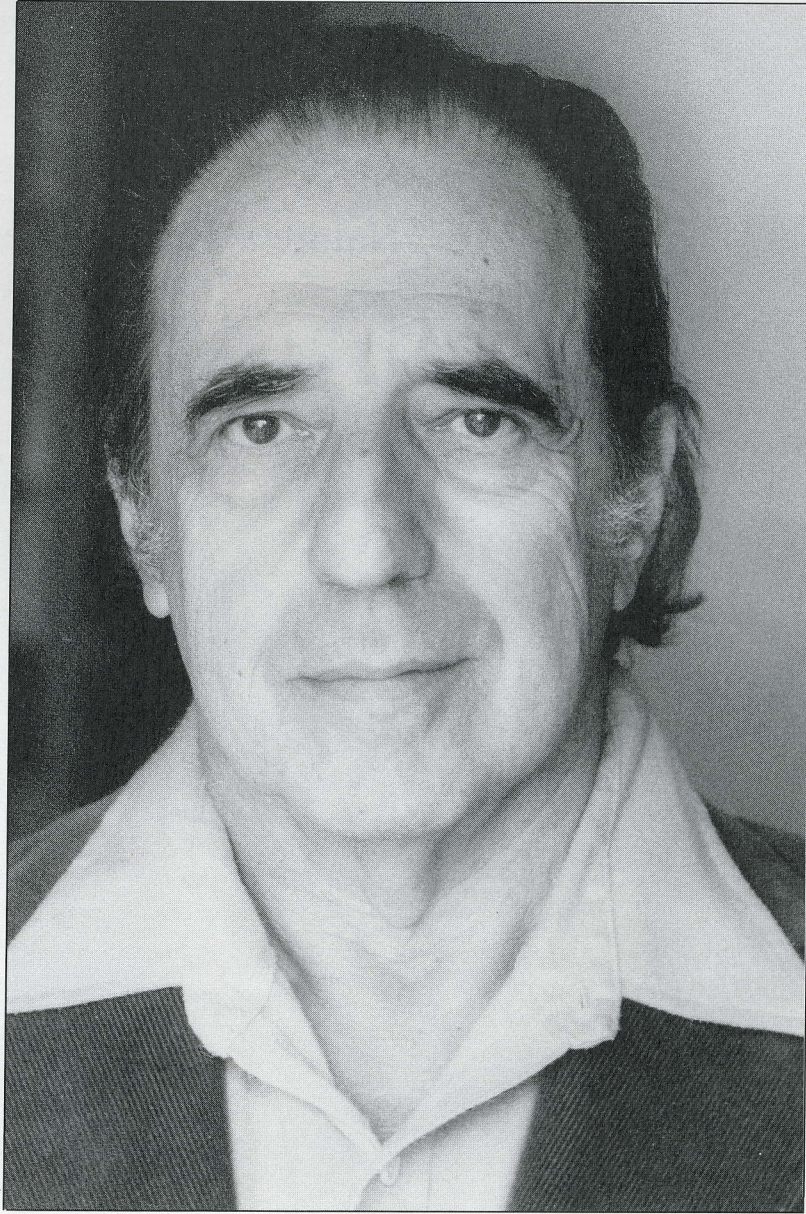# Nature's Perspectives
Prospects for Ordinal Metaphysics

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Introduction

The current philosophical climate is one that sometimes celebrates the powers of the human imagination, as if the human process were somehow disconnected from nature. Some deconstructive or semiotic theories, for example, in denying the referential status of texts or signs, reinforce the alienation of the self from the world. It is against this background that the philosophically original system developed by Justus Buchler is all the more relevant to reconceptualizing the continuity between human experience and nature. The principles of "ordinality" and "ontological parity"[1] entail that there is no privileged order of nature, including "the human order." The phrase "nature's perspectives" does not imply that nature is constituted by monads of consciousness, a view held by process philosophers, but that all human perspectives are in, of, and about nature. Even when human perspectives are primarily "about" other human perspectives, they are natural. Rather, all perspectives, even the human, are located within wider orders of relevance. The ordinal approach is not equivalent to what has been called philosophical pluralism.

The title of this anthology reflects the commitment of ordinal naturalism to a deepened understanding of the "complexes"[2] of nature and of how nature's innumerable orders support or transform human perspectives.[3] If all perspectives are located in nature and represent one or more order within nature, it follows that no perspective is free-floating or purely arbitrary. The *reality* of a perspective is not necessarily equivalent to its validity. Needless to say, some human perspectives are richer and more compelling than others while some other perspectives may have little relevance for larger human and philosophic concerns. Communal forms of "query"[4] serve to separate out more propitious and generic perspectives from those that have limited scope and power.

The ordinal framework refuses to privilege the traits of the human process and project them onto nature as a whole. Much contemporary thought, whether it goes by the name of deconstruction, neo-Kantianism, or radical hermeneutics insists on magnifying what Buchler would call the manipulative dimension of the human process to the neglect of the assimilative dimension. This book aims to show how the basic principles of ordinal

naturalism correct this bias and provide a more judicious account of both human creativity and human limitation and of how human perspectives contribute to, as well as are grounded in orders of community and nature.

Justus Buchler began this project in 1951 with his volume *Toward a General Theory of Human Judgment*. In it and in the volumes that followed, *Nature and Judgment* (1955), *The Concept of Method* (1961)[5], and *The Main of Light: On the Concept of Poetry* (1974)[6], he explored the complexities and relations of "the human-self-in-process" (human nature). These studies are located in an implicit broader theoretical structure which he formally articulated in 1966 in *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes*, his seminal work in general ontology. In many ways this anthology continues the project begun in those works. The essays we have selected represent a series of attempts to further our critical understanding of the structures and implications of Buchler's ordinal approach. They demonstrate in a variety of ways the ramified and ramifying "prospects" for ordinal metaphysics.

