

The International Journal for Field-Being

Non-Substantialism and the Metaphysics of Justus Buchler

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IJFB, Vol. 1(1), Part 1, Article No. 7, 2001.

Citation URL: <http://www.iifb.org/ijfb/BSinger-1-7>

- ¶1. The reason I chose to talk about Justus Buchler's metaphysics at a meeting of this organization is that, like the philosophy of Field-Being, it is a thoroughgoing nonsubstantialism, in direct contrast to the widely accepted substance-quality metaphysics.^[1] But Buchler also rejects all types of metaphysical foundationalism, including atomism, materialism, and metaphysical idealism and does not give ontological priority to either processes or entities.^[2]

- ¶2. The heart of Buchler's general metaphysics or ontology is succinctly expressed in the first sentence of his book, *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes*: "Whatever is, in whatever way, is a natural complex."^[3] This assertion and the way it is supported require explanation. If to be is to be a complex, not only must whatever there is have constituents, those constituents must also be complexes, as must their constituents in turn. But if we are to avoid infinite regress, must we not acknowledge that complexes must be ultimately analyzable into constituents that are not complex but simple and irreducible? And if there is nothing that is not a natural complex, what can the expression, "in whatever way" refer to? Is it not contradictory to refer to diverse ways of being if to to be is, universally, to be a natural complex?

- ¶3. On the first issue, a simple would be an independent, self-constituted trait and could have no relations, since relations are themselves traits, and if it had relations a supposed simple would thereby be rendered complex. But if it had no relations a simple could not be a constituent of a complex, since it could not be related either to that complex or to any of its other constituents. So if they ultimately had to be reducible to simples, there could be no complexes. There would be only an infinite multiplicity of independent, miscellaneous traits-if that were possible. In Buchler's terminology, though, every constituent of a complex is called a "trait," and the term is used not only for qualitative characteristics, but any features whatever. For instance, the possibilities of a complex are among its traits. Every trait is itself a complex, and since "whatever is" is a complex, every complex is an order of traits, that is, an order of complexes. To be a constituent of a complex, a trait of an order, is to be "located" in it and as I shall show, all complexes are ordinally located. This does not mean that there is an infinite hierarchy of complexes, since every complex can be located in a multiplicity of orders and orders overlap and intersect in indefinitely many ways.
- ¶4. Some of the traits of an order contribute to its character or, as Buchler calls it, its "integrity." A striking example of this is the contribution made by the genes of an organism to its other traits. But any trait is inevitably located in other orders as well. In addition to being constituents of the organisms that possess them, genes are located in biological orders and orders of heredity. But there are less complicated examples. The color of an object is a component trait of its integrity. But considered as such, the color- one of the stock illustrations of the thesis of simples-is extended and thus located in a general order of extension. It must also be of a certain hue, and is thus located in an order of light waves, which, like its extension, is a constituent of its visibility. In sum, every complex is located in more than one order and is, in turn, related to those orders. When a complex affects the character or integrity of a second, Buchler calls the relation of the first to the second "strong relevance." A constituent can affect the integrity of the order in which it is located, and the order conditions the integrity of its constituents in the sense that it limits the constituents possible for it. Thus, not all ordinal locations are possible for any complex.
- ¶5. Located in an order of human beings, a person is a social as well as a biological complex, having an ethnic identity as well as various physical characteristics. Each of these is a function of an order in which it is located, which itself has multiple locations. One's ethnicity, the color of one's skin, and the texture of one's hair, are functions of different ordinal locations, yet all contribute to one's integrity, one's being the person one is and are thus strongly relevant to oneself. However, unless the circumstances are extraordinarily important to one's history, one's presence in a movie theater or on an escalator have no bearing on one's integrity. They are only weakly relevant to oneself, and one is, at the same time, only weakly relevant to them. Nevertheless, we and they are interrelated and each is, at least temporarily, located in the other as a trait of that order. This is to say that complexes and their constituent complexes are mutually related, whether weakly or strongly, and each is a

trait of the other.

