Volume 18 | 2026

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

Hermeneutics as Communicative Praxis: Honoring the Work of Calvin O. Schrag

Editor: Ramsey Eric Ramsey

Michael J. Hyde — *God, Rhetoric, and the Reciprocity of the Teacher-Student Relationship*

Duane H. Davis — *Reversibility in Rhetorical Spaces*

Enrique Droguett-Ramirez, A.J. Batalden, & Barbara Weber — *A Contemporary Reading of Dostoyevsky's "Notes from the Underground"*

Anna Poláčkova — *The Issue of Time's Nonlinearity*

Annette M. Holba & Christina Lynn McDowell — *Organizational Leadership*

Ramsey Eric Ramsey — *Words Addressed to Our Condition*

Remembrances
Robert C. Scharff, Majia Nadesan, Corey Anton, Donovan Irven, Annette M. Holba, & Elise Poll

FOUNDING EDITOR & EDITOR IN CHIEF	Andrzej Wierciński
EDITOR	Ramsey Eric Ramsey
FOUNDING EDITOR	Sean McGrath
BOOK REVIEW EDITOR	Andrej Božič
MANAGING EDITOR	Elise Poll
EDITORIAL BOARD	Babette Babich, Mauricio Beuchot, Andrzej Bronk, Nicholas Davey, Donatella Di Cesare, Markus Enders, Jean Grondin, Donovan Irven, Richard Kearney, Dean Komel, Richard E. Palmer, Maria Luisa Portocarrero, Andrzej Przylebski, Yvanka B. Raynova, James C. Risser, John Sallis, Dennis Schmidt, Michael Schulz, Merold Westphal

EMAIL	analecatahermeneutica@asu.edu
WEBSITE	iih-hermeneutics.org
ANALECTA HERMENEUTICA	ISSN 1918-7351

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

HERMENEUTICS AS COMMUNICATIVE PRAXIS: HONORING THE WORK OF CALVIN O. SCHRAG

VOLUME 18 | 2026

ARTICLES

Michael J. Hyde	God, Rhetoric, and the Reciprocity of the Teacher-Student Relationship: A Tribute to Calvin Schrag	4
Duane H. Davis	Reversibility in Rhetorical Spaces: The Problem of Self in Communicative Praxis	31
Enrique Droguett-Ramirez, A.J. Batalden, & Barabara Weber	A Contemporary Reading of Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*: On the Loneliness of Reason, the Risk of Love, and Disappearance of the Shared	47
Anna Poláčkova	The Issue of Time's Nonlinearity: Calvin O. Schrag and Franz Rosenzweig in Conversation	67
Annette M. Holba & Christina Lynn McDowell	Organizational Leadership: Building a Deeper Sense of Community in the Workplace Through Calvin O. Schrag's Communicative Praxis	75
Ramsey Eric Ramsey	Words Addressed to Our Condition: An Enacted Tribute to Calvin O. Schrag	111

REMEMBRANCE

Robert C. Scharff	Calvin O. Schrag: Experience, Self-Awareness, and Historicity	128
Majia Nadesan	Schrag Remembrance: Transversality and the Fitting	137

	Response in an Age of Technocracy	
Corey Anton	Remembering and Honoring Professor Calvin O. Schrag	146
Donovan Irven	Remembering Calvin O. Schrag and the Potential of Kindness	153
Annette M. Holba	Remembering My Experiences with Calvin O. Schrag	159
Elise Poll	On Inheritance, Responsibility, and an Unexpected Obligation: Honoring Calvin O. Schrag	164

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

ISSN 1918-7351
Volume 18 (2026)

Hermeneutics as Communicative Praxis: Honoring the Work of Calvin O. Schrag (1928-2024)

Ramsey Eric Ramsey
Barrett, the Honors College Arizona State University USA
ORCID: 0000-0001-9203-2963

To honor, remember, and take up into thinking the profound philosophical contribution of the work of Calvin O. Schrag, Volume 18 of *Analecta Hermeneutica* is dedicated to essays by a distinguished group of thinkers from across the globe addressing some aspect of Professor Schrag's many contributions to hermeneutic philosophy.

Volume 18 of *Analecta Hermeneutica* is comprised of two types of essays. First, six traditional essays exploring, expanding, and extending the work of Prof. Schrag so as to make an original contribution to hermeneutic philosophy. These contributions make various claims and address issues central to the concerns of hermeneutic philosophy, all of which were concerns of Schrag's in some manner or another in his own work. Among these concerns are: rhetoric and reciprocity, hermeneutics and rhetoric and space, philosophy and literature, time and being, leadership, and being ever-addressed by words.

The second set of essays are shorter pieces the execution of which, while containing memorial and remembrance honoring Prof. Schrag, also make claims to advance hermeneutic thinking. Each essay gives us some reflection on what it meant to interact with Prof. Schrag in a more personal way. Taken together these reflections sketch a compelling profile of this beloved hermeneutic philosopher, colleague, and teacher. So as to refrain from postponing the reader's engagement with these fine essays and reflections, allow me the briefest rehearsal of Prof. Schrag's career for those until now unfamiliar with his work.

Calvin O. Schrag, whose long and illustrious career spanned six decades, played a significant role in bringing continental philosophy to North America. As a founding editor of the journal then called *Man and World* (now *Continental Philosophy Review*) and as an early force in creating the premier professional society for the study of continental philosophy in the States (Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, SPEP), his work helped to create spaces and opportunities for North American contributions to hermeneutic thinking.

A student of John Wild and Paul Tillich, Prof. Schrag's work addressed many pressing issues salient to hermeneutic philosophy among them questions of ethics, issues pertaining to religious and theological thought, and hermeneutics as the practice of communication in everyday life. The last of these led to his creating with colleagues a joint Ph.D. program in Philosophy and Communication at Purdue University, where he held the George Ade Distinguished Professor of Philosophy. From his leadership position in this program his research made important, fecund, and lasting contributions to the philosophical study of communication as a life-word practice in line with what European philosophers following Heidegger and Gadamer call *Sprachlichkeit*.

His numerous books, including *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity*, *The Self After Postmodernity*, and *God as Otherwise than Being*, along with his scores and scores of articles and book chapters (many of his books and articles are translated into several other languages) are without doubt a powerful contribution to hermeneutic thinking and will long act as inspiration for furthering thought concerning issues essential to the contemporary thinking in hermeneutics—the very type of thinking central to the mission of *Analecta Hermeneutica*, the official journal of the International Institute for Hermeneutics. It is our honor to publish this memorial to Calvin O. Schrag, who lives on in the writing and teaching of so many across the globe.

*****

To send us on our way, this from Prof. Schrag's *Doing Philosophy with Others*:

> What becomes manifest in this recursion to a hermeneutic of everyday life as we track the origins of the curricula in our citadels of leaning is a manifold of concrete sense giving and sense making in our conversational involvements. No one discipline in the university and no particular configuration of political, religious, or ethnic-cultural beliefs holds a birthright to the understanding of our personal and

> social existence that plays itself out in the multifaceted conversations, reminiscences, and reflections of humankind.

This truly interdisciplinary and post-disciplinary thinker has bequeathed to the rich tradition of hermeneutic thinking, as is fitting such work, that which is beyond mere calculation. His legacy is present in ways both impossible to tease out in full and yet uniquely and powerfully felt by many, many thinkers throughout the world. Through his copious written work, his decades long teaching endeavors, and his thoughtful mentoring, Calvin O. Schrag stands as an exemplar of what keeps hermeneutic thinking alive.

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

ISSN 1918-7351
Volume 18 (2026)

God, Rhetoric, and the Reciprocity of the Teacher-Student Relationship: A Tribute to Calvin Schrag

Michael J. Hyde
Wake Forest University, USA

Abstract

I develop a narrative whose goal is to disclose the relationship between the three topics that title my project. The narrative begins with a discussion of God's "true" nature based on a hermeneutic assessment of one of the most important moments in the history of Judaism: God telling Its Name to Moses on Mount Sinai. A name grants identity to a given object of consciousness. God's Name contradicts Itself; it thereby poses a conflict that continues today. The consequences of this act introduce a host of topics that grant significance to the central topics of this project that I introduce as my narrative unfolds. These topics include hearing and responding to the call of conscience, experiencing awe, appreciating the value of anxiety, demonstrating the life-giving behavior of acknowledgment, showing a willingness to understand how the desire for perfection requires the ethic of perfectibility, and exhibiting rhetorical and communicative competence in the use of naming, ambiguity, interruption, dialogical interaction, argumentation, conversation, epideictic discourse, storytelling, and eloquence. There are several individuals who are significant for developing my narrative: Calvin Schrag, Moses, Søren Kierkegaard, Annie Dillard, Francis Collins, and Emmanuel Levinas.

Keywords: Calvin Schrag, God, rhetoric, teacher-student relationship, Moses, *Ein Sof*, Søren Kierkegaard, eloquence, Emmanuel Levinas

> There may be future projects, but not one of these projects, should it eventuate, will be a 'final-and-finished' project. This is because in designing our projects, we need to be mindful that they remain works in progress. They are always provisional and open-ended, with the attached caveat, "until further notice." Our projects are never finished. When we die, we die unfinished, and so do our projects.
>
> —Calvin O. Schrag[1]

I was a graduate student, colleague, and friend of Professor Calvin Schrag for many years. His books, articles, lectures, and classroom achievements display his interests in the central topics of this essay. Following Schrag's lead set forth in his book *Reflections on the Religious, the Ethical, and the Political,* I turn first to the question of God's "true" nature and begin developing a narrative based on a hermeneutic assessment of one of the most important moments in the history of Judaism: God telling Its Name to Moses on Mount Sinai. A name grants identity to a given object of consciousness. The social and literary critic Kenneth Burke expands on this event of naming when he notes "The mere desire to name something by its 'proper' name, or to speak a language in its distinctive ways, is instructively 'perfectionist.' What is more 'perfectionist' in essence than the impulse, when one is in dire need of something, to so state this need that one in effect 'defines' the situation."[2]

As we will see, God's Name contradicts Itself; it thereby poses a conflict that maintains its status today. In his discussions of religion, Schrag does not mention the moment when God Names Itself and the conflict produced by this speech act. The consequences of this act introduce a host of topics that grant current significance to the central topics of this narrative and that I introduce as the narrative unfolds. These topics include: hearing and responding to the call of conscience, experiencing awe, appreciating the value of anxiety, demonstrating the life-giving behavior of acknowledgment, showing a willingness to understand how the desire for perfection requires the ethic of perfectibility, and exhibiting rhetorical and communicative competence in the use of naming, ambiguity, interruption, dialogical interaction, argumentation, conversation, epideictic discourse, storytelling, and eloquence. There are several individuals who are significant in developing my narrative: Calvin Schrag, Moses, Søren Kierkegaard, Annie Dillard, Francis Collins, and Emmanuel Levinas.

With all I am saying here regarding things to come, I readily admit that what you are about to read is an "unfinished" essay . . . "until further notice." If the notice

---

[1] Calvin O. Schrag, *Reflections on the Religious, the Ethical, and the Political*, ed. Michael R. Paradiso-Michau (Lexington Books, 2013), xxxix.

[2] Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays in Life, Literature, and Method* (University of California Press, 1966), 16.

is given and a work is produced, the process would need repeating time and again. A mindful mentor taught me the importance of this lesson. We seek progress in developing our research projects. Progress is an ongoing process in search of perfection.[3] The search continues with what I attempt here.

My narrative begins with a question and others to come. Questions serve a rhetorical purpose: they interrupt the flow of communicative transactions and open us to yet foreseeable ways of thinking and acting. As Hans-Georg Gadamer notes, "The essence of the *question* is to open up possibilities and keep them open. To ask a question means to bring into the open. The openness of what is in question consists in the fact that the answer is not settled . . . Every true question requires this openness."[4] I hope readers remain open to the narrative. Its primary purpose is to keep the conversation going about matters of concern that were introduced to me by a much-prized scholar and teacher and that I extend here.

From God to Rhetoric

God supposedly created the cosmos with a Big Bang approximately 13.7 billion years ago. Evolution began its wonders. Moses appeared on the scene approximately 12.8 billion years later. Why did it take so long? Evolution requires a great deal of time. Perhaps God was tired. Perhaps God had more important things to do. Like what? Aldous Huxley offers a chilling response: "Maybe our world is another planet's hell."

Moses is tending his flock of sheep at the base of Mount Sinai when he hears God's call: "Where art thou?" Moses is being personally acknowledged by God as he hears this call. Moses, in turn, acknowledges God as he responds: "Here I am." For Moses, this exchange of acknowledgment was an awe-inspiring experience. The workings of awe and acknowledgement are related. Scripture would have us believe that our willingness to appreciate and be affected by the workings of this relationship is a "gift" from God, a "call of conscience," a "knowing" (*scientia*) "with others" (*con*). Of course, when God calls it is not simply a demand to know with some other human being, but rather to become aware of the "Otherness" of the Other that transcends the other's existence, the "wholly Other" whose showing of Its truth originates from

---

[3] See, for example, Martin Foss, *The Idea of Perfection in the Western World* (Princeton University Press, 1946); John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man*, 3rd ed. (Liberty Fund, 2000); Michael J. Hyde, *Perfection: Coming to Terms with Being Human* (Baylor University Press, 2010).

[4] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York Crossroad, 1989), 299, 261.

what is beyond total comprehension, the "infinity of infinity," what the contemporary philosopher and Talmudic scholar Emmanuel Levinas describes as that which is "Otherwise than Being."[5] God's call is awesome and demands acknowledgement.

The experience of awe is made possible by our wondrous ability to perceive and be moved in remarkable ways by experiences that qualify as being sublime. Awe is incited by the sublime: the remarkable and reverential nature of entities, environments, circumstances, and creative accomplishments. Whether the experience of awe results in cheerful or distressing outcomes, the emotion warrants appreciation for its unequaled capacity to reveal "something more," an otherness, about the reality of our everyday existence. All that we know, think we know, and seek to know is based on the workings of consciousness. Awe is an extraordinary consciousness-raising experience that situates us as witnesses to a momentous revelation of some intended object's truth that warrants acknowledgement. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel emphasizes this point when he notes there is "only one way to wisdom: awe. Forfeit your sense of awe, let your conceit diminish your ability to revere, and the universe becomes a marketplace for you. The loss of awe is the greatest block to insight."[6] The Christian existential philosopher Søren Kierkegaard acknowledges the influence of awe in his life when he writes: "What really counts in life is that at some time you have seen something, felt something which is so great, so matchless, that everything else is nothing by comparison, that even if you forgot everything you would never forget this."[7] The ability to experience awe and acknowledge its wonder is a gift from God acknowledging our ability to acknowledge God.

The workings of acknowledgement are invaluable. What would life be like if no one acknowledged your existence? The question confronts one with the possibility of being isolated, marginalized, ignored, and forgotten by others. The unacknowledged find themselves in an "out-of-the way" place where it is hard for human beings, given their social instinct, to feel at home. The suffering that can accompany this way of being-in-the-world is known to bring about fear, anxiety, sadness, anger, addiction, and sometimes even death in the form of suicide or retaliation against those who are rightly or wrongly accused of making one's life so lonely, miserable, and unbearable. Positive acknowledgement provides an opening out of such a distressful situation, for the act of acknowledging is a communicative behavior that grants attention to others

---

[5] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Klumer Academic Publishers, 1991).

[6] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (Noonday, 1978), 78.

[7] Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations, Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*, ed. Charles E. Moore (The Plough Publishing House, 1999), 263-64.

and thereby makes room for them in our lives. With this added living space comes the opportunity for a new beginning, a "second chance" whereby one might improve his or her lot in life as the acknowledgement recognizes something about our being that is felt by others to be worthy of praise and perhaps even remembrance after we are gone. Indeed, have you ever thought about your own death, your funeral, and who might show up to pay their respects? And when thinking about this last matter, have you ever become upset with those people who you believe should have attended the ceremony but did not? Even when we have passed to the most out-of-the-way place there is, we still crave the kindness of positive acknowledgement—the way it brings us to mind and thus, in a sense, keeps us "alive."[8]

Responding to the call's demand to fulfill its obligation to serve the other, the self assumes the task of perfecting itself, which for Levinas warrants acclaim for its "goodness." Goodness is the ongoing call of conscience that lies at the heart of human existence and that forever calls the self into question. Goodness is a constant interruption that raises the moral issue: Are you being just in all that you say and do? Goodness brings the self and others closer together. Goodness promotes the "dwelling place" (*ethos*) of a neighborhood. The other becomes my neighbor precisely through the way its presence "calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question."[9]

Moses' experiences of being awed and acknowledged by the goodness of God intensify as he ascends to the top of Mount Sinai and stands in front of the "showing-forth" of God's partial presence in a burning bush that does not consume itself and symbolizes what in the related Zohar and Kabbalah tradition of Judaism represents the "Limitless Light" (*Ein Sof*) of God.[10] Throughout the rhetorical tradition this disclosive event of any object of consciousness is typically associated with discourse that bestows praise or blame on the actions of others. However, its most original form takes place before any such assessment is made. The disclosing of the truth of some matter of concern defines the most primordial form of epideictic discourse: the "showing-forth" (*epi-deixis*) of the truth of a being's presence in its "saying" to a witness what its existence is. The light of the burning bush is a showing-forth of God's limitlessness. In other words, the showing of God's presence in the light of the burning bush is a primordial demonstration of the epideictic showing-forth of God's infinity.

---

[8] Michael J. Hyde, *The Life-Giving Gift of Acknowledgement* (Purdue University Press, 2006).
[9] Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," *The Levinas Reader*, trans. Seán Hand (Blackwell, 1989), 83.
[10] Daniel C. Matt, *Zohar: Annotated & Explained* (Skylight Paths, 2002); Michael Berg, *The Way: Using the Wisdom of Kabbalah for Spiritual Transformation and Fulfillment* (John Wiley & Sons, 2001).

"Let there be light."[11] Levinas credits this showing-saying event as being the primordial occurrence of language and communication that is active when attending "with all of one's heart" to some object of consciousness. An example of this showing and saying of some truth was evident when I heard a witness during an exhibit of Van Gogh's paintings declare "This picture speaks to me." I should have asked "Of what?" Something godly? Really?

As the bush burned Moses conversed with God, received the Ten Commandments, and learned that at least trying to abide by the teachings of God as present in the challenging demands of the Commandments is worth the effort. Denying the truth of the Word is a sin warranting punishment. Hence, God's command "Walk before me and be thou perfect."[12]

Moses is told that the Jewish people have a future. He then asks for God's "Name" and is told "*Ehyeh-asher-ehyeh*." English renders this reply in a still popular way: "I am who I am." In Hebrew, however, the dynamic of being open to the future is unequivocal: "I shall be who I shall be."[13] God names Itself in an ambiguous way. Ambiguity encourages pause for thought; it is a rhetorical maneuver that interrupts the conditioned and taken for granted ways of understanding the "true" meaning of the matter at hand. God is a teacher of the commitment that is needed to "know" God as much as possible. And being a teacher of such rhetorical maneuvers as epideictic and ambiguous discourse, God is also a rhetorician, although God never admits as much. The basis of the art of rhetoric is simply stated: Using the right words (that are effective enough) in the right way (so a particular audience is receptive to what is spoken or written), and at the right time (when responding to the immediate needs of the audience).[14] How well this rhetorical activity is performed, how evocative, moving, and awe-inspiring it is for witnesses, qualifies this activity as being eloquent.

With the two conflicting interpretations of God's Name a contradiction is apparent. With its repetition of "I am" the interpretation "I am who I am" is commonly understood as a declaration of God's "completeness." God's Name thus speaks of God's "perfection." Jesus admits as much in his Sermon on the Mount when he tells the gathering that they should be "perfect, even as your Father which is in

---

[11] *Genesis* 1:3. The King James Version is used for Scripture quotations throughout the footnotes.
[12] *Genesis* 17:1
[13] Gershom Scholem*, Kabbalah*: *A Definitive History of the Evolution, Ideas, Leading Figures, and Extraordinary Influence of Jewish Mysticism* (Penguin Books, 1978), 87-189.
[14] See e.g., Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (University California Press, 1970); C. Clifton Black, *The Rhetoric of the Gospel: Theological Artistry in the Gospels and Acts*, 2nd Ed. (John Know Press, 2013).

heaven is perfect."[15] The future orientation of "I shall be who I shall be," however, calls into question this emphasis of perfection. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner makes much of the problem here as he argues what the future orientation of God's Name requires us to admit: "Here is a Name (and a God), who is neither completed nor finished. This God is literally *not yet*."[16] God's existence is thus understood to be completely incomplete, perfectly imperfect.

God needs a future to remedy this condition. Advocates of the interpretation "I shall be who I shall be" maintain that to achieve this goal God requires human beings to behave in a way that demonstrates such virtues as "goodness." Rabbi Marc-Alain Quaknin thus notes that as human beings accept the responsibility of offering this assistance their "ethic is no longer that of perfection but of perfectibility."[17] God needs our acknowledgement of God's need. Rabbi Heschel's way of phrasing this point is noteworthy: "All of human history as described in the Bible may be summarized in one phrase: "*God in search of man*."[18] The search affirms an essential and honorable need of human beings: the need to be needed. Heschel, again, has a noteworthy way of making the point: A human being

> insists not only on being satisfied but also on being able to satisfy, on *being a need* not only on *having needs*. Personal needs come and go, but one anxiety remains: *Am I needed?* There is not a man who has not been moved by that anxiety . . . The feeling of futility that comes with the sense of being useless, of not being needed in the world, is the most common cause of psychoneurosis. The only way to avoid despair is to be a need rather than an end. *Happiness*, in fact, may be defined as the *certainty of being needed*.[19]

Those who affirm the Name of God as "I shall be who I shall be" avoid the anxiety of not being needed to sustain and advance God's livelihood. They thus may retreat from any interaction with their opponents because they no longer care about how their interpretation conflicts with those who interpret God's name as "I am who I am." The conflict, however, still exists, as does the possibility of experiencing anxiety. This emotion is the result of not knowing what is to come of one's existence or when

---

[15] Matthew 5:48.
[16] Lawrence Kushner, *The Book of Words: Talking Spiritual Life, Living Spiritual Talk* (Jewish Lights, 1993), 28.
[17] Marc-Alain Quakin, *Mysteries of the Kabbalah*, trans. Josephine Bacon (Abbeville Press, 2000), 200.
[18] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man,* 136-144. Also see Rabbi David A. Cooper, *God is a Verb: Kabbalah and the Practice of Mystical Judaism* (Riverhead Books, 1997), 67-79; Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 55-59.
[19] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (Noonday Press, 1951), 193-195.

the end will come. Anxiety brings us face-to-face with our potential for being who, what, and how we are. Anxiety individualizes a human being by disclosing to this being its primordial condition of being open and vulnerable to the possibilities of its future-oriented existence. Kierkegaard writes that "the magnitude of anxiety is a prophecy of how wonderful perfection is."[20] He measures this magnitude in terms of how open we become to the Otherness of the "unknown" when, for whatever reason, the future-oriented trajectory of human existence, its objective uncertainty, calls into question our everyday ways of thinking and acting. For Kierkegaard, the unknown is a sign of God's unfathomable perfection, hence his praise for that emotion that exposes us in the most direct way to the possibility of coming to know something about this ultimate source of truth. If the conflict remains between the differing interpretations of God's Name, then so does the possibility of experiencing anxiety. It's possible that one of the interpretations is incorrect. Kierkegaard makes much of this condition: "Possibility is a hint from God. A person must follow it."[21]

What is being hinted at here? The need to abide by the interpretation of God's Name which emphasizes "I am who I am" or the interpretation of the Name which emphasizes "I shall be who I shall be"? Although advocates of either interpretation may be disgusted enough with each other that they retreat from any effort to deal with this conflict, or are not bothered in opting for retreat because they are satisfied with their respective interpretations, a more rational, respectful, dialogical, and civic-minded way of dealing with the conflict will require the advocates of the differing interpretations of God's Name to engage in the communicative and rhetorical practice of argumentation. The philosopher and argumentation theorist Henry W. Johnstone Jr. tells us why this is the case as he identifies the basic requirements of this practice:

> The individual who attempts to speak and act in such a way as to remain true to himself must come into radical conflict with others who are no less true to themselves but according to different beliefs. He cannot sidestep the conflict merely by withdrawing the expression of his beliefs. Such sudden silence might attend the comic downfall of a buffoon, but could not be the choice of a person of integrity. Nor can such an individual overcome the conflict by using violence to annihilate the opposition. Action of that sort would bring down a tragic fate, for one does not express one's commitment

[20] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, trans. and ed. Reidar Thomte, in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson (Princeton University Press, 1980), 188.
[21] Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*, ed. Charles E. More (The Plough Publishing House of The Bruderhof Foundation, 1978), 396.

> at all except in communicating with others capable of taking issue with it. The idea of expression without an interlocutor is just as incoherent as that of commitment without expression.[22]

Elsewhere Johnstone adds this instruction when he notes "Rhetoric is the evocation and the maintenance of the consciousness required for communication."[23] As noted above, the evocative nature of rhetoric is facilitated by eloquence.

Philosophers have long denigrated this rhetorical art by associating it with the use of language to "beautify" one's discourse so as to misdirect and cloud a genuine understanding of the truth of a given matter of concern. A more accurate appreciation of the art, as defined by the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poet Fenelon, emphasizes how the evocative and potentially awe-inspiring function of eloquence "is made up of the methods which reflection and experience have evolved to make a discourse such as to establish the truth and to arouse a love for it in the hearts of [human beings]. Things which strike and arouse the heart . . . eloquence is just that."[24] Eloquence is an agent for constructing narratives intended to cultivate wise judgment. Eloquence is a way of facilitating wisdom and goodness. Eloquence lends itself to disclosing the truth. Kenneth Burke puts it this way: "The purpose of eloquence is to 'convert life' to its most thorough verbal equivalent."[25]

The rhetorical art of eloquence is present throughout the Scriptures. As in the case of Moses and other disciples who admit to God that they lack the necessary rhetorical competence that enables them to abide by God's demand to "spread the Word" effectively to others, God assures these messengers that God will *teach* them how best to use language to remedy this problem. Remember, God is a rhetorician, and God is a teacher.

God suggests that the use of a "parable" can facilitate the persuasive force of a speaker's or writer's message. A parable is a story that employs the art of eloquence so as to better acknowledge the values of those being addressed and, in so doing, further their willingness to be receptive to the storyteller's primary argument. The effectiveness of a parable is dependent on the storyteller's rhetorical ability to use the right words in the right way at the right time to be as persuasive as possible. An astute demonstration of this ability is a sign of the storyteller's rhetorical competence, which

---

[22] Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., *Philosophy and Argument* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1959), 19.
[23] Henry W Johnstone, Jr., *Validity and Rhetoric in Philosophical Argument: An Outlook in Transition* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978), 129.
[24] Wilbur S. Howell (ed.), *Fenelon's Dialogues on Eloquence* (Princeton University Press, 1951), 23.
[25] Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (University of California Press, 1968), 167.

is directed toward "the other," to those being called to respond to what the storyteller has to say about some matter of interest.

Here is a contemporary example of a lengthy parable authored by the Pulitzer Prize-winning nature writer and social critic Annie Dillard, who "worships" God, maintains human beings "were made and set here [by God's creation of evolution] to give voice to . . . [their] own astonishment" (Greek: *ekplexis*, also translated as awe), who admits that the endeavor is fraught with the fear of failure, and who is known to employ eloquent irony to keep her readers guessing about the "true" nature of God. Dillard would thus have us ponder the following question: "Could it be that if I climbed the dome of heaven and scrabbled and clutched at the beautiful cloth till I loaded my fists with a wrinkle to pull, that the mask would rip away to reveal a toothless old ugly, eyes glazed with delight?"[26]

Dillard is a teacher. Her readers are her students. "The impulse to keep to yourself what you have learned is not only shameful, it is destructive. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes."[27] Dillard finds "traces" of God in the happenings of nature. Her story details her experience of awe as she watched and reacted to a total eclipse of the sun. The story offers a stunning display of the evocative workings of epideictic discourse and eloquence.

The story begins with a recall: "It had been like dying, that sliding down the mountain pass. It had been like the death of someone, irrational, that sliding down the mountain pass and into the region of dread. It was like slipping into fever or falling down that hole in sleep which you wake yourself whimpering. We are given an indication of what is to come: the loss of not feeling at home; a being-unto-death.

Dillard and her husband traveled from their home to a location high on a hill in central Washington to witness a total eclipse. Many other onlookers would be there, too. "It began with no ado. It was odd that such a well-advertised public event should have no starting gun, no overture, no introductory speaker. I should have known right then that I was out of my depth." Dillard admits that she once witnessed a partial eclipse, but it "bears almost no relation to a total eclipse. Seeing a partial eclipse bears the same relation of seeing a total eclipse as kissing a man does to marrying him, or as flying in an airplane does to falling out of an airplane." Continuing to prepare the reader for what is to come, Dillard tells us that "Usually it is a bit of a trick to keep your knowledge from blinding you. But during an eclipse it is easy. What you see is

---

[26]Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (Harper Perennial, 1998), 271.
[27]Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (Harper Perennial, 1989), 179.

much more convincing than any wild-eyed theory you may know."[28]A partial eclipse was becoming a total eclipse, a sublime awe-inspiring event. The opening paragraph of Dillard's essay now continues. "The sun was going, and the world was wrong. The grasses were wrong . . . From all the hills came screams. A piece of sky beside the crescent sun was detaching . . . It was an abrupt black body out of nowhere . . . There was no sound. The eyes dried, the arteries drained, the lungs hushed. There was no world . . . Seeing this black body was like seeing a mushroom dried cloud. The heart screeched. The meaning of the sight overwhelmed its fascination. It obliterated meaning itself." Continuing with her description and reaction to this instance of the sublime, she tells us that as the sun disappeared "we saw a wall of dark shadow come speeding toward us . . . It slammed our hill and knocked us out." It felt like "a slug of anesthetic shoot up your arm . . . You can feel the deadness run up your arm; you can feel the appalling, inhuman speed of your own blood." The eclipse spoke of the "universe about which we have read so much and never before felt . . . It was as though an enormous, loping god in the sky had reached down and slapped the earth's face."[29]

The intensity of Dillard's rhetoric is, itself, overwhelming, sublime. She listens and speaks eloquently. Dillard reports that when the sublime event concluded "an odd thing happened . . . we all hurried away. We were born and bored at a stroke." Yes, an extended moment of awe was a terrifying, yet must-see event, but "enough is enough. One turns at last even from glory itself with a sigh of relief. From the depths of mystery, and even from the heights of splendor, we bounce back and hurry for the latitudes of home" with its habits, routines, and mindless conformism that grant much needed and welcomed stability and comfort to the chaos of life.[30]

Dillard and her husband were seated at a restaurant, listening to the repetitions of witnesses asking "Did you see . . . ? Did you see . . . ?" Dillard's descriptions of the eclipse and its effects were intended to display a more carefully crafted and sublime acknowledgment of the awe-inspiring eclipse than what her fellow witnesses were saying about it. She admits her efforts were wanting at times: "In the black sky was a ring of light. It was a thin ring, an old, thin silver wedding band, an old worn ring. It was an old wedding band in the sky, or a morsel of bone.[31] But then a member of the crowd, a student, addressed her with a question regarding a metaphor "which knocked [her] for a loop": "Did you see that little white ring? It looked like a Life SAVER; it looked like a Life Saver up in the sky." "And so it did," admits Dillard. "The boy spoke

---

[28]Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (Harper Perennial, 1982), 15.
[29] Ibid., 25-26.
[30] Ibid., 28.
[31] Ibid., 18.

well. He was a walking alarm clock. I myself had at that time no access to such a word. He could write a sentence, and I could not . . . All those things for which we have no words are lost."[32]

The showing-forth of a showing-forth, an epideictic discourse possessing stunning eloquence disclosing an awe-inspiring epideictic event and its consequences. The event showed itself as a Life Saver causing a "deadness" in a witness. The contradiction does what an eclipse does: interrupts the normalcy of daily life. The interruption evokes a higher state of consciousness of what is challenging us with the ethical obligation of discovering and using the right words in the right way at the right time so that we can share our experience effectively with others. Achieving this goal is sacred for Dillard:

> In "the depths" of a total eclipse are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world's rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power for evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned.[33]

What the total eclipse shows and says about itself is far more sublime than the common, well-worn words in a dictionary's definition of the event. Indeed, it is "monsters" forcing you "farther over the world's rim." Dillard witnesses, acknowledges, and is awed by the way the world, in moments of dread, speaks and shows what for her is a "trace" of a truth that makes possible all that our openness to reality enables us to perceive, including openness itself: God.

Whether one believes or does not believe in the existence of God, Dillard warrants being acknowledged as a teacher of rhetoric and how its use of the showing-forth and related workings of epideictic and eloquent discourse facilitate rhetoric's ability to disclose the truth of matters that demand attention. Her teachings also can be demanding. For example, she requests from readers who are willing to become her students that they "Write as if you were dying. At the same time, assume you write for an audience consisting solely of terminal patients. That is, after all, the case. What would you begin writing if you knew you would die soon? What could you say to a

---

[32] Ibid., 23-24.
[33] Ibid., 19-20.

dying person that would not enrage by its triviality?"[34] The assignment requires students to display rhetorical competence in discovering and using the right words in the right way at the right time so as to be understanding and respectful of another person in desperate need of acknowledgement. Dillard is committed to enhancing the educational nature and value of this communal phenomenon. She does not want to open her safe and find ashes.

What Dillard teaches her students about how the practice of rhetoric acknowledges the status of "the other" has me recall a defense of the ethical function of the practice offered by the ancient Roman senator, orator, lawyer, and philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero: For "what function is so kingly, so worthy of the free, so generous, as to being help to the suppliant, to raise up those who are cast down, to bestow security, to set free from peril, to maintain men in their civil rights? . . . The wise control of the complete orator is that which chiefly upholds not only his own dignity, but the safety of countless individuals and of the entire State."[35] Like a well-trained and dedicated physician, the ethical and morally oriented rhetor has a significant role to play in maintaining the good health of others who dwell in the communal realm of the body politic. This defense of the practice of rhetoric lies at the heart of the philosophy of civic republicanism. As Robert Bellah and his colleagues remind us, in this philosophy "community means a solidarity based on a responsibility to care for others because that is essential to living a good life." Moreover, civic republicanism, emphasizing as it does the importance of developing a rhetorically competent citizenry, maintains that the authenticity of "public life is built upon the . . . languages and practices of commitment that shape character. These languages and practices establish a web of interconnection by creating trust, joining people to families, friends, communities, and churches, and making each individual aware of his reliance on the larger society. They form those habits of the heart that are the matrix of a moral ecology, the connecting tissue of a body politic."[36]

The philosophy of civic republicanism emphasizes the importance of its followers taking seriously their "responsibility to care for others," to acknowledge what was termed earlier their "need to be needed," which is "essential" to their well-being, "to living the good life," and to encourage them to have a say in determining how this life should be lived. Acknowledging others enhances the chances that with their involvement in the democratic process they will provide those who address them

---

[34] Dillard, *The Writing Life*, 68.
[35] Cicero, *De oratore* (1.8.32), trans. H. Rackham (Harvard University Press, 1942).
[36] Robert N. Bellah, R. Madsen, W. M. Sullivan, A. Swidler, and S. M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Harper & Row, 1985), 162, 251.

knowledge of how best to use language in the right way at the right time so that they feel respected and needed to maintain and advance the democratic nature of their being-with-and-for-others. This specific use of language has been referred to several times: the moral and ethical practice of rhetoric. The other calls for the performance of this practice. The other needs to be needed.

From Rhetoric to the Reciprocity of the Teacher-Student Relationship

The philosopher and Talmudic scholar Emmanuel Levinas responds to this need by acknowledging the essential nature of the other as being the basis for developing a philosophy of ethics. Ethical responsibility originates in the "self's" encounter with the other. This encounter, which Levinas maintains is a "teaching" event, is a fundamental aspect of human existence and provides evidence of God's presence on earth.

