

A Conversation with Calvin O. Schrag

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George Ade Distinguished Professor of Philosophy Emeritus, Calvin O. Schrag came to Purdue University in 1957 and retired at the turn of the century. In April, 2000 fifteen eminent scholars gathered at Purdue to honor his forty-three years of service as a scholar, educator, and colleague. This interview provides a fitting afterword to that memorable Purdue gathering, which I organized and later co-edited with William L. McBride as the Festschrift, *Calvin O. Schrag and the Task of Philosophy after Postmodernity* (2002). While in that book Schrag responds to sixteen contributors addressing him from various professional angles, in this interview, in at once a more revealing and personal way, we become witnesses of his philosophical journey through the latter part of the twentieth century. Professor Schrag is the author of some seventy articles and nine books, including *Radical Reflection and the Origin of the Human Sciences* (1980), *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity* (1986), *The Resources of Rationality* (1992), *The Self after Postmodernity* (1997), and, most recently, *God As Otherwise Than Being* (2002).

MATUŠTÍK: Professor Schrag, why did you choose philosophy as your vocation?

SCHRAG: It is extraordinarily difficult to answer questions about the motives that underlie the major decisions in one's personal and professional life. There are always multiple factors at work that play themselves out against the backdrop of the particularities of being born at a particular time and place, family history, and events in one's early development. In my particular case, what would motivate someone to become a philosopher who was born and reared on a farm on the plains of South Dakota during the time of the Great Depression? This may indeed be at the root of your question!

Simplifying, and I suspect doing so to the extreme, I would highlight two factors that played a formative influence on my vocational choice. The one has to do with my family, and the other involves the challenging and influential mentors during my early educational experiences. Along with being a farmer, my father was also a pastor of a Mennonite congregation that espoused the teachings of the radical reformers of the Anabaptist movement of sixteenth-century Europe. It is quite understandable how influences from this left wing of the Protestant Reformation would foster suspicions about hierarchically organized institutions, both those of church and state. I remember as a lad that much of the talk at the dinner table, following a day of strenuous labor of tilling the soil, centered on topics of the struggle for religious liberty, the need for tolerance on matters of belief, and the necessity for critical inquiry. Indeed, I was later to learn that many of the topics and questions discussed were of a decidedly Socratic sort, respondent to the Socratic maxims: "Know

thymself!" and "The unexamined life is not worth living."

These early family influences need to be coupled with the stimulation and encouragement by elementary and high school teachers who allowed their students to proceed at their own pace and pursue interests that extended beyond the confines of a prescribed curriculum. This fostered a desire for exploring uncharted pathways and new horizons. It thus was not unexpected that upon entering college I would be attracted to courses in philosophy, and as a result my vocational goals began to take on a more definite configuration.

MATUŠTÍK: The name Calvin Schrag has come to stand for one of the founding and leading voices of contemporary North American Continental philosophy. This assessment is made against the inherited legacy of the twentieth-century split among analytic, Continental, and pragmatist approaches to professional philosophy. But at your graduation from Harvard University in 1957, were you thinking of yourself as choosing a "Continental" track in philosophy? To ask this question in another way, how would you describe the state of North American professional philosophy during your graduate studies?

SCHRAG: One could not be a student of philosophy in an American college during the 1940s and 1950s and not encounter the thought of Alfred North Whitehead. His book, *Process and Reality*, was discussed both in the classroom and in the hallways, and there was much ado about the need to avoid the twin fallacies of misplaced concreteness and simple location! It was, of course, known that Whitehead had spent the last years of his illustrious career at Harvard, and that one of his brilliant students, Raphael Demos, had been appointed to the philosophy faculty to continue the Whiteheadian tradition. This clearly was a factor in my desire to study at Harvard. I still recall Professor Demos reminiscing on how Whitehead had set aside a day to lay out for him the terrain of his entire philosophical explorations! Somewhat ironically, however, Demos took Whitehead's assessment that the history of Western philosophy was but a series of footnotes to Plato with such seriousness that he decided to devote his own professional career to a study of the main text! As a result Demos became one of America's leading Plato scholars, and clearly I learned more from him about Plato than I did about Whitehead!

In the end, however, it was Demos's colleague, John Wild, who played a more decisive role in my professional development, leading to my opting for the "Continental" track in philosophy. John Wild had studied with Martin Heidegger as a Guggenheim Fellow in 1930–31, and later with two of his graduate students at Harvard he made available a paraphrase translation of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*. It was principally through my association with Professor Wild, serving as his Teaching Fellow for two semesters, that the direction of my future graduate study program was set. It was his suggestion that I apply for a Fulbright Fellowship to enable me to spend a year of study

abroad.

