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

ISSN 1918-7351
Volume 18 (2026)

On Inheritance, Responsibility, and an Unexpected Obligation: Honoring Calvin O. Schrag

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At the end of each semester, I lead a lecture about intellectual lineage as a way to remind students whence their thinking comes and how they are now responsible for carrying it on—for hermeneutics teaches us the power of tradition. Over sixteen weeks, we spend time with scholars who challenge and deepen our study but, as semesters come to their close, it seems the real work begins.

In the humanities and social sciences, the move toward assessment as a form of calculative measurement only further distances students from the experience of education as self-education.[1] For this reason, many of us find it difficult to regard grades as meaningful evaluations of a student's intellectual life because the true test comes only after formal instruction has ended. The real work can only be seen in the way a student charts a life for themselves, incorporates the classroom experience into their way of being, and assumes responsibility for their own education.

For some time, I understood this approach to education primarily through the lens of pedagogy. Education matters because it prepares students to think and live beyond the classroom and build an intellectual life that continues after graduation. Yet this familiar conclusion takes on a different weight after the passing of my own grand-

[1] I've dealt with this understanding with Ramsey Eric Ramsey in "Dwelling, Language, and the Schoolhouse: Interpreting Building in the Context of Education," in *Subject, Identity, and Care: Educational (Dis)closures,* ed. Kamila Drapało, Barbara Weber, Klaudia Węc, and Andrzej Wiercinski (Brill, 2025).

teacher, Calvin O. Schrag. Although I never studied with him directly, he nevertheless exists within my lineage, as his student, Ramsey Eric Ramsey, is my teacher. I am a number of generations removed from Schrag, and thus from thinkers such as Paul Tillich and John Wild who are also in the background as they were his teachers. Thus, his thought comes to me through a line of inheritance carried by teaching, reading, and writing.

In the wake of his passing, I find myself asking what it means to inherit the responsibility of a hermeneutic tradition. Of course, intellectual lineage has never depended upon direct personal contact as so much of humanistic education occurs through encounters with texts. In this sense, we are always already responsible for the ideas that shape us, whether or not we have personally studied with their authors. Still, the death of a teacher can set our responsibility into relief as it reminds us that such traditions endure only insofar as they are taken up, reinterpreted, and carried forward by others.

In this piece, I want to explore my role as both student and steward within Schrag's intellectual lineage. As a student, I return to his text *The Self after Postmodernity*, tracing how the concept of transversality shapes my own research as a PhD student. As a steward, I am also interested in what it means to carry this hermeneutic tradition forward through my own teaching. How might I care well for what has been passed down while also holding it open to change and offering it to new students? These questions guide the reflections that follow, and I hope they might also invite others to consider their own place within the intellectual lineages they inherit.

Studentship

In *The Self after Postmodernity*, Schrag sketches a portrait of the self caught between the legacy of modernity and the disruption of postmodernity. As American philosopher David Carr notes, Schrag's project is not simply to reject or attack postmodern critiques of the self. Instead, he "wants to take the post-modern turn seriously as an occasion for a new approach to the self."[2] Such a sympathetic approach to the project of the self is highlighted in the final chapter on transcendence, where Schrag wrestles with the "storm center in modernity-postmodernity dispute" between unity and difference. [3] He asks what shape the self takes under the celebration of diversity and

[2] Daivd Carr, review of *The Self after Postmodernity*, by Calvin O. Schrag. *Continental Philosophy Review* 31, no. 4 (1998): 445.450.
[3] Calvin O. Schrag, *The Self after Postmodernity*, 126.

plurality of the postmodernists without jettisoning modernity's notion of unification entirely. His response to this tension is the concept of transversality as a way to reinterpret unity not as totality but as "an open-textured gathering of expanding possibilities."[4] He describes transversality as "convergence without coincidence, conjuncture without concordance, overlapping without assimilation, and union without absorption."[5] And it is this holding open of possibility and difference that captures my attention for my own research. For rather than falling prey to either side, Schrag seeks to find a way through the dispute that attends to both unity and fracture as a way to split the difference.