Levinas's appreciation of rhetoric is both instructive and problematic as he develops his philosophy. Recognizing this deficiency does, however, lend credence to an appreciation of the scope and function of rhetoric. Levinas offers what I take to be his most explicit description of his major thesis when he notes:

> I am defined as a subjectivity, a particular person, as an "I" [or self], precisely because I am exposed to the other. It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that makes me an individual "I." So that I become a responsible or ethical "I" to the extent that I agree to depose or dethrone myself—to abdicate my position of centrality—in favor of the vulnerable other . . . The ethical "I" is subjectivity precisely in so far as it kneels before the other, sacrificing its own liberty *to the more primordial call of the other* . . . I can never escape the fact that the other has demanded a response from me before I affirm my freedom not to respond to his demand.[37]

What I have to say about Levinas' philosophy supports what Colin Davis says about the philosophy: "Levinas might be portrayed as lacking rigor, with notions inadequately defined, to the point that even the most careful and sophisticated readers are frequently left mystified; or alternatively he might appear as one who creates a new

---

[37] Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics of the Infinite" (Interview with Richard Kearney), in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*, ed. Richard Kearney (Manchester University Press, 1984), 62-63.

role for philosophy, destabilizing its fictions of mastery, making a space receptive to the as yet unheard language of the Other. I am attracted by the latter reading but cannot quite bring myself to dismiss the former."[38] I agree with both accounts. The practice of hermeneutic charity when interpreting Levinas' discourse helps one to side with the later account. My intent is to do just that, although not always.

We exist in a world of otherness (alterity), of all that is but that is not ourselves. Otherness is a fact of life. Levinas is primarily interested in how this otherness shows itself in the "face of the other" and how it instructs who we are as ethical and moral beings. What Levinas means by "the face" is typically associated with the face of a human being. But the face can mean more than that. Levinas admits as much when defining the face: "A face has meaning not by virtue of the relationship in which it is found, but out of itself; that is what expression is. A face is the presentation of an entity as an entity, its personal presentation . . . the existence of a substance, a thing in itself."[39] For example, the "Big Bang" referred to at the beginning of my narrative has a face. So, too, Dillard's "total eclipse." And here is one more example not yet mentioned. The "human genome," whose "showing-forth" was discovered by the scientist Dr. Francis Collins and his research team. The project was launched in 1990 and completed in 2003. Collins was an atheist when the project began and was so awed by the discovery that while remaining a scientist he became a disciple of God. The discourse of the human genome, he declared, is the "language of God."[40]

Collins heard the call. The "face speaks." Its call of conscience instigates what Levinas describes as a "moving out of oneself" toward the otherness of the other.[41] The face speaks a call for transcendence, for the self to move *beyond* its current egotistic ways of being situated in the world and acknowledge the otherness of the other. Collins found this showing-forth of otherness in the face of the human genome, which he interpreted as a "trace" of God's presence in our lives. The otherness of the face shows-forth in the happening of a total eclipse and in the happening of the Big Bang. Both are cosmological events. The cosmos is expanding at least at the speed of light: 186 thousand miles per second. Does the expanding cosmos have an end point? Is it ever complete, perfect? Who knows? Human beings have a name that answers these questions: God, the ultimate presence of "Otherness" and the happening of "transcendence." Levinas' philosophy is dedicated to teaching his readers and listeners,

---

[38] Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 143.
[39] Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 20.
[40] Francis Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (The Free Press, 2007).
[41] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism,* trans. Sean Hand (John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 9-10.

his students, this "fact of life." He puts it this way: "God is not simply the 'first other,' the 'other par excellence,' or the 'absolutely other,' but other than the other, prior to the ethical bond with another and different from every neighbor, transcendent to the point of absence."[42]

Levinas describes the "showing-forth" of Otherness as a fundamental act of "expression," a "saying" of the presence of Otherness embodied in the face. According to Levinas, the "face speaks" this "presencing," this showing-forth of Otherness which now can be symbolized in what Levinas terms the "said" of everyday discourse. Levinas puts it this way: "Face and discourse are tied. The face speaks. It speaks, it is in this that it renders possible and begins all discourse."[43]

The face speaks, and the self is made aware of an "exposure," a showing-forth of otherness coming from the presence of the other. Levinas refers to this evocative event as "the epiphany of the face" from which emerges a "call of conscience." This call defines an act of "teaching" that "interrupts" and calls into question the self's egotistic tendencies and know-it-all attitudes that preoccupy the self with its own well-being rather than with the well-being of the other. With its call of conscience, the otherness of the face teaches otherwise.

An easier way to understand what Levinas is saying here is to recall the story of Moses and God's use of the burning bush to enhance Moses' understanding of the nature of God's existence. As designed by God, the bush is a rhetorical device, a simile, that helps explain how God exists. The bush is evocative; it sheds a "Limitless Light" (*Ein Sof*) on its surroundings. Its flame never dies out but goes on forever. The bush's existence is infinite, endless, like God's everlasting presence, a constant happening of transcendence.

God's use of a simile to disclose (show-forth) God's most original showing-forth of how God exists confirms my earlier stated claim that God is a rhetorician. Levinas does not admit as much, but when referring to God's showing-forth of Itself he declares that this specific disclosing of truth operates as a "rhetoric without eloquence."[44] I find this declaration confusing. What is rhetorical but not eloquent as God shows-forth Its truth? Here is a summary of how Levinas answers this question: The face speaks. It sounds a call of conscience that interrupts the self's egotistic tendencies. The interruption moves the self toward the other and its need to be needed, its need to be acknowledged for what it has to say and teach with its showing-

---

[42] Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 165-166.
[43] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard Cohen (Duquesne University Press, 1985), 97.
[44] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 72; Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford University Press, 1994), 138-139.

forth of the truth disclosed in the face of what is other than the self (e.g. the Big bang, a total eclipse, the human genome). This disclosure is especially significant if it is evocative enough to be awe-inspiring as the face of something shows itself in the right way at the right time so as to move the self toward the other and its need for acknowledgment. What is more evocative than the way the face speaks of the showing-forth of what is called "God"? This evocative power of the face is, for Levinas, the original happening of rhetoric in the life of a human being. Rhetoric is the movement of the self toward the other as it responds to the interruptive call of conscience that is happening as the face speaks.

Levinas emphasizes that this movement of the self toward the other, its being-with-and-for-the-other, is "asymmetrical." Reciprocity is not called for in the original relationship between the self and the other. The self serves the other. The other does not serve the self. Levinas stresses that the movement at work here originates the ethical and moral responsibility of the self to demonstrate its goodness to serve the other by acknowledging the showing-forth of truth that the face speaks with its interruptive call of conscience. Its Scripture comes alive: "Where art thou?" "Here I am."[45] The call of conscience and what it requires brings to mind another relevant and fitting segment of Scripture: "Walk before me and be thou perfect."[46] Responding to the call's demand to fulfill its obligation to serve the other, the self assumes the task of perfecting itself, cultivating its goodness so that it can better acknowledge the other's need to be needed. Levinas maintains that this ethical and moral endeavor is the defining feature of human dignity. The indelible communal character of human existence is made possible by an altruistic and thus ethical and moral impulse that lies at the heart of human beings. Levinas' philosophy demonstrates a civic republican mentality.

Notice, however, that I made no mention of eloquence in offering this summary. Levinas would have it no other way. As far as he is concerned, there is nothing eloquent happening in this epideictic event. It simply can be characterized as "rhetoric without eloquence." For Levinas, eloquence diminishes the saying of the primordial discourse of the face. Like many of his philosophical ancestors dating back to ancient Greece, Levinas associates the rhetorical workings of eloquence with "ruse, emprise, and exploitation."[47] But does not the burning bush constitute an act of

---

[45] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 105-06.
[46] Gen. 17:1
[47] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Duquesne University Press, 1992), 70-72; Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford University Press, 1994), 135-143.

eloquence? Does not its evocative awe-inspiring nature, its showing-forth of a more original showing-forth, its symbolic (rhetorical) disclosive happening in the right way at the right time, facilitate Moses' ethical and moral movement toward the otherness of the other? Does not the contradiction, the conflict exhibited in the "Limitless light," re-present the contradiction and conflict in God's Name (*Ein Sof*): "I am who I am," "I shall be who I shall be"? Recall Burke's comment regarding the function of the name quoted in the introduction of this essay: "The mere desire to name something by its 'proper' name, or to speak a language in its distinctive ways, is instructively 'perfectionist.' What is more 'perfectionist' in essence than the impulse, when one is in dire need of something, to so state this need that one in effect 'defines' the situation."

With these questions and Burke's comment in mind, perhaps Levinas would be open minded regarding the value of eloquence. The burning bush is not an instance of ruse, emprise, and exploitation. Moreover, I believe that Levinas would be supportive of the argumentation and debate that continues to take place today regarding the proper way of interpreting the truth of God's Name. Argumentation and debate are dialogical (rhetorical) activities that require reciprocity between the interlocutors, the self and the other. As he develops his ethical philosophy Levinas maintains that such a philosophy favors its association with "dialogue." This association modifies the self's relationship with the other. Levinas phrases it this way; ""Thanks to God', I am another for the others."[48] Involved in the dialogical and reciprocal activity of argumentation, the self deserves from the other what the other deserves from the self: a "movement" toward each other. This movement is facilitated as the interlocutors employ the rhetorical and evocative art of eloquence so as to make their arguments more awe-inspiring and persuasive. The interlocutors exist not merely as a self or an other, but rather as a self/other. Levinas does not employ this construction, although I believe it is appropriate for describing what Levinas terms "the third": those individuals in the public sphere who have something to advocate in situations where the truth of matters of interest is being contested and thus where arguments are bound to happen between self/others who demand reciprocity from their interlocutors. For Levinas, such situations allow for the promotion of "justice," which makes possible the creation of civil society and laws that, at least for the time being, grant ethical guidelines for the righteousness of interpersonal behavior.

[48] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 158.

Philosophers admit that they welcomed dialogues with Levinas.[49] For the purposes of the present narrative, the most illustrative dialogue is one Levinas (the teacher) had with his students. Levinas recalls "I remember meeting once with a group of Latin American students of Marxist liberation terribly concerned by the suffering and unhappiness of their people in Argentina." During the dialogical exchange, the students asked him "rather impatiently if [he] had ever actually witnessed the utopian rapport with the other which [his] ethical philosophy speaks of." He replied: "Yes, indeed, here in this room."[50]

With what I have discussed so far about Levinas's philosophy, I think it is fair to say that the students heard a call of conscience coming from others. They are acknowledging this call and what it demands: Accept the responsibility of respecting and serving others. You are obligated to do so. Where art thou? Here I am! The students are moved by the painful plight of others. The students are taking a stand against those who fail to abide by another Commandment emanating from the other's call of conscience: You shall not commit murder. The students are living for the other. It's a way of demonstrating and perfecting their goodness. In short, the students are showing Levinas how the utopian rapport with the other can be put into practice. Levinas could not help being taken with all that went on in this dialogical situation. "Yes, indeed, here in this room."

Levinas, however, has nothing to say about how the actual conversation informed the dialogue: How did the students use language in evocative and interruptive ways to describe their reactions to the call of conscience? Did they argue and tell stories to make their points? Was their speech masterful, hyperbolic, inarticulate? If masterful, did it employ figures of thought and figures of speech to heighten others' consciousness and appreciation of the situation at hand and to sound the student's own call of conscience? To answer these questions is to increase an understanding of how rhetoric is not without eloquence.

Of course, the validity of this claim is supported by the rhetorical competence of a self/other who takes seriously the definition of rhetorical eloquence emphasized by Fenelon as noted above. It deserves repeating: The evocative and potentially awe-inspiring function of eloquence "is made up of the methods which reflection and experience have evolved to make a discourse such as to establish the truth and to arouse a love for it in the hearts of [human beings]. Things which strike and arouse the heart . . . eloquence is just that." Perhaps Levinas would have provided a more

---

[49] Richard Kearney, ed., *Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester University Press,1984), 47-70.
[50] Ibid., 68.

direct and detailed appreciation of rhetorical eloquence by incorporating this understanding of the art in developing his ethical philosophy.

The Reciprocity of the Teacher-Student Relationship

Although influenced by this philosophy, the philosopher Calvin Schrag abides by Fenelon's definition of rhetorical eloquence as he develops a historical and philosophical assessment of the dialogical practices of argumentation, conversation, and the evocative nature of eloquence. In developing his assessment. Schrag argues for a particular understanding of the teacher-student relationship. I offer a critique of his argument. My narrative concludes once this critique is presented.

As developed in several of his books, Schrag holds a basic and well accepted understanding of the practice of rhetoric:

> The distinctive stamp of rhetorical intentionality is that it reaches out toward, aims at, is directed to the other as hearer, reader, and audience. This intentionality illustrates not the theoretical reflection of cognitive detachment but rather the practical engagement of concrete involvement. In the rhetorical situation the other is not set at a distance. He is 'engaged,' brought into the space of praxial concerns. The rhetor seeks to evoke from the hearer a response to a particular situation. He calls for deliberative action and reasoned judgment. Rhetoric as the directedness of discourse to the other, soliciting a response, is destined to slide into ethics.[51]

In other words, the rhetor is involved in the process of using the right words in the right way at the right time for others being addressed, what Schrag terms a "fitting response": members of the audience feel they are being acknowledged in a respectful way, are more receptive to what the rhetor is saying, feel comfortable voicing a response to the rhetor's attempt to be persuasive, and realize that they can contribute to the rhetorical situation at hand and thereby form a reciprocal and communal relationship with the rhetor. The rhetor is a teacher, and those addressed are the

---

[51] Calvin O. Schrag, *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,1986), 198. Also see Calvin O. Schrag, *Philosophical Papers: Betwixt and Between* (State University of New York Press, 1994), 225-244; Calvin O. Schrag, *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity* (Indiana University Press, 2003), 179-196; Calvin O. Schrag, *Doing Philosophy with Others: Conversations, Reminiscences, and Reflections* (Purdue University Press, 2010), 71-76.

students. Owing to the reciprocity at work, the students are also the teacher and the rhetor is also the student. It is a self/other ethical relationship with another self/other, a dialogical way of being-with-and-for a self/other. This way of being is essential to what was referred to earlier as maintaining the "good health" of community advocated by the philosophy of civic republicanism.

The livelihood of the dialogue referred to here is dependent on the rhetorical competence of the interlocutors. One way of achieving this task is for the interlocutors to engage in the rhetorical and rational activity of conversation. The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer comments on the ethical nature of the conversation that should unfold as the interlocutors communicate and dialogue with each other:

> We say that we 'conduct' a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the lead. No one knows in advance what will 'come out' of a conversation.[52]

For Schrag, conversation is a form of "communicative rhetoric" that invites the evocative workings of eloquence so that the interlocutors remain attentive and open-minded to whatever is being advocated by their counterparts and thereby keep their dialogue ongoing. Schrag writes: Communicative rhetoric does not afford

> a privileged authorization and voice of sovereignty to the rhetor. The developing reciprocity of question and answer, challenge and response, is strictly a communal affair. Communicative rhetoric replaces the subject-centered rhetoric, in which the rhetor as knowing and speaking subject is invested with a panoptic vision and a controlling knowledge—a controlling knowledge that is always on the edge of coercive force and manipulation.[53]

---

[52] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and* Method, 2nd revised edition, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshal (Crossroad, 1989), 383.

[53] Calvin O. Schrag, *The Resources of Rationality: A Response to the Postmodern Challenge* (Indiana University Press, 1992), 130-131.

Communicative rhetoric fosters a "teaching" environment that values the reciprocity that encourages individuals to contribute their assessments of the matters at hand such that what they have to say might advance the good health of their communal existence.

Schrag associates the ongoing development of this democratic process with what he defines as the genuine nature of the teacher-student relationship. According to Schrag, "A student acknowledges the gifts given by his teacher not by returning something in kind to his teacher, but rather by giving to others. The very dynamics of the gift is to be centrifugally and ceaselessly given again and again."[54] This definition of the teacher-student relationship is a consequence of how Schrag understands the "true" meaning of the gift and its relationship to the phenomenon of transcendence.

For Schrag, "A gift, to be genuinely a gift, is given without any expectation of return. There can be no expectation of a 'countergift,' for such would place the giving within a contractual rather than a gift-giving relation.[55] Elsewhere he maintains "To acknowledge the gift as gift . . . is to attest to an alterity that transcends" everyday existence. "The gift is a testimony to radical transcendence . . . presented without any expectation of return—without any anticipation of a repayment in kind or by something of equal value . . . The gift event requires that the recipient be freed from an obligation to reciprocate."[56] Reciprocity is not part of the process. But Schrag also claims that "the challenge of perpetuating the event of giving" takes form as the teacher-student "reciprocates by creating more and more giving in responding to the [additional] challenges of our civic responsibilities."[57]

This last statement is a bit confusing, for as noted above Schrag maintains that reciprocity is not a feature of the teacher-student relationship. Resolving this confusion requires one to understand that the reciprocity associated with the relationship involves the students giving the teacher's gift to an audience "again and again" whereby the student acknowledges the value of the teacher's teachings and thus rewards the immediacy of the teacher's efforts. The student's task is to be receptive to the gift of the teacher's teachings and then spread these teachings to others who can keep the conversation going by doing the same. Now the student becomes the teacher, and the given audience becomes the students. The teacher-student relationship calls on those involved in the relationship to be rhetorically competent so as to enhance the success of the communication transactions at hand. The reciprocity of the teacher-student relationship makes possible the asymmetry and transcendence of the relationship, its

---

[54] Calvin O. Schrag, *Reflections on the Religious, the Ethical, and the Political* (Lexington Books, 2012), 112.
[55] Calvin O. Schrag, *The Self after Postmodernity* (Yale University Press, 1997), 139-140.
[56] Schrag, *God as Otherwise Than Being: Toward a Semantics of the Gift*, 110.
[57] Ibid., 128.

taking place in the immediacy of the relationship and before and thereafter this immediacy. The reciprocity involved in the giving of the gift is an ongoing event; it happens in the past, present, and future of the teacher-student relationship

Schrag does not address the confusion that results in what he has to say about reciprocity and how it calls into question his definition of the teacher-student relationship. Given what I have just suggested about the reciprocity of the relationship, I would revise his definition: "A student acknowledges the gift given by his teacher by *returning* something in kind to his teacher as the student, by way of reciprocity, shares this gift with others. The very dynamics of the giving of the gift are centrifugally and ceaselessly given again and again. But this ongoing process presupposes the continuous workings of reciprocity which make possible the asymmetry and transcendence of the teacher-student relationship. What more Schrag has to say about these related phenomena returns us back to the beginning of my narrative, back to God.

The beginning of the asymmetrical nature of transcendence is at least as old as the happening of the Big Bang 13.7 billion years ago, a cosmological event which is the basis of all that exists; hence, the space and time of human existence and its objective uncertainty, the openness of the future. Religious individuals abiding by the dogma of religious institutions give the event a Name: "God." Is God the "I am who I am," or is God the "I shall be who I shall be"? The conflict and argument continue today. In either case, the answer is God. Science objects. As the scientist and physicist Paul Davies argues "Our ignorance of the origin of life leaves plenty of scope for divine explanation but that is a purely negative attitude, invoking 'the God-of-the-gaps' only to risk retreat at a later date in the face of scientific advances." Hence, "to invoke God as a blanket explanation of the unexplained is to invite eventual falsification and make God the friend of ignorance. If God is to be found, it must surely be through what we discover about the world, not what we fail to discover."[58] Nevertheless, religious individuals abiding by the dogma of their religious institutions still call it "God."

We do not know for sure what God is and how and why It exists, if it does. We do know that transcendence is a fact of life. It is the giftedness of this fact that Schrag praises. As he emphasizes, one does not have to identify with the dogmatic institutions of "religion" to be "religious."[59] Schrag thus emphasizes that "The question about God boils down to a question about transcendence as radical alterity."[60]

---

[58] Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics* (Simon & Schuster, 1983), 70, 209.
[59] Schrag, *God as Otherwise than Being: Toward a Semantics of the Gift*, 143.
[60] Schrag, *Reflections on the Religious, the Ethical, and the Political*, 69.

Was the supposedly Limitless Light a showing-forth of the transcendence of a Creator with an ambiguous Name? The question is but one of many raised throughout my narrative. I leave it up to the reader to answer the question. Instead, I close with a case that illustrates my argument regarding the essential nature of the teacher-student relationship. The case is personal. It is one of many examples I have used in various ways throughout my professional career.

I am teaching a graduate seminar in communication ethics enrolled by nine students. During the first meeting of the seminar, I share the wisdom of the philosopher Georges Gusdorf whose words are instructive for what I hope develops as the seminar progresses:

> The decision to express marks the threshold between the passivity of eating one's heart out and creative activity. To speak, to write, to express is to act, to survive crisis, to begin living again, even when one thinks it is only to relive one's sorrow. Expression is a kind of exorcism because it crystallizes the resolve not to let oneself go . . . By doing this, moreover, by helping the other to use his own voice, one will stimulate him to discover his innermost need. Such is the task of the teacher, if, going beyond the monologue of instruction, he knows how to carry the pedagogical task into authentic dialogue where personality is developed. The great educator is he who spreads around himself the meaning of the honor of language as a concern for integrity in the relations with others and oneself.[61]

Comments and questions from the students indicated their appreciation of this wisdom, which they demonstrated in each of the following meetings of the seminar. In one of these meetings the assignment was to assess Kierkegaard's theory of "indirect communication," which is a rhetorical maneuver intended to interrupt an interlocutor's egotistic based understanding of the matter at hand. Kierkegaard offers the following analogy to help others appreciate the purpose of his theory.

> When a man has his mouth so full of food that he is prevented from eating, and is likely to starve in consequence, does giving him food consist in stuffing still more of it in his mouth, or does it consist in taking some of it away, so that he can begin to eat? And so also when a man has much knowledge, and his knowledge has little or no significance for him, does a rational communication consist in giving him more knowledge, even supposing that

[61] Georges Gusdorf, *Speaking (La Parole),* trans. Paul T. Brockelman (Northwestern University Press, 1965), 73, 125.

> he is loud in his insistence that this is what he needs, or does it not rather consist in taking some of it away?[62]

Kierkegaard also provides an example of indirect communication intended to challenge an interlocutor's supposed knowledge of the nature of "the self."

> Man is a spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation [which accounts for it] that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but [consists in the fact] that the relation relates itself to its own self . . . Such a relation which relates itself to its own self (that is to say, a self) must either have constituted itself or have been constituted by another.[63]

I offer introductory remarks regarding Kierkegaard's theory, wanting the students to keep in mind that, for Kierkegaard, the temporal existence of the self is foundational for understanding how to appreciate God's existence. The remarks sound a call of conscience intended to have the students appreciate the importance of knowing-with others, of being-with-and-for-others, and of employing communicative rhetoric that facilitates dialogue. The reactions to the above discourses were mixed. Some found the example an extreme instance of indirect communication. They wondered why readers would appreciate what Kierkegaard was trying to accomplish if they did not have a decent understanding of his philosophy. Others were more tolerant, suggesting that, albeit extreme, it warranted acknowledgment of being an illustration of indirect communication. One student added his own form of indirect communication by sharing his familiarity of the earlier quotation from Aldous Huxley cited in the beginning of the narrative: "What if [our] world is another planet's hell." The quotation was thought-provoking, disconcerting, and awe-inspiring. Another student suggested that the quotation was an evocative and eloquent way of having people consider why they sometimes describe their existence as being "a hell on earth." A science classmate replied by noting that the possibility cannot be disproved. She argued that only massive achievements in cosmology and what they reveal about the nature of planets can secure a "rational" answer to the question . . . "and by then we'll be dead." She admitted that

---

[62] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton University Press, 1941), 69, 265.
[63] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton University Press, 1954), 14.

nevertheless the possibility presents itself. The dialogue and conversation continued as additional arguments were voiced regarding the feasibility of the possibility.

I contributed comments and questions regarding how possibility plays an essential role in Kierkegaard's philosophy. Owing to the ever-present objective uncertainty of the future, possibility is an essential feature of the temporality of human existence, of the ongoing phenomenon of transcendence, of the ongoing happening of space and time. Possibility functions as an interruption that calls into question the self's egotistical, habitual, and typical ways of understanding the truth of the matter at hand. Possibility can lead to an awareness of there being something more to the truth of the matter. The showing-forth of something more calls the self to transcend its current ways of being in the world and spread the words of both a teacher and the teacher's students. The showing-forth disclosed by the something more can incite the emotional experiences favored by Kierkegaard—anxiety and awe—because they open the self to Otherness and thus to an enlightened appreciation of God's existence. For Kierkegaard, this instance of openness is the ultimate goal of indirect communication. It's a gift from God.

Ongoing responses to comments, questions, and challenges arose as the students considered the ways and means of indirect communication and related material. The responses spoke to the importance of the teacher-student relationship. The dialogue increased as continuing arguments, conversation, and attempted efforts articulating the evocative workings of eloquence transpired. Based on past teaching experiences, I remained convinced, to borrow an earlier noted insight from Heschel, that both the students and I "need to be needed" so as to be content with our performance in the classroom and even in settings that are somewhat larger than the classroom. Teachers need to be rhetorically competent in communicating with and for students so to involve them in discussions of course material. Their involvement speaks to their need to be needed. It is a gift to the students who now can reciprocate by performing in a way needed by their teachers so to be acknowledged for doing what it takes to provide students with a quality education. It is an ongoing back-and-forth process, otherwise known as the enactment of reciprocity between self/others. The process prepares the students and their teacher to spread to other self/others outside the classroom the teachings that they developed during their reciprocal endeavors. This reciprocity leads teachers and students in the direction of asymmetry, transcendence, radical alterity. Reciprocity is called for repeatedly if the process is to remain ongoing. The reciprocity of the teacher-student relationship is an ethical communication practice involving a number of related phenomena: the interruptive function of the call of conscience, experiencing the values of anxiety and awe, striving

for perfection, the responsibility of acknowledging others, and exhibiting competence in the rhetorical practices of naming, ambiguity, dialogue, argumentation, conversation, storytelling, and the implementation of the evocative eloquence of epideictic discourse. A sense of accomplishment was present as the seminar concluded. And now so does my narrative.

I designed the narrative to identify a relationship involving God, rhetoric, and the reciprocity of the teacher-student relationship. All the complementary topics mentioned in the introduction have been accommodated. Too much hermeneutic charity? Not enough hermeneutic charity? Without a doubt the narrative remains unfinished. There is more that needs to be said than what is offered here. Being unfinished, however, is not a bad way to be. A special and unforgettable teacher taught me the value of being this way.

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

ISSN 1918-7351
Volume 18 (2026)

Reversibility in Rhetorical Spaces: The Problem of Self in Communicative Praxis

Duane H. Davis[1]
Visiting Professor of Philosophy, Purdue University, USA
ORCID: 0000-0002-1942-4909

Abstract
Communication is an intertwining of emergent selves in rhetorical spaces. I focus upon this intertwining as the space wherein not only interdependent meanings, but also interdependent selves emerge. I describe this rhetorical space as a reversibility of the roles of author, narrator, text, and reader when we seek to understand and to be understood. This account presents the self as a phenomenon that is dynamic rather than static, communal rather than individual, and emergent rather than given. In my account, I rely upon works by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Calvin O. Schrag, whose works I will address on the way to offering my own account. The self is a *phenomenon* that is pre-personal and non-identical; it emerges as differentiation as a self-to-be, replete with possibilities, an "identity" assigned only after the fact.

Keywords: Schrag, Merleau-Ponty, Lispector, personal identity, rhetoric, communicative praxis

[1] I dedicate this essay to the memory of Calvin O. Schrag. Cal was my mentor as an undergraduate at Purdue. He also was a special member of my Ph.D. dissertation committee at Penn State University. He was an inveterate supporter of my career and provided a wonderful role model of caring philosophical comportment.
A version of this essay was presented as an invited colloquium at Miami University of Ohio. I thank members of the Philosophy, French and Italian, and Humanities Programs for their support and for their responses.

It is a commonplace that one of the perennial questions in philosophy is "Who am I?" But that formulation often, though not necessarily, bespeaks a conceit characteristic of the Western modern era: that the sovereign subject is the alpha and omega of the inquiry standpoint. This ascribes ideality to the self that knows itself immediately, transparently, and is adequate to itself. More specifically, modern analytic philosophers often parse this question as *the problem of personal identity*. I agree that there is a problem worthy of discussion here; but one aspect of the problem is that formulation itself. The "problem of personal identity" is an anemic and misguided formulation because, as we shall see, the self is a *phenomenon* that is pre-personal and non-identical. Let us try to understand the problem of the self from a different inquiry standpoint. And we will try to understand this phenomenon as it emerges where we are engaged right now—in the context of communication.

Communication is an intertwining of emergent selves in rhetorical spaces. I focus upon this intertwining as the space wherein not only interdependent meanings, but also interdependent selves emerge. I describe this rhetorical space as a reversibility of the roles of author, narrator, text, and reader when we seek to understand and to be understood. This account presents the self as a phenomenon that is dynamic rather than static, communal rather than individual, and emergent rather than given. In my account, I rely upon works by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Calvin O. Schrag, whose works I will address on the way to offering my own position.

Our Inquiry Standpoint 1: Merleau-Ponty

Let us begin in earnest by reconsidering the parameters of this problem in a more felicitous manner from an inquiry standpoint that is existential, phenomenological, and hermeneutic rather than one that is epistemologically and metaphysically besmirched. In this section, I offer some preliminary remarks marking our inquiry path in the following manner, noting some convictions and making some assumptions.

First, the self is *embodied*. The communicative self is an ineluctably embodied self.[2] This embodiment, anticipated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, rejects the

[2] The fast-changing world of artificial intelligence raises a whole spectrum of interesting questions about this assumption, ranging from issues related to large language models to transhumanism; but for now, at least, I stand my *Abgrund*. Or, if you prefer, I am limiting the domain of my inquiry to embodied selves of a certain kind. One could construe embodiment beyond a humanistic model. Other species communicate. Merleau-Ponty raised issues regarding animality throughout his career—from his first book, *The Structure of Behavior*, to his *Nature* lectures toward the end of his career. For a quite different and provocative approach, cf. Achille Mbembe, *The Earthly Community*, trans. Steven

subject/object dichotomy in favor of a pre-personal embodiment that is ambiguously related to the poles of that dichotomy. Our embodiment is neither subjective nor objective and, in another sense, is both subjective and objective. Obviously, our bodily selves are not established solely by subjective caprice.[3] But when we grant this, one must not leap from one reductive error to another. To reject the embodied self as subject ought not to entail assuming its purely objective corollate. The embodied self is not just another object; it is our orientation within a world and actively involved in the meaning and value of that world. The subjectivity and objectivity of the embodied self surely are important aspects of our experience, but both must be demoted to the status of useful abstractions rather than serving as epistemological or metaphysical foundations: we must rein-in their reign. Thus, the embodied self is "neither/nor and "both/and" subject and object.

Merleau-Ponty articulated this as an ambiguity between subject and object in various manners throughout his career in a *parcours* that made an implicit ontology increasingly explicit.[4] This ambiguity is our way of being-in-the-world. In his early work, the embodied self is thought of as *le corps propre*—a "lived body," as embodied consciousness geared-into the world through its intentional situation. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception involved an investigation into intentional *relations* rather than accepting the knower/known" or "subject/object" dichotomies. For example, let us consider a mundane example like reaching for a doorknob. A commonsense explanation attributes subjective agency to me and objectivity to the handle. From this point of view, when I reach out to grasp the doorknob, I choose the shape of my hand such that it conforms to the shape of the doorknob, allowing me to grasp it effectively and to open or close the door. But, from another point of view, one could just as well say that the doorknob chose the shape of my hand. Now someone—someone just like you—might say that is just crazy, since inert door handles do not choose anything independently. But alongside Merleau-Ponty, I maintain that both of these views are abstractions. That is, it is just as crazy to think that *we* choose anything independently of the things or the people of our situation. Instead, we should focus on the intentional relations from which our sometimes-useful abstractions of subject and object are

---

Corcoran (V2, 2022), where he challenges conceptions of humanity and technology from an animistic perspective.

[3] If my embodiment were entirely up to me, I would do better than this!

[4] Though he is not the only one to wander down this pathway, no one has articulated this overview of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical development better than Martin C. Dillon, by whom I am inspired here and, indeed, throughout my career. Cf. Martin C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, (Indiana University Press, 1988).

made. But these abstractions ought not be taken to be pure epistemological or metaphysical foundations that could explain or at worst, explain-away, their opposed corollate. The truth of the real world is "neither/nor and both/and" subjective and objective. This is the ontological ambiguity at the heart of the matter.

We don't have time to explore this in detail here today, but in the middle part of Merleau-Ponty's career, He began to redescribe this ontological ambiguity in terms of *institutions* such that every instituted-institution calls for an instituting-institution. Likewise, at the very end of his career, Merleau-Ponty adopted the rich and enigmatic language of *la chair du monde* [the flesh of the world] to describe this ontological ambiguity. In these works, Merleau-Ponty speaks of the *reversibility* of the flesh that is at once *écart* [divergence, and the spread created by divergence]. This complex of notions and terms figures into my own account below, so we need to consider them more carefully.

Flesh is always flesh on flesh—hence the "promiscuity" of being. Merleau-Ponty reiterates over and over that the term flesh is no mere metaphor and must be read "*à la lettre*."[5] Things matter concretely in terms of our embodiment in the world we share with others. Our reversible existence is made manifest in embodiment and *intercorporeity* in Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh of the world. Merleau-Ponty develops this ontology to overcome the limitations of the opposition of subjectivity and objectivity. Subjectivity and objectivity emerge in their reversible intertwining.

> As soon as we see other seers . . . through other eyes we are for ourselves wholly visible . . . But what is proper to the visible is . . . to be the surface of an inexhaustible depth: this is what makes it able to be open to visions other than our own.[6]

Merleau-Ponty describes the intertwining of our existence with others as reversible bodies in the flesh of the world—as being "turned inside out under my own eyes" and "floating in Being with another."[7] This access to a the visible always implicates the

---

[5] Cf. Emmanuel de Saint Aubert, *Vers une ontologie indirecte* (Vrin, 2017).

[6] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A Lingis (Northwestern University Press, 1968, p.143; *Le Visible et l'invisible* (Gallimard, 1964), p.188. Parenthetical page references in the discussion of Merleau-Ponty's position refer to this text, with the French preceding the English.)

[7] "For the first time, the seeing that I am is for me really visible; for the first time I appear to myself completely turned inside out under my own eyes. For the first time also, my movements no longer proceed unto the things to be seen, to be touched, or unto my own body occupied in seeing or touching them, but they address themselves to the body in general and for itself (whether it be my own or that of another), because for the first time, through the other body, I see that, in coupling with the flesh of the world, the body contributes more than it receives, adding to the world that I see the

uniqueness of these intertwined bodies as phenomena, in their emergence. This uniqueness is not exhausted by objectivity. Merleau-Ponty describes a synergy, "as upon two mirrors facing one another where two indefinite series of images set in one another arise which belong really to neither of the two surfaces, since each is only the rejoinder of the other, and which therefore form a couple, a couple more real than either of them" (VI 183/139). This coupling, which involves a reversibility of the flesh of the world, manifest always through divergence, is never complete and thus manifests uniqueness. Rather than yoking two extant objects together, this coupling is the institution of subjectivity and objectivity in their interference and encroachment.

