

in thinking, and to do so against the background of a widely shared set of received opinions and practices" (39). While Scharff concedes that "Descartes never consciously embraced the ideas of finite human consciousness and historically determinate rationality" (44), his actual practice of meditation is "at least minimally phenomenological" (45), and worthy of reconsideration and even recovery.

The final article in the collection, Victor Kestenbaum's "The Professions, the Humanities, and Transfiguration," finds its author calling upon Schrag, and perhaps the rest of us as well, to undertake in a more thoroughgoing way the transition from theory to practice that Schrag's writings frequently call for, and more specifically to take up a series of questions concerning the humanities and the philosophy profession and their place within the university and the broader culture. Kestenbaum, a noted Dewey scholar, notes the relative lack of recent philosophical scholarship concerning the professions in general, including the philosophy profession itself, and suggests that much of Schrag's work furnishes a standpoint from which such thought might productively proceed. Kestenbaum is undoubtedly correct in this observation, and he urges Schrag to spell out some of the implications of his thought for ideals traditionally associated with the humanities and the professions—such questions as: "Since professionalism is a state of mind and a habit, what happens to the mind when it becomes professional? What happens to the professional mind when it becomes 'experienced'?... What is the basis of professional judgment? What regulates the relationship between abstract idea and particular circumstance? Really, how far can *phronesis* take you?... What is the nature of groundless professional authority? What sort of Schragian 'communicative praxis' do we need?... How do practitioners respond to what [Hannah Arendt] calls 'reason's need to think beyond the limits of what can be known?'" (300–1). Kestenbaum provides an insightful analysis of some of these questions, and in an appropriately Schragian spirit. It would be worth purchasing the book for this essay alone.

Overall, this volume offers an unusually strong collection of articles organized around a coherent set of themes. It is unlike many Festschriften which too often constitute a random assortment of texts and is a fitting tribute to a philosopher of Schrag's standing in contemporary continental thought.

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God as Otherwise than Being: Towards a Semantics of the Gift

CALVIN O. SCHRAG

Northwestern University Press, 2002; 144 pages.

This book is a quest that begins with the question of the meaning of God, and ends up speaking about the semantics of the gift. The book as a whole is a fascinating and finely navigated voyage through the landscapes that the history

of God-talk has created. Schrag leads us on a journey through the history of Western theology, theism, and various sorts of metaphysics, such as unity, identity, and totality, and beyond the epistemological problems with which they deal. As Schrag puts it, following Tillich, for whom he worked as a teaching assistant at Harvard: "... the concept of God in the history of the metaphysics of theism, which has been destined to follow the trajectories of ontic analysis and construction, falls out not only as philosophically untenable but also religiously pernicious" (25).

These difficult landscapes are traversed without falling into the aporias of postmodern thinking about God. Schrag recognizes that we become "bamboozled in talking about God" (25), and expertly discerns a safe path through terrain difficult, sometimes dark, and often dangerous, to an existence sphere of gifting that is beyond being, aesthetics, and ethics. The gift is not itself a virtue. "It is other than virtue transfiguring discourses and actions within the production and exchange relations that govern the moral economy" (50).

In his attempt to think of God as otherwise than what the overgrown and stultifying thickets of metaphysics will allow, Schrag is not beguiled into the enrapturing sargasso of the opposing extreme, such as deconstructionist claims that there can be no true gift-giving or receiving (due to the inescapable involvement of gifts in exchange relations). For example: "Both Derrida and Kierkegaard, albeit from different perspectives, would assent to the impossibility of that which they have so eloquently described in their discourses on the gift. Indeed, Derrida repeatedly makes much of the impossibility of the gift" (132).

Schrag's view is radically unlike deconstructionist attempts which make gift-giving and gift-receiving impossible by requiring that such giving and receiving be entirely pure and free of any thought of return or acknowledgment. Nonetheless, Schrag makes use of invaluable insights contributed by such writers as Jean-Luc Marion, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida, whose ventures into the wilderness of God-beyond-being have provided useful, if somewhat flawed or exaggerated, maps of the terrain.

In developing his argument, Schrag addresses current debates on the notion of an eschatological God, delimiting ethics in his search for a sort of God-talk more amenable to postmodern language than has been or is now current. In revaluing notions of the self and rationality Schrag deploys his well-developed and existentially rich notion of a "'transversal' rationality, enabling a communication that is able to move across the landscape of differences without coming to rest in hegemonic unity" (40). This, together with the notion of "transversal communication," is developed in detail in Schrag's earlier works (e.g., *The Self After Postmodernity* and *The Resources of Rationality*). As embodied, intersubjective, and historical, Schrag improves upon Habermas's linguistic-communicative turn in philosophy.