- ¶6. Let me recapitulate. Because every constituent of a complex is itself a complex, none is reducible to a collection of isolated, or isolable, components and, in virtue of the fact that each of its constituents is located in more than one order, each is related to those orders, if only in the sense of weak relevance. Those relations must be understood to be constituents of the relata, and to be traits in that sense, even though they are not traits in the sense of characteristics; they are not part of the complex's nature or integrity. But not every trait of a complex is related to every other. For instance, the color of a piece of paper or pottery is unrelated to the weight of either one, and the temperature of the air at a given time is unrelated to the day of the week the temperature is measured. Therefore, it is not the case that every complex is constituted by all others or located in all others: What there is does not comprise a universe of internal relations. Nor is it a single, unitary order of complexes. As I have already indicated, there must be indefinitely many complexes, all ordinally located, but ordered in indefinitely many ways. This is Buchler's "principle of ordinality."
- ¶7. This leads to the question what Buchler can mean by asserting, as the phrase, "*whatever is, in whatever way*" implies, that there are diverse ways of being. Every complex is an order of traits and is located in other orders. Every order, hence every complex, is constituted by complexes which themselves have diverse constituents. Since some of these traits affect the integrities of their ordinal locations, complexes have multiple integrities, Buchler terms the integrities of a complex, considered together, its "gross integrity" or "contour." The contour or overall character of a complex is, in principle, indefinitely analyzable, but our powers of discrimination and analysis are limited and finite. By "ways" of being, then, is meant broadly inclusive orders of complexes with discriminable contours, and we can and do recognize the contours of a wide variety of orders, physical and conceptual, concrete and abstract, qualitative and quantitative, social and individual, biological and chemical, actual as well as ideal. Buchler does not identify these as ways or orders of existence, however, since not everything we discriminate is an existent, and the connotations of existence are too limited. Ideals, for instance, while our conceptions of them exist, have themselves yet to be achieved or brought into existence. But as objects of our aspirations or conceptions, ideals have some kind of being. Rather than existing, they obtain or, to use the word Buchler prefers, "prevail," so that we can more adequately conceive whatever is, in whatever way as whatever prevails in any of the many comprehensive orders of prevalence. To prevail is to be a discriminable complex located in an order or orders of any kind(s) whatever and hence to be related to and to affect other complexes. That is, it is to be efficacious. Existence can be understood as a mode of prevalence. Perspectives of judgment as well, including aesthetic perspectives and the attitudinal perspectives that govern action and conduct in addition to orders of thought, are among the orders in which complexes can prevail. Not only the abstract and the ideal prevail; figures in dreams and fictions also prevail in and with their own orders, as do values and universals. That is, there are indefinitely many and varied orders of prevalence, some of which are human

products.

- ¶8. Complexes may undergo change; their constituents, hence their integrities, may change over time. This means that the contour of a complex may evolve. But the fact that it had the integrities it once did is not erased. In its relation to each of the integrities that are or have ever been ingredient in it, the contour of a complex is continuous; it continues to prevail. It is this that accounts for the fact that things remain the same -that is, retain their identity-through change. (Of course I am using the word "thing" in a non-technical sense.) A human individual starts as a fertilized ovum and goes through the stages of infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age, yet remains the same complex. Identity, that is, is a matter of continuity, not invariance. A complex may come to be, may change, and may cease to prevail at some time, that is, cease to obtain in a given order of temporal relations. These are all forms of what Buchler calls "alescence." But the fact that any complex has prevailed in some temporal order does not cease to prevail-no complex is ever totally erased from the indefinitely extended and indefinitely analyzable multiplicity of complexes that are embraced by the expression, "*whatever is, in whatever way.*"
- ¶9. If whatever is, is a natural complex, locating and located in other complexes, that which is-Nature-must be indefinite in scope. Thus there can be nothing outside of Nature, no supernatural or transcendent being or way of being. Buchler's ontology is a totally consistent naturalism. But his statement also implies that there is no ground or substratum of complexes that is not already encompassed by Nature, nothing ontologically prior to Nature. The latter is expressed by him as the "principle of ontological parity." That is, Buchler's is a nonfoundationalist ontology in which, despite the indefinitely many ways of being, there is none that is basic or primary. As I have put it elsewhere, for him
- ¶10. all orders of priority, being orders of relations among complexes, are just that, orders, located in the World, among other orders of Nature. There are orders of causal dependence, orders of logical priority, etc. Like any other complex, each of these prevails in an order of conditions ... [and] a complex that is prior to another in one order need not be prior in other orders in which the two are located.[\[4\]](#)

- ¶11. Many people cannot accept or even understand the view that Nature as such has no (external) cause. Yet, if there is no complex or order that transcends or is external to Nature, this must be the case. Concomitantly, if there can be no simples, no complex without relations, every complex is ordinally located; and if every relation is itself a complex located in some order or orders, Nature must necessarily be inexhaustible. Temporal orders not being exceptions and so not exempt from these stipulations, in its temporal aspect Nature must be indeterminable as well. (It should be remembered that not all orders are temporal: mathematical orders, for one, are not.) This being the case, just as the claim that Nature has/had an external cause cannot be logically substantiated, we cannot justify the claim that the indefinite complexity we call "nature at large" had a beginning.
- ¶12. The cause of Nature, if indeed it has one, being unfathomable, this view is somewhat analogous to Milton Munitz's conception of the "mystery of existence." In terms of any known rational methods, Munitz says, the question, "Why does the world exist?" is unanswerable and therefore, for us as human beings, it is "wholly speculative and gratuitous."^[5] As Buchler himself puts it, "The question why that which prevails is what prevails and why that which is alescent is what is alescent, whatever prevalences and alescences they are, is a basic form for expression of the sense of mystery, the primordial sense of mystery..."^[6]
- ¶13. Yet precisely because of our human limitations, fears, and hopes, we do have a concept of God or, more accurately, there are concepts of God or Gods in virtually every culture. And in accordance with the metaphysics of natural complexes, to have an idea of anything whatever is to conceive a natural complex, whether or not that complex exists or would be considered "real" in an ordinary everyday sense. As the object of a conception, the complex prevails, and it prevails in the conceptual order or orders in terms of which it is understood. Mathematical objects are a classic example, and so is Plato's Form of Good, which is a significant prevalence in an order of metaphysical and epistemological principles. But what does this mean in the case of God? For simplicity's sake, I shall focus on the Judaeo-Christian concept of one God, a concept that Buchler introduces mainly to illustrate the scope of his categories.

