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Remembering and Honoring Professor Calvin O. Schrag

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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:

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[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

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[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

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[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.