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Calvin O. Schrag: Experience, Self-Awareness, and Historicity

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On March 11th, 2024, the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (SPEP) and the *Continental Philosophy Review* (originally, *Man and World*) lost their last living founder; and I lost my oldest friend. Calvin ("Cal") O. Schrag was the youngest of nine children in a Mennonite farm family in rural South Dakota. He began his education in a one-room grade school and finished his formal education with a Harvard PhD, after passing through Bethel College and Yale Divinity School in the process. During his 43 years at Purdue, he saw its philosophy program grow from a small contingent in the Department of History, Government, and Philosophy to a world class PhD-granting department. His experiencing of lifeworld variety was everywhere in his early history, and he welcomed more of it ever after.

I. Experience

Schrag's philosophical vision is generous and pluralistic, as was Cal himself. But in the current philosophical atmosphere, one must be careful with these adjectives. Schrag's pluralism is experiential, not theoretical. He did not have, nor want to have a general conception of the way apparently different philosophical outlooks are "essentially" the same; nor was he a historical relativist, celebrating the fact that there *just are* many viewpoints. In retrospect, we can see that both of these ideas have the same fatal weakness: They are grounded in the belief (or the denial) that one can figure out how

to cognize life's basics "now," and then apply them backward and forward. This, as Heidegger says, involves applying the wrong temporality to life. Phenomenologists understand that experiencing is a process whose conceptualization can never be monological or final, and that it is already overrich with meaning before it comes to stimulate us to "go further" in some direction and articulate one of its concerns—whether this concern involves "knowing," expressing a sense of mystery or faith, capturing something of the beauty and existential depth of our relations with others and with our surroundings, constructing great monuments, etc.

Schrag approached this temporal character of "factical-historical" existence in the same spirit as the young Heidegger, namely, with recognition that the "unity" among life's various forms of expression is not a theoretical idea but a feature of lifeworld experiencing itself—a single process whose concerns become "regionally" expressed in everything from science to art, architecture, politics, and institutionalized faith. Within any region, there may or may not be requirements for a stable set of basic conceptions, but we all know what happens when someone enamored of their own region's operative ontology attempts to remove its boundaries and make theirs a kind of master scheme for all regions. I stop short of saying that Schrag actually provided an *account* of this experiential groundedness, not as a criticism but in recognition of how things were in North America in the 1950s and 1960s. At the time, the whole question of "regions"—and the twin dangers of their becoming either silos or imperially authoritative—had not yet been brought into focus. For most phenomenologists and existential philosophers, it was enough to stay "there" within the temporal process of their specific concerns. Considering thereness itself was still to come.

By the 1950s, it was pretty clear that Anglo-American philosophers were unlikely to have a pluralistic revelation any time soon. When they referred to what they did as Philosophy, they added no adjective. Cal liked to recall an incident at Harvard when he was assisting Paul Tillich in a course, "The Interpretation of History," and Morton White, then Philosophy Department chair, told one of its majors that Tillich's course could not fulfill any philosophy requirements because Tillich was a "thinker," not a philosopher. There were, of course, smiling rejoinders about Harvard having philosophers who did not think, and we amused ourselves with the suggestion that maybe *Continental Philosophy Review* should be renamed the *Review of Non-Philosophical Thought*.

Yet behind the jokes, there was serious philosophical substance. SPEP's founders understood their hermeneutic situation. They recognized the hegemonic grip that analytic philosophy had over the profession, but their main attention was occupied

elsewhere. Such is the power of direct experiencing that it will show us where and how to go if we give it permission. It is not that we should never interpret thinking as calculation, let robots make incisions instead of surgeons, confine our attention to material conditions, or make our activities conform to "rules." It is, rather, that from the standpoint of lifeworld experiencing, none of these can ever "be" enough.

