

BOOK REVIEW

THE THINGS IN HEAVEN AND EARTH

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John Ryder, *The Things in Heaven and Earth: An Essay in Pragmatic Naturalism*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013. 327 + xiv pp. ISBN 978-0-8232-4469-0. \$24.41 (pbk).

What is ultimately real? Is there a fixed nature to reality? If so, is that nature knowable by the human mind? Philosophers have been confronted with these questions since the very inception of philosophy in ancient Greece. In the history of philosophy various answers to these intellectual riddles have been articulated. As a general rule, the metaphysical issues concerning the ultimate nature of reality have been dealt with from what we could call, along with Joseph Margolis, the perspective of archism.¹ A vast majority of philosophers have constructed their theories under the tacit assumption that there is a way things are in themselves, and that reality possesses invariant, primitive structures that make it so. Except for sceptics and nihilists, hardly any Western thinkers have contested the very foundational idea of metaphysics (and until recently, also science) which holds that reality is made up of primitive particulars. An extremely important exception to this general rule was Justus Buchler, a philosopher who influenced an entire generation of American philosophers, such as Richard J. Bernstein, Kathleen Wallace, and John Ryder, to name a few.

The philosophy of the Columbia naturalists (e.g., John Dewey and John Herman Randall, Jr.) never had an easy time in the philosophical history of the United States. As Charles Hartshorne wrote, Buchler's version of naturalism, the ordinal metaphysics, was very difficult to persuasively argue for because "the entire history of philosophy is against such an idea. Only considerable courage could have made it seem worthwhile to challenge this tradition."² Likewise, Richard Bernstein undoubtedly has a point when he says that, "A philosopher like Buchler who attempts to break away from 'school philosophy' is taking a serious risk. With the introduction of novel terminology, categories, and distinctions, we may be left hanging in mid-air, unable or unwilling to see their relevance to what has become familiar and accepted in philosophic investigation."³ The unusual character of Buchler's philosophy thus requires, every once in a while, new explications and clarifications, not because it is unclear, but rather because it challenges our deeply-rooted ideas about how metaphysics should be done.

The Things in Heaven and Earth, a new book by John Ryder, one of Buchler's last students, should be viewed from this perspective. In fact, it also intends to be a

lot more. The corpus of Ryder's book is divided into three parts, which break down into eleven chapters. As the title of the book suggests, it unfolds along the stylistic line of an essay. Even though Buchler's metaphysics does not belong to the traditional philosophical canon, the book proceeds from a methodologically sound, even traditional, point of view. It first familiarizes the reader with problems in today's conception of naturalism, introduces the key concepts of Buchler's ordinal metaphysics and subsequently applies it to areas as varied as religion, art, and politics.

The driving assumption throughout Ryder's book is that there is no good philosophical reason for traditional metaphysical inquiries. The sort of questions we should be posing, according to Columbia naturalists, is not whether this or that is "really real" but in what sense it is real, that is, what role a particular concept plays in our experience. The central tenet of Columbia naturalism is the principle of ontological parity, according to which all objects (natural complexes) share an equal claim to being real. At the outset of the book, Ryder takes pains to explain the reason why Columbia naturalism should not be mistaken for the conventional, scientific version of naturalism, shaped in the 1960s by philosophers such as W. V. O. Quine. Although both believe that all that exists is nature, they are in substantial disagreement about what this means for inquiry. Conventional naturalists claim that the only way to describe and explain nature is by means of the natural sciences, thus implying that the objects posited by natural science are the only things there are ultimately real. This approach, as Ryder argues, leads inevitably to reductionism and neglects a significant part of our experience not articulable in the terms of natural science.

In one sense, the Columbia naturalists and classical pragmatists agree on the principle of ontological parity. Neither would try to argue in favor of reductionism, claiming that it is just physical reality that ultimately exists and that the world of our ideas is just derivative of that reality (or the other way around). There is, however, a certain way in which pragmatism and Columbia naturalism crucially diverge. As Ryder remarks, for pragmatists such as Dewey, it is experience that constitutes the context in which nature unfolds. For the Columbia naturalists, the central category is nature, whereas experience is only an aspect of it.⁴ Ryder's book, however, tries to reconcile pragmatism and Columbia naturalism into what he calls "pragmatic naturalism." According to Ryder, pragmatic naturalism can also provide us with the right conceptual apparatus to bring constructionism⁵ and objectivism under one roof. Thus, the first two parts of the book can be seen as striving to bring a more objective naturalism into closer company with pragmatism. Favoring the notion of experience over nature, pragmatic naturalism leans towards a more epistemologically constructivist perspective. This venture also has, according to Ryder, a direct impact on contemporary debates between modernists and postmodernists.⁶ For Ryder, the key value of pragmatic naturalism lies in the fact that it is possible to simultaneously endorse the following four statements:

1. Natural phenomena have objectively determinable traits.
2. The traits of natural phenomena are knowable.
3. The process of inquiry is necessarily conditioned and perspectival.
4. Human interaction with the rest of nature, cognitive or otherwise, is active and creative.