You ask about my vocational choice amidst the inherited legacy of a philosophical situation of the time in which analytical, Continental, and pragmatist approaches were becoming significant voices in the American philosophical academy. Clearly, the dominant voices came from the analytical camp, although this camp itself was in a transition from analytical positivism to analytical linguistic philosophy. Signs of a revival of classical American pragmatism were already discernible during the 1950s, and Continental philosophy was beginning to receive a hearing, but in a quite limited manner. This was generally the state of affairs in North American professional philosophy during the days of my graduate studies. Anyone interested in this mix of philosophical currents would have been particularly interested in developments at Harvard and Yale, and those attracted to a more specific Continental orientation would have investigated the philosophy departments at Northwestern University and the New School for Social Research.

MATUŠTÍK: What were your key formative experiences and who were your teachers at Harvard? How was it to work with Paul Tillich?

SCHRAG: The key formative experiences during my graduate program career included associations with a number of faculty and fellow students. First and foremost, I would have to acknowledge the director of my doctoral program, John Wild; but there were also other professors who had a significant impact on my vocational decisions. These included the already mentioned Raphael Demos; Harry Austin Wolfson, who taught me pretty much all the medieval philosophy and philosophy of Spinoza that I know; and Henry Bugbee, one of the more marginalized American philosophers of the twentieth century, whose contribution is currently receiving long overdue attention. Henry Bugbee was deeply interested in the existentialism of Gabriel Marcel, made frequent trips to France to converse with him, and adopted Marcel's non-directive, dialogical approach to philosophical understanding and communication. One of the more cherished memories of my graduate school experience is attending the fireside discussions in Professor Bugbee's home, recalling Descartes's *Meditations* around a roaring fire, pursuing questions about *The Mystery of Being* (the title of Marcel's Gifford Lecture that he delivered at the University of Aberdeen in 1949 and 1950). Unfortunately, upon my return to Harvard after my Fulbright year at Heidelberg, Henry Bugbee was gone, a victim of the "publish or perish" virus that began to infect American universities during this period.

You ask about my association with Paul Tillich. It was during my year abroad that Tillich came to Harvard from Columbia to assume the prestigious post of "University Professor," a transdisciplinary faculty appointment modeled after the Regis Professorship at Oxford. Upon my return to Harvard, Tillich

asked if I would be willing to serve as his assistant. I accepted the challenge, unaware of the quite tremendous responsibilities that this would entail. His undergraduate course on the philosophy of history was quickly oversubscribed and the enrollment skyrocketed to the point where there was no classroom large enough on the Harvard campus to accommodate all the students who wanted to sit at the feet of the great Tillich! So we had to meet in Sanders Theatre, with its multi-tiered balconies, with over four hundred students enrolled, and I the lone assistant! Tillich also taught a graduate course titled "Classical German Idealism" (mainly Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel), which made things a bit awkward for me in having a graduate student evaluate the work of fellow graduate students. Although John Wild was my major professor, Tillich was particularly helpful in the drafting of my dissertation on Kierkegaard and Heidegger. Tillich and Heidegger were colleagues at Marburg University during the twenties, and there is no question that Heidegger's philosophy was a formative factor in Tillich's own research and writing.

I need also mention that it was Tillich who introduced me to Herbert Marcuse and put me into communication with Hannah Arendt. Marcuse was teaching at Brandeis University at the time. When I was writing my dissertation, Tillich told me: "You must meet my good friend, Herbert Marcuse; he knows more about Heidegger than does anyone else!" So I arranged for an interview with Marcuse, which turned out to be quite productive as we discussed multiple facets of Heidegger's philosophical contribution. Also, Tillich suggested that I write to Hannah Arendt at the New School for Social Research and tell her about my dissertation thesis, which I straightway did and received a very cordial letter (which must be stashed away somewhere in my files!) in which she sets the record straight on Heidegger's use and understanding of the distinction between *Sein* and *Seiendes*.

MATUŠTÍK: Who among your student peers became influential in your lifetime?

SCHRAG: A number of student peers during my graduate studies later became quite influential during their own professional careers, and from whom I learned much, both during our student days and beyond. These included Hubert Dreyfus and David Crownfield, both of whom were graduates of Harvard College and then resumed studies in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. Dreyfus finished his distinguished career at the University of California at Berkeley, during which time he became one of the foremost interpreters of Heidegger's work on *Being and Time*. Crownfield retired from Northern Iowa University and made his contribution principally in the area of contemporary Continental religious thought. The late Samuel Todes was also in this group. He taught at Northwestern University for his entire career and established a reputation as a discerning interpreter and critic of Merleau-Ponty's notion of the lived body. Susan Sontag, whose name is of the household genre among New York

literary critics, was a fellow student in Donald Williams's metaphysics seminar. And then there was a somewhat bashful exchange student from Paris, who has achieved a quite significant reputation not only in his native France but indeed worldwide. His name is Jacques Derrida.

MATUŠTÍK: During your studies at Heidelberg University in Germany as a Fulbright Scholar you sought out courses and seminars on Heidegger. It has been said that when you examined the course offerings in the philosophy bulletin you were surprised that no specific courses on Heidegger were listed, and then you were astonished to discover that *all* courses dealt with Heidegger in one way or another. How did you discover your own path to Heidegger and Kierkegaard, the topic of your dissertation thesis and later your first, and still groundbreaking, book?