Hence, SPEP's founders saw themselves as organizing a space where all phenomenologically inclined thinkers, whatever their field, could share in public what their receptiveness to direct experience already showed them: Analytic philosophy, for all its "rigorous," science-minded epistemological machinery, could in principle never provide more than thin "coverage" for a whole variety of non-objective worldly relations where "knowing" and "truth" are already fully meaningful (e.g., true friends, just society, expertise) without waiting to be integrated into a regime of warranted claims and justified beliefs. Even Husserl—albeit with his unphenomenological commitments to finding essences and philosophizing ahistorically often getting in the way—knew to insist that phenomenology must see science itself as a practice emerging in a fundamentally selective way from within the lifeworld, and thus as never earning the right to read naturalist or historicist ontologies back into lifeworld experience. Indeed, even *in* science, one needs to remember that, say, categorial intuitions of number and sensible intuitions of material objects are experientially and ontologically distinct—thus also have distinct interpretations of clarity and distinctness. And from there, one eventually sees the larger point: Outside of science, there is a whole world of phenomena that will not disclose themselves to either categorial or sensible intuition—the experienced and situated body, for example, and lived temporality as opposed to the Aristotelian conception of time as the measure of movement with respect to before and after.

In any case, SPEP's earliest meetings were filled with what I want to call *experiential enthusiasm and theoretical disorder*—precisely the kind of atmosphere in which phenomenologists do their best work.[1] To Schrag, as to John Wild (SPEP co-founder and Harvard dissertation director), it seemed obvious that if phenomenology starts from the lifeworld, descriptions will inspire themselves, with no Universal Vocabulary needed to oversee the conversation. They were thus obviously the right organizers[2]

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[1] Robert C. Scharff, "American Continental Philosophy in the Making: The Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy's Early Days," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2012): 108-117.

[2] To be fair, I should mention SPEP's three other founding members (William Earle, James Edie, and George Schrader), who also obviously shared the same general philosophical spirit I am describing, but given my focus here, I do think the experience-existential awareness-history-oriented sense of phenomenology in SPEP's early days justifies my focus on Schrag and Wild.

for the motley collection of philosophers, therapists, theologians, natural and social scientists, political theorists, and "lit crit" enthusiasts who attended SPEP meetings in the 1960s and 1970s. I still hear "To the things themselves!" announced in Cal's voice, not Husserl's.

II. Existential Self-Awareness (*Selbstbesinnung*)

Yet in the midst of all this organizing and mutual recognition of a plurality of phenomenological concerns, one direction of inquiry emerged more slowly. As Heidegger puts it in *Being and Time*, how does one become phenomenological—in a world where both the philosophical profession and wider culture promote a vision of intellectual maturity that involves primarily cognition, calculation, and rule-governed methodologies? "Our" struggle to *be* phenomenological always happens against the pull of this inherited source of resistance. This resistance comes not just from "out there" but dwells in one's own default sense of world-relatedness; and given that it is grounded in "our" experiencing, it is incurably and irreducibly varied in its expression. Some sixty years ago, it was Cal Schrag who showed me how to make this issue an explicit topic. Husserl had understood how to think about the origin and development of scientific thought that emerges from a lifeworld-based consciousness, but Schrag drew on 19th century figures including Dilthey, Nietzsche, Berdyaev, and above all Kierkegaard and finally Heidegger to begin philosophizing not just about science but about all human activities by working out from direct personal, social, and natural relations as we actually live through them. In summarizing his own philosophical convictions decades later—after emphasizing that "what one is to do with one's life . . . must be taken up as a '*concrete existential* question"'—Cal goes on to observe that for this task, Socrates can be *some* help "in getting the conversation going with his requirement to 'know thyself' and its corollary, 'the unexamined life is not worth living.' *But we have to remember that we don't inherit Socrates; we have Plato's interpretive record of him…and a lot of metaphysics thereafter.*[3]

It is the precisely the difference between our existence being-historical and considering the remembered or empirically recovered past—that is between historicity and reconstructing the past—that needs to be kept in mind when one is struggling to approach phenomena phenomenologically. The mainstream tradition (whether

[3] Martin Beck Matuštík, "A Conversation with Calvin O. Schrag," *Symposium* 8, no. 1 (2004): 133, emphasis added.

moving through Hume or Kant) has written off such subjective-sounding appeals to self-understanding as introspective, "private," and in any case really not "philosophical." Even Husserl made it his official position that those who "remain immersed in the historical" must be seen as "*forcing* [themselves] to stay *mired* in historico-critical activity," and in this way deliberately rejecting the path of true philosophy by "willingly renounc[ing] reason's objective ideal."[4] Yet the stridency of his defense of ahistorical philosophizing only serves to highlight the deeply historical character of Husserl's own thinking and lead us to interpret his own clearly *phenomenological* analyses of categorial intuition, the lived body, time-consciousness, home-worlds, etc., as something he managed to develop despite his official position not because of it. So, when Heidegger says he intends to "stay with life," he means to *dwell in the tension* between Husserl's disappointingly tradition-bound self-descriptions and his promisingly phenomenological descriptions of the things themselves.