Schrag also makes use of such vocabularies as those of Iris Marion Young and Patricia J. Huntington to apply the new God-talk to talk about civil society. The notion of asymmetrical reciprocity first applies to our relationship with God. God's giving is entirely gratuitous and we can do nothing to "earn" it. The

vocabulary of infinite love and compassion, argues Schrag, may best be served by an original semantics of the gift. "The lesson to be learned from the suggestive notion of asymmetrical reciprocity is that living in civil society with its moral demands requires a task of mediation without identity, convergence without coincidence, acknowledging the presence of an asymmetrical gift within an economy of reciprocity" (127). This is a transvalued economy, which is reached through the acknowledgment of a "gift that antedates our thought and action—a gift that informs the very definitions of telos, duties, rights, and aspirations for that which is good for the polis" (127).

For Schrag, God constantly solicits us to work with that which is God in each other, in every human being as neighbor. This is important for civil society since it is not only as individuals of differing status (asymmetrical reciprocity) that we respond to God's summons through the Other, but also as neighbors, within reciprocal relationships—friends, enemies, and strangers alike. We cannot witness the eternity of God in itself, but we witness it in the future, in what is possible; also in the past as that which is or has become. The Eschaton that beckons is Eternity coming into time in the future (as beckoning), but also presencing in what Schrag calls the "fitting response that keeps the gift as its measure" (125). The Eschaton that beckons surpasses being: an eternal giving, loving, whose giving permits human gifting, and human love; in this way we are God's image. This God is not remote and abstract, but continually coming to presence (becoming incarnate) in the fitting response: "It is that which we wait upon in our working" (141).

In its delimitation, the ethical may now be understood as transfigured by the gift as its proper content and measure. In this story, Schrag solves the infinite finite interaction in a unique and fascinating way. For Schrag, the Kingdom of Heaven and other ideal types, such as democracy, are constantly coming-to-be through a pre-enacted eschatology of the fitting response to a beckoning from the Eschaton. Schrag revalues the meanings of *logos* and *kairos* (with the help of Kierkegaard), and these ideas come into play in Schrag's vision of civil society. This society would be one without absolute ownership of goods or lands, without zero-point ownership or individualized possessiveness.

Schrag splits the difference between Levinas and Hegel, articulating a sort of God-talk that, having undergone a double deconstruction of the metaphysical and the epistemological, makes it more amenable to postmodern insights into language than not only the vocabularies of metaphysics and ontology but also that of deconstruction. In viewing the gift as *kairos* and *logos*, something given at the right time, the opportune moment, Schrag brings gift-giving within the coming to presence of the history of our praxial engagements, i.e., of civil society. A gift, in coming to presence, makes itself known. It is genuine when it is an "even yearning for fulfillment and oriented toward actualization, only when there is an acknowledgment and response on the part of the receiver of the gift" (126).

We shall, of course, continue to ask our age-old questions (e.g., What is my *telos*?), but these questions stand out against a backdrop of a "wider scheme of

things that solicits a fitting response" (127). That response is elicited from a region beyond aesthetic and ethical economies. Schrag's God-gift language speaks of a centrifugal loving/giving that seeks no return. Schrag's fitting response, however, rescues the semantics of the gift from the aporias and impossibilities into which the likes of Derrida and Levinas have carried it. For Schrag, in the real world "self-sacrifice issues from motivations that are never wholly liberated from self-interest" (131).

There are some questions, however, that may continue to trouble the reader. Schrag's emphasis on the centrifugality of the gifting of love, on no expectation of return, seems at odds with the Biblical view of God as expecting adherence from his people as well as holding them accountable for the gifts He had given them. This asymmetrical reciprocity human beings have with a God who has no need of the beloved also seems at odds with the Biblical God who has need of man, desires his love, even seduces his prophets. Can this aspect of God's character be justifiably articulated in the vocabulary of Schrag's God-talk? Or is a supplement required?

INGRID HARRIS

Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness

RICHARD KEARNEY

New York: Routledge, 2002; 256 pages.

In the middle of *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, Richard Kearney reflects on September 11th. This is an apt case to test the discipline of teratology, "the study of monsters," that Kearney seeks to recover from medieval thought for the sake of the postmodern interpretation of otherness. September 11th unleashed three monsters: the stranger as monster (the evil terrorists), God as monster (the ignorant deity who rules ultimate reality and allows so many innocent people to suffer so senselessly), and oneself as monster (the sanguinary aspect of ourselves that rationalizes its thirst for revenge by reducing strangers and God to evil or ignorant monsters). *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* thus revisits the topics of the two earlier volumes of Kearney's now complete hermeneutical trilogy: *On Stories*, which understands individual identity in terms of narrative imagination, and *The God Who May Be*, which understands ultimate reality in terms of radical possibility. Ending his trilogy with the problem of discerning monsters (abroad, beyond, and within), Kearney reveals philosophy's task as practical understanding and its hope as justice. "Practical understanding" Kearney defines—after biblical "wisdom," Aristotle's "practical wisdom" (*phronesis*), Kant's "reflective judgment," and Ricoeur's "narrative understanding"—as "the limited capacity of the human mind to deliberate about the enigma of evil" (100). However limited this capacity is, Kearney argues, it is our best hope.