Uncharacteristically sanguine at the vision of a nascent ontology, Merleau-Ponty proclaimed (baptized?) the *reversibility of the flesh of the world* as "the ultimate truth" (VI 204/155) and stated that "there is no name in traditional philosophy to designate" the flesh of the world (VI 183/139).[8] Heidegger indicated the necessity and immense difficulties of accounting for the being of beings; and Merleau-Ponty has complicated this further by forbidding ontology any indifference with respect to the "concretion" of reversible being as flesh (VI 174/132).[9] The "ontological priority" of our being is no longer merely that "in its very being, its being is an issue for it" (SZ 12/32); now, as Merleau-Ponty states, "the thickness of the body, far from rivaling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go into the heart of things, by making myself a world, and by making them flesh" (VI 178/135). The flesh is a "concrete emblem of a general manner of being" (VI 194/147). Our being is corporeal. And it is clear throughout Merleau-Ponty's work that this is overall an account of value-laden intercorporeity. Without sacrificing the integrity of our experiences, we do have access to shared experiences: for better and for worse, it is phenomenologically apt to say that we are, in a sense, "of the same flesh."

---

treasure necessary for what the other body sees. For the first time, the body no longer couples itself up with the world, it clasps another body, applying [itself to it] carefully with its whole extension, forming tirelessly with its hands the strange statue which in its turn gives everything it receives; the body is lost outside of the world and its goals, fascinated by the unique occupation of floating in Being with another life, of making itself the outside of its inside and the inside of its outside. And henceforth movement, touch, vision, applying themselves to the other and to themselves, return toward their source and, in the patient and silent labor of desire, begin the paradox of expression" (189/143-4).

[8] Leonard Lawlor takes these latter words cited of Merleau-Ponty very seriously in his brilliant and tendentious work: *Early Twentieth Century Continental Philosophy* (Indiana University Press, 2011). All citations in this essay cite the original language pagination first followed by the English translation.

[9] As in many places in Merleau-Ponty's work, one must hear the echo of Jean Wahl here. The *sens* of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is *vers le concret*.

The phenomenological orientation of our inquiry standpoint reveals the ontologically ambiguous embodied self as a phenomenon—an *appearance*. It is important to see the self as an *event* rather than reducing it to a thing which appears. As we mentioned before, the embodied self is not just some mere thing in the world. It is no mere object. (Indeed, perhaps there are no such mere objects, but that is a matter for another day.) The self appears as its embodiment engaged in projects and oriented within its world. When we understand appearances as events, we describe an emergent ontology, or an ontology of emergence.[10] Our embodied selves are events, our being-in-the-world.

Note also that this engagement is meaningful and always involves understanding our situations. Our ontological ambiguity rejects not only the subject/object dichotomy but also the equally pernicious dichotomy of fact/value.[11] Thus, our phenomenological inquiry standpoint at the same time celebrates its existential and hermeneutic posture as well. Our selves are embodied in such a way that the world matters to us. Let us keep handy this ontologically ambiguous embodied self [would some of you prefer the more formal trope, "keep in mind"?] as we turn our attention to describe a rhetorical space wherein the phenomenon appears.

Our Inquiry Standpoint 2: From Merleau-Ponty to Schrag

Calvin O. Schrag's philosophical career might be described in the similar playful manner that he approached the trajectory of Heidegger's thought: instead of "early" and "later" periods demarcating a "*Kehre,*" a turn in his thought between Schrag I and Schrag II, we may speak of *three* Schrags.[12] "Schrag I" was one of the leading voices of those introducing existentialism and phenomenology to North American readers, especially Kierkegaard's and Heidegger's thought. "Schrag II" provided crucial insights in hermeneutics and the social sciences. And "Schrag III" developed radical rehabilitations of the notions of the subject and reason in the wake of postmodern critiques. Of course, this is no schizoid model—these three Schrags are intertwined and not exclusively determined chronologically. Heidegger responded to the "endless prattle" of the *Kehre*: if there was a change, it was less a change in his inquiry standpoint

[10] I am also inspired here by Richard Polt's reading of Heidegger. Cf. Richard *The Emergency of Being*, (Cornell University Press, 2007).
[11] As we shall see below, it will also entail deconstructing the fact /fiction dichotomy.
[12] Cf. "The Three Heideggers," in Calvin O. Schrag, *Philosophical Papers: Betwixt and Between*, (State University of New York Press, 1994), pp.159-173. Hereafter, I shall cite this book as *Betwixt*.

than a change in the matter itself. "*Die Kehre spielt im Sachverhalt selbst.*"[13] Likewise, shifts of thinking in Schrag's later work reflects the changes in the philosophical community within which he was engaged. So, although I will focus primarily upon the pioneering work of "Schrag III," who adumbrated a space of subjectivity and a transversal rationality, it is obvious that there are existential, phenomenological, and hermeneutical aspects to this period of his thought that will figure into my account as well.

The groundbreaking work of "Schrag III" was his 1986 work, *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity*.[14] Its status as a philosophical masterpiece has nothing whatsoever to do with that ungainly title![15] In this work, Schrag aims to rehabilitate the subject in the wake of postmodern critiques that, he rightly argues, deserved critical attention. That is, these critiques merited a response to awaken traditional phenomenologues from their dogmatic slumber. Schrag did not dismiss the direction of this new generation out of hand. Unlike many of his generation, he even went so far as to read them--carefully. Schrag's work of this period is a critical response to the prevalent attacks on the notion of subjectivity *en vogue* at the end of the twentieth century. He genuinely engaged the sundry critiques offered by Roland Barthes ("the death of the author"), Michel Foucault ("the death of man"), Claude Levi-Strauss ("expiration of the subject in the domain of the human sciences"), and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction and de-centering of the subject.[16] Schrag's position was to advocate a transvaluation of subjectivity and rationality rather than to cast them aside altogether.

Part of this transvaluation involved the reframing of subjectivity in the domain of communication and rhetoric. The works of this period of Schrag's thought bear the standard of rhetoric against its (mis)appropriation by philosophy. *The Self after Postmodernity*, as well as several other ancillary works, offer important insights occasioned by responses to the great inaugural work.[17] In this essay, I focus primarily on two lesser-attended-to essays from this period: "The Narratival Space of

---

[13] Of course, I refer to the celebrated work by William J. Richardson, S.J., *Heidegger: From Phenomenology to Thought*, (Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), p.xix. Heidegger famously agreed to endorse this monumental study with a Preface to include which questions the central thesis of the text—that there was a fundamental shift or turn in Heidegger's thought denoted as the *Kehre*.

[14] Calvin O. Schrag, *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity* (Indiana University Press, 1986).

[15] I blame the odious indirect influence of Jürgen Habermas for this performative contradiction of any possible conception of an ideal speech community.

[16] A summary of the careful readings Schrag gave to these critics is found in *Betwixt*, p.191-193. Schrag's patient and enlightening readings are elaborated at length in the major works of the period.

[17] Calvin O. Schrag, *The Self after Postmodernity* (Yale University Press, 1997).

Discourse," included in *Doing Philosophy with Others*[18]*;* and "Subjectivity and Praxis at the end of History," included in *Philosophical Papers: Betwixt and Between*.[19]

"The Narratival Space of Discourse" is the first essay in the second part of *Doing Philosophy with Others*. The first part is a collection of accounts pertaining to significant interactions with luminaries of the twentieth century, including Jaspers, Gadamer, Tillich, Marcuse, and Ricoeur, among other "others." But Schrag stresses that these conversations were not intended only in the context of intellectual autobiography. Indeed, he points out that, strictly speaking, there *are* no auto-biographical accounts: "there is always an 'other' in the narratival neighborhood."[20] Schrag describes this interaction between interlocutors as the "intermingling" of the roles of speaker and listener, writer and reader. Contributions to the conversation become blurred during the exchange; it is difficult to say which ideas and words belong to whom. An analysis that objectively assigns fixed roles is only possible as what Schrag calls a "post-mortem" account—and even then, it is possible only in a limited manner.[21] Though he is not cited here, this reflects Bergson's notion of the "retrograde motion of truth."

This intermingling that is characteristic of authentic discourse belies the determination of static rhetorical roles germane to authoritative discourse. It is worth noting in passing that, at first glance, the common etymological roots of *author* and *authentic* do not serve Schrag's distinction particularly well. "Authoritative" derives from the Latin root *auctor*, connoting mastery, and control. This is also the root for *author*, implying the originator or promoter of something. "Authentic" derives from the Greek roots *autos* (self) and *hentes* (doer) combined in *authentikos* (authentic), connoting self-directedness. Yet it is important for Schrag that the distinctions between authoritative and authentic discourse emerge in *rhetorical* space—in communicative *praxis*. Likewise, Schrag associates authentic discourse with mutual *acknowledgement*, which he contrasts with *recognition*.[22] Once again, while the sense he is after is clear: recognition is objectifying knowledge while acknowledgement means something more positive, the common roots of both terms connote an epistemological orientation. The principal philological difference of these terms lies in acknowledgement's connotation of admission or confession of knowledge rather than

---

[18] Calvin O. Schrag, *Doing Philosophy with Others* (Purdue University Press, 2010), 55-61. Hereafter, I shall cite this work as *Doing*.
[19] *Betwixt (Op. Cit.),* 191-202.
[20] *Doing*, (*Op. Cit.*), 55.
[21] Ibid., 55-56.
[22] Ibid., 56-59.

a difference in kind between two ways of knowing. Both derive from the same root, and both seem mired in the classical spectral-epistemological vocabulary. Yet, once again, Schrag's point is that the differences emerge in the realm of communicative praxis.

> The project of the recovery of the subject that we have sketched in the wake of the subject's deconstruction as a nexus of philosophical concepts raises anew the question of a possible ontology of subjectivity. If such an ontology is to appear on the scene it will of necessity have to be an *interpretive/descriptive* rather than a *constructive* ontology. It will take shape as a *hermeneutical* and *praxeological* ontology rather than one informed by metaphysical and epistemological protocols.[23]

I will argue below that this important gesture can be clarified by making more explicit the emergent ontology of reversibility and divergence.

Schrag describes discourse as communicative praxis not only in homage to Habermas, but because all of our discourse is situated in a rhetorical space that has a "binding ethos" shared with others.[24] As "*homo narrans*," the space of subjectivity is limned with "an acknowledgement of the integrity of the interlocutors and an agreement, sometimes tacit and sometimes explicit" available in the rhetorical space that affords praxial promise.[25]

> The space of discourse allows for a creative advance on the part of engaged interlocutors. The power and resources of language as a saying in the refiguring of the said, as the innovative dynamics of the life of the narrating self, opens a space for new perspectives and untried courses of action. This power and resource makes possible new forms of discourse and new associated social practices.[26]

The possibility of creativity emerges within the praxis of authentic rather than authoritative discourse, where mutual acknowledgement rather than recognition is

---

[23] *Betwixt* (*Op. Cit.*), 201.
[24] Ibid., 58. Schrag points out that the conversations related in the first part of this book were not applications of some theoretical position, but descriptions of emerging praxial norms. Every one of those conversations emerged within and reconfigured a binding ethos. I treasure my own interactions with him in this same spirit.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., 60.

possible in intermingled roles. Drawing upon language employed by both Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, in authentic discourse, the freedom of the saying is squarely situated in the facticity of the said. Schrag states that our hermeneutic posture is such that our interpretation is situated in a world shared with others that is "always already interpreted."[27] This promise must emerge within the binding ethos which Schrag ascribes to narratival space.[28] This includes the facticity of socio-political situations in which we live.

> Hence, there is a rhetoric of action as there is a rhetoric of the spoken and written word . . . The subject implicated by its discourse and action in the hermeneutical space of communicative praxis is a subject decentered and decentralized, bearing the inscriptions of a language community and a community of social practices as it undergoes the odyssey of self and social formation.[29]

Thus, the rhetorical space Schrag describes has a factical socio-political horizon, "Hermeneutical self-implicature is operative both in discourse and action."[30]

It is important to note that this situation is factical and neither purely transcendental nor given *a priori*. Schrag's transvalued notion of subjectivity is situated factically in our engagement within rhetorical space, for better and for worse. We are reminded that Schrag III is also Schrag I, the advocate of existentialism, when he describes the pre-reflexive hermeneutic implicature of subjectivity in rhetorical space: "The subject is implicated in its discourse in the way that an unfaithful husband implicates himself in his unguarded conversation."[31]

Finally, Schrag stresses the intersubjectivity of subjectivity when he describes a "triadic intentionality of discourse": rhetoric is by someone, about someone, and for someone.[32] This complication of the intentional structure of rhetorical space gestures toward the reversibility of roles in my own account below.

---

[27] Ibid.
[28] Here we see an important divergence from Habermasian communicative praxis, which is grounded in a transcendental ideal speech community.
[29] *Betwixt* (Op. Cit.), 200.
[30] Ibid., 199.
[31] Ibid., 198.
[32] Ibid., 196-197.

Intercorporeal and Intracorporeal Reversibility

So far, we have touched upon the emergent ontology of Merleau-Ponty's reversibility and divergence in the flesh of the world as well as Schrag's hermeneutic implicature in the rhetorical domain of communicative praxis. Now we can draw upon these resources to offer an account of selves that is phenomenologically apt.

Recall that the emergent ontology of the flesh of the world described reversibility and divergence as two sides of the same coin. The event of the appearance of the self that is at once a situated divergence and a reversible relation with others. The self diverges from others as it emerges as a self; but it also diverges from itself as transcendence. I want to adapt the notions of reversibility in these two ways: *intercorporeal* and *intracorporeal* reversibility. But we must keep in mind that these two terms are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the "inter-" can only be distinguished from the "intra-" in what Schrag called a "post-mortem account."

Let us first consider intercorporeal reversibility: the reversibility and divergence among selves. The radical authority of the author has been called into question and deconstructed. My emergent self is situated in a world shared with others in our intentional matrices. We become who we are through our relations with others. My being-in-the-world is reversible divergence. To take the simplest particular example favored by Schrag, dialogue, when I communicate with another person I can be said to choose words as an agent that hopefully another person could understand. But it could be said that the other person chooses the words insofar as they are fashioned for that person. I become the author of my words through hermeneutic implicature. My style of being is called-for by the other person as much as I affirm it. My identity, an emerging phenomenon, can only be isolated as a divergent entity by virtue of a reversible appearance. My identity is not explained-away in this account, but it is achieved in a rhythm established with the other interlocutor. But just as Schrag taught us that, strictly speaking, there is no auto-biographical account since "there is always an other in the narratival neighborhood," our account must not make the similar mistake of reducing the rhetorical space of communicative praxis to dialogical interactions. We must complicate this deconstruction even more and insist on a nicer neighborhood where there are others rather than one other—where my self is not determined only by my interlocutor and by me, but by a host of others through a complex array of intentional interconnections. Rhetorical space is polyrhythmic.

Every text has both sense and context. Others figure into this context in an active manner. Our rhetorical space involves both sense and *con-sense*. The sense [meaning and direction—*sens*] of rhetorical space is implicated as an integral sensing

that exceeds itself. The sense [again, meaning and direction] of a situation is never entirely one's own.

The sense of my rhetorical space diverges from my expectations of the scripting of the narrative.[33] This divergence is also detachment and alienation, which are not obstacles to the appearance of the self but occasion it. We participate in the narratives we construct that are perpetually out of control. The detachment from our retrospectively constructed selves is the propensity for narration. The divergence involved in the con-sense arises from our own divergence from ourselves as well as our interactions with others in our socio-political context. We are literally *con-scripted* within the rhetorical space in our relations with others (including ourselves). To be clear: when I speak of the collaborative aspect of con-sense and con-scription, I do not endorse some Gadamerian "fusion of horizons" nor some Habermasian "concurrence" even as an ideal.[34] Sometimes we can be unexpectedly written-into a narrative, and sometimes we can be completely written-off or even written out of the script.

Clarice Lispector offers many passages in her work that help us understand our intercorporeal reversibility. Her short story, "Involuntary Incarnation," beautifully presents the reversibility of the rhetorical space intrinsic to the emergent self. Lispector's story invokes the ways we inhabit another's comportment through our interactions as part of understanding one another. She relates how she tries to understand another person on the plane beside her by an "intrusion" into the other woman's body. Lispector describes how she adopts the style of being of the other woman.

> Sometimes, when I see someone I've never seen before, and have some time to observe that person, I incarnate myself in the other person and thus take a great step forward in knowing who it is. And this intrusion into a person, whoever it may be, never ends in self-accusation: once I incarnate myself in someone else, I understand her motives and forgive. I must be careful not to incarnate myself into a dangerous and attractive life, and thus not want to return to myself.[35]

---

[33] Cf. Adrianna Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood,* trans. P. Kottman (Routledge, 2000).

[34] Indeed, I have often half-jokingly maintained that a good slogan for Habermas' position might be, "I came, I saw, I concurred"—inviting the question of what is so critical in his transcendental "critical theory"?

[35] Clarice Lispector, *Complete Stories,* trans. K. Dodson (New Directions, 2015), 404-406.

Lispector describes hilariously and poignantly how she incarnates in a missionary woman sitting next to her.

"One day on the airplane . . . 'Oh my God,' I pleaded, 'not this, I don't want to be that missionary!'

But it was no use. I knew that three hours in her presence would make me a missionary for several days. Her missionary gauntness and extremely polished refinement had already claimed me."

The intrusion is an incarnation—inhabiting a rhetorical space with its style of being and comportment.[36] In a profound sense of reversibility, her gait does not simply accompany her understanding, it *is* her understanding of the missionary. She incarnates into her. She is the missionary, only never quite so—lest she never return to being herself. And that self, keep in mind, is a self she did not author solely and a self she never was. It is better to say that she is not herself, and she is not the missionary, and this reversibility is a unique difference of differences.

The reversibility of the incarnation into the missionary also involves a *reversal* of narrative—in the sense of *peripeteia*, an essential element in Aristotelian tragedy. We can change the narratives from within because of our intercorporeity.[37] Yet this incarnation is "involuntary." Reversibility is not an act of will. The other woman's presence complicates her own presence—her embodied rhetorical space is scripted collaboratively. She is conscripted by the other woman in her own corporeality. There is aptness in the intrusion of the contrivance of the rhetorical space. She recoils at the awareness of the (fictional) incarnation into the missionary because the strictly moral life does not befit her own (fictional) life.[38]

Sometimes these intentional intersubjective relations are described as part of our "facticity." However, for Merleau-Ponty, the concrete, the factical, always carries with it a latency, which he refers to as the "invisible" of the visible. Merleau-Ponty

---

[36] "Right there on the plane I notice that I've already started walking like a lay saint: then I understand how patient the missionary is, how she effaces herself with that step that hardly wants to touch the ground, how if she treads more heavily it would eventually harm others. Now I am pale, my lips unpainted, my face is thin, and I wear that missionary hair" (Lispector, *Complete Stories*, 404-405).

[37] "When I land I'll probably already have that air of suffering-transcended-by-peace-at-having-a-mission. And stamped across my face will be the sweetness of moral hope. Because above all I have become utterly moral. Yet when I first boarded the plane I was so robustly amoral" (Lispector, *Complete Stories*, 405).

[38] Likewise, later in the story, she recoils at her incarnation into a prostitute, which "fell flat" because her (fictional) body-self differed from the (fictional) prostitute-body, was not alluring to the man ignoring her in favor of the newspaper, and because her (fictional) perfume was "too discreet" (Lispector, *Complete Stories*, 406).

states in a working note—in English—that the invisible is "in" the visible. The factical visible is more than itself, pregnant with meaning and being, full of mystery—and this indeterminacy and latency are the promise of value, not something to be overcome. But the flesh which exceeds itself is nothing other than the divergence revealed within the visible bodies within the experiences we share. This means that the truth and value of our fleshly facticity hold promise because it is *fashioned* even as we *fashion* our own existence.

It is important to note that the opposition between fact and fiction is a modern conceit (alongside the conceit of pure reason). Fact and fiction both derive from the Latin *facere*, [to make or to do]. The difference is temporal. Inauthenticity might be described as ignoring the latency of our facticity: facts are so fashionable only insofar as they are understood bereft of their fashionability. Let us move forward and assert that *facticity* must be rehabilitated to include the *ficticity* of our intercorporeity. That is, the allegedly *given* body is given as a fiction of a non-fiction. Facticity is our retrospective reconstruction of the intersectionality we are as we become who we are. An account of the authentic self emerging in the rhetorical space of communicative praxis must feature the ficticity of its facticity.

In order to better understand the ficticity of our facticity, let us turn our attention to intracorporeal reversibility: the reversibility and divergence within selves. John Barth, in his brilliant work, *Chimera*, has a character who humorously expresses his anxiety to another character: "What if we are only fictional characters in some author's work? What if we are our only readers?" Just as there are others in our neighborhood, there are latent others within us as well—characters in search of an author, so to speak. Here I want to complement and complicate Schrag's account of rhetorical space as the space of *homo narrans*. Schrag did this as part of the deconstruction and de-centering of the exclusively authorial and authoritative subject. But instead of foregrounding narration, I suggest that we author this text, we narrate the text, we *are* this text, and we read the text as we suffer it. And, of course, we are never exclusively any of these reversible roles. The rhetorical space of communicative praxis features the self emerging as self through its four reversible roles. Here is a new *Geviert*, a new fourfold, such that the ontology of the rhetorical space of communicative praxis is authorial, narratival, textual, and lexical. Moreover, we suffer the fate, and weight, of accumulating interpretations in the narratival space of embodiment. This is the *power* of the fictive self: the power to shape and to suffer the rhetorical space—to impart the determination of aptness even as we are subject to it. And, again, keep in mind that all of this intracorporeality is situated in its

intercorporeality. We are authors, narrators, text, and readers of our embodied selves alongside and because of others who are authors, narrators, texts, and readers.

Let us return to Clarice Lispector—this time for wisdom regarding our intracorporeity. She published a very short piece, "If It Were Me," as brilliant and provocative as it is brief, on November 30, 1968.[39] The everyday situation with which we all can identify trades upon a suddenly appearing and apparently minor lack of knowledge: in this case, the location of a mislaid document. So she poses the question to herself (a *subjunctive* being who must be other than her present indicative self), "If it were me, and I wanted to keep a document in a safe place, where would I put it?" (C 51) Through reflective consciousness and then through narration, Lispector then takes two steps outside of the situation in order to assess it and then to relate that assessment—all the while trading on the purported identity fashioned only through this divergence. "Sometimes this works. But at other times, I am so harassed by the phrase 'if it were me' that the search for that document becomes secondary and I begin to think. Or rather, to feel" (C 51-2). Here is an anti-*cogito* where, far from providing a guarantor of identity and providing transparent and immediate knowledge serving to orient oneself in the world, this reflective conjuring of the self is haunting rather than reassuring. Reflection can be as paralyzing as it can be instructive.

Next, she breaks the fourth wall of the rhetorical space: "Try it: if it were you, what would you do?" (C 52). And this imperative to the reader is important, because it further complicates the fashioned identity through the feelings we share—through our intercorporeity. The imperative invites the reader to translate traditional *subjectivity* in order to embody *subjunctivity*: insofar as subjectivity is both and neither I or me (the sovereign reflecting subject and the objectified reflection): "What would you do if you *were* the I/me who *might* be you?" The *indeterminacy and instability* between the subjectivity and the subjunctivity of the reader is the basis of value.[40] Reversibility is ontological and not always an epistemological matter alone: we do not always will reversibility nor are we aware of it immediately, as we saw in *Involuntary Incarnation*. Here, the reversibility is complex: there is the person who mislaid the document, the person looking for the document who *might* be the person reflecting about (i.e., reading) her situation, the person narrating the reflective person's account, and other readers, who are invited to suffer and enjoy such a predicament.

---

[39] Clarice Lispector, *Selected Chrônicas*, trans. G. Pontiero (New Direction, 1996).

[40] "'If it were me' seems to sum up the greatest risk we face in life, a new entrée into the unknown. Yet I cannot help feeling that, after those first mad moments of euphoria, we would finally experience the world" [C 52].

This is my sketch of the intercorporeal and intracorporeal reversibility of the rhetorical space wherein we emerge as selves. It is how we are and are not our own bodies; how our being-in-the-world is neither/nor and both/and subjective and objective. It is an emergent ontology that emphasizes the ficticity of our facticity and the subjunctivity of our subjectivity. I described the rhetorical space as at once authorial, narratival, textual, and lexical. The rhetorical space is the *sine qua non* of the misnomer "personal identity." But this may not be reassuring, and it is no more real than the people who suffer and enjoy the lives emerging therein. Lispector beautifully describes the uncanny moment her character realizes that she does not know where the documents are. That is to say, the authentic moment when she realizes that she is not who she was—the woman-about-to-leave-with-the-documents. "From the outset, one feels a certain inhibition: the lie into which we have settled has just been ever so slightly disturbed" (C 52). Our personal identities are vexing mislaid documents; and all we can do is retrace our steps in search of them. What else would I do, if it were me?

So, back to the original problem: "Who am I?" which I hope to have complicated sufficiently to prevent any definitive answer. But these complications allow us to say a few things. I am and am not me. I am not me differently than you are not me. I am not me differently than I am not you. I am not you differently than you are not you. If I really *were* me, completely, there would be no *we*. I am still the same self-same self I never was.

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

ISSN 1918-7351
Volume 18 (2026)

A Contemporary Reading of Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*: On the Loneliness of Reason, the Risk of Love, and Disappearance of the Shared

Enrique Droguett-Ramirez
Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education, University of British Columbia, Canada
ORCID: 0009-0007-7448-6321

A.J. Batalden
Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education, University of British Columbia, Canada
ORCID: 0009-0009-4441-9456

Barbara Weber
Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education, University of British Columbia, Canada
ORCID: 0000-0002-2113-6797

Abstract
This article offers a contemporary reading of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, using the protagonist to expose the dangers of instrumental rationality. Guided by Gadamer's metaphor of the "symbol" as a shard of a broken bowl, we explore how the underground man uses his logic as a defense mechanism against unpredictability and vulnerability, rejecting the gift of love and the present moment. His condition serves as a critique of a modernity that prioritizes control over human

connection, finding a direct parallel in our digital age, where the contemporary digital subject, whose existence is shaped by algorithms and performative hyper-visibility, repeats the same patterns of isolation and self-objectification found in Dostoyevsky's character. In response to this modern manifestation of the underground, Calvin O. Schrag's philosophy is presented as a crucial counterpoint. He conceives of love not as a sentimental feeling but as a form of ethical praxis and a dialogical leap toward the Other. This active form of love, which requires embracing vulnerability, is presented here as the necessary condition for achieving authentic self-transcendence. It is through this risky opening to the other that we can overcome the systemic forms of oppression described by thinkers like Paulo Freire, thereby offering a potential exit from the psychological and social underground.

Keywords: otherness, alienation, calculative thinking, instrumental reason, digital Identity, existentialism, Underground Man, submergence

1. "Offering Cup" and "Shards."

Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *Notes from Underground* is regarded as one of the foundational texts for existentialist philosophy, and has profoundly influenced thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and many others.[1] The novel explores themes of free will, irrationality, and the nature of human suffering through its embittered, introspective narrator, who often acts against his own interests simply to assert his will, thereby challenging deterministic as well as reductionist views of human nature (e.g., the will to survive). The novel has since generated a wide range of receptions and critiques from exploration of rationalism and human freedom[2] to grappling with absurdity,[3] as well as explorations of alienation, and individual responsibility.[4] This sheer volume of commentaries and receptions makes it almost impossible to claim that one is contributing anything new. And yet, it is the very nature of existentialist literature to invite us to read the works again and again - encouraging these very intimate, hermeneutic conversations with the text itself: a text that – like a good friend - always calls for another return.

For our reading of the novel, we are guided by Hans-Georg Gadamer's remarks about the word "symbol:" derived from Ancient Greek "*syn*" (together) and "*bolé*" (parts of a bowl), "symbol" means "throwing" things together, "comparison," or a "token used in comparisons to determine if something is genuine." As such, a "symbol" served almost like a "passport" in ancient times: after a guest's visit, a bowl was broken, and each person kept one shard. Years later, upon one's return, the guest brought his shard; the host compared it with his shard, testing if they fit together and thereby making the bowl whole again. In the case of our reading, we "return" to the text with each of us holding a shard in our hands, thereby probing the text, bringing out what only we, with our "shard," can bring to the foreground. Gadamer writes: "In the case of the symbol . . . and for our experience of the symbolic in general, the particular represents itself as a fragment of being that promises to complete and make

---

[1] Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre: Basic Writings of Existentialism*, rev. ed. (Meridian, 2004).

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, 1–107 (Vintage Books, 1967). Original work published in 1872.

[3] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O' Brien (Vintage Books, 1991).

[4] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes (Washington Square Press, 1992).

whole whatever corresponds to it."[5] As such, with each visit, reading or question, we summoned the text "into the present."

This paper explores how the protagonist's experience of time leads to an "anti-hermeneutic being in the world." It seems that his fear of becoming vulnerable robs him of the "gift of the present moment," as well as the ultimate "gift of love," leading him into a desperate need for control and prediction. As a consequence, the protagonist's insistence on logical certainty becomes both a refuge and a prison. In other words, his obsession with autonomy, grounded in a deeply defensive rationalism, reveals a fear not only of others but of the destabilizing force and unpredictable nature of love. This tension between vulnerability, love, and reason, however, is not a unique conundrum of Dostoyevsky's nineteenth-century figure, but also hints at the bigger philosophical crisis at the time: the transformation of reason from a means of understanding into an instrument of control.

These ideas led to the guiding question for the paper: what happens when rationality, untethered from compassion or humility, is used to defend against the very things that make us human? To set the stage, we explore the interconnection between time and thinking by referring to St. Augustine and Martin Heidegger; focusing on the difference between chronological (productive) and subjective time. We show how thinking opens up towards the present and future, whereas problem-solving (rationalization) aims to control and predict, thereby robbing the present and future of their most unique feature. On this basis, we will interpret specific vignettes from the novel with a critical perspective (Horkheimer, Adorno) and show how this urge to control extends into the digital sphere today, where the modern subject is shaped by regimes of visibility and self-surveillance. In the second part of the paper, we will refer to Calvin O. Schrag's interconnection between thinking, love, dialogue, and vulnerability. His attempt to understand the self both as a process and substance[6] will form our starting point in order to understand the devastating rift occurring in Dostoyevsky's character: Dominated by feelings of distrust, the protagonist remains confined to the underground, a tomb - deprived of light, love, and life itself. On a societal level, we argue with Paulo Freire that the "Underground Man" lives under systematic oppression. From this, a portrait of humanity emerges, which is caught

---

[5] Hans-Georg Gadamar, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 32.

[6] Eric Ramsey and David J. Miller, "From the Loving Struggle to the Struggle of Love: A Conversation with Calvin O. Schrag," in *Experiences between Philosophy and Communication: Engaging the Philosophical Contribution of Calvin O. Schrag*, eds. Eric Ramsey and David J. Miller (State University of New York Press, 2003), 8.

between the longing to be seen and the terror of being known—a condition in which the dream of reason no longer liberates, but produces monsters.

2. Setting the Stage: On Thinking and Time

Both Aristotle and St. Augustine point out that even though we think of time as extending from past, through present, to the future, we actually neither directly experience the past nor the future. In Aristotle's words, the past "has been and is not," while the future "is going to be and is not yet."[7] Thus, the only part of time that does seem to exist is the present. The present's existence, however, is one of continual dissolution. It cannot remain "now" and be a part of time. Or, as St. Augustine puts this, "if [the present] were always present and never moved on to become the past, it would not be time but eternity."[8] Its being, thus, includes its perishing—that is, its becoming part of the non-being of the past. This causes him to ask further: "How can we say that this present also 'is'? The cause of its being is that it will cease to be."[9] He eventually concludes that only this perishing, continually changing present is real, meaning it is where we exist and can respond to what is given to us. As such, the present is not a mere offering but an invitation into an intimacy of Being, where we can turn toward what is given (*zuwenden*) to us. Yet, it does not impose itself, but provokes (*pro-vocare*, to call forth). As we attune to the present, like Heidegger's *Gelassenheit*, an openness to the letting-be of Being opens up. This carries a movement, a generosity (*Überfluss*) that is not reducible to mere abundance but rather to a self-surpassing that constitutes presence itself. It is an event (*Ereignis*) in which one is not merely a receiver but a participant in the very movement of giving.

Now for Heidegger, an opening arises with a question, meaning that we give ourselves into a situation as a question to ourselves.[10] Bringing something into

---

[7] Aristotle, "Physics," trans. R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 1 (Princeton University Press, 1984), 370 (4.10, 218a5).

[8] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed, 2nd ed (Hackett, 2006), 242/11.14.17. Citations refer to the Sheed translation unless otherwise noted.

[9] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 2008), 231/11.14.17.

[10] In Augustine's words "*mihi quaestio factus sum*" (*Confessions*, 217/10.33.50). For an in-depth exploration of this topic, see Adi Burton and Barbara Weber, "Dwelling and Departure: Beginning Disputes between Arendt and Heidegger," in "Dwelling and Belonging: Re-imaginings and Redescriptions," eds. Malgorzata Holda and Ramsey Eric Ramsey, special issue, *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture* 14 (2024): 21–40, https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.14.02; Arthur Wolf and Barbara Weber, "Existential Urgency or: Towards a Provocation to 'Think Different'," *Childhood & Philosophy* 19 (2023): 1–25.

suspense and keeping it open is what allows for this present to unfold and invites us to think further. Heidegger writes: "We are thinking. To say it circumspectly, we are attempting to let ourselves become involved in this relatedness to Being. We are attempting to learn thinking."[11] This means, by responding, we are not staying 'outside' of what has been opened, but rather we are becoming entangled with Being itself. We are face-to-face with the abyss of Being, the groundless groundedness of existence, that turns our own existence into this question to which only we can respond as Dasein. This deeply affects the conception of what it means to think. Here, Heidegger expresses his concern regarding the "calculative thinking" (*das rechnende Denken*),[12] a thinking that is goal-driven, productive, and "races from one aspect to the next."[13] There is a "growing thoughtlessness (*Gedankenlosigkeit*),"[14] because we are "in flight from thinking"[15] and from the encounter with the present. This flight from what is offered to us has not only changed our understanding of thinking, but our ability to relate to others in a profound way, leading into a crippled version of thinking that now forms modern-day rationality.

3. The Pathological Turn: From the Openness of Being to the Monstrosity of Reason

Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* can be read as an effort to illustrate the absurdity of modern rationality and its quest for domination, prediction, and control. One potential entry point to understand this critique of modern rationality is Max Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason*. Horkheimer argues, and at a pivotal point of history, that the illness of reason stems from a desire to dominate nature, which in turn ensures the control of human beings, who are themselves part of nature.[16] This critique reflects the distorted evolution from the Enlightenment's ideal of reason, an objective reason as a means for understanding, to a subjective/instrumental reason as a tool of submission and domination. Dostoyevsky's protagonist of *Notes from Underground*

---

[11] Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (Harper & Row, 1968), 86.
[12] Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking: A Translation of* Gelassenheit, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (Harper & Row, 1966), 46.
[13] Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, 46.
[14] Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, 45.
[15] Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, 45.
[16] Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, trans. John Cumming (Continuum, 2004), 119.

seems to embody this contradiction: a humiliated yet proud, nihilistic yet lucid man and rational to the point of self-paralysis. He is consumed by contradictions as well as an almost dogmatic devotion to rationality, which isolates and disfigures him. His journey is less of a linear descent and more of a slow-motion collision with reality, grotesque and painfully intimate. Like observing our own twisted reflection in a mirror, the "Underground Man" becomes a locked monster, a representation of humans' most hidden dissonances. In what follows, we explore the parallels between Dostoyevsky's protagonist and the digital subject of today as a product of an overextended rationality. Drawing on the Spanish artist Francisco de Goya's Capricho No. 43, "*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos,*" we explore how the Enlightenment's dream of control and clarity, as critiqued by thinkers like Horkheimer and Adorno, instead of liberation, created new forms of alienation, exposure, and self-fragmentation.