SCHRAG: My Fulbright year at Heidelberg was of critical moment for my subsequent professional career, and it was particularly important for the early stages of my dissertation research. As you have indicated, upon my arrival at the university I was somewhat astonished to find that although the course offerings included the standard fare in the history of philosophy and specific seminars on Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Jaspers, the name of Heidegger was conspicuously absent from the catalog of lecture courses and seminars. But I was soon to learn that *all* of the offerings were on Heidegger! Even in the seminar on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, the professor and the students alike were always ready to offer running comparisons of Kant and Heidegger on a variety of topics and themes. Gadamer's seminar on "Hegel and the Presocratics" could well have been titled "Hegel and Heidegger on the Presocratics"!

Plainly enough, the philosophical climate at Heidelberg in those days was very conducive to research on the contribution of Heidegger. It was in this climate that I discovered my own path to Heidegger, via a sustained and quite specific comparison of his philosophy with that of Kierkegaard. While I was enrolled in a seminar on "Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death*," I was at the same time doing a privately arranged directed reading course with Dieter Henrich, who graciously agreed to walk me through the thickets of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*. (At the time, Henrich was Gadamer's Assistant, and as any historian of modern philosophy well knows, Dieter Henrich is currently the world's leading authority on modern German philosophy from Kant through Hegel). It was principally through the combined close critical analysis of these two texts that I landed upon the undergirding thesis for my dissertation—namely, that Heidegger's ontological hermeneutic of Dasein could be explicated as an ontologization and secularization of Kierkegaard's concrete ethico-religious understanding of human existence—particularly as developed by Kierkegaard in Part I of *Sickness Unto Death*. As you have observed, this dissertation was

later expanded and published as my first book, *Existence and Freedom: Towards an Ontology of Human Finitude*.

Also, I would be remiss in not mentioning the opportunity occasioned by my year at Heidelberg to meet Karl Jaspers, who was at the University of Basil at the time. One of my professors, a certain Dr. Rossman, was a former student of Jaspers and taught a seminar on Jaspers's philosophy. I was enrolled in the seminar, and through the good graces of Dr. Rossman was able to arrange for a conference with Jaspers at his Basil residence. The meeting with Jaspers was one of those memorable events that graduate students hold dear. Jaspers wrote to me prior to my departure from Heidelberg and invited me to attend his seminar on Lessing, held the day before our scheduled meeting. So I left a day early, attended the seminar, introduced myself, and told Jaspers that I would be in his office the next day at the beginning of his regular office hours (which were from 9:00 to 12:00). I had some specific questions, mainly spinoffs from a term paper that I had done on Jaspers's thought earlier in my graduate studies, and he deftly fielded each of the questions, stopping at opportune moments to make sure that I had grasped the matter at hand, and providing additional clarification if necessary. The whole session was a veritable clinic in "communication as a loving struggle"—which you recall is the central theme in the second volume of his three-volume *Philosophie*. I was particularly touched by his generosity, turning away students who had come to see him during his office hours, informing them that he wanted to devote his time to a student from the U.S.A. who was in town only for the day. My interview lasted the entirety of his scheduled office hours!

MATUŠTÍK: What were your impressions of Hans-Georg Gadamer?

SCHRAG: Actually, I knew very little about Gadamer when I enrolled at Heidelberg. Although at the time he was already well known as a Plato scholar he was one of the younger tenured faculty. The first course that I took with him was a seminar on Plato's *Theatetus*. This nicely complemented my previous Plato studies and deepened my appreciation of the contribution of ancient philosophy. Everyone, of course, knew that he was working on his book manuscript, *Truth and Method*, and clearly the interwoven theses that informed the published volume, which first appeared in 1960, in various ways came into play in his lecture courses and seminars. Most impressive, however, were Gadamer's clinics on the hermeneutics of dialogic engagement in the classroom, ever struggling to achieve understanding amidst conflicting paradigms and differing language games. He had a superb ability to comprehend the thrust of a question, no matter how clumsily formulated, and respond to the question with clarity and decisiveness. Later, upon reading the publication of *Truth and Method*, I was able to discern the existential passion in Gadamer's

logic of questioning that became so apparent in his face-to-face philosophical interactions.

So clearly there is much that I learned from Gadamer during my student days, and no doubt certain deposits of his contribution remain in my own philosophical reflections, even though I have become increasingly critical of what I consider his overly accentuated anti-Enlightenment stance and his heavy emphasis on truth as tradition. The impact of Gadamer on my studies at Heidelberg was balanced by that of Karl Löwith, who was the senior member of the philosophy faculty during my tenure there. Although Löwith was principally doing philosophy of language at the time, his reputation had been secured mainly through his recently published book, *Heidegger: Denker in Dürftiger Zeit* (1953). In this work he established himself as one of the more formidable critics of Heidegger's philosophy. Because Löwith had taught in the United States during the time of World War II, he was quick to make himself accessible to American students for informal discussions.

