JUSTUS BUCHLER, 1914-1991

Justus Buchler, 76, Distinguished Professor Emeritus in Philosophy at the State University of New York at Stony Brook died on March 19, 1991 at the Leader Nursing Home, Chambersburg, PA. Death was attributed to complications from a stroke.

Justus Buchler taught at Columbia University for 30 years before joining the Stony Brook faculty in 1971. He retired in 1981 and resided in Garden City, NY. He grew up in New York City. He graduated from City College of New York in 1934 and received master's and doctorate degrees at Columbia in 1935 and 1939, respectively. He is survived by his wife, Evelyn Urban Shirk, Professor Emeritus in Philosophy at Hofstra University, a daughter, Katherine Tessen and a sister, Beatrice Buchler Gott­hold.

Buchler's major published works are Charles Peirce's Empiri­cism, Toward A General Theory of Human Judgment, Nature and Judgment, The Concept of Method, Metaphysics of Natural Complex­es, and The Main of Light: On the Concept of Poetry. The Journal of Philosophy and The Southern Journal of Philosophy dedicated special issues to his work, sponsored by The Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy (of which he was a founding member), was held at Fairfield University in 1976. SUNY Press has just published a second, expanded edition of his Metaphysics of Natural Complexes (1989) as well as Nature's Perspectives: Prospects for Ordinal Metaphysics (1991), a collection of essays on his work and its importance for contemporary thought. More recently, commentators are expressing interest in his work and its relevance for issues raised by postmodern thinkers, such as Habermas, Foucault, Rorty and Derrida.

The most striking feature of Buchler's work is its compre­hensiveness. The range of subjects covered, from possibility to community, from poetry to God, is testimony to the interpretive breadth of his system of thought. This is no surprise given Buchler's distinctive background and experience. His interests and work have ranged through literature, history, art, education, curriculum development and of course, philosophy.

Buchler's career at Columbia University was a distinguished one; he earned the Johnsonian Chair in Philosophy in 1959 and was awarded the Butler Silver Medal in 1973. Yet, perhaps one of his most significant contributions was to enhance and sustain Columbia's reputation as a major force in the development of general education in this country. As the administrative and intellectual head of the Contemporary Civilization (CC) program at Columbia College (beginning in 1942) he was the program's guiding spirit and intellectual leader, its self-critical force insisting upon annual reexamination and requiring editorial
committees to change and improve basic materials on a regular basis.

Buchler's own theory of judgment has some roots in the CC experience. From the early days of his intellectual career Buchler had a respect for the complexity of human utterance. While acknowledging his attraction to figures such as Peirce and Royce and his respect for Mead and Cassirer, he felt that sign-theory has to be superseded metaphysically by a theory of human production or utterance. A healthy respect for the utterances and actions that constitute human beings is embodied in the parity of the modes of judgment -- active, assertive and exhibitivE -- in Buchler's theory of judgment. The ubiquity and indispensability of each of the modes of judgment for understanding human experience and its products, were exemplified in Buchler's work and life: his love of literature and poetry, classical music, the visual and plastic arts, photography, baseball. Coupled with his breadth and sheer catholicity of interest was a very strong desire to establish instruments of rational discipline in attempting to understand the recurrent patterns in human discrimination and ontologically, in the world around us. The breadth and scope of his system, on the one hand, and the rigor of it, on the other, can be seen as the controlled expression of these two urges in Buchler. Students recognized these traits in Buchler and were drawn to work with him. Among his students he was known for his rigor, his passion for philosophy, but also for his humanity and compassion.

Perhaps the fact that Buchler wrote his dissertation on Peirce can give us some clue to the character of Buchler's perception of himself as a philosopher. Peirce was, in both his person and his work, unconventional, not bound to any specific school of thought or modes of analysis. Buchler, too, struck out in unprecedented and unconventional directions. Starting with Toward A General Theory of Human Judgment, published in 1951, his primary commitment was to the development of an original philosophical system. He has published in Mind and Analysis, but chose not to be limited by analytic philosophy in his methods and subjects. He shed light on the genius of Peirce before Peirce was fashionable, but chose to transcend the limits of pragmatism in his thought. He moved beyond the insights of his predecessors and developed his own theory of the human self as "ordinally" (relationally) constituted. In his work nothing is sacred; one can interrogate the status of anything, any "complex." In the metaphysics of natural complexes nothing is suspended in nonbeing; every complex is related to some other complexes and is accessible to discrimination, in principle if not always in fact. While Buchler's metaphysical insights go far beyond those of Peirce, they also provide a sound ontological basis for interpreting Peirce's point that there are no fixed limits to inquiry.