Heidegger's term for cultivating a doubly mediating awareness of our "factical historical" condition is philosophical self-elucidation (*Selbstbesinnung*), but unlike Heidegger, Schrag went on immediately to emphasize the necessarily dialogical and communal character of such questioning. Yes, the cultivating of self-awareness must be done *by* me, but it is wrong to assume this means it is mostly *about* me. *Jemeinigkeit* is not an inner feeling or reflexivity over here where my ideas are located. It is immanent in practices where "my own" awareness of existing is alive to the sense of its social, cultural, political, linguistic, and technoscientific character—with everything given through an inheritance that presents us with a pre-understanding of things that is always both currently determinative of who I am but also less than a perfectly satisfying fit with current experience.[5]

Unsurprisingly, then, Schrag's publication history reads like a conversationally-oriented, topical tracing of the trajectory of American Continental philosophy since the 1950s. He repeatedly seeks to catch the inner sense of new developments and show how their core contributions to a phenomenological philosophy deserve to be critically assessed but also carried forward—an approach he called "splitting the difference." After all, one's own thinking—like everyone else's—always remains situated; so that

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[4] Edmund Husserl, "Philosophy as Rigorous Science," trans. Quentin Lauer, in *Husserl: Shorter Works*, ed. Peter McCormick and Frederick A. Elliston (Notre Dame University Press, 1981), 196, emphasis added.

[5] "We are mostly caught up in the world of ordinary affairs and settle for interpreting ourselves in its reflected light. But at the same time, we fall in with a tradition that we have more or less explicitly embraced—a tradition that deprives us of providing our own guidance in asking questions and making choices" (Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtasugabe Vol. 2, Sein und Zeit* (Klostermann, 1977), 21/*Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (SCM, 1962), 42-43).

the challenge is to continually and self-consciously work *from* there instead of planning an ahistorical escape and final epistemic self-grounding. In this spirit, Schrag considers philosophers associated with existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, structuralism, post-structuralism, critical social theory, deconstruction, and postmodernism, as well as their effect on psychotherapy, theology, and science—not as "positions" defining historical "periods," but with the aim of taking up and further developing whatever made these movements worth our phenomenological time in the first place.

Schrag's conception of philosophical thought as involving "transversal rationality" fits his dialogical outlook well. He argues that the classical and modern metaphors of metaphysical and epistemological grounding, as well as the postmodern imagery of historical relativity are all overdetermined. The urge to ground, as much as the urge to celebrate the absence of grounding, both treat their position as if it gave them total presence at the end of a whole process. In recognition that both options, together with the very idea of such an end point rest on an objectivistic misconception of being-in-the-world were illusory from the start, Schrag opts for an existentially more appropriate middle way of "striving for a semblance of coherence in our . . . discursive and non-discursive practices and for a measure of consensus in our engagements with others."[6]

In short, "splitting the difference" is determining what to take forward (e.g., the phenomenological elements in Husserl's analysis of time-consciousness and the lived body) and what to rethink beyond Husserl's less than phenomenological conception of phenomenology. Out of this strategy have come Schrag's interpretation of human science, a theory of communicative praxis and transversal rationality, a postmodern conception of selfhood, a concept of divinity set free from metaphysics/dogma/sect, and through it all, a continuous reconsideration of the sort of self-understanding that makes possible the continuous appropriation process that Kierkegaard and Heidegger call "repetition."

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[6] Calvin O. Schrag, "Transversal Rationality," in *The Question of Hermeneutics: Essays in Honor of Joseph J. Kockelmans*, ed. Timothy J. Stapleton (Springer, 1994), 76.