MATUŠTÍK: Your university career bears marks of an extraordinary, almost monastic stability of place—Purdue was your first and only tenured appointment from 1957 to 2000—yet the shape of its philosophy department has undergone dramatic developments. In your lifetime it has evolved from an unknown liberal arts unit to a department with a strong Continental presence and then to what is today one of the top Ph.D. programs in the United States, where a pluralistic study of philosophy can be pursued with integrity and faculty support. After half a century in the profession, what is your prognosis for the future of philosophical pluralism in the United States?

SCHRAG: Purdue was my first professorial appointment. I joined the faculty in the fall of 1957, immediately following the completion of my graduate studies, and overriding the objections of my major professor. This was a time when teaching appointments in philosophy were readily available, and Professor Wild had a hard time comprehending why anyone would want to be stuck in a mid-western agriculture and engineering institution with no graduate program in philosophy! I could not bear to tell him that at the time Purdue did not even have an undergraduate major in philosophy on the books! But I very much liked the young faculty of philosophers in what was then called the Department of History, Government, and Philosophy, which itself was part of the School of Science, Education, and Humanities. Also, it was evident that Purdue, given its resources, was on the way to becoming a complete university, shedding its image as a specialized technological institution. Subsequent decades demonstrated that this potential could be actualized. Within less than a decade a doctoral program in philosophy was set in place. So Purdue became my permanent home, with intermittent visiting appointments at the University of Illinois, Northwestern University, Indiana University, and

the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

As the Department of Philosophy developed it became evident that we had significant resources, both in personnel and higher administration support, to chart a rather unique mission of philosophical pluralism, accommodating differing perspectives and fields of inquiry. Analytical philosophy, pragmatism, and Continental philosophy were all given a voice. At the time that we were building our program there were graduate schools that were predominantly Continental in approach and there were schools that were entirely analytical, and students were required to follow one direction or the other. We found this to be unacceptable and made a commitment to foster an environment of pluralism. It would be presumptuous on my part to say that we inaugurated a trend, but over the years we were able to discern increasing recognition on the part of philosophy departments of the need to accommodate a plurality of philosophical perspectives. Given that the world of tomorrow will indeed be a multicultural global village, such an accommodation of multiple perspectives becomes a veritable requirement, lest we all fall victim to a profound metaphysical embarrassment. And here I am reminded of Thomas Carlyle's classic response to Margaret Fuller's heroic self-affirmation: "I accept the universe!"—to which Carlyle replied, "Gad, she'd better!"

MATUŠTÍK: During your lifetime, you reflected in your works on the rise, division, and overcoming of various trends within Continental philosophy itself. You witnessed among these at first the rise in prominence of phenomenology and existential philosophy (and the philosophical society bearing that name), to be eclipsed by the emergence of hermeneutics and poststructuralism, and issuing into a broader intellectual sparring between modernism and postmodernism lasting through the turn of the century. With works by philosophers such as Rorty and Habermas, Ricoeur and Derrida, or Davidson and Brandom, this last division would seem to displace the one among Continental, analytic, and pragmatist orientations of the 1950s, thereby returning us to the space of interrupted Central-European conversations among logical positivists, phenomenologists, and critical theorists of the 1930s. You revisit this very space in your timely Husserl lecture delivered to Prague students of Jan Patočka and members of Ivan Havel's transdisciplinary Center for Theoretical Study. What do you consider to be the key philosophical questions of the twenty-first century that bring us together across our divergent philosophical starting points?

SCHRAG: The development of Continental philosophy during the twentieth century, as you indicate, was not that of a serene and untroubled unfolding. It underwent numerous turns and twists, exhibiting shifts of inquiry as it moved from phenomenology to existentialism, to existential phenomenology, to hermeneutics, to critical theory, to structuralism, to poststructuralism—and

at times to a combination of all of the above! All this now appears to have culminated (if indeed the grammar of "culmination" is appropriate here) in an agon between the modernists and the postmodernists. Yes, the tenure of my professional career allowed me to visit these changing philosophical scenes. Indeed, it was mandatory for anyone laboring in the vineyards of recent Continental thought to become involved with the undulating cross-currents of philosophical reflection. And add to this already mixed panoply the different stages of analytical philosophy and a quite vigorous revival of American pragmatism, the philosophical situation of our time has indeed become a quite crowded and variegated landscape.