What he respected most in philosophy was the creative proc-
essor and Plato as the distinctive paradigm of this process. A philosopher has to invent categories if the world is to be made intelligible. It was as a metaphysician that Buchler was most original and exhibited his inventive power most forcefully. He has an eye on persistent traits exhibited universally, in the world at large. And, he had the power of abstracting and conceptualizing those traits to shape the categories of his system. His groundbreaking principle of ontological parity reinvigorates the very meaning of metaphysics; his radical reconceptualization of possibility is a directive for any serious attempt to deal with the issue.

Buchler began as a serious and impressive logician, but moved in other directions, away from mathematics to the broader issues of the "metaphysics of utterance," such as the nature of meaning and communication, and later, the "metaphysics of natural complexes." He developed strong personal and intellectual ties with John Herman Randall, Jr., emerging in co-authorship (Philosophy: An Introduction) as well as an instructional partnership in Randall's great course in the History of Philosophy at Columbia. The power of Randall's unique comprehension of intellectual history was complemented by Buchler's metaphysical sensibility and inventive power to develop a persuasive systematic philosophy.

For Buchler academic life as not just the life of the mind. While he was totally self-disciplined in his work, he was not a person of the "ivory tower." He engaged in public discussion and lectures on radio and to various lay audiences, as well as providing instruction at the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry (1958-1960). Among his activities in the community of the university were his chairmanships of the CC program and of the Philosophy Department at Columbia at different times and his writing of a history of the tradition of General Education at Columbia College, "Reconstruction in the Liberal Arts." Academic citizenship was for him as much a part of the academic life as identification with one's intellectual work. In Buchler's own categories, the practice of citizenship is utterance primarily in the mode of active judgment.

In spite of a long and well-established career at Columbia, in 1971 Buchler moved to the State University of New York at Stony Brook where he continued his work. Those who knew him well were not surprised that he was willing to make a move to a newly established public university and to a department where he helped shape the development of the graduate programs in philosophy. True to his own philosophical outlook his career was defined by the emergence of new possibilities. During the Stony Brook years, Buchler wrote The Main of Light (1974), his Replies to Critics for the Fairfield conference and The Southern Journal of Philosophy special issue on his work (1976) and the two major articles which completed the system of general ontology, "On the Concept of "the World"" (1978) and "Probing the Idea of Nature" (1978). His passing is a loss to those who knew him but he
continues to be present to us in his products, his utterances: his carefully crafted system of thought and the impact his life and work made on the many students who were touched by and drawn to work with him. Justus Buchler's legacy is the challenge to confront the risks and satisfactions of a life committed to the boundlessness of query.

Sydney Gilber and Patrick Heelan

Justus Buchler's Herbert Schneider Award Citation

(Presented at the 15th Annual SAAP Meeting, University of Pennsylvania, 6 March 1978.)

The officers and members of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy take great pleasure in honoring Justus Buchler with the presentation of the Herbert W. Schneider Award for distinguished contributions to both the understanding and development of American philosophy.

In a long and exemplary career as teacher, scholar, and thinker Buchler has challenged and inspired generations of students -- many of whom are now active in this Society -- at Brooklyn College, Columbia University, and the State University of New York at Stony Brook. As a scrupulous editor and sympathetic but not uncritical interpreter of the works of Peirce and Santayana he has thrown fresh light on the thought of those two seminal thinkers. Extending, but sharply modifying, key themes in the work of Peirce, Royce, Dewey, Mead, and Whitehead, he has gone on to develop a brilliant and original speculative system -- a categorial scheme, a general ontology, and theories of knowledge, action, science, religion, and art -- in particular, a penetrating new account of the ontological status and function of poetry. In all this, Buchler has substantially enriched contemporary American philosophy. It is his special merit to have done this during a period when the winds of doctrine were, for the most part, blowing hard in an anti-speculative direction.

Justus Buchler has brought high intelligence, rare sensitivity, and a wide-ranging philosophical imagination to the persistent exploration of central issues in speculative philosophy. All of his writings are marked by a striking economy of means, compression of statement, and precision of formulation.

The Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy takes pride in honoring Justus Buchler with this Herbert W. Schneider Award for his contributions as teacher, editor, and interpreter in the field of American philosophy. But above all we honor him as an original, systematic, and encyclopedic American philosopher.

George L. Kline