The potential risks of absolute rationality presented in Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* echo Goya's prophetic warning in *Los Caprichos*, a series of 80 satirical aquatint prints created between 1797 and 1799. In number 43, the Spanish artist declares *"El sueño de la razón produce monstruos"* (*The dream of the reason produces monsters*), a phrase that resonates over modernity like a riddle. The engraving depicts a man asleep at his desk, haunted by nightmarish creatures, an image often interpreted as a critique of superstition and ignorance. However, the phrase allows for deeper readings. In Spanish, "sueño" can mean both "sleep" and "dream," and the ambiguity opens the door to an alternative interpretation: not a lack of reason, but its excess. Reason's utopian dream, taken too far, generates its own horrors. Although Goya was influenced by Enlightenment thinking, he was skeptical about some of its core values. His image anticipates the rise of instrumental reason, a logic so dogmatic that it transforms life into a mechanical process and humanity into a solvable equation. Goya seemed to sense the danger of reason turned into dogma, a rationality that, when unmoored from ethics or imagination, creates monsters. Thus, we are threatened both by the sleep of reason and by its unchecked ambition to dream the world into submission.

Goya's sleeping man can thus be seen as the visual and psychological archetype of the Underground Narrator. Like the figure in the etching, the Underground Man is locked in a state of solitary confinement, plagued by nightmares of his own intellectual creation. He is simultaneously the tormentor and the tormented, trapped within a ego-driven chamber where the external world is eclipsed by his own projections. His eyes are closed to concrete reality, yet hyper-aware of the abstract structures he has built to replace it. This isolation is the radical culmination of a rationality so hypertrophied that it ceases to engage with the living world and begins to feed on itself. It is precisely

within this claustrophobic intersection of reason and nightmare that the "monster" is born.

The etymology of "monster," from the Latin *monstrum*, derived from *monere* (to warn), reinforces this idea. Monsters, in their original sense, are both aberrations and signs, omens of what is to come. In *Notes from Underground*, the protagonist becomes just that: a monster created by excessive rationality, whose grotesque existence is a warning against the obsessive drive for prediction, domination, and control. Thus, Dostoyevsky's "Underground Man" is a victim of too much rationality, rather than of ignorance; a man who dissects every emotion and social gesture until they lose their vitality. He does not live among others, but instead reduces interactions to equations and relationships to power dynamics. He attempts to control every variable and predict every outcome. When life resists this predictability, he refuses to blame his model, retreating further into abstraction. His humiliation, being brushed aside like a particle of dust, is not simply a social slight, but an ontological crisis. To be ignored is to be disproven and to cease to exist within the rational model he has constructed. In one moment of raw confession, he states:

> . . . One night as I was passing I saw some wretched tavern, through a brightly lit window I saw some gentlemen standing around a billiard table doing battle with their cues and then one of their company was thrown out the window. Any other time this would have positively sickened me, but I envied the ejected gentleman so much that I even walked straight into the billiard room "Perhaps," I told myself, "I'll get into a fight and I'll be thrown out of the window too" . . .[17]

A necessity for being seen, rather than chance, drives the "Underground Man" to humiliation. This results in a pain that is performative at its core, an existential pain expressed as a spectacle of exposure. In this, he anticipates our own condition: the online subject, shaped by algorithms of predictability and control, whose existence is flattened, searchable, and monetizable. Thus, the "Man Underground" becomes today's "Man online," endlessly strategic, curated, transparent, and ultimately, endlessly alone. In both cases, the logic of visibility demands total self-exposure. To be visible is to be real, but this visibility comes at the cost of interiority. The Crystal Palace, Dostoyevsky's symbol of rational perfection drawn from Chernyshevsky's utopian vision, becomes a sterile utopia of transparency, a fitting mirror of our

[17] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground and the Double*, trans. Ronald Wilks (Penguin Classics, 2009), 44. Citations refer to the Wilks translation unless otherwise noted.

technological reality.[18] It is, as Byung-Chul Han argues in *The Transparency Society*, in the modern world of transparency, everything is expected to be visible, where image and observer exist in unmediated contact, severed from their hermeneutic depth and condemned to "the inferno of the same."[19] Here, transparency is not illumination but exposure. Visibility, stripped of opacity and privacy, turns into compulsive hyper-visibility. Identity, no longer a process of becoming, is a commodity: something to be optimized, packaged, and sold.[20]

This monstrous condition arguably finds a contemporary resonance in the social media platforms, where the spectacle of reason has taken on new, more dangerous forms. It may be that, in our efforts to optimize existence through algorithms, we risk converting even the most intimate aspects of human life, i.e., grief, affection, boredom, and joy, into datasets. Social media platforms, with their logics of visibility and transparency, seem to suggest that to be seen is to have value. In this light, the grotesque performativity of Dostoyevsky's "Underground Man" might be seen to anticipate the performative gestures of today's digital subject: the calculated vulnerability of the influencer, the inflammatory provocations of the internet troll, the ritual of humiliation of the "lolcow," or the curated "authenticity" of raw online moments. For these figures, attention-seeking is secondary to a deeper existential display. Their performances are staged under the indifferent, yet determinative, gaze of algorithmic systems.

It is here that Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* regains its critical relevance. Their indictment of Enlightenment reason, its transformation from liberatory force to instrument of control, finds amplification in digital culture. The cultural industry they described has not vanished; it has absorbed attention as capital. Where they saw standardized and mass-consumption culture products, we now see standardized selves, templated identities optimized for engagement.[21] What circulates in these spaces is not the absence of reason, but its hyperactive distortion: a form of rationality so extended that it begins to dissolve the subject it claims to empower. Visibility, once a promise of recognition, becomes a mechanism of estrangement. The more one self-discloses, the more one becomes a stylized projection, self-reduced to

---

[18] See Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, trans. Michael R. Katz (Cornell University Press, 1989).

[19] Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford University Press, 2015), 2.

[20] Han, *The Transparency Society*, 9.

[21] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford University Press, 2002), 95.

metrics. As with Goya's monsters, what emerges is a product of reason's unchecked proliferation, driven by its attempt to master what perhaps resists mastery.

Today, our monsters are more charming: streamers who replace lived social experience, dating apps that turn desire into swipes, and echo chambers that hypnotize us with our own reflections. Goya painted bats and owls; Dostoyevsky gave us a man tormented by his own logic. We, in turn, have domesticated the beasts, and we live with them and call them "personal optimization". Yet, the core remains unchanged: when reason dreams with its eyes open, its monsters become our mirrors. The only way out may be to accept that being human means dwelling in the fog between calculation and chaos. As Dostoyevsky writes: "But what can a decent man speak of with most pleasure?" The answer lies in the question: "of himself" [22] to laugh at the monster, to embrace the unexpected, and his monstrosity, and perhaps, to switch off the lights of the Crystal Palace, for a moment.

That is likely why the novel *Notes from Underground* feels so uncomfortably precise and cringeworthy in its self-awareness. It resonates with unsettling clarity because it mirrors the distortions of our present. It is a text that resists smooth and rapid consumption, demanding a slower, more agonizing kind of reading. It sabotages the rhythms of modern reason and productivity, pushing readers to stop, reflect, and accept the contradictions rather than resolve them. Like the grotesque figure it portrays, the novel swells in the reader's gut, refusing to be metabolized quickly. Its hermeneutic challenge lies in its deliberate excess, in the way it forces us to confront the absurd mechanisms of our own self-fashioning.

4. The Narrator's Demonstration of the Monstrous: Turning a Symbol into a Person

Yet those social mechanisms we create through our shared acceptance of them, the invisible walls that bound our actions and confound our togetherness, are invisible for the same reason most of our imaginings are invisible: they are not there. As in Goya, they are the immaterial and intangible things of sleep and dreams, which we make manifest by actions driven by our fears of them. We may have now given form to many of them, and made them to exist in the strange shared "dream world" of online social spaces. Though they still remain mostly hidden. They exist as secret inscrutable

[22] Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 6.

algorithms that can determine your ability to be heard or seen, or who you hear or see, and become the imposition of concrete laws of connection. Yet in the physical, shared world, meanings and endings are subject to the messiness of human reactions and limited perceptions, where the impact of a bump in the street, or a brawl in a bar, can take on meaning and meaninglessness simultaneously.

Within the narrator's efforts to examine, explain, and excuse his actions he partakes in an act of self-revelation. The narrative act of reflection not only does the intended work of revealing his history to the reader, but to himself. He demands to be seen, while also trying to impose his own control over the terms upon which he is perceived. He depicts himself using the language of ugliness, disease, and monstrosity in an effort to espouse the fundamentally human and inevitable nature of those conditions, to connect himself with his reader through the common nature of his afflictions and actions. In trying to use himself as a symbol and as a warning of the full application of logic and reasoning to living, he allows himself to revel in his own monstrous nature/failure as an instrument of society. And through doing so, he unknowingly performs an act of demonstration, which is to say de-monster-ation, of himself.

Through the act of self-examination, the narrator unwittingly gives himself a particularity and a humanness that brings him to the limits of seeing himself as only a monstrous symbol. He rigorously applies the logic of cause and effect, believed to be a product of an intelligent mind, and repeatedly stumbles over its paradoxical nature. The longer he works to explain and perceive it, though, the more he realizes that, as with the broken bowl, he is only able to truly represent a piece of the picture. Through his continued attempt to engage in his avoidance of, or flight from, his present, he can no longer avoid the fact that there are pieces of his life which, upon re-examination, do not fit together with the simplicity he believed he symbolized.

5. Love as the Leap into the Unknown: On Self-Transcendence and Alterity

This "flight from the present" is further explored in the context of self, love, and rationality in Schrag's deliberations on *Communicative Praxis and the Space for Subjectivity* and later in his book on *The Self after Postmodernity*. Reflecting on the emergence of the self in a postmodern age, Schrag describes the self as having "to steer a course between the Scylla of selfhood anchored in a stable and self/identical substance, immune to the ravages of time, and the Charybdis of the self dispersed in a random becoming, without any university or directions. The self, between these unacceptable alternatives, is a self

refigured as the 'who' of discourse, action, community, and transcendence."[23] Thus, for Schrag, the self does not exist as an enclosed monad or substance only, but is also for the Other and continues to find its identity in dialogue with the other.[24] It already hints at the dramatic deterioration of Dostojevsky's anti-hero, who is desperately holding on to the side of control, predictability, and permanence.

Now, for Schrag, love emerges from the dynamic interplay between substance and process, control and vulnerability. Love is not merely an affective state or moral virtue, but a dynamic mode of relational existence that resists the absolute control of rational discourse. And as it transcends pure rationality as a self in movement, or self-transcendence toward the other, it cannot be quantified or controlled. ". . . love . . . is not understood against the backdrop of an economy of exchange: a love given without the expectation of return. . . . The gift that expects nothing in return is grace."[25] And even though nothing is offered in return, it calls us into a unique possibility: to be called upon as irreplaceable, where we are not "man" (they). This is why Schrag says: "This call is itself a gift. It is a gift because, in offering itself up-laid bare without the expectation of return-it also lays bare the space for response. The gift of the call makes giving possible."[26] Thus, in love, the self is summoned beyond itself, not through abstract reasoning, but through a lived exposure to the presence and needs of the other. This describes the hermeneutic attitude, which engages with "what is" and thereby opens the space for ongoing interpretation, where knowledge continues to emerge from the dialogue between self and world. In those moments, possibilities arise that have not been there before—like a blossom might open with the rising of the sun, into manifold petals. Love, therefore, is not purely sentimental, but a central part of what can be called "philo-sophy", a friendship with wisdom that may only occur in a dialogue among friends, that continues to transcend the hardened boundaries of a self. A transcendence that is not escapism, but a radical reorientation, where the self no longer claims mastery, but answers to what is outside and beyond it.

This, however, not only requires openness to the Other, but moreover to allow ourselves to be vulnerable and to be changed.[27] Love cannot be grounded in certainty,

---

[23] See Ramsey and Miller, "Conversation with Calvin O. Schrag," 9.

[24] Calvin O. Schrag, *The Self after Postmodernity* (Yale University Press, 1997); Ramsey and Miller, "Conversation with Calvin O. Schrag," 9.

[25] Ramsey and Miller, "Conversation with Calvin O. Schrag," 39.

[26] Ramsey and Miller, "Conversation with Calvin O. Schrag," 41.

[27] See Schrag's many references to the writings of Emmanuel Levinas, which cannot all be explored here, but are fundamental to understanding the radicality of his ideas on love, vulnerability and the Other.

exchange or mutual fulfillment, but instead is ethical before it is emotional, is relational before it is rational. As stated before, we respond to the Other without guarantee, we say "yes" without knowing what that "yes" will cost. Love is not just a feeling, but rather entails action and care. In such a mode of being towards the other, we acknowledge that we are "never enough." The American philosopher and student of Schrag, Ramsey Eric Ramsey writes:

> . . . Eros: neither wholly materialist (mortal) nor wholly idealist (divine) . . . The beautiful medium of communicative praxis is that simultaneously impoverished and overflowing condition of the possibility of human relations . . . abundance and lack surround us.[28]

Thus, we yearn for and throw ourselves into a dialogue with the Other, who exceeds us; and we leap into a life that will always elude our control. And yet, it is this leap of love that breathes life into every moment we have on earth and with others. As such, the possibility of love takes on an essential role, and Ramsey ends with the words: "Love explains the hope . . . with which we began and without which we would not be able to continue."[29]

6. Trapped by Reason Or: Risking to Love without Experience

To begin, there are two quotes I wish to place in juxtaposition:
"I was such an egotist and in actual fact had so little respect for others that I could not imagine that she would do such a thing. This was more than I could bear."[30]
"When people lack a critical understanding of their reality, apprehending it in fragments which they do not perceive as interacting constituent elements of the whole, they cannot truly know that reality."[31]

The protagonist of Dostoyevsky's novel *Notes from Underground* lives in a world that is tightly enclosed by walls built out of the concepts of logic and reasoning. Throughout his narration, he presents every experience in such a way to prove his

---

[28] Eric Ramsey, "Procreation in a Beautiful Medium: Eroticizing the Vectors of Communicative Praxis," in *Experiences between Philosophy and Communication: Engaging the Philosophical Contribution of Calvin O. Schrag*, ed. Eric Ramsey and David J. Miller (State University of New York Press, 2003), 194.
[29] Ramsey, "Procreation in a Beautiful Medium," 199.
[30] Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 115.
[31] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (Bloomsbury Academic, 2000), 104.

understanding of the motivations of mankind to be either personal advantage or independence. Motivations that drive people throughout their lives, doomed to collide with the same walls of inevitable failure that surround the narrator. The structure of this belief is based on his experiences: This becomes most obvious when we look closer at the protagonist's inability to accept kindness or love. In reference to Schrag's deliberations on love and the self, love is spontaneous in nature and cannot be willed or controlled, earned or quantified. And yet, the Dostojevsky's protagonist is unable to accept any kindness out of free will, without transaction or expectation, he remains equally incapable of receiving the present moment as a gift. In fact, he does everything in his power to escape the present: by either excessively preparing for and attempting to predict the future, or by recounting and scrutinizing past events as a matter of cause and effect. As such, he is unable to respond to what is being offered to him—whether it's love itself or anything else.

In the following, we will refer to the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire's work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and show how fatalism, cynicism, and strict adherence to a perceived logic can be seen as symptoms of an oppressed, or as Freire names submerged person: specifically those, who are unable to comprehend the systems under which they are oppressed, and as such not identify what is causing their experienced limitations. Instead of causes, they can ascribe their sense of inevitability to an external imposition of fated forces to be met with "Fatalism in the guise of docility," manifest in the protagonist's conception of the ideal society in the image of the humanless crystal palace.[32]

As we witness the seemingly confident reflections of the "Underground Man," we notice one encounter that leaves him questioning, unable to rationalize within his understanding. A moment that despite his many attestations to the unavoidable dominance of reason gives the lie to his narration, and in his reflection brings his notes to an end. In this moment he is faced with being seen, being accepted, and being unable to bear it. Being unable to understand the moment, he attempts to destroy it, only to be faced with further proof of its authenticity which has haunted him since. It was the refusal of his money, whether as insult or otherwise, on the part of Liza, that has so perplexed him in the years between his experience and his writing thereon. His inability to open himself, to trust her motives, and understand this experience of being empathized with, renders him incapable of accepting his moment of acceptance in vulnerability without shame.

---

[32] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 61.

But how could he have trusted her, not having known love himself? Though the narrator's direct references to his own upbringing are few and brief, they illuminate the foundations of the underground man's world. Throughout his youth he knew only insecurity. With no family, his world was that of competition, domination, and discomfort. The experience of acceptance and security in social belonging was denied him, and so he developed no way to recognize it or believe in it. Instead, he experienced only rational, transactional, or conditional relationships, based on his continued performance of what was required of him. With those experiences he built his understanding of the world around his perception of the truth.

In his brief remembrance, he reveals the roots of the thoughts that still plague him. Specifically, his fear of being rejected by those upon whom he is dependent, and his certainty that his inherent otherness caused, and would inevitably lead to further social rejection. Through his experiences in school, he witnesses the apparent duplicity of what he is taught he should be, (knowledgeable and hardworking) and what others are actually rewarded for being (wealthy and socially capable).

This belief lays the foundations for his twin obsession with both receiving acceptance and desiring independence, which effuses his every motivation and clouds his interpretations of others. It haunts the interactions of his life, rendering him constantly alert to threats of instability, denial, and refusal of social power and respect. It is through this constant alertness that he creates a distance from the world, eventually believing that acceptance is not only impossible, but foolish to desire. It is his inability to trust others that removes the possibility of his beliefs ever being challenged and leads to the inevitability of his isolation.

Within his isolation, the protagonist has made himself invulnerable. Which is not to say he cannot be hurt, but he cannot be touched. He cannot be challenged, nor experience the joy of overcoming. He can not take up the possibility of unknowing, the pain of failure, or loss, or regret, and as such he cannot open himself to the vulnerability necessary for change. He asks no questions that he expects to be answered by another. Not of the reader, and not of any of those who share space in his tales. He alone is the font of answers, pre-empting and controlling the form of any possible criticism by continually projecting it into the mouths and minds of those around him, both in the "present" moments within his stories, and in his recollections of them with the reader.

Through his narrative domination and assertion of understanding the "underground" the narrator adheres closely to the idea of the "submerged" person described by Freire. Freire describes a characteristic of submergence in words that are deeply evocative of the underground man when he says, "The very structure of their

thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity."[33]

His true opportunity to be seen, and through being seen also be challenged, comes from his interactions with Liza. His experience of being looked at directly, and being seen, is revealed through his descriptions of her eyes. In their first meeting, her eyes perceive him in a way he refers to first as grave, giving the impression of the threat of judgment, distance. He then progresses to describe her eyes as childish, almost innocent, ascribing naivete to her when she feels seen by him. She both listens to him and questions him. She puts trust in him through her revelations to him, and by earnestly and openly responding to his words, though he can not maintain his belief in her sincerity, because he feels his own lack of it.

When she comes to him for their second encounter, she proves the honesty with which she first proclaimed she would come to him. And as she does, her eyes are said to take on a wide but knowing form. He first ascribes terror as the emotion behind her eyes, but then can not help but identify it as sorrow, perhaps pity. Despite seeing the narrator honestly, in a state of undeniable patheticness, she still remained open to him, refusing repulsion. For this he meets her with nearly every challenge he could, but can no longer meet her gaze. In the end, he attempts to drive her away with insult added, offering to pay her for their encounter as a way of asserting his belief in her desire to benefit from him, and not desire for him. He does this to soothe himself and deny the honesty of her offer of togetherness. He attempts to refuse her in order to refuse what she had borne witness to, and to refuse her ability to undermine his deeply held beliefs about the world, to prove himself right.

Again, this mirrors the actions taken by the submerged in Freire upon their encounter with a potentially loving other. The narrator performs an act of false generosity, recognized as such during his own reflections. Freire describes the manipulative actions and intentions of the submerged subject with words that could not be more apt to both explain and damn the narrator's actions:

> With this false generosity, he attempts not only to preserve an unjust and necrophilic order, but to "buy" peace for himself. It happens that peace cannot be bought; peace is experienced in solidary and loving acts, which cannot be incarnated in oppression.[34]

---

[33] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 45.
[34] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 146.

In the novel, this is shown by Liza refusing to accept his money, and in doing so rejects both advantage and independence, and again displays her sincerity and her understanding, and in doing so invalidates the narrator's beliefs directly and unequivocally. With this act, she performs what can only be referred to as a demonstration of togetherness, of love, for the narrator. She gives him an opportunity to be accepted without instrumentalization, as a person and not a means. At the moment he could not perceive it as such, could not trust in it, and so continues to deny it in an attempt to reassert his own power and understanding. Upon his reflection, and with her denial of his bait, she makes the acceptance she offers not symbolic or monstrous, but tangible, present, and real. The shame that follows him from this event is in the knowing that through her, his "petulant prayers were answered" and he now was left the worse for the knowledge that he was the author of his own isolation.[35] Through her refusal to act in a way that was consistent with his previously held belief, she revealed the existence of there being more to the world than the narrator had believed possible. She became the narrator's experience of a "frontier between being and being more" that is possible through true openness and togetherness.[36] As a person still submerged, underground, oppressed though, he instead reacts to her offer of humanity in an act of "Horizontal Violence" to reassert his internalized understanding of domination and order.[37]

As such, the narrator creates isolation in an attempt to simulate independence, refusing the idea of being with others, relying solely on structures of dominance and hierarchy, conceiving of social cohesion only as static and personally self-destructive in service to an unknown other rather than those who comprise it. There can be no logically constructed crystal palace that is built by or for the weak and imperfect, to provide for the "other", or promote togetherness among irrational flawed humans, as they can not be part of a singularly, logically, perfect world. So he refuses his own perceived weakness and humanity and refuses the opportunity for an experience of social togetherness despite, and within, otherness. He refuses love.

This inability to take on the pains and joys of human togetherness is shockingly relatable even in its repulsive characterization, because it is born of an incredibly fundamental human feeling, insecurity. The insecurity that comes from his certainty

---

[35] Fyodor Dostoevsky, "Notes from Underground," in *Three Short Novels of Dostoevsky*, trans. Constance Garnett (Anchor Books, 1960), 297. Wilks translates the phrase "petulant prayers" as "capricious requests" (p. 117).

[36] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 102.

[37] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 62.

that his continued existence is always dependent upon performing for others. That he is always only as secure as his ability to adhere to a society built on a model of being which he feels has no true place for him. Because his relationships had always been conditional, it made sense to believe that to partake in the social "real life" is to partake in his own subjection to a community which only exists through oppression.[38] That, at best, society can only lead us to a decision between "cheap happiness or exalted servitude". He can believe this with certainty because it was, up to that point, all he had been able to experience. Because is there anything else that life can be, without knowing love and acceptance? "Even in my underground dreams I did not imagine love except as a struggle. I began it always with hatred and ended it with moral subjugation, and afterwards I never knew what to do with the subjugated object."[39] But with the act of Liza, he is left with the memory of something beyond his previous imaginings, and has no choice but to speak of his previous understanding in the past tense.

7. Within and Without the Wall

In *Notes from Underground*, Dostoyevsky reveals the limitations of logic and instrumental rationality. The protagonist continuously runs into the "wall of logic," a system that fails to respond to his inner turmoil or offer any resolution to his existential crisis. Rejected by this wall, he finds himself trapped in a world where facts strip away his individuality, reducing him to a mere machine: predictable and detached from authentic life. This wall becomes a metaphysical boundary, confining him to a rigid, deterministic reality.

As such, Dostoyevsky's protagonist stands as a grotesque emblem of modern subjectivity: hyper-rational, self-aware, and yet fundamentally estranged from both others and himself. His rejection of love is not a triumph of independence but a symptom of his deeper fear of unpredictability, being truly known, and the responsibility that genuine connection demands from him. In seeking to master every variable of human interaction, he reduces life to calculation, turning relationships into performances and vulnerability into weakness. This same pathology finds eerie continuity in today's digital subject, who lives under the tyranny of metrics, optimization, and perpetual exposure, where identity becomes curated, emotion

[38] Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 117.
[39] Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 293, trans. Garnett.

commodified, and reason stripped of depth. Both figures are not victims of ignorance, but of an excess of self-consciousness divorced from ethical or emotional grounding. Their condition is one of spectral presence: always seen, never encountered. In sum, the protagonist remains ensnared within the wall of facts, trapped in a purely chronological timeline where the present—the only life truly given to us—vanishes, much like in Zeno's paradox. His only modes of engagement are either to predict situations or to insert himself destructively in order to regain control. By turning away from what is given, he ends up "living past life" ("*am Leben vorbei leben*"), thereby locked in an inauthentic mode of being, which resembles a tomb. The novel astutely criticizes the limitations of deterministic logic, which cannot account for the richness of human freedom, the ability to love, or the possibility of being called into an authentic response to life, where we are irreplaceable.

It is here that Schrag's reflections on love might disclose a path beyond the wall. If instrumental reason seeks mastery through prediction and control, love begins with an acceptance of uncertainty and vulnerability. As Schrag argues, love is not an exchange governed by calculation, but a gift that lays open the space for response. It calls upon the self beyond its own enclosure and toward the other, not through necessity or utility, but through a generosity that cannot be reduced to reason's economy of equivalence. What the "Underground Man" ultimately refuses is not merely Liza's compassion, but the possibility of answering such a call.

The tragedy of Dostoyevsky's protagonist, therefore, is not that he suffers, but that he cannot accept what is given. Unable to receive either the present moment or the gift of another person, he retreats ever deeper into the underground of his own certainties. Yet the lingering power of the novel lies precisely in the fact that Liza's gesture remains. Her act of acceptance becomes a fracture in the wall, a reminder that human existence cannot be exhausted by logic, prediction, or self-interest. Beyond the wall remains the possibility of dialogue, vulnerability, and love—the very conditions through which the self may become more than itself. In this sense, "Notes from Underground" leaves us not simply with a critique of reason's monstrosities, but with the fragile hope that, through openness to the Other, another way of being remains possible.

We die from being alive.
The more alive, the more we die.
No one dies from being dead.
Therefore, some people,
in order not to die,
prefer to be dead.

Thus two opposite stories are written:
some biographical chronicles,
innumerable necrographical notes
with a few jottings about what is alive.

The apparent monolithic relationship
between lives and deaths
becomes a patio of mosaics then
with many capricious drawings.

And in that patio a child is playing
who doesn't even look at the drawings.

By Roberto Juarroz

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

ISSN 1918-7351
Volume 18 (2026)

The Issue of Time's Nonlinearity: Calvin O. Schrag and Franz Rosenzweig in Conversation

Anna Poláčková
University of South Bohemia, Faculty of Theology
ORCID: 0009-0003-3755-8841

Abstract
Drawing on Calvin O. Schrag's *The Phenomenon of Embodied Speech* and *Kierkegaard's Existential Reflections on Time*, the first part of this article examines the so-called "present with fringes"—a term used by Schrag for the temporal synthesis wherein the instantaneous moment is inextricably tied to the necessity of the past and the possibility of the future. The second part turns to Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* and *The New Thinking*, illustrating how his tripartite narrative of Creation, Revelation, and Redemption transforms objective history into a lived story mediated by language. The following study highlights their shared focus on embodied speech. While Schrag emphasizes the "instant of decision" that transforms the individual from observer to participant, Rosenzweig illustrates how the "tenses of reality" unify God, man, and world. Ultimately, both philosophers present the "now" as a transformative event where disparate temporal and relational elements are unified into a single, immediate experience.

Keywords: personalism, existentialism, time, speech, Schrag, Rosenzweig

1. Introduction

This article seeks to explore the phenomenon of experienced time through a comparative analysis of Calvin O. Schrag (1928-2024) and Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929), both of whom move away from abstract—or objective—time toward a model of existential temporality. The first section examines Schrag's concepts of "embodied speech" and "present with fringes," where the present moment serves as a synthesis of necessity (the past) and possibility (the future). For Schrag, following Kierkegaard's existential anthropology, the instant is a site of transformative decision that turns the individual from a detached spectator into a personally engaged participant. The second section addresses Rosenzweig's concept of new thinking, which utilizes a narrative, tripartite structure of Creation, Revelation, and Redemption to describe the "tenses of reality." Rosenzweig elevates speech as the organon of Revelation, turning the pre-story of the world into a lived encounter.

The comparison reveals three primary commonalities: the rejection of isolated "nows" in favor of temporal synthesis, the prioritization of the concrete *Self* over the generic genus of humanity, and the role of language as the catalyst of immediacy. Ultimately, while their frameworks differ—Schrag focusing on the *Self*'s synthesis of past and future via decision, and Rosenzweig focusing on the relational actualization of God, man, and world—both thinkers conclude that the present is a transformative event rather than a theoretical point, serving as the unique locus where the individual actively participates in the construction of meaning.

2. Schrag's "Present with Fringes"

In *The Phenomenon of Embodied Speech*, Calvin O. Schrag seeks to illustrate the temporal synthesis of speech on an everyday common greeting "How are you?".[1] He suggests that although the question grammatically uses the present tense, it is meant to refer to the past. In other words, the person who poses the question expects that the referent's current state of being is influenced by his past experience. However, a future trajectory can be observed on the seemingly simple question as well—the tie to the future indeed differs from the past's contribution to the present moment. Schrag claims that the future's relevance in the instantaneous present lies in the form of possibility. In this

[1] Calvin O. Schrag, "The Phenomenon of Embodied Speech," *World Futures: The Journal of New Paradigm Research* 7, no. 4 (1969): 13. https://doi.org/10.1080/02604027.1969.9971661.

way, every speech act holds both direct and indirect prospect of what is yet to come.[2] However, speech acts and dialogue cannot happen in a punctual "now." Lived communication requires a certain kind of "thick present" where the speaker can maintain an identity across the syntax of a sentence.

The aforementioned understanding of what Schrag calls "present with fringes"[3] can be traced also in his article *Kierkegaard's Existential Reflections on Time*. Here, he treats Kierkegaard's notion of contemporaneity—specifically one's immediate experience of time—in the same fashion. Kierkegaard, Schrag argues, approaches time as a phenomenon belonging to the existing subject. As such, he contrasts it with the notion of abstract, objectivized and measured time which is thought to be experienced only when posited in space.[4] In Kierkegaard's existential anthropology, time does not consist of continuous succession of "nows," or moments, aided by space. Contrarily, time approached existentially—or time immediately experienced by the *Self*—unifies the past, the present, and the future. In this way, the individual experiences immediate synthesis of the past and the future in the present.[5] In other words, both the past and the future are relevant for the individual's existence in immediacy; same as with the common question "How are you?". Schrag expands the claim by addressing Kierkegaard's polemics with Hegel with regard to his unhappy consciousness. The Dane holds that while Hegel was right that one is unhappy when he is removed from the present by dwelling either in the past or the future, he failed to approach the matter existentially. By resting on a purely abstract level, Hegel became only a spectator of the phenomenon.[6]

Moreover, the Kierkegaardian concept of contemporaneity with Christ serves to further illustrate the previously discussed temporal synthesis. The absolute paradox of God-man, i.e., the eternal God entering time in flesh, represents the very unity of temporality and eternity in the instant. Nonetheless, the two opposite poles are not mediated but remain qualitatively separate.[7] The same can be said of the *Self* which consists of two dialectically opposite extremes—possibility rooted in the future, and necessity belonging to the past. Ultimately, the concrete instant—moment, or the

---

[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Calvin O. Schrag, "Kierkegaard's Existential Reflections on Time," *The Personalist: An International Review of Philosophy, Religion, and Literature* 42, no. 2 (1961): 149. https://dn720709.ca.archive.org/0/items/sim_pacific-philosophical-quarterly_1961_42_contents/sim_pacific-philosophical-quarterly_1961_42_contents.pdf
[5] Ibid., 150f.
[6] Ibid., 151.
[7] Ibid., 155f.

"now"—presents one with an opportunity to decide. Schrag emphasizes that by the act of choosing, the individual becomes contemporary with the God-man and the once historical moment repeats itself as a possibility. To put it differently, contemporaneity turns the individual from a mere second-hand observer, or student of the historical Christian event, to a personally engaged disciple of Christ. The God-man's presence is thus available to every individual in any moment via decision. To conclude, the instant provides the opportunity for God to reveal himself to the individual, and enables the individual *Self*'s past and future to be unified by means of decision.[8]

In *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity*, Schrag transitions his earlier concept of the "present with fringes" into the literal topography of human speech.[9] He argues that dialogue relies on an inherent fullness of the present: when we communicate, the presence of our discourse is never an isolated point in time, but a dynamic field where the retrospective weight of what has been said actively conditions our prospective anticipation of what will be uttered next.

Moreover, to fully appreciate the temporal depth of Schrag's "present with fringes," one must look to his later elaboration[10] on the existential tension of the "already but not yet" theological concept. In *God as Otherwise Than Being: Toward a Semantics of the Gift,* Schrag utilizes this phrase to conceptualize a "preenacted eschatology,"[11] arguing that meaningful existential realization is never an over-realized, static fixture of the past (the "already"), nor a wholly deferred, transcendent reality of the future (the "not yet"). Rather, time operates as a dynamic suspension where the future is continuously "coming-to-presence" within the immediate fullness of lived history.[12]

3. Rosenzweig's World-Poem as a Narrative of Lived Temporality

Like Schrag, Rosenzweig approaches the phenomenon of experienced time existentially. Being a compelling narrator himself, the Judeo-Christian personalist often

---

[8] Ibid., 159f.
[9] Calvin O. Schrag, *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity* (Indiana University Press, 1989), 24-28.
[10] Although this paragraph mainly considers Schrag's *God as Otherwise Than Being: Toward a Semantics of the Gift*, he also deals with the "already but not yet" in his *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity* (146–147).
[11] Calvin O. Schrag, *God as Otherwise Than Being: Toward a Semantics of the Gift* (Northwestern University Press, 2002), 134.
[12] Ibid., 135.

portrays the world's meaning by means of storytelling.[13] In *The New Thinking*, Rosenzweig reviews his magnum opus *The Star of Redemption* and emphasizes that the book should not be primarily read but rather *listened to* like a compelling story. The book itself consists of three parts through which the author—or storyteller—wishes to narrate the world-story. In fact, Rosenzweig elevates the narrative aspect of the *Star* and calls its content a "great world-poem retold in three tenses;" Part I being the "book of the past," Part II yielding to the "immediate exchange of speech" between human beings and God, and Part III representing the "book of the future."[14] Another parallel, provided by Galli in her Introduction to *The New Thinking*, captures the story's tripartite nature as "once upon a time," "the story proper," and "(blissfully) ever after."[15]

A compelling parallel with Schrag's conceptualization of temporal synthesis and spatiotemporal immediacy is established through two primary channels: the integration of *three* distinct tenses within a *single* narrative and the uniquely organic, phenomenological quality of the present. In his philosophical work, Rosenzweig insists on the adoption of the so-called new theory of knowledge or new thinking. The new method—a revision of the old theory of knowledge centered on objective, static truths—proposes that the final truth is an inherently dynamic concept. These dynamics suggest that truth reveals itself as a truth *for a subject,* rather than as an independent entity knowing only itself. Accordingly, the kinetics allow truth to transform into *my* truth or *our* truth. Regarding Rosenzweig's narrative of the world, he contends that the anthropology of the new thinking undergoes a radical shift: whereas traditional idealism viewed the human being through the static lens of the third person, the new thinking refuses to reduce the concrete individual—defined by his own name—to a mere genus of humanity. Thus, all genuine human interactions are mediated by the famous triad of Creation, Revelation, and Redemption—they occur within a directed temporality defined by a distinct origin and teleological end. Besides the triad, there are also three "irreducible elements of reality"[16] which Part I of the *Star* deals with—God, man, and world. Departing from the pure old thinking in which God, man, and world are part of a timeless pre-story[17], these elements are

---

[13] In *The New Thinking*, Rosenzweig acknowledges Schelling's *The Ages of the World* for its anticipation of a "storytelling philosophy," a project Rosenzweig explicitly seeks to realize. Franz Rosenzweig, *Franz Rosenzweig's "The New Thinking"*, ed. and trans. by Alan Udoff and Barbara E. Galli (University Press, 1999), 81. This narrative theology is further informed by his Jewish background, which is firmly grounded in the spiritual and communal tradition of storytelling.

