

## The Implications of Ordinality

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I have titled these remarks “The Implications of Ordinality” because ordinality is the philosophic concept that most generally characterizes Justus Buchler’s work. It is not, however, his only distinctive concept. His theory of judgment, and the attendant approach to experience, are also both unique and profound, as are the categories such as proception through which he understands human being. At the more general metaphysical level Buchler introduced another important concept or principle, that of ontological parity, which also goes a long way to distinguishing his philosophical perspective from most others. In these pages I would like to consider the principle of ontological parity as well as the general concept of ordinality and their implications for my own thinking and for philosophy in general.

Buchler was an unapologetic metaphysician, and at a time when metaphysics was rapidly becoming unfashionable, and in fact an object of derision by a growing number of philosophers. The schools of thought that grew out of Russell, Wittgenstein and Carnap had already by the middle of Buchler’s career rendered marginal the kind of philosophy to which he was dedicated. Metaphysics had come to be regarded as a sterile manipulation of concepts and ideas that led to nothing that could legitimately be considered knowledge or insight. Toward the end of his career, though too late for him to address it, the variety of post modernist ideas developed a similar hostility toward metaphysics, though for different reasons. Metaphysics, the post modernists have said, is an illegitimate attempt to force the varieties of being and experience into a single mold,

and what's worse, tends to represent at the intellectual level something similar to imperialism at the social. From the one side metaphysics is rejected for being meaningless, and from the other for being oppressive. The result has been that Buchler's work itself, and that of those whose thought has been influenced by it, are overlooked nearly entirely in contemporary philosophy.

Both sets of reasons for rejecting traditional metaphysics have their merits. Traditional philosophy has often attempted to read all of reality through its own more narrowly focused lens: Descartes through the developing physics and mathematics of the early modern period, or Hegel through his sense of the superiority of modern European civilization. The post modernists have a point. Similarly, it is difficult to object to the claim that far too often traditional metaphysical philosophy has amounted to a manipulation of concepts to no apparent effect. Nonetheless, the post modernist and analytic traditions have overstated their respective cases, and their failure to appreciate the value of metaphysics in Buchler's sense of the term and its useful implications has been to the detriment of contemporary philosophy.

Metaphysics, as Buchler understood it, is the attempt to develop the most appropriate general categories applicable to a given subject matter. When that subject matter is reality in general, metaphysics becomes ontology. When the subject matter is more circumscribed, it becomes the "metaphysics of..." i.e. human being, or art, or as Buchler himself could put it, of baseball. That is, the philosophical study of any subject matter, if it intends to elucidate characteristics of its subject, requires that we bring to bear some set of general concepts. Metaphysics is simply the reflective development and articulation of those concepts.

It is in his general ontology, in the metaphysics of “whatever is in whatever way,” that the principle of ontological parity and the concept of ordinality have their place. The principle of ontological parity asserts, simply, that nothing is “more real” than anything else. There is a great deal packed into this claim. Most importantly it helps us to avoid the temptation to assume that some things are ontologically more significant than others. Traditional idealists, for example, will claim either that material reality is less real than the spiritual, or they will go so far as to claim that the material is illusory altogether. Similarly, most forms of materialism make the same mistake only the other way round, by regarding spirit either as ontologically less significant than matter or as an illusion. By itself, the principle of ontological parity does not refute any of these claims. But it does indicate a different point of departure. It suggests that the proper role of the philosopher is not to deprecate or to argue out of existence any aspects of the world or experience as they are encountered. On the contrary, the role of the philosopher is to understand these aspects of the world and of experience. The more fruitful philosophical inquiry, in this spirit, is one that attempts to sort out the relations of the universal and the particular, of matter and spirit, of mind and body, of knowledge and experience, of poetry and science, of the religious and the secular, of the individual and the social. When we give up the inclination to regard some aspects of nature as ontologically more significant than others, and by psychological if not logical implication, as more important in general, then we are far more likely to encounter, appreciate and possibly even understand nature in its diversity, its richness, and in its complexity. This is, for me, the most significant and philosophically valuable implication of the principle of ontological parity.

To begin from the point of view that nothing is more real than anything else is in fact related to the concept of ordinality. If the point of philosophical inquiry is not to argue away this or that aspect of nature but on the contrary to understand nature in its diversity and complexity, then in all likelihood we will have to understand the various aspects of nature in their relations with one another. This, anyway, is the assumption of ordinality. In other words, the concept suggests that it will be most intellectually fruitful to understand all aspects of nature, whether general or particular, ideal or material, whether a human product or not, whether actual or possible, whether identified through science, poetry, mathematics, literature, music, painting, sculpture, or with a steam shovel, as possessing the traits that they do, as having their nature, so to speak, in sets of relations with other aspects, or what Buchler called “complexes” of nature. The term “ordinality” derives from the concept of “order,” which Buchler defined as “a sphere of relatedness.” To say that nature is ordinal is to say that all its complexes are relational in nature. The role of the philosopher, then, at least in the metaphysical process, is to elucidate the relations that lead to the “natural definition” of any complex or aspect of nature.

This is an unusual position in the history of philosophy, and in my experience it is usually met either with derision or more benignly with disbelief. Nonetheless, its value, I would argue, is considerable. Most importantly, it makes it much more likely that in the study of any subject matter we will take into account its many constituents. We are not forced, as the alternative approach inclines us to be, to argue away this or that potentially relevant aspect of a subject in order to identify its core, or substance, or essence. If any complex simply is its constituents in some specific set of relations with one another, then

our inclination is to pursue rather than avoid its constituents. Thus we are more likely to avoid the reductionist tendencies of a good deal of traditional and contemporary philosophy. This in turn helps us to come to grips with the fact that every subject matter is probably more complex than we might like it to be. Consider, to select one general area of philosophic inquiry, the social sphere. A great deal of ink has been spilled attempting to show that social reality is “really” a matter of discrete individuals interacting in one way or another, or that it is really a “social” matter in which individuals play a less significant role; or that a particular social problem is at bottom a problem of individual morality, or at bottom a problem of social relations. If we approach problems like these from an ordinal point of departure we are far less inclined to try to argue away one or another aspect of social reality or social problems, since we have begun with the assumption that the subject in question is by definition the set of relations in which all its constituents are located. For me this has proved an invaluable insight, and I suspect that it would be for others as well if they would allow themselves the opportunity to grasp it.

Finally, and I have made this point in several places in print, ordinality would go a long way to rectifying the excesses of a good deal of contemporary philosophy and to finding common ground among the intellectual styles of philosophy as it is currently practiced. Philosophy in the analytic vein tends to accept the traditional modernist assumption of the objectivity of the world and the capacity of inquiry, especially science and mathematics, to reveal its nature. Philosophy of the more post modernist sort tends to emphasize the creative aspects of human experience and interaction with nature, and the inherent limits of human access to the world, and the twain do not often meet. This is both unfortunate and unnecessary, because in crucial respects both are right. It is a virtue

of ordinality that it expresses an understanding of nature in which it is possible to understand how both can be right. If the complexes of nature are by definition relational, then those complexes that are related to human being will have their nature defined in part by the role played by human beings in their constitution. This is the creative place of human being in nature. At the same time, however, there is nothing mystical or uniquely subjective about this. The complexes of nature are what they are, not by the fiat of any person or by result of human inquiry, but by the relations that stand among their constituent complexes. Those constituents may include human beings, but that fact does not render the relations any less “objective.” In other words, nature as understood ordinally is such as to suggest both human creativity and “natural definition,” or objectivity. These are not mutually exclusive approaches to nature, and for me the greatest service that ordinality as a concept plays to show how this is the case.