like Sartre and the existentialists, freedom for Schrag is the first principle of action.[5] Our communication, our way of being with one another, are all composed of acts. The composition of acts, of words and deeds, come together in a mosaic of life, and looking back over it all we can see the shape and color of a beautiful life well lived.

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[4] Calvin O. Schrag, *Radical Reflection and the Origin of the Human Sciences*, (Purdue University Press, 1980), 93-94.

[5] See Calvin O. Schrag, *Existence and Freedom: Towards an Ontology of Human Finitude*, (Northwestern University Press, 1987), 177-179; and, Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Sarah Richmond, (Routledge, 2018), 569.

Schrag was an example for me, not just of a scholar, but of a person who had taken a certain position on the world where our words and actions weigh and mean more than the theoretical positions we hold. Indeed, he helped me to understand that our theoretical positions, insofar as they have meaning and import, do so only because we act in accordance or discordance with these principles and our actions are opportunities to reconfigure the world. We are our relations, with ourselves and others and the things in between. By acting, in word and deed, we reconfigure ourselves and thus, reconfigure the relations that provide the context for the possibilities of what the world might become. We are, in short, the possibility of another world made flesh and are making together the flesh of the world.

As an example, as exemplary, Schrag provides a picture of what the world might be when we take a certain stance or position within it. It comes down to the very basic principle, the all too human notion, of kindness. And therein lies the Buddha nature that I observed often when dealing with Schrag. A practiced and willing compassion effused the things that Schrag did and said. These were, in the end, his greatest teachings.

Insofar as teaching remains my vocation, I try to remember these lessons. Not because I value them as erudite, esoteric truths about the hidden nature of the world, although they do sometimes have that flavor. But what I value about them really comes down to how they help me to be in the world. When a kid at school comes to me for help, unsure if I even can help – there is the test of these theories. To know that I even present to a student in need as a person who could help, who would be willing to help, that is already the first step to success. Let us be wary of the difference between seeming and being, because each step must be followed by another and the student must quickly be shown that their trust was not misplaced. These are conscious decisions, cultivated ahead of time, practiced, put into practice, informing a pedagogy, but not only for the sake of pedagogy. It was really for the sake of humanity, of human kindness, that Schrag lived and taught and philosophized the way that he did. I hope we all can remember him for that. I know it is what motivates me when I think back on my time with Schrag.

Our time is finite. Schrag grappled with the significance of human finitude his entire career. It is our finitude that makes life meaningful and gives our decisions weight. It is from our finitude that we can shine a light as a guide for others, even for our past and future selves. I have tried, in my short time here, to explain what Schrag meant to me and to the others in my community who knew him. I hope to at least have left a sketch, a shaky, philosophical portrait of a man who taught me much and lead by example. I will remember Schrag, and do my best to commemorate him, not

in citations on paper, but by the thousand little acts that constitute my days, that pass between myself and others, that help to shape the world we share. And that, I hope, will do just honor to a legacy of kindness that cautioned against valuing preformed theoretical schemes over the lived experience of everyday life. That, I think, remains Schrag's lasting, most persistent advice—to live, to live and to be kind, and, in your kindness, leave a better world than you found.