[14] Rosenzweig, *The New Thinking,* 85f.

[15] Barbara E. Galli, "'The New Thinking': An Introduction", in *The New Thinking*, 17.

[16] Rosenzweig, *The New Thinking,* 32; 75f.

[17] This pre-story of the old thinking should not be interpreted pejoratively; rather, it represents a foundational, "pre-time" ontological stage necessary for the emergence of the *new*. While the old

situated *within time*, where they achieve actualization and enter into mutual relation. It is precisely this actualization of God, man, and world in time that the *Star*'s Part II engages with. Effectively, if the elements were not separate and irreducible, they could not affect each other.[18]

The pivotal insight of Part II lies in Rosenzweig's assertion that by virtue of speech, reasoning—or the pre-story—becomes *audible*. The so-called "language of grammar" thus becomes the very organon of revelation which conditions human interaction and continuously generates the "presentness of experience"[19] or "tense of reality"[20]. Nonetheless, the difference between the old and new thinking does not necessarily lie in sound versus silence but rather in the "need of another" and in the "taking of time seriously."[21] At the same time, however, the *another* must be understood concretely—for Rosenzweig, speaking to everyone is like speaking to no one or the general public—a specific individual with ears but also a *mouth*.[22] Thus, immediacy, or presentness, allows for a so-called "bridge-building"[23] during which the separate elements of reality open up. God—who on his own is concealed and incomprehensible—suddenly makes himself known in Revelation. Man—who shuts himself in when on his own—comes out of his shell through Creation. The world is perplexing on its own but by means of Redemption it starts to make sense. Importantly, Rosenzweig holds that the tenses of reality cannot be interchanged—every single moment, or event, contains its present, past, and future, without which it would be hardly discernible.[24] Therefore, these tenses of reality enable us to discern the elements by comparing them and seeing what they do to each other.[25]

Returning to Rosenzweig's world-tale, he emphasizes that Revelation facilitates the "miracle of return and renewal."[26] While God created the world, it is through his self-revelation that the world is truly constituted for the first time. In this framework, Creation remains perpetually present; even when viewed as a past event, it emerges

---

thinking seeks timeless essences in isolation, its inclusion here serves as a deliberate, self-conscious threshold—describing their inner workings.

[18] Rosenzweig, *The New Thinking,* 32f.

[19] While this specific term originates in the *Star*, Rosenzweig employs the concept of the present in the same manner throughout *The New Thinking*. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. by William W. Hallo (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 110.

[20] Rosenzweig, *The New Thinking,* 85.

[21] Ibid., 87.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., 85.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., 90.

from the primordial Revelation to Adam that stands at the inception of human history.[27]

4. Converging Moments: A Comparison Between Schrag and Rosenzweig

Both Schrag and Rosenzweig move away from abstract, or objective, time to a model of existential temporality where the present moment serves as the locus of meaning and synthesis.

The first similarity can be seen in the concept of *temporal synthesis*. Both thinkers reject the idea of time as a series of isolated "nows." Schrag argues for a temporal synthesis where the present moment is fringed by the past (necessity) and the future (possibility). A simple greeting like "How are you?" contains this entire triad. Rosenzweig proposes a world-poem in three tenses. He insists that every "tense of reality" is discernible only because it contains its own past, present, and future. Revelation (the present) thus acts as the bridge that makes the past (Creation) and future (Redemption) audible and real.

The second commonality lies in the *rejection of abstraction* over the concrete *Self*. Both philosophers prioritize the existing subject over the spectator. Schrag uses Kierkegaard to critique Hegel's unhappy consciousness, arguing that abstract time is merely space-posited. Thus, meaning is found only in the immediacy of the *Self*. Rosenzweig critiques old thinking for treating humans as a generic genus. His new thinking insists on the concrete individual with a specific name, ears, and a mouth, for whom truth must become *my truth*.

Third, both authors view language as the *organon of immediacy*, meaning that the present moment is activated through the event of speech. Schrag illustrates the synthesis of time through embodied speech, where the act of even a casual greeting creates a shared, immediate present. Rosenzweig describes grammar as the organon of Revelation. Speech is what allows the pre-story to become audible, turning the hidden God and the shuttered man into relational beings in the now.

---

[27] Regarding the element of Creation—the world, or the "It"—Rosenzweig engaged in a lengthy and largely friendly correspondence with Buber. Rosenzweig argued that instead of the I-It relation, one should consider the He-It and We-It relations, representing God as Creator and the world as created. This dialogue is analyzed in detail by Friedman. Maurice Friedman, *Dialogue, Speech, Nature, and Creation: Franz Rosenzweig's Critique of Buber's 'I and Thou' Modern Judaism* 13, no. 2 (1993). http://www.jstor.org/stable/1396088.

Last, for both Schrag and Rosenzweig, the present is not just a point on a line; it is a *transformative event*. Schrag, in line with Kierkegaard, holds that the instant allows the individual to become contemporary with the eternal, i.e., the God-man, through decision, moving from a mere second-hand observer to an engaged participant. Rosenzweig's concept of Revelation facilitates a miracle of return and renewal. In the moment of Revelation, the world is constituted for the first time, making the past, i.e., Creation, perpetually present and accessible.

5. Conclusion

This study sought to demonstrate that while their starting points differ, both Schrag and Rosenzweig rescue the present moment from the vacuum of objective, or linear time. For Schrag, the casual greeting "How are you?" serves as the primary evidence for a "present with fringes," where the individual's speech act synthesizes the necessity of the past with the possibilities of the future through a Kierkegaardian act of decision. In this framework, the "now" is the site where a detached spectator is transformed into a personally engaged participant.

Rosenzweig, conversely, constructs a "world-poem" where the present is defined by Revelation. Here, speech acts as the *organon* that makes the pre-story of the world audible, bridging the gap between a past Creation and a future Redemption. By replacing the generic genus of humanity with a concrete individual that has name, ears, and a mouth, Rosenzweig establishes the present as a relational event rather than a static point.

Ultimately, both thinkers converge on a shared horizon: time is not a series of isolated "nows," but an existential synthesis. Whether through Schrag's present with fringes or Rosenzweig's tenses of reality, the human encounter in language becomes the unique locus where meaning is actively actualized and the *Self* truly emerges.

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

ISSN 1918-7351
Volume 18 (2026)

Organizational Leadership: Building a Deeper Sense of Community in the Workplace Through Calvin O. Schrag's Communicative Praxis

Annette M. Holba
Duquesne University, USA
ORCID: 0000-0003-1842-6221

Christina L. McDowell
Cornell University, USA
ORCID: 0009-0009-3571-7099

Abstract
Community, from a philosophy of communication perspective, offers and opens understanding that assists with designing specific organizational practices to create not just any community but a sincere community. Calvin O. Schrag's philosophy of communication perspective that underlies his emphasis on communicative praxis opens a discussion for communication ethics implications situated in an applied context of organizational leadership and leads this endeavor. This essay offers a pragmatic application of Schrag's work that assists with understanding the phenomenon of organizational practices around community building in the workplace. Because many organizations and those leading them focus on community, or say they do, examining the nature and quality of community helps to clarify the quality of experience within them. In this essay we explore Schrag's understanding of community and offer a hermeneutic entrance for application to organizations through his discussion of rhetoric in community. This essay also identifies Schrag's emphasis on praxis as a condition that situates four coordinates of community as polysemy, discourse and action, being-with-others, and responsibility. Additionally, in the spirit of Schrag's philosophical pursuit, we discuss the betwixt and between of hermeneutic humility and transversal rationality which leads to identifying communication ethics

implications of communicative praxis. Finally, the essay ends with an application of the praxis approach specifically for organizations and its leaders.

Keywords: communicative praxis, polysemy, being-with-others, communication ethics, hermeneutic humility, transversal rationality, community

Community, from a philosophy of communication perspective, offers and opens understanding that assists with designing specific organizational practices to create not just any community but a sincere community. Community within an organization can be seen through employees working together for a common purpose (e.g., a meaningful goal).[1] A sincere community is marked by a common center.[2] A common center builds an infrastructure for being-withness that makes someone feel "home" even in difference. The common center allows for trust to be built and sustained. Also, individual actions are attentive to the common center and trust in everything one says and does. This is a deeper connection that allows for and honors continued engagement even in disagreement; however, the disagreement does not lessen the deep connections in the relationship. Even in disagreement there is trust. Using Calvin O. Schrag's philosophical framework of communicative praxis leads this endeavor.[3] Our focus in this essay is on the communication ethics implications that emerge from an organization and its leader's words and deeds used to connect people and more importantly to build a workplace community that is sustainable. The question guiding this inquiry is how do we know if community is sincere or insincere, especially in organizations? So, how does community arise in organizations, and how can a workplace community be sincere and sustainable? Coming from a philosophy of communication perspective, Schrag's understanding of community and his emphasis on communicative praxis provides an opportunity to discuss those communication ethics implications in an applied context of organizational leadership. By starting with a question in this historical moment, we offer a pragmatic application of Schrag's work that assists with understanding the phenomenon of organizational practices. Because many organizations and those leading them focus on community, or say they do, examining the nature and quality of community helps to clarify the quality of experience within them.[4]

In this essay we first explore Schrag's sense of community. Second, we offer a hermeneutic entrance through Schrag's application of rhetoric in community. Third, we identify praxis as a condition that situates four coordinates of community as

---

[1] O. C. Tanner, "Your Company Culture Depends on a Thriving Workplace," updated April 24, 2026 https://www.octanner.com/articles/your-company-culture-depends-on-a-thriving-workplace-community

[2] Ronald C. Arnett, *Communication and Community: Implications of Martin Buber's Dialogue* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1986).

[3] Calvin O. Schrag, *The Self After Postmodernity* (Yale University Press, 1997).

[4] George Manning, "Organizational Culture: Building Community," McGraw Hill. January 2, 2025. https://www.mheducation.com/highered/blog/2025/01/organizational-culture-building-community.html

polysemy, discourse and action, being-with-others, and responsibility. In the workplace, polysemy is demonstrated through the collaboration of teams on projects, committee work around governance or policy, team building exercises, or development of community connections and collaborations. Discourse and action in organizations occurs when individuals have agency that allows them fuller or full participation in the life of the organization. From decision making, to connecting with constituents, to discussing and deciding with co-workers the issues inherent in organizational patterns and life. Participating in discourse and action means people must be fully attentive to other engaged vocabularies and their implications upon or toward others. From department to department or team to team, when engaging in discourse and action together, organizations grow together and grow apart—this is an organic process. These agents in discourse and action are always embedded in the life system of the organization and believe that they are all 'in it together' in both word and deed. Embedded agents create new policy together and adhere to the traditions (e.g., mission or values) that have come to represent the organization. This does not mean that things never change but the changes that do occur are results of embedded action agents engaged with one another (e.g., setting policy, adding employee wellness programs, developing new avenues for client engagement). In an organization, being-with-others manifests through interdepartmental communication and behaviors. Perhaps identifying ways in which different departments collaborate or exchange data that will enhance the outcomes for each department or the overall success of the organization. Reflecting on how intertextuality comes together across departments or communities of constituents in ways that shape and reshape meaning for those engaged. Consider departments as different narratival neighborhoods or clusters of interests, knowledges, epistemic communities, and discourses that are dynamic, fluid, and responsive to others within the field or neighborhood. Not allowing neighborhoods to become silos unto themselves occurs by looking for overlaps and noticing how different perspectives can enhance the neighborhood. Using language across departments and sections that is inclusive and not derogatory enhances relationship building and minimizes pecuniary emulation by acknowledging and demonstrating a responsibility to others. Responsibility to others could include observing fairness in resource distribution and understanding how that can impact department functionalities across the organization, independently and collaboratively. Through upholding a responsibility to others, organizations exemplify a concern that moves beyond financial gains by also focusing on the human being. Fourth, we discuss the betwixt and between of hermeneutic humility and transversal rationality leading to

communication ethics implications of communicative praxis. Finally, we end with an application of the praxis approach for organizations and its leaders.

Connecting people is often grounded in a dialogical and ethical commitment made by a person to act in the way that will create the condition for building community. This is often the case with communication by organizations and its leaders; however, while intentions might be good, the communication surrounding developing an organizational community often creates a false sense of community. To consider how to avoid creating a false sense of community, Schrag's understanding of community provides coordinates that will guide organizations and its leaders to foster a deeper/fuller, sincere, sense of community with others. Additionally, exploring these coordinates point to the need for hermeneutic humility and the acknowledgement of transversal rationality as precursors to understanding the communication ethics implications of the self and community. This leads to a set of recommendations for organizations and its leaders for developing and sustaining "community" in the workplace. In the spirit of community, we first offer a tribute and acknowledgement of Professor Schrag's work and its significance.

Acknowledging Calvin O. Schrag

Purdue University holds space for Calvin O. Schrag on their website. He is identified as the George Ade Distinguished Professor of Philosophy Emeritus/Philosophy and his scholarly specializations are listed as phenomenology, hermeneutics, and postmodernism. Schrag was an amazing teacher, and we know this because he produced some of the top scholars and teachers for the next generation of philosophical thinkers in communication, rhetoric, semiotics, phenomenology, and hermeneutics in the United States and abroad. Schrag's philosophical odyssey exemplified transversal rationality, as did his approach to teaching and by extension, his intellectual generosity toward those of us who did not have him as a teacher because we could connect with him any time on the phone, over email, and socially at conferences. Professor Schrag was always teaching to and for someone, about something. His modeling of transversal rationality spread betwixt and between the academy, institutions, and in all kinds of dialogic encounters around the ideas that interested him most.

Schrag passed away March 11, 2024, leaving a legacy that will continue to inspire, transform, and innovate the practice of reasoning and how we understand rationality in application, especially in community. Schrag provides a rich overview of

community that acknowledges the historical moment and opens opportunity for practical applications through communicative praxis.

Calvin Schrag's Sense of Community

Historically, community offers an invitation for a group to carry out the standards of the community. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word "community" derives from the French "communité," meaning "joint ownership."[5] Communities have common centers. These common centers can involve geographic coordinates or qualities, value-based environments, or shared interests. Communities have a *sensus communis* or an understanding that is counter to individualism and that recognizes the significance of a human community that is co-constructed, co-driven, and co-experienced.[6] By having this type of common sense, communities have shared understandings and customs that allow for collaboration, adaptation, and imagination leading to shared governance that opens to forging new insights through collective communicative behavior.[7] This could be when a community needs a new fire truck, but the town budget does not have the funds. Town council, chamber of commerce members, and local churches might collaborate and organize a day of giving designed to facilitate major fundraising events across the town and with participation from local businesses, schools, and nonprofits. Members of all of these organizations come together to support the local fire department and the larger needs of the community through collaboration, adapting schedules and agendas, and using imagination collaboratively to reach success. A community involves the practice of communicative engagement around common sense or the notion of sensus communis.[8] A community does not automatically have common sense but all human beings have the capacity to develop it through experience and practice. It is a collaborative experience when speaking of community.

In community a person has concern and care for what is valued and communicated within the group (e.g., common characteristics and goals). A community, or place composed of a common center, includes developing language to

---

[5] "Community," n., Etymology. Oxford English Dictionary Online, accessed January 25, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/community_n?tl=true.
[6] Ronald C. Arnett and Pat Arneson, *Dialogic Civility in a Cynical Age: Community, Hope, and Interpersonal Relationships* (SUNY, 1999).
[7] Ronald C. Arnett and Annette M. Holba, *An Overture to Philosophy of Communication: The Carrier of Meaning* (Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 2012).
[8] Arnett and Holba, *An Overture to Philosophy of Communication,* 2012.

include community in interpersonal communications.[9] This perspective is grounded in habits of the heart and three important ideas surround developing communal language.[10] First, "community does not rest primarily on feelings, but rather one a commitment to story-centered values that bond people together."[11] Second, "relationship cannot be considered the most important term in communication and a community perspective. Story-guided values, not just positive feeling and utility, are needed to bond relationships."[12] Third, "language of interpersonal communication sensitive to community is grounded in a 'community of memory.'"[13] Through these ideas, a person can see story-guided values, the proper evaluation of relationships, and a community of memory are greatly needed when cultivating interpersonal communication within community.

There is also an account of the self when one is part of a community. According to Schrag, "[t]he intentionality and intelligibility of particular human action have their sources in the social practices that structure the life of a given community."[14] Accordingly, community can also exist in organizations.[15] Factors of building a strong workplace community include "shared commitment to goals," "communication feedback," "camaraderie trust," and "adaption unity."[16] Community becomes necessary within the workplace to motivate people, too, and to encourage them toward caring for other communities.[17] People are driven by a desire to make a contribution to something important to them or to be involved in something larger than themselves. In organizations, people are most productive when they feel like they are a part of something important or that helps others.[18] The biggest motivation driver that inspires people is a sense of connection. Building a deeper sense of community in organizations

---

[9] Arnett and Arneson, *Dialogic Civility,* 1999.
[10] Arnett and Arneson, *Dialogic Civility,* 1999.
[11] Arnett and Arneson, *Dialogic Civility,* 272.
[12] Arnett and Arneson, *Dialogic Civility,* 272.
[13] Arnett and Arneson, *Dialogic Civility,* 272.
[14] Schrag, *The Self*, 76.
[15] Sean Hamill, "Corporate Community Involvement: A Case for Regulatory Reform," *Business Ethics: A European Review* 8, no. 1, (January 1999): 14-25; Paul Tracy, Nelson Phillips, and Helen Haugh, "Beyond Philanthropy: Community Enterprise as Basis for Corporate Citizenship," *Journal of Business Ethics*, 58 no. 4 (June 2025): 327-344.
[16] O. C. Tanner, "Your Company Culture."
[17] John A. Davis, "Market Basket Shows the Best and Worst of Family Business," last modified August 4, 2024. https://hbr.org/2014/08/market-basket-shows-the-best-and-worst-of-family-business
[18] Yuliya Shymko and Theodore A. Khoury, "From Community Rootedness to Individual Entrepreneuring: The Development of Entrepreneurial Motivation Through Temporary Community of Practice," *Journal of Business Venturing* 38, no. 3 (2023): 10.1016/j.jbusvent.2023.106300.

leads to a deeper sense of belonging.[19] This inspires and motivates employees to trust the organization and care for the life of the organization. Studies suggest that the relationship between belonging/community and motivation should be studied across organizational environments.[20] When employees lack engagement (e.g., motivation to do more than the minimum job functions), organizations risk occurrences such as quiet quitting where employees are "'not engaged' at work.'"[21] A strong community in the workplace becomes meaningful for employees.[22] Consequently, increasing employee productivity and overall loyalty to the organization.[23] Thus, community sustains organizations.

Schrag considered how the self engages in the world after postmodernity.[24] He begins with the term, "praxis," because it provides a particular vocabulary to investigate and understand how human beings exist together in the plurality of spaces.[25] Through praxis as an overarching concept, one understands "the communal character of human existence."[26] Praxis focuses on skills, habits, customs, and public functions that create the context of "intelligibility for individuated bodily motility."[27] Schrag said, these elements of praxis lead to a rhetoric of communal action.

Schrag's use of the term praxis sets up a natural connection between the individual and the community because praxis occurs within the context of polysemy and polysemous vocabularies.[28] These vocabularies are necessary to bring together people, society, spaces for socialization, governance, development of a statehood, and ultimately culture(s). This is why Schrag said that looking at these polysemy in context enables the exploration of community, what it is, how it works, and why it is important for ontological wellness.[29] Additionally, "the polysemy that travels with the notion of community can direct us to the phenomenon of being-with-others."[30] This is

---

[19] "Building Community in the Workplace: 15 Ideas for a Connected Team," Plus One, accessed June 15, 2026, https://www.plusoneworkplacewellbeing.com/building-community-in-the-workplace/.
[20] Shymko and Khoury, "From Community," 2023.
[21] Jim Harter, "Is Quiet Quitting Real," Gallup, accessed June 16, 2026, https://www.gallup.com/workplace/398306/quiet-quitting-real.aspx.
[22] Aditya Gupta, Vishag Badrinarayanan, Linda Alkire, and Indu Ramachandran, "The Countervailing Effects of Job Crafting on Salesperson Ethical Behaviors: The Role of Meaningful Work and Organizational Interventions," *Journal of Business Ethic,* 203 (January 2026): 425-451, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-025-06003-y.
[23] Gupta, Badrinarayanan, Alkire, and Ramachandran, "The Countervailing Effects," 2026.
[24] Schrag, *The Self*, 1997.
[25] Schrag, *The Self*, 1997.
[26] Schrag, *The Self*, 76.
[27] Schrag, *The Self*, 76.
[28] Schrag, *The Self,* 1997.
[29] Schrag, *The Self*, 1997.
[30] Schrag, *The Self*, 77.

important because it suggests that it is not enough to live in an environment with others and think that is community. There is another, deeper, understanding of community that is both phenomenological and ontological, this is what Schrag means by "being-with-others."[31] The sense of "withness" is different from sharing the same space with others. Being-with-others reflects both an ontological and phenomenological aspect that Schrag situates within communicative praxis. He states, "the self that is called into being through discourse and action is at the same time called into being within a community" and this allows for a "self-implicature of the human subject in its manifold concretions."[32] The ontic aspect here is the idea that one is constituted—called into being—in community through discourse and action with others. The phenomenal aspect is the awareness one brings to the experience as the self is fleshed out by shifting one's focus of attention from the self "as present to itself to the self as present *to*, *for*, and *with* the other."[33] The term, withness, reflects the phenomenological focus of shifting one's attention around the aspect of "with." Schrag clarified what else is needed as an organic aspect of sharing space with others that emerges from a full, intimate, caring, and empathetic ego with which the self "is called into being through discourse and action" that is at the same time an interconnection acknowledging the fullness of the experience to include not only the content but also the interhuman connection and care that develops and is shared.[34] He indicated that a true community occurs when there is a concrete "we-experience" whereby the "I-experience" is recursively activated.[35] This means community emerges through a sense of selfhood that "fleshes out the portrait of the self by engendering a shift focus from the self as present to itself to the self as present to, for, and with the other."[36] It is the shift from self to other that is key for a sincere sense of community to emerge and exist. Some people answer this call to community and others do not– they keep their distance and do not become connected. Intersubjective connections are deeply tied to the ontological nature of being-with-others but as with the whole of human experience, there are different experiential dimensions that all human agents move through. Some dimensions are deeply ontological and phenomenological, and others are pragmatic and situated within a transactional dimension that does not share the deeper, more intense depth of qualities as the more intersubjective realm. These different dimensions are not mutually exclusive.

---

[31] Schrag, *The Self*, 77.
[32] Schrag, *The Self*, 77.
[33] Schrag, *The Self,* 78.
[34] Schrag, *The Self*, 77.
[35] Schrag, *The Self*, 78.
[36] Schrag, *The Self*, 78.

Schrag pointed to the notion of community as being either empty or full. When community is empty, it is simply more than one person (there are at least two people) together with another person, physically or virtually. However, there is no interconnection experience or acknowledgment of interconnection on the part of all the subjects. This community is empty and after the experience disperses, there is nothing left other than perhaps a distant memory that fades over time. For example, people attend music concerts because of their interest in a specific genre, but when the show is finished and everyone leaves the venue there is nothing left other than the memory of the experience. A fuller experience under the same circumstances that has a deeper sense of community involves praxis, sincerity, time, and deeper interconnections that are woven through vocabularies forming dialogue, sharing experiences, and being inter-engaged. Consider the same example of people attending a music concert; however, add the factor that the concert is a Beyoncé, Taylor Swift, or Lady Gaga concert and suddenly there is a fuller experience and deeper sense of community as a fan is collectively known as "Beyhive," "Swifties," or "Little Monsters." Thus, polysemous language is a thread that weaves together interconnections that build toward deeper meanings. The use of language is not limited to creating nicknames or the act of naming itself; rather, language opens the possibility of dialogue, and it is also the tool that is used to build and support interspaces of engagement. The act of naming inspires and solidifies identification and a coming togetherness around the identification and shared knowledge experience.[37] Language allows people to have conversations, reminiscences, and reflections.[38]

Schrag pointed toward elements that might be considered coordinates of a deeper sense of community that highlight the deeply woven fabric between living beings. These four coordinates are polysemy, discourse and action, being-with-others, and responsibility. These coordinates occur and reoccur in hermeneutic (interpretive) fashion organically in response to the ongoing, emergent, and serendipitous experience; they are interconnected and coexist, and they occur within a framework of a praxis orientation. These terms have multiple meanings from philosophical usage over time. Therefore, it is important to consider how Schrag used them in his own philosophy of communication. Before focusing on the four coordinates, Schrag's discussion of rhetoric situates the relationship between the self and communication within community.

---

[37] Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (University of California Press, 1969).
[38] Calvin O. Schrag, *Doing Philosophy with Others: Conversations, Reminiscences, and Reflections* (Purdue University Press, 2010).

Rhetoric

Schrag identified a rhetorical turn in relation between meaning, understanding, explanation, and interpretation. Related to this, he also re-examined and re-situated the notion of subjectivity, with the implicature of the self. This enabled him to reposture rhetoric within the space of communicative praxis, and this highlights the need for word and deed to come together and align.[39] Additionally, Schrag emphasized discourse in the play of communicative praxis. We are not alone, we are with the other, which leads him to the recognition of communication being **about** something, being made **by** someone, and being **for** or **to**, another person.[40] He also used communication **toward** someone as well. Schrag situated the couplet communicative praxis as word and deed. It is the combination of word and deed that sketches out a rhetorical turn designed to make explicit under the study of rhetoric. This turn intentionally acknowledges both self and other. It brings together the encoder and decoder into a different relationship. Schrag wanted to acknowledge that not only is the sender there, the *by someone*, but the receiver is also there, the *for someone*, the *towards someone*, and the *to someone* of our messages, of our praxis. Schrag stated, "there is thus in the rhetorical turn an accentuation of discourse and action as being for and toward someone."[41] This is important. He did say that in rhetoric we cannot forget that the persuasion is directed toward the other, whether you are a hearer, a reader, or some other kind of recipient of the rhetoric.

Schrag's reposturing of rhetoric, expands awareness of how we think about rhetoric and how we study it. It also informs how rhetoric can be received and how it impacts others. According to Schrag, we rarely put an accent on the hearer or the reader, but this was important to his understanding. This is an integral core of communicative praxis and it is operative in the expressivity of discourse and action, and in the self-implicature of a speaking and acting subject, "this self-implicature appears against a backdrop of discursive and social practices in which the insertion of the other is an accomplished event.[42] Schrag's perspective "cultivates a rhetorical consciousness in which there is a hermeneutical reference to the world, a hermeneutical self-implicature to the subject, and a disclosure of the other."[43] While situating the other back into our understanding of rhetoric in a healthy way, Schrag

---

[39] Calvin O. Schrag, *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity* (Purdue University Press, 2003).
[40] Schrag, *Communicative Praxis*, 2003.
[41] Schrag, *Communicative Praxis*, 2003, 179.
[42] Schrag, *Communicative Praxis*, 2003, 180.
[43] Schrag, *Communicative Praxis*, 2003, 180.

elevated the other in the space of communicative praxis as being integral in the space of communicative praxis.[44]

Praxis

Praxis is generally considered as theory-informed action.[45] Aristotle distinguished it from theory (a body of knowledge that one comes to by skilled reasoning and truth) and *poiesis* (a creative making or bringing something into existence—the process not the product) in *Nicomachaen Ethics*; it is grounded in action. Praxis is essential for understanding and articulating the "communal character of human existence."[46] Thus, by communicating with other humans, one cultivates skills, habits, customs, and public functions that can serve and assist others. This is mainly how people interact and make their collective way through environments. It also points to the role of rhetoric and its impacts to and outcomes from language and its implications. Schrag tied praxis to ethics in that the ethical individual must strive for fitting responses within contexts and applications in one's engagements and actions instead of seeing ethics as only theoretical principles.[47] The space of engagement that Schrag referred to as communicative praxis is also as an ethics and "phenomenon of the gift."[48] Not only did Schrag identified a rhetorical turn he also identified a turn to "the ethical–[a] return to responsibility."[49] Schrag described this turn as a "call to the other," a responsibility to provide, in a responsible manner, a fitting response and a return to decision, to action, and to motivation.[50] Schrag tied this to our social practices in community. In this space of communicative praxis, it is our word and deed that matter and it is what advances the historical becoming of humanity. Praxis highlights "the amalgam of discourse and action, speech and behavior, and thought and perception."[51] A space of communicative praxis comprises not only speech as an act and event but is also filled with gesture, facial movements, facial proxemics, body motility, locutionary and illocutionary performances and writing.[52] It is the full space of human subjectivity in

---

[44] Schrag, *Communicative Praxis*, 2003.
[45] Aristotle, *The Rhetoric and Poetics* (Modern Library, 1984).
[46] Schrag, *The Self*, 76.
[47] Schrag, *The Self*, 1997; Schrag, *Communicative Praxis*, 2003.
[48] Calvin O. Schrag, "On the Ethics of the Gift." *Symposium*, 8 (2004): 197
http://doi:10.5840/symposium20048223
[49] Schrag, "On the Ethics," 108.
[50] Schrag, "On the Ethics," 108.
[51] Schrag, *Reflections on the Religious, the Ethical, and the Political* (Lexington Books, 2013): 109.
[52] Schrag, "On the Ethics," 2004.

action and interaction. Communities then must be composed of people grounded in praxis that embodies ubiquitous ethical underpinning which weaves together a deeper/fuller sense of connection as each person is undeniably interconnected with-the-other. According to Schrag, first, ethics must be grounded in the situated human and negotiate the discourse and action that people engage. Schrag states that meanings in discourse and action occur in holistic space that has multiple textures which means there are multiple ethics at play.[53] In Schrag's re-situation of rationality, he aligns ethics and ethos suggesting a new humanism.[54] In Schrag's space of communicative praxis, the subject is decentered, making room for acknowledging the other as an ontological necessity within a praxial space of discourse and action. Language is used for this purpose and it is this triangulation of discourse, action, and language that Schrag admits rhetoric as "the directedness of discourse to the other, soliciting a response, [and] is destined to slide into ethics."[55] Because of the interconnections of language and discourse, ethics disrupts and decenters the self, allowing for an ethical relation to emerge. It is the space of communicative praxis that Schrag discusses that creates a blueprint for the organizational life-world to cultivate a deeply penetrating sense of community. Schrag suggests that the "coupling of expression with the metaphoricity of texture and its displayed reference has to do with the announcement of its role in the dynamics of human action, in the patterning of social practices, and in the institutional life of a culture."[56] Without praxis you cannot have the intersubjectivity. Then, your community is not a deeper sense of community. You are part of the community, but there is no allegiance to the community. If a person wants to have a deeper sense of community that also the community to thrive for people, then praxis must exist. Without praxis, for organizations, it is most likely that the enterprise will fail, because it is not a sustainable model. Change in social, political, economic, etc. are changes that can impact the overall viability.

Praxis is also crucial for organizations and its leaders. An example of this is when an organization clearly demonstrates its mission through its strategic and organizational decision-making and its pledges to audiences. For example, Patagonia consistently maintains that its "in business to save our home planet" through its decisions and how its leaders and employees represent the organization.[57] Embedded in a praxis approach is a dialogical and ethical commitment to an organization's

[53] Schrag, *Communicative Praxis,* 33.
[54] Schrag, *Communicative Praxis,* 2003.
[55] Schrag, *Communicative Praxis,* 197.
[56] Schrag, *Communicative Praxis,* 197.
[57] Yvon Chouinard, "Earth is Now Our Only Shareholder," Patagonia, accessed June 15, 2026, https://www.patagonia.com/ownership/

audiences, including all its constituents. A praxis approach exemplifies a commitment to the self and the other about something, by someone, and to/for someone.[58]

A praxis orientation allows for the integration of the four coordinates–polysemy, action and discourse, being-with-others, and responsibility–into words and deeds and the creation of a deeper/fuller. sincere sense of community informed by and embedded in responsibility, accountability, and a care for and about the whole community and its relationships between constituents and to others outside the community. A praxis orientation also points to a transversal rationality that Schrag believed was necessary for a praxial environment.

We provided an entrance to our discussion of community through rhetoric and situated what is meant by a praxis orientation. We now turn to defining the four coordinates and afterward, we provide a synthesis of the coordinates that demonstrate hermeneutic humility, transversal rationality and its ties to communication ethics implications.

Polysemy

Polysemy, the many possible meanings and comprehensions of a word or phrase, can exist at the same time and coexist together. This understanding opens hermeneutic humility whereby one recognizes there are other meanings that coexistence and often invites convergence and divergence. Transversal rationality relies on polysemy and thus "emerges as a place in time and space where our multiple beliefs and practices, our habits of thoughts and attitudes, our prejudices and assessments, converge."[59] Schrag suggests that these convergences enable a "wide reflective equilibrium," that allows a communal space to emerge where personal commitments, disciplinary judgments, and all sorts of engagements coexist and thrive.[60] This understanding of polysemy enables deep understandings and interconnections with others.

Polysemy is essential to a thriving community that has a deep/full sense of community and commitment. To do so, organizations incorporate formal mechanism (e.g., focus groups, invite interdepartmental dialogues, retreats) to invite. For example, LEGO is a company often associated with creativity by employees and other internal and external stakeholders. The common polysemous vocabularies held by internal

---

[58] Schrag, "On the Ethics," 2003.
[59] J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, *The Shaping of Rationality: Toward Interdisciplinarity in Theology and Science* (Eerdmans, 1999), 136.
[60] Van Huyssteen, *The Shaping,* 277-282.

(e.g., employees) and external stakeholders (e.g., consumers/users) around the notion of creativity fosters a deep/full sense of community and commitment. Schrag indicated humans should be attentive to "polysemous vocabularies" throughout the ages that have taken wrong turns toward creating problematic communities.[61] He is pointing to learning from this kind of situation. This is another reason ethics must be part of communicative praxis. Polysemous vocabularies have contributed to misunderstanding, and perhaps some forms of mistrust, greed, or threats due to the hermeneutical nature of language and changes over time. For example, an organization leader may offer to support an employee (e.g., interacting with a stakeholder), but the employee routinely finds themselves in an isolated situation and left to handle matters on their own. This contradicts the language used around support by the leader and results in employee mistrust around the notion of "support" not only from the individual leader, but also the organization. Schrag stated that when these vocabularies focus solely on politico-economic organization, the risk toward the development of a communist state is high.[62] Again, outside of ethics, polysemy has shown itself to be dangerous because there are not guidelines or contours to follow if not tied to ethics (and *common sense*). However, with attention and awareness, polysemies focused around community as interconnections between individuals instead of having a political or economic *telos* (aim, end, or purpose), "can direct us to the phenomenon of being-with-others" and this brings into focus a "self as discovering and constituting itself in relation to other selves."[63] These rightly-focused polysemy vocabularies create the fabric for ontological and phenomenological interconnections with others. Polysemy, therefore, impacts the organization by creating a space for the polysemous vocabularies to be shared, tested, built upon, and engaged through discourse and action.

In an organizational context, leaders must be attentive to the polysemy of the organizations they lead. There are many industry examples of leaders being attentive but also ignoring the polysemy of their organizations. For example, Elon Musk, as an organization's leader, demonstrates what happens when the polysemy of the organization is ignored. On the Tesla side, one perspective is to consider how Musk, CEO of Tesla, abandoned the organization for a while when overseeing the United States of America's (US) Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). Consequently, his absence and focus on DOGE impacted the Tesla overall brand, including shareholders (e.g., stocks fell) and stakeholders (e.g., Tesla owners). Musk

---

[61] Schrag, *The Self*, 1997.
[62] Schrag, *The Self*, 1997.
[63] Schrag, *The Self*, 77.

was not there running Tesla and his association with the US government also affected the organization (e.g., Tesla owners placed "I bought this before Elon went crazy" stickers on their vehicles). As a leader, you cannot just turn your back on the organization. On the DOGE side, Musk also rejected the polysemy of the organization. He was critical of the "One Big Beautiful Bill Act" ("An Act to Provide Reconciliation Pursuant to Title II of H. Con. Res. 14") calling attention to its massive spending and impact it will have on Americans' debt and jobs.[64] In both cases (Tesla and DOGE), Musk rejects the vocabularies that do not align with his own experience and understanding. By tending to the polysemy connected to his organization, Musk would have exemplified praxis to his organization and connected both dialogically and ethically to the workplace communities that he connected with. Through this action, the disruptions Musk and his organization (Tesla and DOGE) experienced might not have occurred.