My own research and teaching during the later half of the twentieth century very much reflected this mix as I made efforts to navigate my way through it. You mention the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy. Yes, I was very much a part of the inauguration of this Society, which was convened for the first time in October of 1962 at Northwestern University. The original charter committee consisted of John Wild, the newly appointed Head of the Northwestern Department of Philosophy, who had just made history by being the first senior professor at Harvard to relinquish his position and move to another university; William Earle and James Edie, who were Wild's colleagues at Northwestern; George Schrader of Yale; and myself. Records indicate that some forty professors and graduate students attended the inaugural meeting. As you know, since then the Society has burgeoned to a membership of some twelve hundred. My first two books, *Existence and Freedom* and *Experience and Being* were basically efforts to address issues in the developments of phenomenology and existential philosophy. Clearly, *Experience and Being* is my most phenomenological work, in which I make an effort to split the difference between Husserl's *Experience and Judgment* and Heidegger's *Being and Time* by a cross-reading of a phenomenological account of "experience" with an existentialist perspective on "being."

But then structuralism emerged on the scene. In 1968 the students at the University of Paris buried existentialism with a mock funeral of Jean-Paul Sartre, accompanied with floating banners that read: "*viva le structuralisme!*" So a new challenge was brought forward. How does one deal with such a multifaceted structuralist form of inquiry—multifaceted because the proponents of this new approach came from the assorted disciplines of anthropology, sociology, literary theory, linguistics, psychiatry, and political theory, as well as from formal philosophy. The common field of exploration was defined as "*les sciences de l'Homme*," and the agreed upon assessment was that the human sciences are in disarray, in a veritable state of crisis, lacking any understanding of their origins and any trustworthy definition of their goals. My book, *Radical Reflection and the Origin of the Human Sciences*, was my critical response to the structuralist challenge, proffering the argument that in seeking to solve the crisis of the human sciences via a search for an

infrastructure of abstracted linguistic units and binary societal relations the structuralists were looking in the wrong place. What the situation required, I countered, was a response to the crisis of the human sciences with a search for their origins in a hermeneutic of everyday life.

It was surely not wholly unexpected that a *poststructuralist* reaction would follow on the heels of widespread dogmatic pronouncements about superstructures and infrastructures. All of these structures had to be *de*-constructed. Such was the requirement of the times. So everybody started deconstructing pretty much everything in sight, including, and indeed first and foremost, the human subject and anything that resembled a structure of subjectivity. *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity* was my response to the poststructuralist demand for deconstruction, and as you know in the work I espoused a critical position that was sympathetic to certain strategies of the deconstructionist stance, commending the poststructuralists for calling our attention to the vagaries of classical metaphysical definitions of the subject as well as modern epistemological efforts to secure a zero-point foundationalist epistemological subject. However, contra certain excesses of deconstruction, I argued for a vibrant human subject as self-interpreting speaker and agent that could be found within the folds of communicative praxis as an amalgam of discourse and action.

As you observe in your question, however, the scene appears now to have changed again, situating philosophical discourse against the backdrop of the modernism versus postmodernism debate. This requires that one broaden the philosophical conversation to include representatives of pragmatism and the new analytical philosophy as well as the more standard figures in recent Continental thought. Along with Derrida, Ricoeur, and Habermas, one needs to extend the conversation to include Rorty, Davidson, and Brandom. This does appear to require returning to an earlier, pre-1950 space of inquiry. Yes, as you point out, I did revisit this space in my Prague lecture of March 2000, and I revisited this space against the backdrop of Edmund Husserl's famous Prague lecture of 1935, "The Crisis of European Sciences and Psychology," which later made its way into his massive and groundbreaking posthumously published work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy*.

I specifically chose as the title of my Prague lecture "The Task of Philosophy for the New Millennium" in commemoration of Husserl's profound contribution in his very last work, in which he set the task of philosophy for the future as that of retrieving what he called "the *genuine* sense of rationalism," after the *naïve* rationalism of the eighteenth century had declared bankruptcy. This call for a genuine sense of rationalism is a task that needs to be undertaken time and again, and in my lecture I made an attempt to address the principal issues in this task by sketching a refigured concept of reason as *transversal*, navigating a passage between the Scylla of unredeemable claims for a

hegemonic universality and the Charybdis of a historically relativistic procession of particularities. I had already developed in some detail the requirement for an understanding of reason as *trans*-versal rather than *uni*-versal in my 1992 book, *The Resources of Rationality: A Response to the Postmodern Challenge*. In my Prague lecture I was intent on relating this requirement to Husserl's contribution during an earlier period of the twentieth century. I am now of the mind that the issue having to do with the potential and limits of human reason is indeed one of the key philosophical issues that beckons us in the twenty-first century as we strive to communicate across our divergent philosophical perspectives.

There is another facet to the requirement of returning to the space of philosophical inquiry during the earlier decades of the twentieth century that needs to be mentioned. This has to do with revisiting the contributions of the stalwarts in the classical period of American philosophy, namely the triumvirate of Peirce, James, and Dewey. These pioneers of American intellectual history forged new pathways in their explorations of the resources of reason in its praxial orientation. Peirce called our attention to the fortunes and limitations of language for philosophical reflection; James attuned us to the resident intentionality in what he called "the world experienced"; and Dewey sought to enlighten us on the public and its problems. As we make our way about in the new millennium, we will be enriched by a remembrance of the accomplishments of this indigenous American philosophy.