III. Historicity

In Schrag, then, one encounters a philosopher who, in Dilthey's phrase, *thinks from* where the things themselves are directly disclosed, and thus from where all phenomenology rightfully takes its bearings. This "hermeneutical situation" is thoroughly relational—meaning that it is both "my own" (i.e., not just the site of what "one" says and does), but also at the same time thoroughly socio-historical, mutually understandable, and linguistically accessible without any possibility of theorizing its completion. In fact, when the time came for it, Schrag could not bring himself to write a philosophical "autobiography," since even in a resolutely "first-person" account, he knew he would still have to tell us how he became who *he* was through engaging in many "critical dialogues." The best he could do is write *Doing Philosophy with Others*, frame its chapters as "conversations," and only then feel safe in adding some "reminiscences and reflections." In spite of themselves, his interlocuters speak about human historicity, both in general and in the thought of others, without recognizing its presence in their own thinking. Not that all ahistorical thinking is something inherently bad; it's just that its own claims show decisively how they are, just like everyone else, being-historical in saying, doing, or thinking anything. Our existence, says Nietzsche, is basically an imperfect tense that can never become a perfect one.[7] Of course, he intends this to be taken self-referentially, but too many thinkers repeat his statement without themselves getting the message.

This way of being-in-the-world is hard to describe in general terms, but how it structures everyday life is concretely evident everywhere. Why can't we just "decide" to have a different native language or rid ourselves of prejudices? What makes "Who taught them to us in the first place?" seem like an improper question? As it happens, I was first prompted to consider this matter by life, not books, as a result of Cal's remark in a seminar at Northwestern. After I had made some especially sweeping and decontextualized claim, he turned to me and asked: "Where are you standing when

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[7] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 61. What Putnam said of Rorty applies to many others: We hear that there is no God's Eye viewpoint, asserted as if from a God's Eye viewpoint (Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, ed. James Conant (Harvard University Press, 1990), 25). [Some of the places where this topic figures especially prominently in Schrag's works are *Philosophical Papers: Betwixt and Between* (State University of New York Press, 1994), chaps. 3, 5, 9, and 12; *The Resources of Rationality: A Response to the Postmodern Challenge* (Indiana University Press, 1992), 3-49; *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity* (Indiana University Press, 1986), 1-6, 158-76; *Experience and Being: Prolegomena to a Future Ontology* (Northwestern University Press, 1969), 206-15, 253-69; and *Existence and Freedom: Towards an Ontology of Human Finitude* (Northwestern University Press, 1961), 3-25, 142-53.]

you say that?" As I came to see when the embarrassment wore off, this is in fact always a timely question because it is always appropriate to cultivate awareness of who we are being as we think, especially in philosophy. To use Heidegger's early language, all thinking is hermeneutical—in the sense that living through our engaged relations with our surroundings is already and inescapably "going on" (*ereignet*) in any articulation of their concerns, whether one exploits an awareness of this or noisily denies it. Here, I think, lies the real origin of Heidegger's early distinction between inauthenticity and authenticity. It is not a question of choosing between uninspired ordinariness and a specially elected "ethical" option. Rather, it is a matter of recognizing, or failing to recognize the determinate, situated, experiencing we already "have"—but mostly in the form of inherited interpretations that obscure precisely this condition.

IV. Ending Note

Finally, for all his scholarship and published work, Schrag insisted that his "first passion" was teaching. When all the courses are over and all the writing done, he said, "it is our students that should matter the most." I was one of them, so I close on a personal note.

Cal and I knew each other for over 60 years. We met when I was an undergraduate at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, at a time and in a place, as he aptly put it, where existential philosophy was best studied with the shades drawn. When he later visited Northwestern, I took a third of my graduate courses from him. It is unlikely I would have later become *Continental Philosophy Review*'s Editor without his encouragement. The way Cal helped me during the editorial transition period says a lot about who he was. Knowing that I had little editorial experience, he stayed available, without recognition, for my first two years. We each wrote paragraphs explaining our reactions to every new submission. We then compared notes, but with Cal leaving the final decision to me. In this way, I learned how to be an editor "in conversation"—and also got some first-hand experience of what Aristotle means in saying that one becomes an expert by hanging around with experts.

This sort of generosity was typical of Cal. Given his hermeneutic outlook, it is unsurprising that there are no Schragians around, but there are many former students scattered across the map who can tell stories of his mentoring, his eagerness to make difficult philosophers accessible, and his encouragement of the work of others. In a professional world full of "individuals," Cal encouraged us to think from our own experience but especially in light of the possibilities of community, communication,

and shared humanity in an incurably messy world. The title of his late work, *Convergence Amidst Difference*, is spot-on. It displays hope, tempered by experience, and it is addressed to persons, not minds.