On the other hand, an example of a leader being attentive to the polysemy of the organization is exemplified by a former Market Basket CEO (Market Basket is a local New England grocery chain store). In 2014, a family dispute led Market Basket's Board of Directors, made up of mostly family members, ousted its CEO, Arthur T. Demoulas (Artie T.). Artie T. established such a strong connection with employees that news of his firing resulted in all employees (management and non-management) walking off the job and customers and vendors boycotting the store (see Market Basket Case Studies).[65] Artie T. treated employees with respect and demonstrated they were valued (i.e., fair wages, profit-sharing, low prices, knowing employee names). Because of this, the grassroots protest, not only provides an example of good employee relations, but also how when a leader is attentive to the polysemy of the organization a deeper/fuller sense of community is confirmed during a particular moment (e.g., organizational change).

Discourse and Action

The second coordinate is discourse and action. For Schrag, the self is called into being through discourse and action that engulfs ranges of polysemic vocabularies.[66]

---

[64] Oliva-Anne Cleary, "Trump's 'Big Beautiful Bill' Faces Opposition From Musk and Some Republicans as The Senate Narrowly Votes to Advance It," Time, accessed June 15, 2026, https://time.com/7298552/trump-big-beautiful-bill-senate-advance-musk-criticism-opposition/

[65] Daniel Korschun and Grant Welker, *We are Market Basket: The Story of the Unlikely Grassroots Movement that Saved a Beloved Business,* (Amacom Publishing., 2015).

[66] Schrag, *The Self*, 1997.

Discourse and action is experienced through embodied agents within a setting of unity of contraries that enables agreement and disagreement, harmony and discord, liberation and oppression, mastery and slavery.[67] This means individuals should be attentive to and have an awareness of the vocabularies and their implications that brings people together (and apart). These experiences shape communities and build the deeper/fuller sense of community through words and deeds. Contraries provide ability to pull out more meaning, multiple levels of meaning and examples of meanings because you might consider a contrary a rhetorical device (i.e., a *topos).*[68] Here the notion of arguing from the negative might be useful and sometimes more effective than arguing otherwise. In community, contraries tend to happen all the time in election cycles, local, regional, and national. There are contrary perspectives and ideologies but if they collaborate through language, discourse, and action, they have a better chance to meet the needs of the people together, suspending their egos and focus on service to the other. In organizations, contraries can be seen between departments. As example, finance and marketing departments. Finance is about save spending and not lose money or spend more than you have; whereas, marketing's position is to expand to reach out to new audiences to meet annual budget income. On one hand, finance wants to spend less to save money when you are over budget before the new budget year, so you do not get more in the red and do not open new strategies when you have no money. On the other hand, marketing wants to increase marketing reach with more commercials and expand the audience base by adding more direct mail and promotional events. In this example, it appears that there is a conflict/contrary due to a shortfall. These are opposite actions but negotiating together and building in limits could provide leverage to bring in more people while trying to maintain a conservative margin. By communicating across departments, finance and marketing are more likely to come up with solutions and are able to collaborate on negotiated actions to take together. In government, we also see contraries. Police have a goal to protect children and separate them from their families if needed;/social workers, through child protective services, have a goal to protect children and reunite them with their biological families. These are two extremely different approaches to child protection. In dialogue, police and social workers want to keep children safe but they have different ways of thinking about what 'keeping safe' means and what it should look like. When police and social workers share more

---

[67] Schrag, *The Self*, 1997.

[68] Christina L. McDowell Marinchak and Annette M. Holba, "The Importance of Topoi in the Business and Professional Communication Classroom," *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly,* 89, no. 2 (2026): 300-316.

deeply with each other, understanding of perspectives emerges and grows. Discussion can assist with building interagency respect and evolving and shaping meaning collaboratively. Solutions can involve more of the desires from each entity, and this creates a deeper sense of trust, perspective about the different agencies. Schrag indicated that individuals understand what is best for themselves is "always embedded in forms of discourse and projects of action that testify to the involvements with other selves."[69] These individual selves frame their engagement "in a social understanding of great temporal depth," which Schrag also refers to as tradition.[70] Tradition also leads toward developing that deeper/fuller sense of community and interconnection as well as interdependence.

The retail organization, Costco, taking its employees' call for unions seriously is an example of discourse and action. After learning of workers in Norfolk, Virginia voted to unionize, Costco's two CEOs (outgoing and incoming) exemplified discourse and action. In a joint letter sent by both of them to Costco employees demonstrated their attentiveness to the vocabularies of the union employees.[71] Moreover, instead of resisting union voices, the former CEO took full responsibility for not attending to the voices, which resulted in the union coming to exist. Additionally, the new CEO recognized the various employee voices and committed to working together with them side-by-side instead of being adversarial, as other organizations had done in the past (e.g., Trader Joes and Starbucks). The two CEOs' discourse and action exemplified a strong sense of dialogical and ethical practices with their organizational communities, both internal and external.

Being-with-others

The third coordinate is being-with-others. Human ontology requires interconnections that constitute the self. Simply put, we cannot do it alone, singularly. In being-with-others, the use of multiple and unlimited modalities is central to providing most open and inviting sense of togetherness. Schrag talks about these interconnections through the metaphors of conversational horizons and narratival neighborhoods. According to Schrag, conversational horizons have a revelatory capacity for revealing interplay,

---

[69] Schrag, *The Self*, 89.
[70] Schrag, *The Self*, 90.
[71] Dominick Reuter, "Costco's CEO Just Shared a Surprising Response to a Warehouse Unionizing," Business Insider, accessed Jun 16, 2026, https://www.businessinsider.com/costco-ceo-responds-to-warehouse-employees-joining-teamsters-2024-1.

exchanges, and interconnections of intertextuality that all come together to shape meaning of our own experiences.[72] They are comprised of multiple narratival neighborhoods or clusters of interests, knowledges, epistemic communities, and discourses that are dynamic, fluid, and responsive to others within the field or neighborhood. Within conversational horizons, we experience diversity, multiplicity, plurality, differences, and those polysemous vocabularies that build and bring individuals together that eventually become the weaving patterns of the community fabric. Schrag identified narratival neighborhoods as places, virtual or physical, where we engage and converse with others, weaving the community fabric by remembering, reminiscing, ruminating, and reflecting on communicative praxis transactions, exchanges, encounters, and outcomes.[73] The process by which meaning emerges happens through reading, thinking, and reflecting on ideas with others. This process is not always chronological or logically or spatially organized. The Coca-Cola Company's "Share a Coke" 2025 campaign is an example of being-with-others and weaving a community fabric. First started in 2011, Coca-Cola brought back its iconic campaign "in 2025 for a new Generation," targeting Gen. Z with "a focus on shareability and customization to engage a cohort of digital natives that crave authenticity."[74] The campaign is an attempt to tap into the original intent to "encourage fans to connect and make memories with friends and loved ones," tapping into the nostalgia of cracking open a Coca-Cola but also continuing to weave threads between others, a narratival neighborhood, a community.[75] In this way, Coca-Cola also invites the opportunity for conversations, reminiscences, and reflections that create nostalgia and community—a way for being-with-others. Coca-Cola's long history as a company also exemplifies the crossing of historical moments, which adds an additional layer to its community (internally and externally) and the conversations between and among others. In narratival neighborhoods, illumination occurs that is dynamic, fluid, and responsive to others and to the self. The fabric of interconnection is woven together by participating in narratival neighborhoods and having awareness of the conversational horizons.

---

[72] Schrag, *Doing Philosophy*, 2010.
[73] Schrag, *Doing Philosophy*, 2010.
[74] Chris Kelly, "Coke Refreshes 'Share a Coke' to Reach Gen Z With Digital Experiences," MarketingDive, accessed June 16, 2026, https://www.marketingdive.com/news/coca-cola-share-a-coke-campaign-refresh-gen-z-digital-experiences/743648/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CShare%20A%20Coke%E2%80%9D%20originally%20launched,4.63M.
[75] Kelly, "Coke Refreshes."

Responsibility

The fourth coordinate is responsibility. Schrag stated, "the amalgam of communication and praxis has been designed to orient reflection on discourse and action as being *about* something; as being initiated *by* someone, and as being addressed *to* and *for* someone."[76] Being-with-others requires connection and interconnection that is cultivated within narratival neighborhoods against the backdrop of conversational horizons, with there always being discourse and action about, by, to/for something or someone.[77] Within this setting, there is a moral accountability to-the-other situated as a responsibility. Responsibility means individuals are situated within an ethicality; a delineation of the ethical as a fitting response to the alterity of discourse and the action of those with whom the self shares a concrete lifeworld.[78] Schrag suggested "[r]esponsibility, nurtured by the call of conscience, supplies the moral dimension in the narrative of the self in community."[79]

For audiences, an organization's practices matter. Practice impinges upon people, making us pay attention. Sometimes practices happen within understanding in life. When an organization ignores practices a "broken covenant" happens, exposing a lack of responsibility to others.[80] Consider The Honest Company, as an example. The Honest Company was started with the mission of providing clean products for babies and young children, and then, allegedly, the organization turned around and put an enormous amount of chemicals in their laundry detergent to make the product at a lower cost.[81] While the organization (including its leaders) disputed the claims, at the moment the company was under scrutiny, its public responsibility and promise to others was ignored (e.g., parents). For Schrag, responsibility communicates a public accountability. For Schrag, responsibility communicates a public accountability. A public accountability, therefore, engages and influences others. When public accountability is ignored, so is the responsibility.

Together, these four coordinates–polysemy, discourse and action, being-with-others, responsibility–that are situated within the praxis framework open one to

---

[76] Schrag, "On the Ethics," xi.
[77] Annette M. Holba, *Philosophy of Communication Inquiry: An Introduction.* (Cognella, 2022).
[78] Schrag, *The Self*, 100.
[79] Schrag, *The Self*, 100.
[80] Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *The Good Society.* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1991).
[81] Eun Kyung Kim, "Jessica Alba's Honest Company Under Fire for Laundry Detergent Ingredient," Today, accessed June 16, 2026, https://www.today.com/home/jessica-alba-s-honest-company-under-fire-laundry-detergent-ingredient-t7955.1.

consider words and deeds from a communication ethics perspective. In the following section we discuss the betwixt and between of hermeneutic humility and transversal rationality leading to communication ethics implications of communicative praxis.

Hermeneutic Humility, Transversal Rationality and Communication Ethics Implications

Schrag emphasized humility in general and in specific circumstances, such as in academic research and scholarship. Schrag and Ramsey opened their thoughts around humility in academic research or scholarship by warning against methodolatry or having an excessive preoccupation with rules governing research and thinking in the academy that created boundaries and limits in gathering and interpreting data.[82] Schrag and Ramsey agreed with Gadamer's critiques of scientific research methods in that there was an "excessive preoccupation with methodological rules and criteriological postulates" and they advocated for researchers or scholars to suspend methodological preconceptions, obsessions with rules, criteriological postulates, and pointed them to get to the data itself, directly without prejudging data and even within data constraints in order to let the datum/data speak for itself/themselves.[83]

This discussion pointed Schrag and Ramsey to overall phenomenological humility and led them to a conversation around narratival interpretation and transversal comprehension. Organizations are structured similarly to the life system of our personal lives. There are leaders/parents/elders, employees/subordinates/children/other relatives/neighbors and everyone has a space, plays a role (e.g., sometimes roles are hierarchical and other times merit based). Thus, having phenomenological humility as an individual who is a leader/supervisor/manager means that those individuals will listen more, and listen more deeply, when others communicate an issue to them or a new idea. Humility creates a boundary for one's ego and will not allow an individual to place limits on other people's good ideas or their curiosity. Humility teaches one to suspend their judgments and allow other people's ideas solve a problem or lead in a given situation, even if a leader was expected to lead. For example, in a monthly meeting with a leader where an employee recommends a solution to a problem that is better than the leader's

---

[82] Calvin O. Schrag and Ramsey E. Ramsey, "Method and Phenomenological Research: Humility and Commitment in Interpretation," *Human Studies*, 17 (1994): 131-137.
[83] Hans-George Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Continuum 2002); Schrag and Ramsey, "Method and Phenomenological Research: Humility and Commitment in Interpretation," *Human Studies*, 131.

initial plan, hermeneutic humility allows the leader to embrace the employee's recommendation publicly and moves forward with it. A lack of hermeneutic humility might lead to a leader taking ownership of the employees' idea by not acknowledging the employees' contribution to the situation. Schrag suggested that humility opens one to not only understanding and explanation but to a deeper level of comprehension that penetrates the density of discourse and action.[84] While one can understand something and even explain its process, left to a complete mental act, which Schrag described as coming from "a lonely cognitive subject," meaning is incomplete without action.[85] Schrag advocates for "conversational and communal endeavors" that invites action, interactions, and even transactions between people and vocabularies.[86] These interconnection endeavors remind one of the value of the other and their vocabularies. Hermeneutic humility begins with this endeavor.[87]

Schrag and Ramsey bring together the metaphors of narratival interpretation and transversal comprehension in their discussion of phenomenological and hermeneutic humility.[88] Narratival interpretation illustrates having a holistic understanding and an analytical explanation when seeking meaning. In transversal comprehension, one observes multiple lines of phenomena dynamically coming together/colliding and managing any conflict in those interpretations that arise, there comes a deeper, holistic understanding tied to praxial rationality. Schrag and Ramsey suggest that in that moment of holistic understanding in narratival interpretation one experiences the economy of the "hermeneutic as," which is the taking of something "as something."[89] We can use the same or similar process when we try to recognize the world around us. We suggest that the same elements of narratival interpretation and transversal comprehension, situated within a space of communicative praxis, allow people to find meaning in their world through transversal coming togetherness as well as coming apart. In the workplace, messaging at a town hall meeting during organizational change, as example. The engagement of transversal rationality across disciplines is a type of praxial rationality that involves a critique of something, an articulation of something, and a disclosure of something that provides a hermeneutical understanding, a narrational implementation, and rhetorical engagement of ideas,

---

[84] Schrag, "On the Ethics," 2003.
[85] Schrag, "On the Ethics," 85-86.
[86] Schrag, "On the Ethics," 85.
[87] Schrag, "On the Ethics," 85.
[88] Schrag and Ramsey, "Method and Phenomenological," 1994.
[89] Schrag and Ramsey, "Method and Phenomenological," 1994.

which Schrag stated is a "performance of reason."[90] For Schrag, transversal rationality provided one with a way to understand praxial accomplishment. He provided a pathway for understanding how various disciplines discussed transversal rationality.[91] For example, in the discipline of mathematics, transversality is defined as a generalization of orthogonality, or a generalization of the geometric idea of perpendicularity which enables one line to intersect with other lines, perhaps two or more without, achieving any kind of coincidence. Another example in physiology might be how the grammar of transversality is used in describing the networking of bands of fibers; or another example can be in physics as they refer to it as a concept to transverse mass in figuring out the ratio of accelerating forces.[92] In the workplace, an example could be overtime pay or time and a half for a staff employee or using an extra compensation rate card for activities outside of normal duties. Schrag pointed out that notably, in philosophy, the concept of transversality describes and orients people to the dynamics of consciousness and how it interplays into our social practices.[93] In each of these approaches, Schrag observed there is an interrelated sense of lying across, extending over, intersecting, meeting and converging without the occurrence of some kind of coincidence or concurrence without causal connection.[94]

Transversality opens awareness of interrelated senses to realize and explain geometrical spaces, occurrences in nature, the body's anatomical structures, varying physiological processes, overall human behavior, and cultural-historical frameworks. Schrag used this idea to explore how reason is "transversal to the multiple configurations of discourse, perception, human emotions and actions, and institutional complexes."[95] Transversality lies across the varied forms of personal, social, and organizational experiences diagonally and occurs betwixt and between the diagonal forces to be able to more fully critique, articulate, and disclose without coincidence in a recognition of the interrelated senses of discourse, thought, and action. Schrag suggested that the "dynamics of transversal rationality falls out as a convergence without coincidence, an interplay without synthesis, an appropriation without totalization, and a unification that allows for difference."[96]

---

[90] Calvin O. Schrag, *The Resources of Rationality: A Response to the Postmodern Challenge*. (Indiana University Press, 1992): 148.
[91] Schrag, *The Resources*, 1992.
[92] Schrag, *The Resources*, 148.
[93] Schrag, *The Resources*, 1992.
[94] Schrag, *The Resources*, 1992.
[95] Schrag, *The Resources*, 158.
[96] Schrag, *The Resources*, 158-159.

Schrag believed that transversality reveals or discloses a window to the wider world of thought and action that shows how a "praxis-oriented rationality, a transversal dynamics in the interdependent workings of discernment, articulation, and disclosure, meets this wider requirement" of general rationality.[97] From Schrag's perspective, he warned that there should be vigilance over having this sense of imperialism, of privileging one concept or metaphor over another. He suggested that the task in seeking understanding is to discern how the use of each concept or metaphor encountered plays without reducing it to something else. For example, consider the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the workplace. People are using AI daily to produce work, but Schrag might warn, depending on the use of AI for work production, if a leader focuses on AI instead of the human being (e.g., employees), the risk is there for the leader to implement imperialism in the workplace—privileging AI over the work of the human, and, eventually, the human will be pushed aside. Schrag suggested, for understanding transversal rationality, the diversity of vocabularies of transversality should not become imperialized and when all of the vocabularies are interplaying and interconnecting, the interdependent notion of transversal rationality emerges.

Therefore, instead of thinking we are standing at the beginning of a discourse, we must acknowledge that the discourse is already there, it is already in session, and we are entering into the discourse with already existing vocabularies that might have some import to the ongoing nature of the discourse. A leader enters the discourse and its existing vocabularies of a new department when taking on a new role or the organization when starting to work at a new enterprise, as example. This means we are picking up on a story that has already been told. It is not ours and ours alone. Instead, we have entered into a space that already is engaged in conversation, in dialogue, in a narratival structure and when we enter, it is kind of like the hermeneutic circle, when we enter that space, the space then undergoes a refiguration. For instance, when a person begins working in a new leadership role, there must be a willingness to adjust by both the new leader and those working for them.

Transversal rationality involves an interrelation of senses that acknowledges what is there but also resists what is there so that one can build on what the vocabularies in existence that creates a chronotopal field, or conduit for meaning across time and space, across multiple disciplines and possibilities (e.g., an external person hired to lead an organization must acknowledge the current practices of the organization but will also engage in a level of resistance to implement necessary

---

[97] Schrag, *The Resources*, 179.

changes to improve the workplace environment). This allows for appropriation of the vocabulary of presuppositions as not permanent parts of the architecture of communication or conversation but as temporal touch points that constantly evolve. Having a praxis-oriented rationality and illustrating a transversal dynamic in the interdependent workings of our discernment, articulation and disclosure, we get to the wider requirement of knowing or interpreting from our hermeneutical awareness of the world around us.

Current times call people to look at differences in philosophical assumptions that guide them in their everyday interactions with the other(s) (e.g., people, places, organizations). In the workplace, an openness to difference is essential for cultivating an inviting environment (e.g., leaders invite employees to participate in organizational functions; however, the level of engagement is for the employee determine). This creates challenges when one realizes the set of assumptions that we carry tell us what is good but when we no longer agree on what is good, when our assumptions compete against those of another, the challenge becomes learning how to continue to interact and engage despite the differences that might stand between us.[98] An employee joins an organization only to learn that what was communicated to them during their job interview by leadership was a façade and the collaborative environment that was promised is in reality nonexistent. Today, we must also negotiate with emerging new technologies and ethical frameworks (e.g., generative AI). Therefore, we must be willing to look at difference as an opportunity to learn more and not remain stagnant in our current understandings and approaches in life (e.g., leaders take the opportunity to make a change and/or to make a workplace better by supporting a group that has historically been marginalized by others). Communication ethics, approaches based on philosophy that guide people in communicative engagement, is a way forward, as they are a way to understand how ethics are formed, how our assumptions impact other human beings.

People's ethical frameworks are shaped by what is important or what matters to them. Arguably, embracing difference is even more of a necessity as society is faced with global political, social, economic, and even technological implications and uncertainties. Today's organizations and its leaders are more susceptible to be impacted more than in the past and there are a variety of examples that support this claim (e.g., trade policy and tariffs, tax legislation, shifts in federal regulations in the United States). This requires people to not only recognize the ground upon which they

---

[98] Ronald C. Arnett, Janie M. Fritz, and Leeanne Bell McManus, *Communication Ethics Literacy: Dialogue and Difference* (Sage Publication, Inc., 2009).

stand, but also a willingness to learn from others.[99] Moreover, communication ethics can be applied to everyday life and has practical impact. People dislike, loathe, care, love others because particular things (e.g., common interests) either pull them together or pull them apart. Thus, there is no communication without sets of assumptions that underline communication.

Communication ethics does not always provide a direct or straight pathway or response pertaining to the good or the right action. Instead, it guides a person from a unique standpoint, recognizing that standpoint may not be congruent with others. Communication ethics responds to questions of a given historical moment in which specific goods are in contention, which means one's response may change as the historical moment changes.[100] In fact, the question usually changes as the historical moment changes. This means that communication can be temporal in nature and is dependent upon the "weight" and "height" about what matters for and within the human condition from a particular perspective."[101] Having a communication ethics perspective means that one is responding to a question or questions of a given historical moment. There is always an interplay between history and ethics. In fact, "[d]ialogical and dialectical engagement, performative praxis of ethics, and the intimate relationship between historical moments and ethical reflection provide a background for understanding the diversity of perspectives as goods in contention change in any given historical moment."[102]

It is important to presuppose that there are positions not necessarily in agreement with our own. This stance provides a way to contend with the diversity that exists today. Issues of difference are then driven by fundamentals of communication ethics. In our interactions, we are trying to understand not only our own ethical position, but others' as well. Communication ethics do not emerge out of the abstract; rather, they are connected to narrative structures.[103] This requires leaders of organizations to acknowledge the ground on which they stand but also that those individuals standing on the same ground (e.g., other senior level employees in the organization) could have different approach for working with others. From a communication ethics perspective, the focus is on the difference in the communicative approach and not whether one approach is better than another.

---

[99] Ronald C. Arnett, Annette M. Holba, and Susan Mancino, eds., *Communication Ethics: Goods in Contention* (Peter Lang, 2018).
[100] Arnett, Holba, and Mancino, eds., *Communication Ethics*, 2018.
[101] Arnett, Holba, and Mancino, eds., *Communication Ethics*, 1.
[102] Arnett, Holba, and Mancino, eds., *Communication Ethics*, 3.
[103] Arnett, Holba, and Mancino, eds., *Communication Ethics*, 2018.

Communication ethics are tied to community, as there are ethical implications of being in any community. As previously noted, community is broadly defined as having common characteristics as well as goals and activities, which is why community can also exist in organizations.[104] Individuals who are part of an organizational community should have an appreciation for others in the same organization. To communicate ethically there must be a focus on the community and not of the individual self. This represents community because not everyone in community within an organization offers a sense of community or togetherness by that common characteristic (difference is present). Common characteristics are enough to force a person into particular communities; however, there is more than having common characteristics that bind a community together (e.g., mission, values, strategic priorities, initiatives, etc.).

Robert Bellah et al. suggested that through community human beings, as a society, can navigate through personal and social differences or contention.[105] The way to do this is to "find a narrative background that can offer guidance without dictating."[106] The author's connect language to the development of community which must go beyond the ego, beyond individualism and must include a moral dimension of communication.[107] A community story involves having a vocabulary that is grounded in commitment, sacrifice, loyalty, and principle.[108] Experiencing a sense of community involves "dialogic civility" that is situated in a constructive hermeneutical space that lays the groundwork for public respect while co-constitutively discovering the shared ground from which dialogue can occur.[109] This space of difference and diversity should be guided by respect and care for the other, an opening for us to take a communication ethics approach in a given situation.[110] To stabilize a community, people must work within the story and participate in what is going on around them as a person. The call is to engage a given charge or task that is set for a person to better the community.

---

[104] Hamill, "Corporate Community Involvement: A Case for Regulatory Reform," 1999; Tracy, Phillips, and Haugh, "Beyond Philanthropy: Community Enterprise as Basis for Corporate Citizenship.," 2005.
[105] Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton, *The Good*, 1991.
[106] Arnett and Arneson, *Dialogic Civility,* 271.
[107] Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (University of California Press, 1985).
[108] Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton, *Habits of the Heart,* 1985; Arnett and Arneson, *Dialogic Civility,* 1999.
[109] Arnett and Arneson, *Dialogic Civility,* 1999.
[110] Arnett and Arneson, *Dialogic Civility,* 1999.

Considering how to foster a deeper/fuller, more committed sense of community in an organization can be challenging; however, using Schrag's framework of praxis can be a responsible approach for organizational leadership. Combining this with the framework, the following recommendations provide the potential for a more successful pathway toward community building in organizational culture and practices. Especially at a time when there is caution and a lack of trust between the individual and many organizations, finding a way to build a healthier, deeper/fuller community is necessary to ensure a dialogical and ethical commitment between self and others.

The Praxis-approach for Organizations and its Leaders

Applying the four coordinates of polysemy, discourse and action, being-with-others, and responsibility, offers recommendations for organizations and its leaders. The application considers the polysemy of the organization, demonstrates discourse and action with others, fosters being-with-others in multiple modalities, and accepts responsibility to the organization and to others. If leaders want to embody praxis lived out within the organizational community, they must engage dialogical and ethical practices. A person's phenomenological attention should be toward the other and not to the self. Consequently, organizational leaders must be willing to set their egos aside and focus on the other/others–the people, the place, the organization.

Consider the Polysemy of the Organization

Leaders should consider the polysemy of the organization. At the center of this call to action is knowing there is diversity in language and diversity in perspectives between and among internal and external stakeholders as well as audiences beyond. Even in the organization infrastructure, recognizing the language used has an impact on how employees think and feel. For example, default referencing the financial challenges an organization is facing and noting the current financial austerity when responding to employee inquiries [e.g., addressing pauses on promotions, filling open positions, or adding additional responsibilities to roles] will impact employee thoughts and feelings by, about, and to/for the organization and its leaders different from if an organization and its leaders acknowledging previous mishandling of finances to employees (i.e., taking responsibility for past/previous actions). Considering the polysemy of the organization, can also be useful to leaders when communicating. This means being

consistent with language that should be embedded with respect and dignity with the other (e.g., employees, shareholders, consumers), consistent between language used and actions a leader takes.

In considering the polysemy of the organization, leaders reflect on who the organization is, who they want to be, and how do we work together. This could be as simple as creating a new policy. Leaders must consider the language they use around making the policy (e.g., gender or diversity of employees). For example, how will employees understand the policy's meaning and how will meaning emerge for them. We see such reactions in organizational roll backs of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives/programs and policies (e.g., enthusiastic support to active and passive resistance). Notably, with polysemy, organization culture and practice plays a part.

Imagine a situation where a leader has in mind an organization restructuring. Leaders may think through what a restructuring may look like on their own, but to do the actual work they must move to work with others, move to dialogue. In dialogue, you recognize the polysemy of the organization. This action-oriented approach provides others the opportunity to respond (e.g., to the organizational restructuring). Taking the communication to the workplace community then invites other voices into the conversation. In this way, all the other voices of the organization participate (e.g., a representative from each department). Each participant, then, can share with everyone in the room their perspectives as well as to hear those of others. The diversity in language and perspectives of those around the table demonstrates where you recognize polysemy.

So often organization decisions are made in a closed-door environment without recognizing what challenges may arise (e.g., decrease in productivity, low employee morale, increase in turnover). Consequently, people feel offended and do not buy-in. While considering polysemy will not eliminate all organizational challenges, it will have a significant impact on the organization's community. When leaders consider the polysemy of the organization, they communicate an openness to difference and through their actions demonstrate community exists within a particular organization.

Demonstrate Discourse and Action with Others

Discourse and action links word *with* deed. Starting with the voice (speaking), the speaker moves what is being said into action—words align with actions. Leaders should demonstrate discourse and action with others. With discourse and action, there

must be some type of action associated with what is being said. When the voices of others do not see action taken by the speaker, what is said will be ignored or disregarded. For example, many organizations implement a total quality management (TQM) process. TQM "is the continual process of detecting and reducing or eliminating errors in manufacturing."[111] The purpose of TQM is "to hold all parties involved in the production process accountable for the overall quality of the final product or service."[112] During the TQM process, employees are open and honest with the hope changes will occur. There must be some attention to making sure that there is some kind of action at the conclusion of the TQM process, especially if people are devoting time to complete some type of task. If nothing else, to validate the time people spent going through the process. If nothing happens at the end, future requests for employee engagement will not be taken seriously. Moreover, employee cynicism will surely develop throughout the organization impacting employee productivity and leaving employees feeling undervalued.

As noted earlier, discourse and action is experienced through embodied agents within a setting of unity of contraries including, agreement and disagreement, harmony and discourse, liberation and oppression, and mastery and slavery. Leaders keep people in dialogue. Intuitively, leaders can do so (action) by providing and asking for feedback, taking serious input from others, creating open and safe spaces, having conversations to explain decisions, building trust with others, etc.[113] We selected agreement and disagreement and liberation and oppression by Schrag as a setting for discourse and action to provide an example for leaders.[114] Workplace agreements and disagreements could be task-related, interpersonal or procedural. A common agreement and disagreement that occurs in the workplace, and could also include liberation and oppression, is change.

Recently, there is much debate about a post-COVID action taken by organizations and its leaders—return to office (RTO) mandates. Organizations are requiring employees to RTO and the implementation of these policies has been met with a mix of emotions. On one side, company leaders believe bringing people back

---

111 The Investopedia Team, "Quality Management: Definition and Example." *Investopedia*, July 23, 2025, https://www.investopedia.com/terms/q/quality-management.asp#:~:text=Quality%20management%20is%20the%20act,process%20of%20evaluation%20and%20improvement.

112 The Investopedia Team, "Quality Management," 2025.

113 Expert Panel, "20 Smart Ways Managers Can Foster More Open Dialogue in the Workplace," *Forbes*, May 31, 2023. https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbescoachescouncil/2023/05/31/20-smart-ways-managers-can-foster-more-open-dialogue-in-the-workplace/.

114 Schrag, "On the Ethics," 2003.

to work will allow employees to build relations, boast morale, and rebuild engagement.[115] On the other side, some employees are reluctant about the RTO mandates, stating such factors as long commutes, less flexibility, a way for the organization to get the most out of lease agreements, even toxic work environments.[116] Presumably, if an employee wants to keep their job, they will comply with the RTO mandate, acknowledging they disagree with the employer's decision. In this case, the phrase "agree to disagree" is appropriate. However, if leaders and employees both recognize they have a disagreement, it is easier to come to a compromise. A flexible work agreement, hybrid work option (e.g., employees must be in the office at least three days a week), or a 4/10 work schedule could be a suitable course of action.

Liberation and oppression enter the RTO conversation when considering the leader and employee relationship. It is easy to see the cause-and-effect argument here. For example, if the leader who implement the RTO mandate is trusted and respected by employees, the response from employees may not be as dissenting. Consequently, the leader is seen as a liberator (e.g., a champion) to employees and their professional success. Whereas leaders who are viewed as oppressors by employees will most likely have greater pushback.

In the end, people disagree multiple times a week. The probability that we hear at some point during our professional career, "this is how it has always been done" is high. Human nature reveals that we get stuck in our ways and resist change. As leading expert on leadership and change John Kotter points out, change can significantly help organizations; however, drawbacks are to be also expected.[117] In the RTO example and many other organization decisions about change (e.g., resources, technology, teams, mergers, acquisitions), the idea is also that bringing people back to the office, back together, will build community. Leaders and their employees will benefit when mandates (e.g., top-down decisions) move to dialogue with those most impacted–demonstrating discourse and action.

---

115 William Arruda, *Why Return to Office (RTO) Mandates will Backfire,* Forbes. (January 7, 2025). https://www.forbes.com/sites/williamarruda/2025/01/07/why-return-to-office-rto-mandates-will-backfire/.

116 Thomas Chamorro-Premuzic, "The Real Reasons Companies are Forcing you Back to the Office," Forbes, February 28, 2025. https://www.forbes.com/sites/tomaspremuzic/2025/02/28/the-real-reasons-companies-are-forcing-you-back-to-the-office/.

117 John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2012).

Foster Being-with-others in Multiple Modalities

Surrounding ourselves with people from different backgrounds and experiences from our own signals an openness to learning. Asking leaders to value different perspectives is not new; however, arguably, it is more important than ever. From varying social and economic viewpoints to opposing political stances and embracing technological advancements, leaders should foster being-with-others in multiple modalities. Being-with-others in multiple modalities suggests an appreciation of others in trying to further the collective group—community is being-with-others.

Conceptually, togetherness is critical to group effectiveness, and, as Schrag also points out, the interconnections through conversational horizons and narratival neighborhoods. In the workplace, the notion of a team (functions and dynamics) provides for a good example.[118] Being-with-others in multiple modalities at work is seen through actively collaborating with and supporting others, not simply designating tasks for each person. The polysemous vocabularies (expertise, interest, capabilities, etc.) of the team reveal the conversational horizon, the meaning behind the team and its creation. Consequently, teams, units, departments, or sections are narratival neighbors. Structures—identified based on geographic, function, role, or other typologies—have their own microcultures within the larger organization become narratival neighborhoods that participate in interconnected conversational horizons on the whole organization. One example might be how each division contributes to development of a strategic plan or implementation of new policies. Team unity is therefore dependent on its members working towards one goal or purpose, and, through "habits of the heart" (social practices that shape community) each person realizes their value to the team.[119]

When leaders support being-with-others in multiple modalities it is more than focusing only on productivity, it is about cultivating connection and presence with others. This means not just doing work but doing work in a meaningful way. Even in times when leaders find themselves in a situation where they demonstrate support of the other (e.g., a direct report), but the other does not believe they are supported, it is necessary for leaders to continue focusing on the work. For example, a leader decides an employee must build on a skill before they are put up for promotion; however, the employee believes they are ready for the next level. Instead of focusing on the disagreement, the leader responds by recommending professional development

---

[118] Schrag, *Doing Philosophy*, 2010.
[119] Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life,* 1985.

opportunities for the employee to complete, so the next time they will be ready for the promotion. In doing so, the work becomes the place where the affirmation happens.

If leaders can find meaning in the most difficult times, through their vocabularies, they can begin to shape who you are not only as leaders, but "otherwise than being."[120] Leadership then is not outcomes; rather, response to whatever outcomes occur. An example here is how organization leaders provide guidance to a manager for addressing internal conflict between coworkers. While the advice is genuine and makes logical sense (e.g., worked in the past to address similar situations), the outcome in the current situation is not successful (e.g., other factors are at play, such as different communication styles, unclear role responsibilities, dissimilar values or work ethics). In this instance, the opportunity opens for the leader to being-with-others in multiple modalities by responding to the failure (the outcome that occurred) through working with the manager to identify another approach for addressing the conflict. To solely focus on the failed outcome, would be to ignore being-with-others. What matters then is the response/doing/action. In these moments, leaders not only acknowledge what is taking place/happening but also demonstrate a sense of responsibility to the other through their actions. This understanding is grounded in the notion that "I am my brother's keeper." Even in the most stressful, uncertain moments, there is a sense of being in this together as a community.