MATUŠTÍK: Some philosophers, even if they do not become kings, try to influence the course of the world, others pursue philosophical arguments in a thoroughly apolitical and acosmic manner, still others grant philosophy an existential role of non-political politics. You at times speak of "transversal rationality" as an aid to global dialogue across cultural differences. Is there a place for philosophy in public affairs, or do you think that many ills of the world would be cured when philosophers stopped meddling in politics?

SCHRAG: Philosophy is in danger of losing its birthright if it evades its responsibility of addressing the ills of civil society. This is why we need to be reminded time and again of the questions that Plato raised in *The Republic*. We might not arrive at the same answers that Plato did, but we cannot shirk the responsibility of addressing the questions that he asked. What is the good state and what are the resources for setting it up? These are intensely practical-political questions that are constitutive of the inquiring beings that we ourselves are. Personal identity is inseparable from socio-political identity; personal goals and aspirations are inextricably entwined with that which is deemed to be good for the polis.

Although I have not written any books specifically in the genre of what is commonly referenced as social or political philosophy, as you have indicated

I have at times called upon the notion of “transversal rationality” to help us navigate the churning rapids of social and political strife by steering a course toward a global dialogue that strives for cooperation amidst cultural differences. The concept/metaphor of transversality—basically a generalization of orthogonality, delineating a convergence without coincidence—is able to do service in an understanding and critique of civil society by setting the requirement for a recognition of the need to coexist with the other while acknowledging her or his otherness. It provides a sheet anchor against hegemonic aspirations to absolutize a particular political platform, or a set of prescribed folkways and customs, or an established religious institution. In times of accentuated cultural crises, such as events of racial and ethnic genocide, it issues a call to acknowledge the other as a citizen inhabiting a common earth, who may indeed illustrate differences of race, creed, or color, but with whom I am destined to work out my civic responsibilities, seeking convergence without coincidence, congruence without identity, assimilation without absorption, cooperation without the sacrifice of difference. This is the truth of transversality as the dynamics of understanding and communication in its applicability to the social order.

MATUŠTÍK: What you say assumes that philosophers can always be helpful in public affairs, and that is why they should take a stance, but what about those philosophers whose attempts at changing the course of the world have actually made things worse? Both left and right politics have had their saints and demons among philosophers. What is a philosopher’s responsibility or role in the world?

SCHRAG: How does transversal rationality as a conceptual bulwark against both universal hegemony and anarchic particularity translate into concrete political responsibility? This strikes me as being the brunt of your question—and it is a question most difficult to address—as I guess all *good* questions are! What is the vocation, the calling, of the philosopher as a servant of civil society? Here I am of course reminded of Marx’s paradigm shift, calling for a *changing* of the world rather than a simple *understanding* of it. Clearly philosophers, who carry a social identity as do all other human beings, are called upon to make decisions that have political consequences for their time and place. And these decisions, as you suggest, can be fraught with miscalculations and misjudgments. Plato gave his support to the Tyrants of Syracuse; Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic philosopher, overlooked violations of human rights as Emperor of Rome; Heidegger’s reticence and retreat from politics is well known, and this reticence and retreat is doubly disturbing because we know from his writings during the mid and late thirties that he was profoundly concerned about the distortions of political power in the hands of what he called “global master criminals”—a quite explicit reference to Hitler. But Heidegger did not

respond to this corruption of power; instead he withdrew from the political arena. The situation was quite different in the professional life of Paul Tillich. As professor at the University of Frankfurt in 1933, he directly confronted the oppressive measures of the Nazi regime by publicly denouncing the storm troopers when they invaded the university and expelled the leftist students. The price that he had to pay for his protest and intervention was dismissal from his teaching post at the university.

Clearly, political responsibility is always a matter of responding to the contingencies of the times, and to do so with unavoidable risks. Yet, respond one must. Currently we find ourselves in the midst of an Iraqi crisis, which some political pundits of the day define as a clash of cultures in which Judaeo-Christian civilization is pitted against the alien "other" of Islamic civilization. A fitting response requires that we reject this exclusion and demonization of that which is other and strive for communication and compromise across political and cultural differences. There is much talk of making the world free for democracy, but we tend to define this democracy on our own terms, again failing to acknowledge the contributions of other political voices and the possibility of alternative democratic procedures. "Globalization" is a term that is very much in the news nowadays, and there clearly is a sense in which our world is increasingly becoming a global village. But as we deliberate on how to make our way about in this multicultural village, we need to attend to the subtle insinuations of economic imperialism and global domination. Our current national political philosophy appears to be very much of a war machine mentality, boastful of a military superiority superseding that of any other nation or indeed cluster of nations, resonant with the rhetoric of preemptive war and unilateral regime change. A fitting response, we urge, would give more attention to peace-making resources amidst the panoply of cultural differences.