The insight of transversality has become increasingly important within my own work as a PhD candidate in English literature, where I study speculative fiction, utopian desire, and solidarity. Again and again, the novels I study are animated by the pull between difference and unity, especially as it relates to utopian futures. What does a shared future require from people whose histories, desires, and material conditions are different? How might solidarity emerge without requiring the erasure of difference? These questions become particularly urgent within utopian and dystopian fiction because such texts are often concerned with how we move from the world as it exists now toward some imagined future.

Here Schrag's concept of transversality offers a way to discuss how we might rely on difference to bring richness and depth to our solidarity. In many of these texts, solidarity is less about assimilation or total universality and more about acknowledging differences without letting them drive us apart. "What is required," Schrag writes, "is a transversal ordering and communication that is achieved through a diagonal movement across the groups, acknowledging the otherness and integrity of each, while making the requisite accommodations and adjustments along the way."[6] Note here the emphasis on action, movement, and process by which transversal unity holds together multiplicity. In its holding together, the concept of transversality highlights possibilities of collective life where we might weave plurality and common purpose together without sacrificing one to the other. And it is this approach to a multiplicity of voices that models an understanding of solidarity that continues to shape both my scholarship and teaching as I attempt to hold such an inheritance of care.

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[4] Schrag, 129
[5] Schrag, 128
[6] Schrag, 132

Stewardship

Unlike studentship, stewardship emphasizes the responsibility of carrying tradition into relation with others. For me, this responsibility emerges most clearly in the classroom where ideas are reinterpreted through encounters with new students, questions, and historical moments.

I began thinking more seriously about stewardship while attending an academic conference session after Schrag's passing dedicated to honoring his legacy. Former students gathered and the conversation moved between reflections on his philosophical contributions—communicative praxis, the fitting response, transversality—and more personal memories of Schrag as their teacher. As I listened, it became obvious how difficult it was to separate his thought from his pedagogy, for the way he wrote and taught appeared deeply intertwined.

Several participants remarked upon the distinctive texture of his writing. One described him as "so attuned to the moment," willing "to go nowhere over a few pages" due to the hermeneutic density of his thinking. Another observed that after existentialism and structuralism, Schrag situated himself between traditions, asking what might be carried forward and what ought to be left behind. "He's continually threading the needle," one participant remarked, to which another responded, "perhaps this is why he felt obligated to be so ecumenical." In this conversation I began to hear a portrait of a philosopher who was committed to thinking across positions that otherwise appeared irreconcilable.

This tension-balancing character also influenced his life as an academic. "Schrag was very antidogmatic . . . At the end of the day, it was the people's discourse." This approach may partly explain why Schrag never became even more famous, since he remained more invested in people and dialogue than espousing his own contributions (of which there were, in fact, many). In keeping with the hermeneutic tradition, when Schrag was asked by those outside his field what his research method was he would simply reply, "I'm going to read some books!" This anecdote was shared humorously, but it also reveals something important about his orientation toward intellectual life. So much of his own work was never about strict frameworks or entrenched debates, but about grounding communication in practice.

What moved me most, however, were the stories shared of Schrag as a teacher. I heard he was "beloved by everyone," and how he would "never shame you. He made you better, but not at the expense of your psyche." The group talked about how his students "really did not want to let him down." So much of what I heard during this

session was about Schrag's legacy existing through his work and how he modeled his philosophical commitments through dialogical thinking and attentive teaching.

And yet, for all the reflection and conversation, there was no mention of preserving the good word of Schrag as if he were divine and we, his disciples. In fact, it was clear that his students had been irrevocably shaped by their teacher and also freed by him. Although many still teach and research in the field of hermeneutics, their scholarship extends into media ecology, rhetoric, ethics, and aesthetics. And their students, in turn, study literature, environmentalism, law, and many other fields. As I continue teaching, I find myself drawn to this model of stewardship as both inheritance and responsibility. I am one of many in a beautifully complex web of inheritors taking on a legacy of the phenomena of hermeneutics. To take up this inheritance, then, is to agree to the difficult work of relation, interpretation, and living with others across difference. In this sense, stewardship becomes a hermeneutic practice of caring for ideas by allowing them to encounter new forms of life so that we might continue to learn how to live well in the wake of those who taught us to do the same.