Accept Responsibility to the Organization and to Others

The moment a person steps into a leadership role they must accept the responsibility they made to the organization and to others. Leadership and responsibility are inseparable. In essence, a leader has a moral accountability to those they lead.[121] This can be challenging. When you are in a position of leadership, you must navigate between a "multiplicity of goods."[122] In doing so, leaders must decide what direction they will take related to such facets as organizational structure, culture, tone, and change. Accordingly, leaders make a public announcement of what they accept as their responsibility to the organization and to others.

Leaders will also inevitably be tested by others. Maybe it will be by the new employee who immediately challenges the status quo without taking the time to learn

---

[120] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence* (Duquesne University Press, (1998/1974).
[121] Schrag, *The Self*, 1997.
[122] Arnett, Fritz, and Bell McManus, *Communication Ethics,* 2009.

the organization's culture, the human resource department that is to provide support when navigating a difficult situation between coworkers but in reality protects the organization and not its people, or the stakeholder who places blame before gathering and grasping all the facts. In such moments, it is the response that matters. Regardless of how challenging a situation becomes, leaders must accept the responsibilities they have publicly announced by stepping into the leadership role.

When leaders accept responsibility, they also give others (internal/external audiences) the opportunity to recognize the ethicality of the organization's practices. The ethicality of an organization, for instance, could be seen broadly in its mission statement, code of ethics, policies, or more narrowly how leaders (or the organization) respond during crises. The well-known 1982 Tylenol case is a good example of leaders and an organization demonstrating public accountability and its ethicality through a positive lens and accepting responsibility during a crisis moment.[123] When an organization and its leaders do not accept responsibility for actions, a level of public backlash will occur and in some cases not accepting responsibility could lead to legal ramifications, as was the case with Phillip Morris in the 1990s when the organization face scrutiny over its knowledge that nicotine was addictive since the early 1980s (see Master Settlement Agreement [MSA]). No matter the consequence, good leaders accept responsibility and avoid blaming and/or proposing mediation when managing the situation is necessary. When leaders choose to shift blame away from themselves, they are privileging their own egos and not accepting responsibility for their own action and that is demoralizing in the organization (others see it).

Praxial Integration of the Four Coordinates

Strong leaders accept responsibility for challenges facing their organization. Thereby, demonstrate an ethical approach within the organization. There are times that leaders must have the courage to accept responsibility for the organization when things go wrong. Leaders first take the responsibility publicly, but then they must take an action to counter what went wrong (i.e., discourse and action). Consequently, in their public accountability, leaders use different vocabularies to communicate with multifaceted audiences (i.e., polysemy). Engaging in discourse and action and using polysemy enables leaders to connect with others inside and outside the organization (i.e., being-

[123] Howard Markel, *How the Tylenol Murders of 1982 Changed the Way we Consume Medication,* PBS. September 29, 2014). https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/tylenol-murders-1982.

with-others). This is how a leader accepts public accountability to the organization and to others (i.e., responsibility). Together, leading from a praxis framework organically builds a deeper/fuller sense of community in an organization.

To be clear, in the engagement of communicative praxis, hermeneutic humility is the glue that creates and sustains the fabric of the community. Without hermeneutic humility, recognizing transversal rationality can be quite challenging. Hermeneutic humility allows one to be open to, acknowledge, and embrace polysemic vocabularies in the encounter betwixt, between, and within the community. Leaders can work to cultivate a deeper/fuller sense of community, and through a practice of hermeneutic humility and with an understanding of transversal rationality, leaders find their ethical compass which can define their communication ethics framework from which to continue cultivating and sustaining a deeper sense of community. Schrag's space of communicative praxis is a holistic space that acknowledges the community is a multifaceted, multiperspectival, and multiactionable space where encounters are always experienced betwixt and between spaces inhabited by textured lives of interconnected human beings.

Conclusion

Communicative praxis offers a sound framework from which community emerges. Focusing on the other/others—the people, the place, the organization—lays a foundation for building a deeper/fuller sense of community. Building community as part of developing, sustaining, and nourishing organizations has its challenges today. The optimum sense of community is the choice that provides a deeper/fuller sense of being-with-others that enables the organic emergence of community that is a dwelling place for organizational members—home for professional engagement. A space of communicative praxis exemplifying trust and care that emerges within a praxis framework, powered by the four coordinates of polysemy, discourse and action, being-with-others, and responsibility, and enkindled with passion in engagement within conversational horizons and narratival neighborhoods thus creating a sense of home and a place of trust for human engagement to flourish. Organizational leaders can build their skill sets around these coordinates and reimagine what they ascribe to their understanding of community and how to manifest it in their interactions with others. In building skills around these coordinates, leaders need to allow humility to undergird their disposition and approach to personal-professional development. In allowing humility to guide their learning, self reflections, observations, and reasoning, they

begin from a position of acknowledging the other(s), understanding that their leadership is not really about themselves, and, therefore, any training, development, and actions ought to begin with the other(s) in mind first. Making this a practice in their leadership, ensures that leaders set their own biases and perspectives aside to make room for other and different perspectives. This allows the community to emerge in an integral fashion where transversal rationality opens the pathway for the four coordinates to flourish.

Schrag lays out an integral roadmap for creating the conditions to build an authentic sense of community through communicative praxis. He created this road map over the course of his lifetime through his concern for community, inquiries into rhetoric, and praxis including the discussed four coordinates. Schrag also identified how hermeneutic humility and transversal rationality can be the guide to identifying a communication ethics approach for engaging in the space of communicative praxis in community. As a leader, Schrag's road map can serve as a guide for leadership well into the 21st century.

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

ISSN 1918-7351
Volume 18 (2026)

Words Addressed to Our Condition: An Enacted Tribute to Calvin O. Schrag

Ramsey Eric Ramsey
Barrett, the Honors College Arizona State University USA
ORCID: 0000-0001-9203-2963

Abstract
This essay pays special tribute to Calvon O. Schrag by enacting a hermeneutic reading of Thoreau's *Walden*. The reading is set up by an engagement with Hadot's understanding of philosophy as a way of life as it can be seen in the fragments of Epicurius, which are echoed throughout *Walden*. Against this backdrop the essay gives an interpretation of *Walden* with sustained attention to the chapter titled "Reading" and the concept of dwelling. This interpretation shows, when seen in the light of "Reading," *Walden* is well understood as a book theorizing hermeneutics as such. So as to extend this understanding to the contemporary pedagogy in another register and vocabulary, the essay moves to a brief encounter with psychanalysis (understood as questioning, words, and interpretation) as articulated by Adam Phillips.

Keywords: words, reading, friends, needs, dwelling, Schrag, Thoreau, Epicurus, Hadot, Phillips

Prologue: Having Been Taught to Read

I have already elsewhere published an essay to share my gratitude for my teacher, Professor Schrag, and delivered it to him in a *Festschrift*.[1] To honor him on this occasion, I publish the essay below, an essay he said he liked when he read an earlier version of it years ago. Since Prof. Schrag's reading of the piece, I have been reworking the essay—trying to make it one that achieves something for hermeneutics by way of American Philosophy.

In an interview with Prof. Schrag (it is still the way of addressing him after all these years that seems most fitting in this context) he states there that continental philosophers of hermeneutics ought not forget there are, as he calls them, "indigenous" American thinkers who deal with philosophical issues in so-called continental ways. By this he meant thinkers such as Emerson (whose "American Scholar" address he much loved and read again and discussed with me just a few years before his passing) or William James (who plays a major role in Schrag's thinking in his wonderful *Radical Reflection*, the book I read as an undergraduate and the exhilaration after which led me to seek out the graduate program where I could study under his tutelage—doing so changed everything in my intellectual life).

Here I take up the work of Thoreau another of the thinkers who belongs to the American Philosophical tradition and who has something to contribute universally to hermeneutics. Of the many classic philosophic texts I read with Prof. Schrag *Walden* is not one of them. However, ever since he taught me how to read, I have read every book thereafter benefitting from his influence. I attempt below to enact these reading lessons as to honor the finest of philosophers and teachers by doing the work of reading he taught me to undertake. It seems understated to say: Prof. Schrag's words from the start and each moment afterward always seemed addressed to my condition.

I. Questions and Occasions

> Thou, a goddess, dost question me, a god, upon my coming, and I will speak my word truly, since thou biddest me.
>
> –Hermes to Calypso, *The Odyssey*, Book 5 line 98

[1] Yet one wonders if once is enough; indeed, what number could possibly be enough for all he helped make possible for me and countless other students? See *Experiences between Philosophy and Communication* (SUNY, 2003) my festschrift (along with David James Miller) for Calvin O. Schrag in which appears our lengthy interview with Prof. Schrag and my chapter "Procreation on a Beautiful Medium: Eroticizing the Vectors of Communicative Praxis" pp. 191-200.

It usually begins because someone asked. Even for the gods. Questions have a way of getting things started and hermeneutics and education share a gratitude for this consequence of questioning.[2] Furthermore, those who teach hermeneutics and who read and teach psychoanalytic texts to assist in this endeavor know questioning and interpretation is also at the heart of the cure made of words. This more than mere similarity among these texts shows them to be kindred spirits for the professor looking to disclose the fundamental nature of dwelling.[3] The question how do we make good conversations? is dear to these interrelated efforts at education. It is undeniable language, love, and the questions they raise together are at the heart of something mattering to dwelling and world. These conversations we seek to make good with one another and that are called education are not undertaken simply to show some philosophical erudition or psychoanalytic acumen. Something more important is at stake on each occasion.

Important, indeed. One thing we might say the study of psychoanalytic theory teaches philosophy, or we might say the use to which those teaching the hermeneutics of dwelling might put psychoanalysis, is as a reminder of what philosophy long ago promised it came into existence to do *viz*., nurturing a way of life. One such philosophical response made in this light, one embodying the virtues of philosophy as a way of life to which I shall turn my attention here is Thoreau's *Walden*. This book about dwelling and reading, about words and world—that is to say, this philosophical book—comes to us, according to Thoreau, because someone asked. On the first page of *Walden* under the first chapter's title "Economy," which is *Walden*'s word for dwelling, we read: "I should not obtrude my affairs so much on the notice of my readers if very particular inquiries had not been made by my townsmen concerning my mode of life . . ."[4] It ought not surprise anyone who has read this American writer as a philosopher that *Walden* could motivate the French philosopher Pierre Hadot to write an essay on Thoreau or that a passage from *Walden* would be an epigraph to his masterful study devoted to his understanding of philosophy as a way of life.[5]

---

[2] See "Quests and Questioning or Again and Again," *Phainomena* 31, no. 120/121(2022): 301.
[3] See Ramsey Eric Ramsey, "Letters on the Hermeneutic Education of Dwelling," *Empedocles: The European journal of the Philosophy of Education* 6, no. 1 (2015).
[4] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* in *Walden and Other Writings*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (Modern Library, 1992), 3.
[5] Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Harvard University Press, 2002) and Pierre Hadot, "'There are Nowadays Professors of Philosophy, But Not Philosophers'," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 19, no. 3, (2005): 229-237.

Philosophy as a way of life is most often practiced, according to Hadot, by a philosopher undertaking a two-fold task. First a thoughtful diagnosis of what ails our living together well. Following this, and then from within the love of wisdom, a love that can only be occupied by way of conversation, the offering of a therapy for what ails us. To understand this two-fold practice of diagnosis/therapy it serves us to turn to words from Epicurus because I find these and other Epicurean words strewn throughout *Walden*: "vain is the word of a philosopher by which no human suffering is healed."[6]

By way of Hadot's lead, I shall draw together an understanding of philosophy as a way of life through some of Epicurus' words with the hermeneutic education of dwelling provided by Thoreau. Thoreau, who places language, words, and reading at the heart of its project of awakening, will then be brought into a brief conversation with contemporary British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips. In Phillips we find he questions love and words in such a way that his claims about psychoanalysis and poetry are keenly relevant to my educational and hermeneutic concerns.[7]

II. Home, Homemaking, and Homecoming

> "Poetically man dwells" [says the poet]. Do we dwell poetically? Presumably we dwell altogether unpoetically. If that is so does it give lie to the poet's words; are they untrue? No. . . . For dwelling can be unpoetic only because it is in essence poetic.
>
> —Martin Heidegger, "'. . . poetically man dwells . . .'"

Simply because we understand the hermeneutic circle is not vicious in no way means we are free from any number of bad circlings. It seldom works to live poorly as preparation for living well. If we are not careful, tragically, the time may not come when we feel ready to give up the preparation, and thus living well would remain ever-waiting. As Thoreau puts a fine point on it: at least the labors of Heracles had an end. Yet when we look at our labors today, they appear as if they will go on forever. Or, at least, until we are at our end. To break the bad circling requires us to look around, to take account of our circumstances, and to find out of what we are made and what has already been made of us by and in our circumstance. A homemaking, both as the making of a house while rendering its costs with an accountant's detail and then

---

[6] Epicurus, *The Essential Epicurus*, trans. Eugene O'Connor (Prometheus Books, 1993), 97.
[7] Adam Phillips, "Poetry and Psychoanalysis," *Promises, Promises: Essays in Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Basic Books, 2001), 1-34.

through this conceit taking a look around at circumstance and dwelling, is the keenly observed philosophical diagnosis begun in "Economy" chapter one of *Walden*. This reading, evaluation, and diagnosis of *oikos* shows the dangers of our circumstances and the price it exacts from us when we misunderstand ourselves and choose both the wrong vocations and baser ways of dwelling. "Yet, they honestly think there is no choice left," the philosopher of *Walden* says.[8] He understands this to be but another symptom of our mistaken selves and counters this resignation and hermeneutic exhaustion with a claim that echoes Epicurus: "It is never too late to give up our prejudices."[9]

So as to give them up it may help to find a bit clarity about some of the detrimental prejudices we might embody today. As prescribed by philosophy as a way of life, let's proceed, then, by pursuing a diagnosis that might allow in its wake a therapy linked to learning how to read. To achieve this, I turn to a still powerful aspect of the work of Epicurus that seems to be echoed on nearly every page of *Walden*'s first chapter *viz*., his well-known discussion of the three levels of human needs. For Epicurus, we remember, the first and fundamental level of the needs of dwelling includes, as we might expect, food, shelter, clothing. These needs he calls both natural and necessary and the pursuit of which honorable and fitting to our nature. Securing these needs provides all our happiness could wish (or almost all as we shall see). But we have trouble drawing the line here, trouble resting in our happiness. "My greatest skill has been to want but little," claims Thoreau.[10] However, the devil is all round, and the seductions seem too compelling to resist for most of us; we want what at first seems but a little bit more.

As a result, luxurious versions meeting these first level natural and necessary needs press themselves toward us and we against them. They take us in because they appear in such an ingenious disguise. They wear a natural cover by referencing their connection to the first level, for they care again for real needs; yet in this manner of meeting them they are wholly unnecessary in the misplaced lavishness of their excess. In our pursuit of them, e.g., too lavish a table, too grand a house, and a closet filled with too much fashion, we are lead away from our flourishing. We do not need psychoanalysis to remind us seductions have persuasive ways of justifying themselves. We always have an out at this level, a kind of defense, a series of reasons why we need this and this and this even as our happiness flees. Put into words our alibis sound something more or less like this in the end: do we not need to eat? have a roof? and

[8] Thoreau, *Walden*, 8.
[9] Thoreau, 8.
[10] Thoreau, 66.

cover our nakedness? Of course we do; nonetheless, we ought beware—it might also be that each new purchase is another self-inflicted wound which in time, perhaps, will be one too many to survive.

While discussing dwelling Thoreau has this to say about such luxuries, in this case that of needing shelter: "I intend to build me a house which will surpass any on the main street in Concord in grandeur and luxury, as soon as it pleases me as much and will cost me no more than my present one."[11] Few are the places in English where one has said "never" so eloquently. Is one able to hear this resounding "never" and not be moved to some reflection? Would that ever a luxury be sought it were measured against and tethered to these lines. As damaging as this second level mistake might be when it leads us further and further from the better possibilities of our dwelling, another level awaits on Epicurus's rendering of the human condition, one worsening our condition still more.

At the third level, we no doubt recall, are those needs neither natural nor necessary and the seeking of these lead us to ruin, even if we were to capture them. Hostage to them—these worthless things—either as goals or as possessions, Epicurus believes, cannot bring the tranquility that is flourishing itself. Fame, unjust power over others, and wealth belong to the road of this unhappiness. Profound is its distance from the simple pleasures so easy to obtain. "I have in mind," says Thoreau, "that seemingly wealthy, but most terribly impoverished class of all, who have accumulated dross . . . and thus have forged their own golden or silver fetters."[12] I need to upgrade my shackles is rather an odd thing to say. Our condition, our dwelling and having to keep dwelling, must meet certain needs. We need not, however, live under their yoke says the founder of the ancient Garden of philosophers. The first level needs–the all-we-really-need–remain necessary but, we are thankful, easy to obtain when we know what is enough. The third level goods are so much more difficult to obtain but this, if read rightly, is evidence of our being blessed, for what is most difficult to secure need not be sought at all.

The mix of second and third level needs is a powerful force and an ubiquitous part of dwelling today. This misunderstanding misshapes our dwelling together by having naturalized itself in our understandings of who we are and what we take to be the requirements of our social relations. Thoreau shares this understanding of the human condition, even if he succeeds in his wish to avoid writing an ode to dejection. Yet, today is more complicated than he could have imagined. If his distrust of the

---

[11] Thoreau, 47.
[12] Thoreau, 15.

telegraph marks the height of his worries about communication technologies, then we must wonder what he would believe of the chance the words we share today could have of doing what we desire of them. In a world of unrestrained consumerism, the quiet desperation so famously identified in *Walden* is today rather more noisy. The noise of thoughtless talk broadcast incessantly from all types of devices such that no time is safe from it and every place threatened to be within its range means today the clamor is as loud and persistent as the despair may be pervasive.

Thoreau, we might say, was out in the woods looking for room, looking for enough leeway that these thoughts, that is to say the proper words, might come to him uninterrupted. The words of *Walden* call each of us back to some better understanding of the first level of needs, which does not mean, as it appears we must still insist, back to Walden Pond: "I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way."[13] We are called back by philosophy as a way of life to learn what it means to dwell—called home, to homemaking, and to homecoming. The where and why of education share an answer in this light: it is from within a debased dwelling that we are called to undertake our education towards dwelling's better possibilities.

III. Reading Lesson

Enter Hamlet reading on a book
Queen: But look where the poor wretch comes reading.
—Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 2 Scene 2

Tenderly to achieve the ethical dwelling we are capable of sharing with one another must become a vocation. One way to respond to this call of love and language is to continue a reading of Epicurus that pushes certain of his claims to show the first-level needs are not exhausted by food, shelter, and clothing. To take Epicurus seriously is to understand friendship belongs to this group of needs as well. Friendship, for Epicurus, is the one need that is allowed, as it were, to be at odds with aspects of his philosophical position. Friendship fits the following description from Epicurus: there are things demanded by our experience that may be said to be disallowed by our theory. The type of friendship that makes its way to the first level of our needs is achieved through a shared love of wisdom, that is to say, of course, through philosophy, which

[13] Thoreau, 67.

is itself achieved in language, through reading the world, and by way of conversation. This understanding of love and language places philosophy, friends, and conversation among life's necessities. "Friendship dances around the world proclaiming to all of us," Epicurus tells those dwelling near him, "to rouse ourselves and give thanks."[14] Proclaiming this gratitude remains among friends to the end.

On his death bed Epicurus is still using words this way, writing to a friend to say how much pleasure is the memory of their past philosophical conversations and how grateful he is to have those memories with him now. This gratitude for one another and for philosophy made in conversation shows the essential nature of hermeneutics to an understanding of dwelling. We ought not wish, Epicurus reminds us, to pretend to be philosophers but to be philosophers really, to be in friendship by way of sharing a world in conversation. This is the possibility dwelling grants us and for this is the deep gratitude and the pure joy that Epicurus has for life itself. Thoreau also embraces this way of understanding dwelling and his call to awaken his near-dwellers shares this overwhelming sense of wonder in the reading of words and world.

If we must, it seems best to cite here the lines, perhaps too often cited if too little worked on, from *Walden* concerning pretending to be a philosopher: "There are nowadays professors of philosophy but not philosophers."[15] We note here these lines follow, and for a number of lines after continue, a lengthy discussion of dwelling and need, marking the dangers of luxury and making a defense of simplicity, a word that shall be repeated later in the text three times in a succession and punctuated by an exclamation point as a maxim for living well. Rather than stay right here certain that we are philosophers and it is only some of our colleagues who only philosophy professors, let's let the passage run on bit longer. The passage goes on to say: "Yet is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but to so love wisdom as to live by its dictates . . ."[16] Furthermore, near the end of this long paragraph we hear this Epicurean echo: "The philosopher is in advance of his age even in the outward form of his life. He is not fed, sheltered, clothed, warmed, like his contemporaries."[17]

It is far from insignificant that in the ancient Athenian Garden the inhabitants addressed one another as friend. Anyone willing to be a friend of wisdom was welcomed–this included women, and men, and free persons, and slaves. They all heard the address "friend" referring to themselves and used it for calling out to all the others

---

[14] Epicurus, Fragments, 82.
[15] Thoreau, *Walden*, 14.
[16] Thoreau, 14.
[17] Thoreau, 14.

with whom they would converse. The way Thoreau calls himself a philosopher, the way he names others such, and invites others to become philosophers is done in this spirit of friendship. Philosophy belongs to living and to anyone who wishes to join the conversation and who thinks by living well one thus professes. One's living well among friends is a sufficient peer-reviewed publication record. There is now in this light, we might be led to believe, a pressing need for many many more philosophy professors.

In the paragraph following the one we have been discussing the philosopher with needs met sufficiently, does not seek more or better versions of what meets these needs. She is rather sent on her way in Epicurean fashion to an adventure in thought and words. She departs on the alternative adventure the text calls life. Who would be a philosopher would live well. The philosopher would learn how to read as sign every fact she comes across attempting not simply to make knowledge of it but life. To learn to read is to learn to live a philosophical life (granted, this is not always learned on one's way to a degree in philosophy).

This set of reflections makes Epicurus and Thoreau near-dwellers, which is to say neighbors, and provides a way towards learning to read understood as essential to the hermeneutic condition and to the health of our conversational being-together. Of course, we shall not read the chapter of *Walden* titled "Reading" as mere book list (though there be some virtue in that) nor, as some do, as that strange third chapter that gets in the way of things, that obstructs the movement from the beginning of the book and the real work of *Walden*, something unnecessary between the critique of Concord and its cheap business compared to the riches of and being in Nature. To the contrary, I believe this ought to be interpreted as the key chapter, it belongs right where it is, after a profound mediation on dwelling and the wasting of its possibilities. Reading is, as I shall understand it, the how or by way of which of dwelling. Teaching ourselves to read is to be ever-involved in learning the lesson that the fundamental nature of human-being-together as reading.

The world needs to be read—in any case it is being read all the time. Thoreau understands this and calls the readers of his text to turn their attention to reading the world and their place in it. Early in the chapter he makes claims allowing us to see reading and life itself ought to belong together in our understanding of the human condition: "To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the custom of the day esteem."[18] This task is living itself and the way we are currently reading and are taught to read will not do; the esteemed reading customs of the day have left us bereft. This

[18] Thoreau, 95.

is the link between the first chapters' opening diagnostic on the sad nature of our dwelling (economy) and this chapter's therapy as learning to read philosophically. Were we to learn to read well we would be learning to live otherwise creating a new economy of friendship one fitting to our hermeneutic nature. If memory serves me, Walt Whitman imagines this condition with the phrase City of Friends.

To read in the manner offered here takes what the text calls deliberation. It takes leisure to read. Speed reading is for Thoreau part of the problem: "Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written."[19] It takes time to read well, it takes conversation, it takes imagination. Even then it may take more than we are able to provide or at least we are best if humbled before the attempt. Of the greatest poems the philosopher writes: "only great poets can read them . . . yet this only is reading." Devoting "our most alert and wakeful hours . . ." to reading is the charge left to the reader of this chapter bearing the title "Reading."[20]

We readers await words. The quality of the words coming to us depend, in part, on our being ready to receive them, being ready to meet them upon their arrival. It matters greatly that we are reading well and awaiting words at our best. The quality of reading determines who we are and how we are with others. Reading the chapter as we are, teaches us what is true of poor reading, that it leads to poor conversation and poor thinking. It is inversely the case (we wager nearly everything) for good reading. But reading, conversation, and thinking already say living itself for the philosopher of *Walden* who puts it this way: "It is not all books that are as dull as their readers. There are probably words addressed to our condition exactly, which, if we could really hear and understand, would be more salutary than the morning or the spring to our lives, and possibly put a new aspect on the face of things for us."[21] No reader of *Walden* can miss here the power attributed to words in this passage for nothing could seem to matter more or garners more praise throughout the text than dawn and spring. Yet here words, the right words met in the proper way by the reader, can be "more salutary" than the morning or the spring. It will be words that awaken us. The constant calling of *Walden* is, of course, issued in words. It is a book after all. No doubt we are meant to be readied by these words for those words meant for us, those addressed to our condition. Perhaps some of the words meant exactly for us are among those in *Walden* itself.

Words addressed to our condition can come to us because the hermeneutic nature of dwelling is being able to be addressed at all. The word *condition*, this "with

---

[19] Thoreau, 96.
[20] Thoreau, 98 & 99.
[21] Thoreau, 102.

saying" or "speaking with" of the *con dicere* of the human condition, tells us what we need to know about reading and its inextricable link to being-in-the world. Dwelling is the always already being-together of being ever-addressed by others and by world. As dwellers in the world we are always embedded in traditions that are addressing us. In the midst of these traditions, we do not find only the chance of meager repetition but kindred spirits, a community of friends who share good words and who need us as creative and worthy readers. We are assured by Thoreau: "These same questions that disturb and puzzle and confound us have in their turn occurred to all the wise men; not one has been omitted; and each has answered them, according to his ability, by his words and his life."[22] Nonetheless, our moment of the question is our own occasion for it so that we do not merely repeat them nor repeat their responses even as we learn from them and put them into play in our own thinking. A good reading produces a well-crafted echo. An original echo has its own charm we are told as Thoreau contemplates the ringing of a faraway bell.

The chapter "Reading" no doubt talks of books in general and of classics books in particular and of bad books too easy to read. It talks, too, of reading books and learning to read books and thus addresses what I am calling the hermeneutic education of dwelling. We see this in the beautiful final image of this chapter: a call to forgo funds for another bridge in town in favor of an education in reading. This education will teach a way of reading that will appear an inconvenience to those accustomed to reading quickly. "[G]o around a little there" he says of the inconvenience caused by the forgone bridge so that we might "throw one arch at least over the darker gulf of ignorance that surrounds us."[23] As ever in *Walden* the brilliance is that we are always talking about whatever it is we are talking about and then so very much more as well. Reading books and being readers of more than books and having a profound faith in being bettered by the reading of both is what the remainder of *Walden* is about, if we can suffer such a pithy summary of the next fifteen chapters. *Walden* cannot begin and cannot be the great pedagogical text it is if reading is not made central to living itself, which is my way of saying: *Walden* is nothing if not a theory of hermeneutics in the manner of doing philosophy as a way of life.

We gain confidence in this understating when the next chapter begins. This chapter is titled "Sounds" and focuses our attention on the commitment to listening so dear to hermeneutics. This chapter takes us to the heart, not of the literal recording of the days spent on the pond rather to the beginning (and too the continuation) of a

[22] Thoreau, 102.
[23] Thoreau, 104.

reading of the meaning of the moments spent by the pond. Far from abandoning reading the chapter begins by highlighting its central importance to life itself. To get things started the chapter begins by questioning the reader and the practice of reading itself as it relates to living a life: "What is a course of history or philosophy, or poetry, no matter how well selected, or the best society, or the most admirable routine of life, compared to the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen? Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer? Read your fate, see what is before you, and walk into futurity."[24] Or as I have been struggling to say all along: reading is our fate.

IV. In Need of One Another

> The discourse of the unconscious, the operation of the word on the physical and its perception, are wondrous in and of themselves. Opening the window onto those mysteries can in fact make all things new.
>
> –Lila J. Kalinich, Introduction to *The Dead Father*

We readers must try by putting strange things to our tongues to see not if but how language and love belong to one another, to see how our conversations put words in our mouths that can have the taste of something new. This way of thinking of words belongs as well to the understanding Adam Phillips has in much of his work and especially in his essay "Poetry and Psychoanalysis." When talking of psychoanalysis Phillips always seems to me to be saying things directly related to hermeneutics and to education. For example, "Psychoanalysis teaches people a way of hearing what they say that enables them to speak in new ways" he writes.[25] Such an education as way of hearing what one (and reading what others have) has said and looking over the words one uses means one often abandons some of the words that seem to be leading one astray. Thus, such conversations are a type of loss. By gaining new words one gives up old ones and as a consequence: "this entails mourning one's old vocabulary, often the words one was brought up on; losing some of one's favorite words for oneself can be a mixed blessing" Phillips goes on to say.[26] What is so for one's own words is so for one's encounter with the words of others. Here we account for some of the resistance to *Walden*'s wake up call. It is not easy to give up beloved words as they are part of

---

[24] Thoreau, 105.
[25] Adam Phillips, "Erich Fromm" in *On Flirtation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 131.
[26] Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation*, 131.

oneself especially those very words we were taught were best for us and would help us most in getting along.

We are always underway in this endeavor with words already all around. One goes to poetry and to psychoanalysis, claims Phillips, and I am suggesting also to hermeneutic philosophy in this case *Walden*, looking for better words.[27] However, as we have just seen, looking for other words to take up into a life means making room for them. Shedding beloved words is a crisis as Thoreau understands when he writes: "our molting season, like that of the fowls, is a crisis in our lives."[28] Yet, we do not start from scratch nor can we give up everything all at once. It is an insight as true of hermeneutics and education as it is of psychoanalysis when Phillips maintains: "psychoanalysis is torn between helping people conform and helping them to create revolutions."[29] The occasion for teaching hermeneutics is always one occurring between tradition and novelty, between conservation and critique, between giving up and holding on to certain words. Teaching, consequently, acknowledges reading is always doing many things at once. At its best giving us the chance to conform without being conformist and to be revolutionary without being reckless.

Although we are readers by endowment we are not by such alone good ones. So too with dwelling. We cannot help but read and dwell but we need to develop our reading abilities to better our ethical place in dwelling. As Thoreau notes we cannot simply wait for our good habits to arrive because, as he writes, they are such: "which a mere lapse of time can never make to dawn."[30] Or again our need for education is put this way by Phillips: " . . . our apparently innate poetry-making talents don't by themselves give us the lives we would prefer."[31] Accordingly we need education. We are in need of one another sharing words and loving wisdom to make our way to the dwelling of which *Walden* believes us capable.

The study of hermeneutics teaches us the world comes to us through interpretation, thus the act of reading the world and words is woven into every practice within dwelling. For this reason we must make both worthy of the worlds we prefer. They must have something of wakefulness in them, some "good enough poetry" as Phillips says nodding to Winnicott. We seek good reading because we, as those Phillips suggests turn to psychoanalysis, have a "belief in words" (or as his stronger version

---

[27] Ramsey, "Letters on the Hermeneutic Education of Dwelling," As I say there: *we look for words with other words*. p. 83.
[28] Thoreau, 22.
[29] Phillips, *On Flirtation*, 131.
[30] Thoreau, 312.
[31] Phillips, "Poetry and Psychoanalysis," in *Promises, Promises: Essays on Psychoanalysis and Literature*, (Basic Books, 2002) 12.

puts it: "can psychoanalysis be anything other than a religion of words").[32] Our actions are assisted when the perspectives we gain from good words are able to "put[s] a new aspect on the face on things."[33]

Seeking what he calls the "useable heritage" in America's philosophical past, Curtis White discovers these new faces come from poetic readings of the world's possibilities. White finds in Thoreau and other American Transcendentalists what he finds in European Romantics beginning with Blake *viz.*, imaginative and utopian visions: "they fought not for a place but for a new set of ideas through which to recognize what would count as Real."[34] This is how an act of reading can be an act of resistance (noting that all readings are social and political in some manner or another). The new face might well be a beautiful one but it is also meant to be something else. The poetry and the reading I am suggesting is far from the simple decoration of a life that might get along without it. Instead, these readings and this poetry and their beauty are part of the challenge and the resistance to what currently counts as natural and presents itself thus unchangeable. These resistance readings are challenges to what passes for being impossible to alter by imagining the world otherwise within its real existing possibilities.

In "Life Without Principle" Thoreau tells us what he thinks our bad readings and practices have made of the world and what the consequences of our mistakes are in lines that have this sense of resistance in them:

> This world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle! I am awakened almost every night by the panting of the locomotive. It interrupts my dreams. There is no sabbath. It would be glorious to see mankind at leisure for once. It is nothing but work, work, work . . . I think that there is nothing, not even crime, more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, ay, to life itself, than this incessant business.[35]

The study of hermeneutics is helpful to this critique by teaching that these ways of being making up what is called here business attempt always to hide the fact that they are based on readings too. Wishing to hide its ground in reading the desperate ways of the world attempt to make themselves appear natural and consequently incapable of being altered. But another world is possible–many other worlds in fact. We are

---

[32] Phillips, "Poetry and Psychoanalysis," 6.
[33] Thoreau, 102.
[34] Curtis White, "The Spirit of Disobedience: An Invitation to Resistance," *Harpers*, April 2006, 16.
[35] Thoreau, "Life Without Principle," 748.

constituted by poesies and as such we can always read otherwise, as does Thoreau in the passage above. It follows, then, the world will have to be reread and remade from out of the same addressed condition from which we have made of it what it is today. This remaking is made all the more difficult in a world seduced by the illusion of certainty in human affairs. Our readings and actions are historical responses to events history will alter again in time. That said, we must think beyond what is and is not working. Without dreams and imaginations looking beyond what is, without the leisure to read well everything that has mattered to us in these reflections suffers: poetry, philosophy, life itself. To avoid the worse than criminal ways of being we must in our conversations and interpretive work "open new channels–not of trade but of thought."[36]

Even a book such as *Walden*, which so often seems so sure of itself, knows better than think its reading has exhausted any one text or occasion. Moreover, it considers this a virtue. Of its own words it has this lament: "in this part of the world it is considered a ground for complaint if a man's writings admit of more than one interpretation."[37] For a hermeneutic philosopher such as the one in *Walden* this part of the world, is the literalist world the one made by narrow ways of reading that have overtaken so much of our thinking; it is a real danger if this part of the world becomes nearly everywhere in the world. So as to read well one needs to be able to draw from a rich and varied reservoir of responses thus responding to the particular questions raised by each occasion. The hermeneutic education of dwelling needs to show the dangers of literalism and how unhealthful it might be to wish the ambiguity of the world away. Neither rigid nor capricious, good reading must be as creative as it is well informed. "The universe is wider than our view of it" we read in *Walden*.[38] Nonetheless, our views are still the only worlds we have and thus call for our readings to be worthy of our being together with one another.

As is more than clear by now the practicing hermeneutic philosopher of *Walden* believes we are not as accomplished readers as we are capable of being. He may well be correct in uncovering a major reason why this is so when he looks around at what conditions us and comes the evaluation: "We know not where we are."[39] Too few of us have looked six feet above us or six feet below us he says and suggests were we to have done so we would have some sense of where we are. On my reading, as a text in hermeneutic theory, *Walden* looks deeply in both directions and locates human being

---

[36] Thoreau, *Walden* 301.
[37] Thoreau, 348.
[38] Thoreau, 301.
[39] Thoreau, 311.

in its understanding of ethos. Below, always hailed by the address of others and the world, it finds reading and words at the heart of the human condition. This always already of being addressed demands of us our most accomplished interpretive work. Above he finds the imagination the education of which allows one to read beyond mere facts. Here one can play with the world's possibilities that ought to be, which, however, have not yet been actualized. Education, needless to say, can play a significant role in looking in both directions.

