

Situating the Decentered Subject

Calvin O Schrag. *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity*.
Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1986, 214 pages.

Perhaps the most strident feature of twentieth century thought has been a rejection of the traditional notion of subjectivity. Criticisms of subjectivity have emerged from a variety of philosophical perspectives. The works of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Levi-Strauss, Barthes, Foucault, Rorty, and Derrida, all reflect a growing disenchantment with the Cartesian subject. This disenchantment finds its most dramatic expression in Foucault's announcement of the "death of man," and it finds its most radical working out in Derrida's project of deconstruction.

Since the traditional notion of subjectivity has been shown to be flawed, it is easy to overlook the fact that even in Derrida's deconstruction of the subject, there are admissions that a trace of the subject remains. The deconstruction of the subject does not render the subject nonexistent, merely resituated. The difficulty we find in the wake of deconstructive work is how are we to think this resituated subject. This is the task that Schrag takes up in his most recent work, *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity*.

The criticisms of traditional subjectivity emerged out of the recent linguistic turn of philosophical research; so too Schrag's effort to describe the decentered subject requires him to come to grips with the problem of language. While the majority of the work being done on language has shown the inadequacy of attempts to provide language with an epistemological structure or metaphysical foundation, Schrag takes the next step. He is not content simply to say that language has no such structures or foundations; he attempts a positive description of what it is. In order to do so, he develops the notion of communicative praxis. This concept is the key to Schrag's work.

Schrag describes communicative praxis as an amalgam of discursive

and nondiscursive practices. Praxis as the sphere of human action and interaction is seen to be a heterogeneous register of meanings. Communication is seen to be similarly heterogeneous: it is the activity of communicating, the information communicated, the means of communicating, the art of communicating, and the interchange of thoughts and opinions. Schrag indicates that both praxis and communication share the same space and, in this common space, they intermingle in such a manner that action expresses and communication performs. By considering communicative praxis as a commingling of action and speech Schrag carefully avoids the mistake of subordinating speech to action or action to speech. The author is emphatic that one is not the referent of the other. Communicative praxis is the interplay of the two; neither praxis nor communication is given the status of being the ground of the other. This does not mean they oppose one another but that together they form a holistic fabric of expression. When the author describes communicative praxis as a weave of expressive discourse and expressive action, he does not use the term "expressive" to indicate a movement out from some epistemological interior. Expression is better understood as an event. Schrag is particularly vigilant in avoiding the metaphysical language of interiority and exteriority. He is also careful to avoid attempting to ground the web of expressive discourse and expressive action in any philosophical foundation. To describe the relation of communication to praxis Schrag interjects a third term, texture. With the notion of texture, we are not presented with a master metaphor which would proclaim the primacy of the text. On the contrary, the term is introduced in order to underscore the irreducibility of the nondiscursive to the discursive, not to reduce them both to some third term.

Schrag describes communicative praxis as a three-dimensional phenomena. It is about something, it is by someone, and it is for someone. Schrag divides the book into three parts, each of which corresponds to one of these dimensions.

The first, and by far the largest, concerns the texture of communicative praxis. Here Schrag seeks to rehabilitate the philosophical notion of reference. While he is critical of any attempt to ground discourse in any metaphysical or epistemological substances, he is also unhappy with any treatment of language which would refer words only to other words. Schrag views all such attempts as misguided, indicative of a discursive closure. Rather than closing discourse upon itself, Schrag situates discourse in the space of communicative praxis, a space he describes as hermeneutical. The reference of discourse is not an epistemological reference but a hermeneutical reference. For Schrag discourse is about our way of life; it is about the interplay of language and action. The interplay of language and action, which is communicative praxis, is an interplay