NOTES


Splitting the Difference: The Less Pretentious Claims of Reason


For a number of years now, Calvin Schrag has been constructing a systematic philosophical position based on a broad knowledge of contemporary discussions, not just in Continental philosophy but also drawing upon pragmatism and even Whiteheadian process metaphysics. His knowledge of what is going on is prodigious and his bibliographies are immense, a ready introduction not just to the arguments of the moment but also to the more incisive discussions of what is at issue. This latest work is doubly motivated, on the one hand, by his own work and a question that had been raised against it, on the other, by what he calls “the postmodern challenge to the resources of rationality itself” (ix). Since the question put to him had to do with how the position he had presented in *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity* (1986) allows for and “solicit[s] considerations pertaining to the claims of reason,” (ix) one can readily guess that his response would be a defense of rationality. The question is what form this defense will take and, from the external perspective of the “postmodern challenge,” what threat it is intended to counter. Is Schrag convinced that contemporary philosophy is out not just to transform reason, but worse, to transgress it to the point that it no longer matters? Or does he merely think that so-called postmodern philosophies have lost sight of something significant in the tradition. In either case, how will he respond?

As it turns out, his basic reply is phrased in terms of the rubric of the “task of philosophy,” (1) where the operative assumption is that Western philosophy has seen itself as “the steward of rationality” (1). The central question for such an understanding of philosophy has always
been how to understand this task. Indeed, "the history of Western philosophy is pretty much a history of conflicting interpretations on the understanding and the use of reason" (1). More specifically, from the perspective of the "postmodern challenge" this history can be seen as shaped by the "problems and discourses that emerged from the Kantian and Hegelian perspectives on rationality" (3). If we can call this setting out of the framework of the problem already a strategic move, the tactics that follow from it should be at least partly evident. In fact, they are explicitly stated as "an exploration of rationality between modernity and postmodernity" (7), where this context is seen to be shaped by fears that the earlier modern tradition had over determined reason, particularly in terms of its epistemological paradigm.

In a nice turn of phrase, Schrag characterizes the so-called postmodern response to these fears as a challenging of the "despised logos" (8). This challenge in its most extreme form comes down to a rejection of reason through a disparagement of the logos, as expressed as a celebration of difference and a jettisoning of any drive for unification. As should be obvious, if the "postmoderns" are right, Schrag's own efforts are doomed to failure, so parrying the external challenge should at least make plausible the possibility that reason does have a place within Schrag's own constructive position and indeed does play a role there. And in fact his argument can and should be read as moving back and forth between these external and internal perspectives.

From the latter perspective, the burden of his case lies in showing that rationality is preserved and best understood if it is seen to be linked to praxis—indeed, that such an understanding of rationality is more adequate than either the modern or the postmodern formulation. In this sense, "our notion of praxis functions as an indicator of the amalgamated discourse and action that textures the space of human endeavoring, exhibiting a striving for an understanding and explanation of the configurations of experiences through which such endeavoring passes" (9). And from this it is said to follow that both forms of labor and the subject of consciousness must be seen as "implicates of praxis rather than foundations of it" (9), conclusions that are intended to strengthen Schrag's claim that he is not entrapped by the epistemological model that defines modernity.

The back and forth movement, from external to internal perspectives, and historically between the modern and the postmodern, is further conveyed by a central metaphor Schrag uses to characterize rationality: it is "transversal to the multiplicity of our discursive and nondiscursive practices" (9). When I first saw this expression I thought it was another take on the problem of immanence and transcendence that has bedeviled