I do not think Ryder succeeded in proving that all of these statements can hang together. Nowhere in the book has Ryder demonstrated how we could reconcile pragmatism with any position which would assert the intelligibility of the concept of an experience-transcending reality. In any inquiry, do we learn about an independent reality *or do we learn about our interactions with what we postulate to be an independent reality?* I personally favor the second option, simply because the only intelligible content the term ‘independent reality’ possesses is normative. In other words, the notion of an independent reality works as a regulative hypothesis of inquiry, not as an object *to be inquired into*. I do not see how a pragmatically sound metaphysics could change that. I also do not believe that classical pragmatism, in its identification of being and cognizability, allows us to meaningfully hold that “natural entities possess traits independently of us and that we can know something about them.” Does the very predicate “to be a trait” make sense apart from the process of inquiry? What difference does it make to our picture of the world or the process of inquiry if we insist that they exist independently of us?

Overall, Ryder does an excellent job elucidating Buchler’s key concepts: natural complex, order, trait, natural definition, prevalence, and alescence. The problem arises when he wants to “smuggle in” the objectivism/relativism controversy, which I doubt was of much interest to Buchler himself. What are we to make of expressions like “objective” and “socially constructed traits”?⁸ How are we to distinguish them? Isn’t this the kind of vocabulary we want to avoid? Ryder seems to argue that an objective trait is something that exists independently (prior to) our acts of cognition. Take the example of the American continent.⁹ America, as a general idea (a network of values, images, etc.) did not exist prior to its “discovery” by Columbus. However, according to Ryder, its topography existed independently of us. Both traits are constitutive of the natural complex “America”—first, being socially constructed and second being objective. However, are not both equal? What difference would it have made in 1491 to talk of the topography of America as opposed to, for instance, the very idea of America? In my estimation, it would not have made any difference at the time (both these terms would have lacked pragmatic meaning, as C. S. Peirce holds), just as it does not make any difference now (both can be seen as equally “constructed”).

My criticism is, however, in no way meant to degrade the immense value of the book itself. Ryder’s clear and persuasive depiction of the conceptual framework by means of which we can see reality as radically relational, is noteworthy. Moreover, Buchler’s picture of nature as something that completely lacks primitive individuals

(in the metaphysical sense) is something that accords with what we know from the best natural sciences of today.¹⁰ In this sense, Buchler's ordinal metaphysics, upon proper development, could also address empirically irresponsible analytic metaphysics, for example, the notion of bare particulars which is inconsistent with today's best physics.

Ryder also applies Buchler's ordinal metaphysics to the realm of politics and social relations in general. I agree with Ryder when he writes that nothing prevents contemporary societies from addressing their vital problems more than Margaret Thatcher's notion that there is no such thing as society. The idea that society exists, still lurking in the subconscious of a significant part of our political representation, might be politically mobilizing, but in the pragmatist view, as well as in the perspective of ordinal metaphysics, it is ontologically mistaken. Society, along with the rest of nature, is relational all the way down. In the last part of Ryder's book, which I find the most appealing and philosophically innovative, he makes clear what it actually means to think of democracy, social experience, and cosmopolitanism in relational terms.

To sum up, despite certain problematic passages, especially in the first part of the book, John Ryder's long awaited monograph *The Things in Heaven and Earth: An Essay in Pragmatic Naturalism* is an enormous success. It not only revives one of the most provocative and extraordinary philosophical traditions in the American thought, it also takes ordinal metaphysics where it has never been before. In a purely pragmatic manner (pace Dewey), it shows how metaphysics *does* matter in everyday life and politics. I highly recommend the book as an intellectually challenging primary source in the areas of ordinal metaphysics and American philosophy.

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NOTES

1. See Joseph Margolis, *Historied Thought, Constructed World: A Conceptual Primer For the turn of the Millenium* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1995), 24. .
2. Kathleen A. Wallace, "Justus Buchler Biography," <http://www.users.drew.edu/rcorring/downloads/Justus%20Buchler%20biography%20by%20Wallace.pdf>.
3. Richard J. Bernstein, "Buchler's Metaphysics," in *Nature's Perspectives: Prospects for Ordinal Metaphysics*, ed. by Armen Marsoobian, Kathleen Wallace, and Robert S. Corrington (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 29–30.
4. Ryder, *The Things in Heaven and Earth*, 22.
5. Terminologically speaking, it would have been better to refer to the philosophical attitude which stresses the role of the cognizing subject as 'constructionism' as opposed to Ryder's 'constructivism.' See Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 47.
6. In this regard, Ryder refers to pragmatism as postmodernism because "for both of them the process of experience, in the broad sense of interaction, is constitutive of what is experienced" (23). Far from intending to be too focused on petty terminology, this is not a very good way of stating the nature of postmodernism (this concept being itself rather problematic). What is a "broad sense of interaction" as opposed to, say, a "narrow sense"? Does constructionism automatically imply postmodernism? See also Larry A. Hickman, *Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism: Lessons from John Dewey* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).
7. Ryder, *The Things in Heaven and Earth*, 27.
8. Ibid., 104.
9. Ibid., 105.
10. See James Ladyman and Don Ross, *Every Thing Must Go: Metaphysics Naturalized* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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