I

This volume is evenly divided between reprinted, and now classical papers, and those that were written especially for this volume. We believe that this selection will be (a) of immeasurable value for scholars who already have some familiarity with Buchler's system, as well as (b) of interest to those not familiar with ordinal metaphysics. We have grouped the selected papers into three parts. In the first, called "Critical and Systematic Overview," are grouped essays dealing with either the system as a whole or its pervasive principles or features. The nature of metaphysics, naturalism, and Buchler's systematic principles are explored. The second part, entitled "General Ontology," deals explicitly with aspects and implications of Buchler's broadest categorial investigations, that is, his general ontology. These essays critically explore and compare many of Buchler's central categories and principles with those of classical and contemporary thinkers (e.g., Aristotle, Whitehead, Lewis, Rescher). Substance, identity, possibility, materialism, and even the nature of categorial analysis itself are explored. The final part, entitled "Systematic Extensions and Applications," typifies the breadth of applications and interpretations of Buchler's system. These extensions cover such areas as foundationalism, the theory of poetry and communication, dream analysis, the nature of community, and the redefinition of God (the "divine natures"). A brief glance at the bibliography of secondary literature found at the end of this volume also gives some indication of Buchler's growing influence on the community of philosophic thought.

Buchler's system has not created a school of thought so much as stimulated further query into a broad range of philosophical subject—matters. The concepts developed within ordinal naturalism are remarkably free from bias and provinciality and indications of this fact can be seen in the rich and subtle variations that have emerged from the many assimilations of Buchler's framework. If one of the tests of philosophic worth is the ability of a framework to further and deepen query, then Buchler's thought represents one of the most profound developments within systematic philosophy.

II

Twentieth century philosophy has generated corrosive doubts about its ability to provide a framework for understanding the world in its broadest most general sense. The obsession with epistemology and linguistic analysis has blunted efforts to systematically probe into extralinguistic traits. Ironically, hermeneutic theories have joined hands with analytic philosophies to compress all reflection into the artifacts of human language. Nature, insofar as it remains available, is reduced to a series of self—validating texts that can have little or no relevance for each other. Pantextualism replaces naturalism and drives the principles of human speech and writing into the innumerable orders of the world. The concept of validation is reduced to a mere commentary upon a commentary, which is itself but a prior commentary on something else. The endless chain of signifiers closes in on itself and makes it impossible for community and communication to permeate and guide the human process.

Allied to this metaphysics of the text, which asserts that whatever is in whatever way is a text or an intratextual interpretation, is a belief that all hermeneutic acts are arbitrary on the deepest level. Against this view Buchler speaks of the "deep roots and interests in our pursuit of concepts"[7] which themselves guide the hermeneutic process and insure that the acquisition of meaning serves the larger needs of the community and its members. While many complexes in the world are texts or are translatable into textual terms, many are not. Further, the act of interpretation is always already involved in extratextual needs, desires, and compulsions that are not arbitrary or purely conventional. Buchler corrects the postmodern obsession with textuality by insisting on the ubiquity of ordinality that permeates all orders, whether textual or not.

On the political level, pantextualism has generated a kind of solipsism that makes it impossible to engage in *joint* forms of query and social critique. The *ordinal* framework provides a conceptual vocabulary with which

to break out of this solipsism and relativism. While no order will be relevant to *all* other orders, it will be relevant to some. Insofar as orders are relevant to each other they become available for communication and comparison. In the order of human perspectives this availability is a necessary trait for the forms of community that permeate the human process. Solipsism is overcome whenever relevance becomes communication within perspectives. Insofar as the self enters into the innumerable orders of natural and conventional communication, pantextualism, which insists on individual monads of self–reflexivity, is left behind.

It is important to stress that Buchler is not simply adding a new list of categories to the world so much as challenging us to redefine the very process by which philosophers frame and articulate concepts. Categories are not generated to serve purely private or merely aesthetic interests but to provide means by and through which further explorations of the world are possible. Systematic philosophy is distinctive in that it refuses to cling to categories of only regional import. The quest for a truly general conceptual array is deeply related to the concern for interpretive justice. Every gain in breadth should be paralleled by an equal gain in interpretive precision. What many thinkers find especially compelling about Buchler's framework is this combination of sheer breadth with interpretive subtley and precision. The essays contained in this volume are a testament to the philosophically compelling nature of Buchler's system.

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Notes

1. For a treatment of these principles see *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes,* 1966, 2nd expanded edition (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), chapter 1 and 3 passim. Also the essay by Gelber and Wallace in this volume entitled: "Nature, Power and Prospect: Justus Buchler's System of Philosophy," explicitly treats these principles.

2. "Complex" or "natural complex" is the most generic form of identification for Buchler. See his discussion of the term in *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes,* 1 ff. For a discussion of the tensions between a categorial and precategorial understanding of "natural complex" see, "Conversation Between Justus Buchler and Robert S. Corrington," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 3:4 (1989), pp. 261–274.

3. For a treatment of the concept of perspective see *Toward a General Theory of Human Judgment*, 1951, 2nd revised edition (New York: Dover, 1979), chapter 6 passim.

4. For a treatment of query see *Nature and Judgment*, 1955, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), chapter 2 passim.

5. *The Concept of Method*, 1961, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985).

6. *The Main of Light: On the Concept of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

7. "Conversation Between Justus Buchler and Robert S. Corrington," p. 269.