The professor of a hermeneutics of dwelling may not encourage the same type of free-association of the psychoanalyst but indeed she tries to keep open a well-tended space where students and she together feel free to associate, to allow themselves to be led by the reading and to take it places on what might seem at first nothing more than a whim. A little faith is needed. Philosophical conversations often lead us best when we risk an interpretation, when what comes to us from listening to words is shared and contributed to the goings on of each attempt at education. In the face of the newest plans for cost effective and efficient teaching, to stand our ground with respect to the hermeneutic education of dwelling it will take courage to avoid becoming what in *Walden* is called: "improved means to unimproved ends."[40]

V. Coming to a Sense of Reading

> Poetic thinking commemorates rather than represents; it proceeds by way of showing rather than referring, it is a setting-forth instead of an explaining, and it is evocative rather than demonstrative.
>
> –Calvin Schrag, *God as Otherwise than Being*

Thoreau suggests a dawning should lead the senses; it asks the seer to look from the surface of the pond to its bottom and read meaning at every level, at every depth. To hear the sounds that swirl all around is more than just being able to identify their source–it also includes a recording of their meaning such that one hears the owl only when one risks an interpretation of what his hooting might say about dwelling. And so on to each of the rest. The contact with all that touches us the wind on our face, the wood in our hands, the earth beneath our soles is also what we shall understand somehow. There is a hint of utopia in every sweet scent and lessons not to be ignored in pungent ones. As well with taste; the sour woodchuck has its say as well as the cool

[40] Thoreau, 49.

morning drink at the pond's edge or even a fresh-baked pie at Emerson's house (where, by the way, Thoreau arrived not as hypocrite but as a friend; he came "for friendship" and not the food Emerson's son tells us).

Thoreau means to awaken readers to reading in its broadest sense; such an awakening will restore us to our senses. Ethics, for Thoreau, is to awake to and stay awake within dwelling. The awakening certainly begins with a liberation of the senses achieved by reading lessons from our experiences and encounters with world and with others making all of these themes for philosophical conversation with friends. Dulled these many years, our senses are waiting, he has faith, for something to move them. To act aright we must be able to look over here and over there, to hear the saying of everything that has a say, and to touch and be touched. To achieve the best of our dwelling we must be able to take in the scents given off by this and then that, and most of all to have our taste challenged by welcoming strange sounds to our ears and putting strange things to our tongues.

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

ISSN 1918-7351
Volume 18 (2026)

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

Robert C. Scharff
University of New Hampshire, USA

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]

---

[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

---

[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."

---

[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

---

[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.

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

ISSN 1918-7351
Volume 18 (2026)

Schrag Remembrance: Transversality and the Fitting Response in an Age of Technocracy

Majia Nadesan
Arizona State University, USA
ORCID: 0000-0002-2399-5587

Today, as anonymized power exercised through AI systems and large language models threatens to consolidate an unprecedented technological panopticon, the philosophy of embodied and principled communicative praxis developed by Calvin O. Schrag appears not merely relevant but urgent. What follows is both a remembrance and a reconstruction: a reflection on encountering Schrag's thought at Purdue in the early 1990s, and an argument that his concepts of transversal rationality and the "fitting response" offer indispensable resources for confronting technocratic governance in our increasingly post-human moment.

Subjectivity, Embodiment, and Communicative Responsibility

As a graduate student at Purdue, I was intellectually cathected to postmodern critiques of power—particularly the biopolitical analytics of Michel Foucault and the linguistic deconstructions of Jacques Derrida. Foucault's account of disciplinary surveillance and the panopticon illuminated ubiquitous power and modern regimes of normalization.[1] Derrida's reflections on différance and erasure destabilized metaphysical certainties.[2]

[1] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish,* trans. Alan Sheridan (Vintage Books, 1979), 209.
[2] Jacque Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1978), 95.

Yet both, in different ways, seemed to decenter subjective agency to such an extent that existential choice and moral responsibility became conceptually attenuated.

I was not prepared to relinquish the reality of agency having grown up working-class in Berkeley during the 1960s and witnessed movements for equality and liberty alongside episodes of arbitrary violence. Political struggle presupposes actors who deliberate, choose, and assume responsibility. What I found in Schrag was neither a regression to metaphysical transcendentals nor an embrace of postmodern alterity and fragmentation. Rather, I encountered a reconstructive philosophy of praxis in which subjectivity is constituted communicatively yet remains ethically accountable.

In *The Self after Postmodernity*, Schrag describes the self not as a foundational substance but as an "event of temporalization"—emergent within the interplay of narrative memory, anticipation, and embodied action.[3] Subjectivity is neither sovereign nor dissolved; it is achieved within communicative engagement. The self is formed through responsiveness to others. Agency is neither absolute nor illusory. It is relational and enacted.

This emphasis on communicative responsibility becomes especially salient today, as power operates remotely through algorithmic infrastructures that facilitate centralization, anonymization and automation of decision-making. Think, for example, of the battle between the AI industry firm Anthropic and the U.S. Department of Defense over use of AI for domestic surveillance and automated warfare.[4] Unlike Anthropic's balk, OpenAI is waiting in line for its opportunity to partner with DoD and quite open to dispensing with "guardrails."[5]

Technicism, the metaphysical and deeply material elevation of untrammeled technical reason, threatens the social commons existentially. Anonymous expertise is elevated in key decision-making over "lay people" perceptions and concerns. Automation is ubiquitous. Social systems are fragmented and public recourse to technological externalities limited. The erosion of communicative accountability threatens not only politics, but agentive selfhood and the communities that sustain it.

---

[3] Calvin O. Schrag, *The Self After Postmodernity* (Yale University Press, 1995), 37.

[4] Amrith Ramkumar "Trump Administration Shuns Anthropic, Embraces OpenAI in Clash Over Guardrails: OpenAI chief says deal for Pentagon to use its tools in classified settings includes the same prohibitions that Anthropic had wanted," *The Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 27, 2026, https://www.wsj.com/tech/ai/trump-will-end-government-use-of-anthropics-ai-models-ff3550d9?st=8Gm6tM&reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink

[5] Ramkumar, "Trump Administration Shuns Anthropic"

The Universalization of Technique: Technocracy Emerging

The erosion of communicative accountability is a symptom and effect of increasingly self-referential, or autopoietic, social systems, as described by Niklas Luhmann.[6] As elaborated upon by Jurgen Habermas, the abstracted medium of instrumental reason colonizes other systems as its binary logic precludes recognition and understanding of non-self values and lifeways:

> The rationalization of the lifeworld makes possible the emergence and growth of subsystems whose independent imperatives turn back destructively upon the lifeworld itself.[7]

In line with these thinkers, Schrag warned against the epistemic reduction of knowledge to instrumentality, what he termed the "universalization of technique into technicism":

> When theoretical knowledge is reduced to a calculus of quantification in which it is only the anticipation of objectified results that guides the procedures, we witness the intrusion of technicism into the epistemic domain of *theōria*. When the sphere of human action and the practices of human agents are reduced to a composite of feedback control mechanisms in the service of a program of social engineering, we witness the intrusion of technicism into the sphere of praxis and *phronēsis*.[8]

When theoretical knowledge is reduced to quantification and predictive calculus, the sphere of theōria becomes subordinated to instrumental control. When praxis is reconceived as feedback regulation within systems of social engineering, *phronēsis* is displaced by optimization.

This diagnosis anticipates contemporary developments with striking clarity. Big data modeling and predictive analytics increasingly mediate governance at institutional and household levels. AI systems filter information, moderate speech, profile behavior, and nudge conduct. Administrative rationality is recoded into algorithmic procedure. Decision-making migrates from deliberative forums to opaque

---

[6] Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz and Dirk Becker (Stanford University Press, 1984), 89.
[7] Jurgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action Volume Two: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Beacon Press, 1987), 186.
[8] Calvin O. Schrag, *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity* (Indiana University Press, 1989), 20.

computational architectures. In this milieu, AI and other forms of automation and social engineering end up deployed without transparency or human accountability.

Unremitting systems colonization risks dystopic technocracy. Technocracy, as described by Miguel Angel Centeno, is not primarily an ideology but a mentality—a cognitive framework that shapes how problems are defined and solutions generated.[9] Its operative criteria are efficiency, manageability, and measurable outcomes. What falls outside quantifiable parameters is rendered marginal or unintelligible. More recently, Yanis Varoufakis has argued in *Techno-Feudalism* that digital platforms and algorithmic infrastructures are transforming liberal capitalism into a new hierarchical order structured by data extraction and infrastructural control.[10] Whether or not one accepts the "feudal" analogy, the structural shift is undeniable: power is increasingly abstracted, infrastructural and anonymized, rather than overtly sovereign.

The result resembles a panopticon without a visible guard, without responsibility or accountability. Surveillance technologies accumulate data across domains of life. Algorithmic systems censor, classify, and prioritize without transparent justification. Large language models generate hyperreal content in a manner evocative of Jean Baudrillard's simulacra—signs untethered from stable referents.[11]

Within this technocratic regime, human beings become serialized as data points: behavioral traces parsed into predictive probabilities, stabilized into profiles, monetized as recommendation vectors, and governed as risk classifications. Lifeworld is colonized by system to a degree that even earlier critical theorists such as Habermas and Luhmann could scarcely have imagined. Yet, what is most troubling is not merely surveillance or automation. It is the erosion of communicative answerability. Decisions emerge from distributed networks whose agents—designers, engineers, institutions—are shielded by technical opacity. Agency becomes infrastructural. Responsibility diffuses. Technocratic systems' erasure of humans through their transfiguration into data points and behavioral vectors presents troubling possibilities for representing and controlling social life.

---

[9] Miguel Angel Centeno, "The New Leviathan: The Dynamics and Limits of Technocracy," *Theory and Society*, 22 (1993): 307-335.

[10] Yanis Varoufakis, *Techno-Feudalism: What Killed Capitalism* (Melville House, 2023).

[11] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (University of Michigan, 1994), 1.

Technocratic Closure and Autopoietic Reduction

Technocratic systems increasingly resemble autopoietic communicative orders, processing inputs according to narrow operational codes: measurable/non-measurable, optimized/suboptimal, compliant/non-compliant. Value is translated into metric. Ethics becomes compliance. Politics becomes performance indicator.

Niklas Luhmann's theory of observing but decoupled systems increasingly resonates as communication itself is reduced to coded information transfer in closed autopoietic systems: External events—such as the collapse of privacy—are registered by observing systems but cannot be communicated across them unless they are translatable, for example, into legal forms through claims, cases, statutes, precedents, etc. . . .[12] However, in response to Luhmann's autopoietic model, the humanist tradition has long countered that decoupled systems are never truly autonomous and what is required is a form of communicative action mediating differentiation.[13]

Schrag innovates and elaborates upon communicative praxis, as involving a shared social space textured by embodiment, motivation, decision, and social responsibility. With Habermas, Schrag argues that communication is not mere relay; it is actional, relational, and normatively charged. Technocratic closure (systems colonization) arises when this textured communicative space is flattened into data flow. The result is a disembodied rationality incapable of responding to ethical claims except by re-encoding them into system-compatible variables.

Transversal Rationality: Convergence Without Coincidence

Communicative praxis is tricky to theorize because it must mediate systems and also be responsive to its textured embodiment and social embeddedness. In *The Self After Postmodernity*, Schrag articulates transversal rationality as an alternative to both foundational unity of a universalizing code on the one hand, and postmodern dispersal and alterity on the other. It seeks "convergence without coincidence, conjunction without concordance."[14] That formulation is especially powerful when applied to a fitting communication response to untoward technocratic governance.

Transversality acknowledges differentiated discourses—science, law, ethics, technology, politics—without collapsing them into a single code. It resists the

[12] Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 34-36.
[13] Habermas, *Theory of Communication Action*, 399.
[14] Schrag, *The Self after Postmodernity*, 148.

modernist temptation to impose impermeable unity (e.g., a single narrative), and it avoids postmodern resignation to fragmentation and the inability to collaboratively communicate across differences. Instead, it affirms communicative crossings.

Applied to technocracy, transversality means that technical rationality cannot claim self-sufficiency. Technicist demands to efficiency and commercial viability cannot be elevated over other value orientations. Optimization must remain answerable to ethical discourse. Efficiency must remain interrogable by democratic deliberation. Predictive modeling must remain open to experiential critique. Transversal communication re-opens discursive boundaries that technicism seeks to close. It does not deny expertise; it situates expertise within a broader field of communicative accountability.

Incorporating diverse publics in economic and infrastructural decision-making presents real-world procedural challenges, but these have long-been explored with clearly marked paths for expanded accountability and inclusion. These possibilities promise alternatives to dystopic technocracies but require ethical transversal communications. They require a fitting response.

The Ethics of the Fitting Response

Schrag's concept of the "fitting response" deepens this critique.[15] Ethics, in his formulation, is not primarily about attaching value predicates to a moral subject. It concerns responsiveness arising from communicative interaction. The moral self is constituted in answering the claims of others.

As Schrag explains in *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity*, the fitting response:

> places us in the proximity of the *ethos* of our communicative praxis, and invites us to assume a posture toward the patterns of comportment which inform our thought and action. The question points us to the patterns of obligations that arise from our interactions with other selves, interactions which we have seen are constitutive of selfhood. It directs us to the requirement of responsiveness, without which the very notion of a moral self and a moral character would have no meaning. The language of morality is

[15] Schrag, *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity*, 202.

> the language of responsiveness and responsibility, and if there is to be talk of 'an ethics' in all this it will need to be an ethics of the fitting response."[16]

Communication cannot escape responsibility and a fitting response acknowledges the "ethical requirement within the space of ethos."[17]

Technocratic governance, by contrast, often replaces responsiveness with procedural compliance. Decisions are justified by reference to models, benchmarks, or "best available evidence." While evidence matters, it does not exhaust moral reasoning. A fitting response requires contextual judgment—*phronēsis*—sensitive to texture, history, and relational obligation.

To demand a fitting response from technocratic systems is to insist that they remain communicatively answerable. This entails:

- Traceable decision pathways
- Identifiable loci of responsibility (designers, deployers, institutions)
- Normative auditability beyond technical validation
- Institutionalized channels for contestation and revision

The fitting response thus becomes both an ethical stance and an institutional design principle.

The demand for more democratic and social accountability in technological innovation is not new but previous scholarship rarely has engaged with the critical role of communication and the ethical demands of a fitting response to technological aporias presented by new technologies, such as AI. Perhaps this literature assimilated the postmodern views of autonomous, decentered agency when describing technological developments and reason, thereby impinging upon efforts to conceptualize embodied agencies and communication responsibilities.

Reconstituting Embodied Agency

The deepest danger of technocracy is existential. When selves are reduced to data profiles, their idem-identities (measurable sameness over time) are stabilized through predictive classification rather than dialogic engagement.[18] Agency becomes reactive,

---

[16] Ibid., 204.
[17] Ibid., 202.
[18] Schrag, *The Self after Postmodernity*, 35.

shaped by nudges and curated feeds. Life-defining decision-making, such as decisions executed in warfare, becomes automated. Life itself faces erasure by disembodied agency.

Schrag's communicative praxis re-inscribes embodiment and relationality. The self is not a node in a network but an event of temporalization enacted in responsive engagement. To preserve such subjectivity requires restoring spaces of dialogic interaction not fully mediated by algorithmic filtering. It also requires acknowledging the inescapable responsibility of abstracted social systems to the lifeworld and its constituents. For-profit enterprises and government bureaucracies must be responsive to impacts and expressed concerns of organic, embodied communities. At a more practical level, incorporating communicative praxis might require:

- Democratic input into technological design norms
- Participatory governance mechanisms for technological innovation, such as AI
- Public oversight boards with genuine authority
- Transparency (e.g., model documentation and explainability standards and decision-criteria)
- Institutional responsiveness and commitments to contestability

Although requiring changes in legal codes, these measures are not merely regulatory. They are transversal forms of communicative praxis that must be acknowledged across systems as non-negotiable. They are non-negotiable because they create spaces where claims can be articulated and answered. These spaces enable competing value frameworks and narrations of the future to be expressed, representing the range of human experiences and forms of agency.

Reconstruction, Not Nostalgia

Schrag's philosophy is neither nostalgic for metaphysical foundations nor fatalistic about fragmentation. It is reconstructive. It affirms that rationality survives the demise of foundationalism, provided it is understood transversally and enacted communicatively.

The challenge today is not to reject technology but to resist technicism—the colonization of all domains by instrumental logic. Transversal rationality and the ethics of the fitting response offer conceptual resources for reconstituting agency within technological infrastructures rather than outside them. If technocracy diffuses agency

into systems, Schrag recalls us to accountable speech and embodied action. If algorithms obscure levers of power, the fitting response demands answerability. If communication is reduced to data transmission, communicative praxis restores its texture. In this sense, Schrag's work is indeed hopeful—not because it promises easy solutions, but because it preserves the possibility of responsible agency amid systemic complexity.

Today, Schrag's intellectual and personal legacy continue to inspire hope for navigating increasingly autonomous systems. Growing alienation requires a fitting response of renewed social dialogue and forums for representing, debating, and participating in rapid social-technological change. Schrag's legacy promises possibilities that transverse the alienation and existential crisis of technicism.

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

ISSN 1918-7351
Volume 18 (2026)

Remembering and Honoring Professor Calvin O. Schrag

Corey Anton
Grand Valley State University, USA
ORCID: 0000-0003-0633-9489

Introduction

Arriving at Purdue University in 1994, as a first-year PhD student, I was eager to meet professor Schrag. His book *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity* was one of the reasons I chose to go to Purdue. While there, from 1994 to 1998, I had the pleasure of taking three courses with professor Schrag: The first was a seminar on postmodernism where we were engaging the material he was addressing in his book, *The Resources of Rationality*. Back then, it was quite illuminating to go from classes in the Communication Department, where a few professors seemed rather uncritically enamored with postmodern thinkers, to Schrag's seminar where, although he acknowledged some insights within postmodernity, he mainly revealed shortcomings and oversimplifications of postmodernism and provided resources for thinking through it and past it. The second course I had with professor Schrag was one of the most influential seminars I took in graduate school. It was on Martin Heidegger, where we read *Being and Time*. I will say more about that in a moment. Third, I had professor Schrag for a seminar, largely on Søren Kierkegaard, where we were reading some of the material around his, at the time, recently published book, *The Self After Postmodernity*. I also should add that he was on my dissertation committee, and he graciously blurbed my first book, which was my dissertation, *Selfhood and Authenticity*.

I want to share two personal stories regarding professor Schrag and then offer a few insights I learned from him, mainly from his Heidegger seminar but also from his scholarship. First, the personal stories.

A Couple of Stories About Schrag

One day a few of us graduate students went into Schrag's office seeking advice about writing. We were talking about getting started on our dissertations, and for some reason that in hindsight seems unclear at best and misguided at worst, we asked him point blank: "Professor, how do you write your books?" I can't remember what exactly we thought he was going say. Once we asked the question, we could see he was humoring us. He had a perplexed grin on his face and a certain twinkle in his eyes as he vaguely stared off into space, perhaps wondering what he possibly could say in response to such an obtuse question. At the least, he seemed to find it slightly funny and odd, but then, his face grew more purposeful and resolved. He looked at us, slightly raised his eyebrows and stated, somewhat as if he were asking a question, "Three pages a day?" That's just what he said: "Three pages a day?" Then, he added, "Yeah, if you get three solid pages in after a full day of writing, that's probably been a good day."

Another time, not too long after the writing query, several of us went into Schrag's office and asked him if he would be willing to do a seminar on his own work. A few of us had read a good number of his books at this point, and we wanted to see what he thought about it and if he would be willing to do it. His face bore a mix of what appeared to be slight surprise, disagreement, and a touch of confusion. He almost looked disappointed in us for asking this of him. He gently smiled and shook his head back and forth. He said, "No. No. No. Go study your Hegel. Read Kierkegaard. Read Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty." I always found that to be one of the most amazing aspects about him. He was so incredibly modest and humble.

Next, allow me to walk through a few insights I learned from professor Schrag, mainly from the Heidegger seminar but also from his scholarship more generally.

Schrag, Heidegger, and Hermeneutics

In Schrag's seminar on Heidegger's *Being and Time*, I was one of the students assigned to do a précis on sections 32-35, titled "Understanding and Interpretation." Schrag

had mentioned in class the importance of these sections in connection with Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. In those sections, Heidegger writes, "Any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must already have understood what is to be interpreted" to which he adds, "What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way."[1] These are the claims I want to explore in a bit more detail here. One of the main insights that came to me from the Heidegger seminar regards the relationship between interpretation and understanding. It is as if people generally assume things to be one way, but they are sometimes nearly opposite of what people assume. For example, in common sense, people tend to imagine that they're without any "pre-having," without any fore-structures. They unreflectively imagine individuals without presuppositions, who simply stand before things. Then, when those individuals begin an encounter, they interpret something, perhaps further interpret it and then after all those interpretations, they subsequently arrive at an understanding. That seems to be, very roughly cast, how common sense naively assumes things to be. Heidegger, in contrast, is suggesting that understanding is not a cognitive psychic activity that goes on "within" a mind after a series of individual interpretations. Heidegger writes, "Whenever something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception. An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us."[2] Understanding is always already out in the world as a projection of possibilities. It is thoroughly part of the temporality of Dasein, a temporality that incorporates past, present, and future. In projecting possibilities, Dasien exhibits a futuralness, a sort of leaping-ahead that retainingly-awaits. This also means that we always already understand in some pre-cast way. There is a "fore-having," whereby we already stand in some relationship to the situations that we are in as well as to the things we are attempting to interpret. The material to be interpreted has always already been made available to understanding. As Heidegger writes, ". . . interpretation is grounded existentially in understanding; the latter does not arise from the former."[3]

This can seem to be a vicious circle, as one is thereby caught within whatever one is trying to interpret. Said simply, if understanding precedes interpretation, how can one avoid having the interpretation already determined in advance? I quote Heidegger at length:

---

[1] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Harper & Row, 1962), 195.
[2] Ibid., 191-192.
[3] Ibid., 188.

> In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing. To be sure, we genuinely take hold of this possibility only when, in our interpretation, we have understood that our first, last and constant task is to never allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather . . . by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves.[4]

We here find Heidegger foreshadowing a theme he will develop at length later in *What is Called Thinking?*. In that text he seeks not that which people term "thinking" but rather a particular kind of thinking, "called thinking." "Called thinking" is thinking that is not an imposition upon things, but a thinking which is called forth by the things to be thought about.

Interpretation, then, is the way that understanding unfolds and develops itself. There are many different examples that could be given to illustrate this, but I think the most relevant is simply how people already have presuppositions about what understanding and interpretation are and how they relate. This is manifestly evident when we try to grasp how and why texts can be difficult to comprehend. One of the reasons people struggle with interpreting a text is because they already have sets of assumptions. Some of these fore-had assumptions are about philosophers, philosophical traditions, and the history of various arguments and stances. Other assumptions regard what communication is, what language is, what a text is, what a person is, and how all these are related.

In many regards, after professor Schrag's Heidegger seminar, I couldn't help but see how Schrag's work incorporates these insights as concerns and how he used them as a hermeneutical strategy. What is so striking about Schrag's work, for me anyway, is his ability to take hold of inherited traditions of philosophy and eke out and articulate a middle way: a space between those who overstated their claims and those who underdeveloped available resources; between claims that invite exaggerated reductionisms and claims that underappreciate implicated complexities, between those who swell with one-eyed mania and those who drown in the delirium of diversity. He always finds a way to save the proverbial baby from being thrown out with the bath water. Schrag well expresses this where he discusses "transversality." He writes, "Such is the dynamics of transversality, striving for convergence without coincidence, skirting

[4] Ibid., 195.

the Scylla of a hegemonic unification while steering clear of the Charybdis of chaotic pluralism."[5]

Contextualized in this way, Schrag's books showcase his engagement with philosophical traditions, where he commonly traverses between positions and often splits the difference with a fitting response. Take, for example, his book *Radical Reflection*. Schrag therein opens a space for recovering the living human being between the metaphysical, epistemological appeals of philosophy and the empirical methodological reductionisms plaguing contemporary psychology, sociology and anthropology. With fine nuance, he navigates the spaces between "methodological pretention" and "methodological naïveté" to reveal a more original mode of reflection, one that is "protophilosophical" and "protoscientific" and which antedates the conceptual formulizations of both philosophy and science. He clears room between existential praxis-oriented philosophies and linguistic/semiotic orientations of structuralism by splitting the difference: he locates the originary milieu of the embodied communicating subject who draws upon semiotics resources. By way of this radicalized anthropology, the human subject, always already historically situated within the living text of the lifeworld, is rescued from the extremities of both philosophy and science. As Schrag concludes his book, "The challenge of any scientific and philosophical study of man, in its aspirations to understand man and his world, it to maintain a reflexivity on this original text."[6]

In his book *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity*, he shows how people have been thrown into a historical tradition mired in metaphysical appeals to a transcendent ego, some kind of soul substance or mind removed from commerce with the world. But subsequent scholars have been quick to decry this as illusion and have sought to abandon the idea of self altogether. They have sought to replace it with an interplay of desire and power, assemblages of social-historical forces. He argues that jettisoning the Cartesian and/or Kantian foundational metaphysical bedrock self does not amount to giving up wholly on the matter of self. Self is not totally deconstructed, not liquidated in the plays of power and desire, not reducible to functions of language where all claims to presence are eternally deferred. Self is stitched into the fabric of discourse and action. Someone is talking about something to someone, and action bears an intersubjective intentionality as people move through the world. Self is refigured, de-centered, more dialogic and contingent, part of a tradition that allows for

---

[5] Calvin O. Schrag, *The Self after Postmodernity*, (Yale University Press, 1997), 132.

[6] Calvin O. Schrag, *Radical Reflection and the Origin of the Human Sciences*, (Purdue University Press, 1980), 126-127.

novelty and emergence of fresh interpretations and activities. Part of Schrag's accomplishment and legacy was to find room between thinkers and traditions by turning to the things themselves. It was to reveal the motivations within the early traditions and to acknowledge the limitations of overly reductive interpretation of self, as if self is either a clinical object that can be weighed and measured in a lab or it is nothing at all. Schrag's work thus details the texture, the space of communicative praxis, where persons exercise a kind of limited but real autonomy and agency. They are neither free from historical circumstances nor determined by them.

In a later book, *The Resources of Rationality*, Schrag makes a distinction between the "hermeneutics of nostalgia" and the "hermeneutics of affirmation." He writes: "In the radicalization of hermeneutics as an interactional and communicative praxis, the rational requirement for discernment borne by the dialectics of participation and distanciation remains in force . . . Hermeneutics thus progresses as both a hermeneutics of nostalgia and a hermeneutics of affirmation."[7] By the former, he refers to the posture of participation with the past and with tradition, to engage in creative remembrance. It allows us to interpret and re-evaluate the past, attempting to secure space for traditions and lifeways that have been and should continue to be informative to the present. By the latter, he refers to distanciation and to possibilities not yet explored, to practices and values that need to be sought, fostered and brought about.

Finally, in his book *The Self After Postmodernity*, we can see Schrag employing this strategy throughout, where he draws a portrait of self in discourse, action, community, and transcendence. In each case, he opens middle-ground articulations. This appears most clearly as he concludes the chapter on "The Self in Community." He shows how the self who is situated within the space of communicative praxis, a self who is "context-conditioned" rather than "context-determined," is afforded the capacity for "a fitting response that is neither ahistorically absolutist nor historically relativistic."[8]

In the present, we all struggle to make sense and to give fitting responses where we open to the past and future, selectively retaining portions of the past while opening to possibilities still outstanding. Philosophical discernment, with a longing for justice, integrity, and honesty, is what Schrag's work so well illustrates and demonstrates. I am

---

[7] Calvin O. Schrag, *The Resources of Rationality: A Response to the Postmodern Challenge*, (Indiana University Press, 1992), 73.
[8] Schrag, *The Self after Postmodernity*, 109.

grateful beyond words for receiving the gift of having been, and of continuing to be, one of his students.

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

Donovan Irven
Independent Scholar, USA

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]

---

[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.

---

[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.

---

[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.

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

ISSN 1918-7351
Volume 18 (2026)

Remembering My Experiences with Calvin O. Schrag

Annette M. Holba
Duquesne University, USA
ORCID: 0000-0003-1842-6221

Calvin O. Schrag was the George Ade Distinguished Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Purdue University specializing in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and postmodernism. I did not attend Purdue for my graduate studies, but I still recognized Professor Schrag as someone who had significant influence upon my thinking, my learning, and the trajectory of my scholarship. I do know some of his former students and they described him as an amazing teacher/mentor and I can see why. Those former students of Professor Schrag's are some of the top thinkers that have emerged as the next generation of significant philosophical thinkers in communication, rhetoric, semiotics, phenomenology, and hermeneutics in the United States and abroad. Through their teachings and scholarship, Schrag's legacy is alive and continues to make a difference in the lives of their students in our ever-evolving disciplines.

Professor Schrag was guided by and exemplified intellectual generosity toward those of us who did not know him like his own students knew him. We could connect with him any time on the phone, over email, in academic environments, and socially at conferences. Professor Schrag was always teaching *to* and *for* someone, and *about* something. His modeling of transversal rationality spread betwixt and between the academy, institutions, and in all kinds of dialogic encounters and environments around ideas that interested him most. Professor Schrag passed away March 11, 2024, leaving a legacy that will continue to inspire, transform, and innovate the practice of reasoning and how we understand rationality in application.

You can learn a lot about Professor Schrag by reading his scholarship. Schrag described his own philosophical journey as a philosophical odyssey.[1] He also practiced what he preached. Through his emphasis on transversal rationality, he became an intellectual conscience as he advocated for hermeneutic humility when he warned against imperialism as we approach our scholarship. He wanted his students to be open to others exactly where they are and to learn from them no matter what. We can describe his odyssey as being "betwixt and between" which is a couplet he used quite often, especially in his text, *Philosophical Papers: Betwixt and Between*. Schrag described this collection of his philosophical essays as an "assemblage of narratives" rather than a unified master tale of his work.[2] He also described it as a collection that demonstrates a shift in his focus over time, a shift in the philosophical interests that drove his questions which he described as a bunch of "turns and twists in discursive strategy, as well as some experiments within the rhetorical and communicative environment."[3] Professor Schrag indicated odyssey is more like a collage of stories than a grand narrative, but that the stories have some kind of "open textured binding."[4] He referred to it as a "panoply of indicators of the shifts and turns that were required in addressing the variegated philosophical concerns that make up the legacy of recent continental thought" referring to the latter part of the 20th century.[5] In many ways, Schrag was critical of his discipline. He was not only a philosopher, but he was also a kind of philosophical critic in that he was not just reciting histories in philosophy, but rather, he was philosophizing by creating an appendage of how he observed and phenomenologically experienced continental philosophy in the 20th century.

When I think of Schrag's body of scholarship and his legacy, one emphasis area of his inquiry has been around reason and rationality. He sought to sketch a reconstructive space for situating claims of reason. His thinking exemplified reason and rationality by exploring *how* to think about things, how one thinks and reasons. Through his inquiry, Professor Schrag outlined a reconstruction of reason.

At a more personal level, Professor Schrag encouraged my thinking and writing by asking questions that opened meaning in significant ways. One time, after I presented a paper at a conference, he raised his hand and made a few comments. The paper I presented was on leisure at a communication ethics conference at Duquesne University. The point I was making suggested leisure, philosophically speaking, was

---

[1] Calvin O. Schrag, *Philosophical Papers: Betwixt and Between*, (State University of New York Press, 1994).
[2] Ibid., 1.
[3] Ibid., 1.
[4] Ibid., 2.
[5] Ibid., 2.

more about being rather than about doing. I wasn't fully sure how to weave my argument, or how to reason through it to make my point clear since I was still working through my ideas. However, the question he asked me hermeneutically opened that pathway so that I could make my case, which I was able to do in several subsequent publications. Professor Schrag's focus on, and engagement with, debate, dialogue, and dialectic (rhetoric) provided me the guidance and persistence I needed to embrace transversal rationality and hermeneutic humility so that I would be able to create a compelling case grounded in possibilities not absolutes.

Later, when I was writing my second book on leisure, I knew the framework that I wanted to use for that was to mirror Schrag's framework in *Self After Postmodernity* to demonstrate the relationship between the self, leisure, and the other, in a discussion illuminating an ethical framework of self in discourse, self in action, self in community, and self in transcendence.[6] This project enabled me to engage in transversal rationality and hermeneutic humility as I considered how leisure cultivated an ethical awareness. Though, I was not yet aware of how the structures of moral consciousness actually shaped the ethical relations between self and other and self and community. My continued and ongoing contemplation on Schrag's work has enabled me to be clearer in my articulations of his work and it has expanded my continuing understanding of his philosophy. These are just small examples of how Professor Schrag impacted my professional development and the trajectory of my own scholarship.

However, on a personal note, Professor Schrag also demonstrated a commitment to the human element of his work—his interpersonal commitment to the other. Through ongoing email discussions, when in 2014 I was co-coordinating and co-facilitating an NCA Roundtable discussion where top philosophers in the Communication discipline would respond to questions, I found our conversations delightful, funny, and warm-hearted. Besides those deeply authentic dialogic engagements in email, and at various conferences, symposiums, and conventions over the years, in July 2014, I received a package at my home from Professor Schrag. Here is the text of the letter I received on his Purdue University letterhead:

> Dear Annette,
> Enclosed find some stuff for your bedtime reading. It will probably put you to sleep before you finish the Introduction!

---

[6] Calvin O. Schrag, *Self After Postmodernity*, (Yale University Press, 1997).

> I look forward to receiving the questions that you and Igor are crafting for the November NCA Conference. This has all of the makings of being a most enjoyable event! See you in Chicago.
> All the best wishes,
> Cal Schrag

This letter was inserted in his book, *Reflections on the Religious, the Ethical, and the Political* (2013). The inscription in the book stated:

> To Annette Holba,
> With my compliments and all of the best wishes,
> C. O. Schrag

Of course, I read the book and found it very valuable to the development of my own thinking about leisure as well as other aspects of philosophy of communication that would come to inform future projects I embarked upon. But it was really the idea that Professor Schrag took the time to write me a note, package up and send a book with such a human-centered message to someone he only knew from conventions that struck me as extra kind and extra special. That was his heart which I came to understand as the embodiment of hermeneutic humility.

In the book, Schrag offers an existential and phenomenological description of moral consciousness. After considering his discussion around the structures of a moral consciousness (intersubjective intentionality, historicity, temporality, purpose, meaning, and freedom) his work expanded my thinking on leisure that led me to make the claim, leisure creates the condition for one to engage with and act from a moral consciousness.[7] Schrag suggested that the structures that he identified are transcendental factors that account for the possibility of a moral act. However, I thought, but what moves these factors to open this possibility? After thinking about this question for a while, I realized that leisure is involved in each of those factors as 1) leisure informs intersubjective intentionality, 2) leisure occurs within historical context, 3) leisure is shaped by kairotic time and time outside of time, 4) leisure opens purpose, 5) leisure leads toward meaning, and 6) leisure is a catalyst for freedom. Working through each of these structures has been challenging but it also has expanded the significance of leisure in ways that were hidden to me before.

I was saddened to hear of Professor Schrag's passing. We have lost a truly special human being who embodied excellence as a philosopher, teacher, mentor, and

---

[7] Calvin O. Schrag, *Reflections on the Religious, the Ethical, and the Political*, (Lexington Books, 2013), 92-99.

colleague. He is missed by many, but he has left us with a roadmap to keep his philosophical odyssey going. By using the seeds of his work as philosophical coordinates in our own journeys, by remembering to approach our scholarship with hermeneutic humility, and by remembering transversal rationality was his correction to traditional rationality and reason, we will carry his legacy well into the future.

Thank you, Professor Schrag, for your kindness, your intellectual generosity, and your hermeneutic vision and invitation to help us keep steadfast on our own philosophical journeys.

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

Elise Poll
Arizona State University, USA
ORCID: 0000-0003-1483-4682

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.

---

[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.