- ¶14. Buchler does not address the issue of God's "existence." As I have indicated, he takes the concept of existence to be inadequate as a synonym for his more general concept of prevalence. I should note that he avoids the term "reality" as well, since it has connotations that prevalence does not, for instance illusions, which prevail, would be termed "unreal," and he rejects the notion that there are degrees of being or reality. To discuss God is to discuss a complex that, considered purely as a prevalence, is ontologically on a par with any other. Regardless of the validity or invalidity of any proofs of God's existence, there is a God who prevails in orders of faith and inspiration, and this God, who is worshipped, feared, and loved has a long history in Western civilization. It should be clear that it is this complex for which we use the name God. God is not to be mistaken for the name or even the concept or idea of God. People do not worship a concept or a name but the complex to which they are applicable, a complex taken to be transcendent and antecedent to Nature, despite the fact that it could not be so according to the metaphysics of natural complexes.
- ¶15. Nevertheless, this God whom people believe in and worship is a product of human judgment, a historically evolved complex that reflects a number of equally historical perspectives. While they have much in common and are historically related to one another, some of these perspectives also differ from one another in significant ways, as do the perspectives of Jews and Christians. These are the perspectives governing the varied behaviors and institutions that have developed in the course of religious life in western societies. Yet Jews and Christians, Catholics and Protestants of different denominations worship the one God. Moreover, in affecting feelings, beliefs, and practices, and inspiring much of the greatest art and music that has ever been created, this God is efficacious-I should say powerful-despite the fact that in metaphysical terms we should not say that He exists.
- ¶16. Buchler's metaphysics of ordinality calls for comparison with Lewis Hahn's equally systematic philosophy of contextualism. Both are naturalistic and both, rejecting traditional substance-attribute metaphysics, deny that Nature consists of discrete atomic units. But whereas whatever is, including processes, is taken by Buchler to be a natural complex in the same sense as every other, Hahn's metaphysics is a version of process philosophy. In a summary statement, he says that his philosophy of contextualism "takes as its root metaphor patterned events, things in process, or historical events."[\[7\]](#) Sounding somewhat more like Buchler, but still speaking in process terms, Hahn takes these "textured events" to be "complex interrelationships of tendencies each interwoven into an integral whole with its own individual character or quality." In a way that is close to Buchler's concept of ordinal location, he says, "The external relations in terms of which these substances were to be connected are replaced by contexts, and the antecedent mechanistic spatiotemporal field of location likewise gives way to contextual references."[\[8\]](#)

- ¶17. In dealing with the issue of perception, Hahn is heavily influenced by Dewey, especially because Dewey stressed the fact that practical drives are inadequate to account for the diverse qualities we perceive. Buchler was also influenced by Dewey, stimulated by him to develop an ontology that avoids intellectualism and what Dewey called the "fallacy of selective emphasis," and broadening the concept of experience. Buchler agrees with Dewey in placing aesthetic and moral experience on a par with intellectual experience. But he still saw Dewey as placing too much emphasis on conscious immediacy and taking thought or reflection as the fullest and most genuine manifestation of experience, especially in the way he contrasts mere experiencing with "an experience."^[9] For Buchler, not all experience is conscious. In fact, he discards the notion of experience altogether, substituting for it the broader concept of "proception," which encompasses the human process in its entirety; all that enters into a person's life and history, the whole "interplay of the human individual's activities and dimensions, their unitary direction," whether conscious or not.^[10]
- ¶18. In holding activity and articulate action to be among the indefinitely many and varied orders of complexes, but not to exhaust them, Buchler's metaphysics differs from the ontology of Field-Being Philosophy, although it is significant that, like the latter, he broadens the concept of action. But this must be stated carefully, since Buchler does not identify action or activity with being at large. Instead, he holds it to be a mode of judgment, with judgment in turn seen as integral to the human process, proception. Judgment is ordinarily taken to be a faculty or process of discernment or understanding, and in much recent philosophy is construed as predication. But just as he has broadened the concept of experience, Buchler has broadened the concept of judgment, following Dewey again in rejecting intellectualism but doing so in a more consistent and far-reaching way. According to Buchler's general theory of judgment, not all judgments are intellectual or conceptual and not all are assertions. Rather, he defines three general modes of judgment, assertive, active, and exhibitive, roughly analogous to Aristotle's concepts of saying, doing, and making. Defined as concisely as possible, assertive judgment consists in asking, assenting, reasoning, and inquiring as well as stating; active judgment includes all activity, all forms of "doing"; exhibitive judgment encompasses all types of making, arranging, and showing or presenting. Exhibitive judgment includes all art—even when, as in poetry, that which is exhibitively arranged and presented is linguistic—but it is not confined to art: aligning bricks when building a wall is exhibitive, as is choosing how to dress. The distinction is a functional rather than a substantive one, as every judgment has more than one dimension. In so far as judging is something we do, judging is always active, and in so far as every judgment, even an assertion, is at least minimally shaped or organized, it has an exhibitive dimension.

