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Remembering My Experiences with Calvin O. Schrag

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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

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[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!

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[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

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[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.