I have given you a very sketchy response to your difficult question, but I hope that I have at least laid down some markers that might put us on the path to a more extended discussion of the issues at stake.

MATUŠTÍK: The most admirable thing about your lifework is its freshness and vitality, marked by your sustained capacity to learn anew what it means to engage in "communicative praxis." When the new generation of students brought feminist, gender, class, and postcolonial concerns into your classroom, you were among the first in your generation to support them as legitimate questions for mainstream philosophy. How did these voices stimulate your thinking and professional engagements, and how did they enter into your writing?

SCHRAG: My notion of "communicative praxis" is a kind of companion piece to that of "transversal rationality." Indeed, there is a sense in which the latter

is a further explication of the dynamics operative in the former. The project of communicative praxis culminates in a call for the "ethic of the fitting response," as this response is a response to an amalgamated discourse and action that is always already there when one's ethical reflections begin. Transversal rationality guides the resources that enable one to make a response that is fitting.

You are correct in suggesting that the new generation of students that brought feminist, gender, and class concerns into the conversation played a formative role in the shaping of my understanding of communicative praxis. Plainly enough, an ethic of the fitting response to the occurrent discourse and action requires responding to the voices of gender, race, and ethnicity by acknowledging their integrity. As instructor in the classroom and as participant in colloquia at professional meetings it soon became evident to me that pockets of systemic discrimination were still operative. Currents of gender bias and racism were subtle and almost imperceptibly embedded in established linguistic and social practices. I was forced to face up to this in a quite personal way. As founding editors of the international philosophical quarterly, *Man and World*, John Anderson, Joseph Kockelmans, and I had it brought to our attention, principally by our feminine readership, that there was an insidious sexism within the very title of our journal! Fortunately, with the help of the newly appointed Editor-in-Chief of the journal, Robert Scharff, we were able to persuade the publisher to change the title to *Continental Philosophy Review*.

The concept of "praxis," of course, extends all the way back to the classical period of Greek philosophy, and particularly the works of Aristotle. The notion of the "fitting response" also has its forerunner in the Greek concept of "*kathakonta*," used by Aristotle and later by the Stoics. My linking of "praxis" with "communication" was designed to highlight the dialectics of conversation and the role of rhetoric in the shaping of our social practices. To be sure, Gadamer had already moved in this direction, and he too made much of the Stoic requirement to do that which is fitting. I am certainly ready to acknowledge the influence of my former mentor in shaping my own take on the dynamics of the fitting response, and such is the case even when I criticize him for putting too much capital in the economy of retrieving and conserving the tradition which stimulates the drive toward his envisioned goal of a "fusion of horizons." Sometimes the call for the fitting response requires a more robust acknowledgment of the alterity and integrity of the other and a more radical intervention, revision, and at times overthrow of traditional modes of thought and practice. On these matters I find Iris Marion Young and Patricia J. Huntington's use of the grammar of "asymmetrical reciprocity" to be most suggestive. The notion of asymmetrical reciprocity provides a space for the ethical relation in communicative praxis that does not occlude the "otherness" of the other. The voice and visage of the other is heard and seen as exerting ethical claims

that solicit a reciprocity of dialogic interaction that keeps the conversation of humankind going in spite of differences—and indeed *because of* differences.

MATUŠTÍK: Many of your students speak affectionately about you as their teacher. Socrates never wrote anything, and your impact too, wholly apart from your publications, could be felt simply through your students. We read in Plato many shrewd philosophical arguments advanced by Socrates, and yet we know that the Socratic effect reaches deeper than merely exercising logical vigor and clarity of mind. Since all philosophical traditions—never mind their quarrels—claim some of the Socratic mantle for themselves, it might be worth asking the hardest pedagogical, if not philosophical, question of all. In the final and deepest instance, what does the teacher teach?

SCHRAG: Yes, the question “What does the teacher teach?” is one of the most difficult of all questions in philosophical pedagogy, and it is a question that every philosophy instructor needs to ask time and again. It would be presumptuous on my part to say that I have an answer to this question, even though I have spent forty-three years in the classroom at various universities. It is doubly ironic that I have no definitive answer to this question, given that I entered the profession primarily because of an interest in teaching! How can it be that after forty-three years in the business of teaching no fully satisfactory answer appears to be forthcoming?

Your reference to Socrates in the framing of your question is clearly of utmost relevance, for I still believe that it is the dynamics of Socratic inquiry that offers the most productive response to your query. Teaching philosophy involves a combined utilization of dialectics, ignorance, irony, and maieutics—and to this day Socrates stands as the incomparable exemplification of this so-called “socratic method.” Teaching philosophy involves the dialectics of a yes and no, affirmation and negation, method of thinking and discourse. It requires a posture of Socratic ignorance whereby one achieves the knowledge of knowing when one doesn’t know. It illustrates the use of irony in disclosing both to oneself and to others the hidden discrepancies between what is said and what is meant, and between what is preached and what is practiced. And it is a process that is maieutic in character, eliciting from the student potentialities of thought and action that are able to stand in service of the Socratic ideal of self-knowledge and creative participation in the affairs of the polis. This is what a teacher of philosophy should teach—clearly not a string of propositions tied into a bundle of assertoric claims, but rather a logic of questioning wherewith to interrogate the resources of self and societal constitution. And in following this Socratic method one will quickly become aware that one learns more from one’s students than one either realizes or is prone to admit.