- ¶19. One similarity between Buchler and Lik Kuen Tong, despite their differences, is that Buchler would agree that "articulate action is not contrasted with rest, for rest, like its correlative, motion, is a form of activity," and in so far as all are forms of activity, "articulate action is not ... distinguished from contemplation, consciousness or thought either."[\[11\]](#) Another similarity, somewhat akin to Hahn's contextualism, is that Tong maintains that "activity is always activity under conditions," and always "arises out of, and is limited by, a conditional matrix constituting the ground of its individuation."[\[12\]](#) Buchler's view of judgment as ingredient in and conditioned by the proceptive process from which it emanates, and his assertion that every judgment presupposes a perspective are comparable. But Buchler maintains that all judgments, including active judgments, are human products. Equating production with utterance, he conceives the latter as broadly as possible, but it is still human utterance. However, being our products, emanating from the proceptive process, our judgments ramify and extend our being and in this sense, they must all be understood to ramify and extend Nature or being at large. Nevertheless, as judgments, actions arise within, rather than wholly constituting being.
- ¶20. Going beyond Dewey, for whom inquiry is so important, Buchler uses what for him is a broader term, "query," to refer, not only to inquiry, but to all forms of probing, experimenting, the purposive development of judgments in all three modes. Writing this paper was no more or less an exercise in query than planning the route I would take in driving to Fairfield from Long Island. In Part II of *Nature and Judgment*, Buchler states, "As judgments ramify the being of the individual, so individual judgments may be ramified or developed" and "When pursued systematically or methodically, the process of ramifying judgments is the process of query."[\[13\]](#) His theory of judgment includes a careful examination of the generic traits of query in all three modes and various exemplifications of all three, including science, art, and philosophy, and he has written a book on poetry as a form of exhibitiv judgment, *The Main of Light*.[\[14\]](#)
- ¶21. Buchler never claimed to be the ultimate authority with regard to ontology or any other branch of philosophy or to have developed a metaphysics that is totally correct or complete. In replying to one of his commentators in a symposium devoted to his philosophy, he said, "I am not much concerned ... with the problem of 'justifying' the categories. The work the categories do is their justification." He continued, "Even though I am obliged to regard some philosophies as better and richer than others, I see no compelling ground to legislate to philosophers how they should philosophize. Criticism is always necessary, but it cannot anticipate invention."[\[15\]](#) I believe that Buchler's categorical scheme does important work, but so do those developed by Lewis Hahn and Lik Kuen Tong. I leave it to you and to other philosophers, present and future, to engage in query, to study and criticize the work of all three, and determine for yourselves how they can be either corrected or extended or both.

END NOTES

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9. Justus Buchler, *Nature and Judgment*, New York: Columbia University Press (1955), Chapter III, "Experience"; John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co. (1926), 140. "The existential starting point," says Dewey, "is immediate qualities" (298); see also, John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, New York: Minton Balch & Co. (1934), Chapter III.
11. Lik K. Tong, *What is Field-Being?*, 2000, <http://apps.fairfield.edu/ijfb/www.ijfb.org> . .
10. Justus Buchler, *Toward a General Theory of Human Judgment*, New York: Columbia University Press (1951), 4.

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- [13.](#) Justus Buchler, *Nature and Judgment*, New York: Columbia University Press (1955), 58.
- [14.](#) Justus Buchler, *The Main of Light: On the Concept of Poetry*, New York: Oxford University Press (1974).
- [15.](#) Justus . Buchler, [Reply to Anton: Against 'Proper' Ontology](#), *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 14(1) 1976, 85-90, 85. Special editors Beth J. Singer and Joseph G. Grassi.

ISSN 1548-6001

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