MATUŠTÍK: Although in your earlier career you wrote a few articles in the general area of philosophy of religion, you never wrote a book on the subject until recently, *God as Otherwise than Being: Toward a Semantics of the Gift*. During the past decades, philosophy of religion in North America has been predominantly a venture in analytical philosophy. You, however, highlight the contributions of such recent Continental philosophers as Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Marion, and remind the reader of the continuing importance of Kierkegaard and Tillich. How does this augur for a philosophy of religion for the new millennium?

SCHRAG: Even though I had been teaching general courses and seminars in philosophy of religion from time to time during my tenure at Purdue and at some sister institutions on visiting appointments, I had never planned to write a book specifically in the genre of philosophy of religion. So it is a bit of an accident that my book, *God as Otherwise than Being*, came into existence. Professor Eugene Long of the University of South Carolina, who at the time was President of the Metaphysical Society of America, invited me to present a paper at the annual meeting of the Society in the spring of 1998, which had philosophy of religion as its general topic. I obliged with a presentation on "The Problem of Being and the Question about God." This presentation, energized by a quite spirited response, got legs and ran the course of a book-length manuscript. In the published manuscript I develop a thought experiment on the meaning of "God" as "Gift." This follows the route of a deconstruction of the classical concept of God as a supernatural being situated on the apex of a vast celestial hierarchy, defined through categories drawn from Greek cosmology and theistic metaphysics as necessary being and first cause. The strategy in the experiment, which is basically that of investigating what language permits us to say about matters of divinity, is that of shifting the inquiry away from the constructs of cosmology and metaphysics (to which the theology of the ancients and medievals, as well as the moderns, remained very much indebted) to a grammar of the gift, understood as a giving without expectation of return. Such is precisely the dynamics of the transcending "works of love" of which Kierkegaard speaks in his unparalleled volume bearing that title. And it is from Kierkegaard that we continue to have much to learn. When we begin asking the question about the meaning of "God," we soon find ourselves talking about the "Gift." This is the result of my quest into the meaning of divinity as it impacts upon our wanderings along the stages of life's way.

MATUŠTÍK: Are you currently working on any future project?

SCHRAG: I have just completed a manuscript bearing the title *Convergence Amidst Difference: Philosophical Conversations Across National Boundaries*,

which is scheduled for publication by the State University of New York Press. The format is structured by five essays presented at five different foreign universities and Academies of Science (Bulgaria, England, France, Russia, and the Czech Republic), engaging my interlocutors on topics including the hermeneutics of sense and reference, the fate of the human subject in the wake of its deconstruction, the delimitation of the project of metaphysics in response to postmodern assaults on metanarratives, and a revised notion of rationality designed to meet the needs of the philosophical world of tomorrow. This very likely will be my last major work. I am now a bona fide senior citizen and need to entrust the task of philosophy to my younger colleagues.

MATUŠTÍK: Putting aside the questions about your vocational and professional path, what does it all add up to for you existentially and personally?

SCHRAG: Your final question may turn out to be the most difficult of all! You request a statement on how my professional activities in teaching and research over the years “add up existentially and personally.” In seeking a launch pad to respond to your query, I find myself recalling the challenge that one of my professors at Heidelberg University presented to his class when he opened his lecture course on the philosophy of Kierkegaard: “In your studies you will have to make a decision to take Kierkegaard either merely historically or in earnest!” (*nehmen Sie ihn bloss historisch oder nehmen Sie ihn ernst!*). Also in this connection we need to be reminded of the quote ascribed to Feuerbach: “Do not wish to be a philosopher at the expense of being a man/woman.”

At the end of the day one needs to address the *concrete existential* question (not to be confused with an inquiry into the abstracted ontological structure of *Existenz!*) of what one is to do with one’s life within the short span between birth and perishing—which is the lot assigned to all of us. Socrates, of course, is of some help in getting the conversation going with his requirement to “know thyself” and its corollary, “the unexamined life is not worth living.” But even here one needs to be wary of having Socrates’s existential musings solidify into the abstract metaphysical speculation that has found such a congenial residence in the history of Western philosophy. Kierkegaard also, and particularly when we take him seriously rather than merely historically, helps us add up that which is of existential and personal relevance in our own stages along life’s way. Then in adding up the account in the more explicit ethico-religious register of our existential predicament, we all do well to heed the call of the ancient prophets of Israel, and especially Micah’s consummate admonition to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with one’s God. Striving for justice, kindness, mercy, and humility pretty much consolidates matters when one adds up that which counts “existentially and personally.”