

On Biehl's Defense of Bookchin's Immanent Dialectic

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Biehl on Asian Philosophy

In her "Reply," to "Domesticating the Dialectic," Janet Biehl attacks what she characterizes as my "curious effort" to "marry the Western dialectical tradition with Taoism and Buddhism" and my citation of the Buddhist dialectician Nagarjuna. Biehl announces that "For his part, let it be known, Hegel didn't think much of Asian philosophy, writing that there 'what is highest and the origin of things is nothing, emptiness, the altogether undetermined, the abstract universal ...'"

Biehl is certainly correct in her belief that Hegel wrote this. However, it is well-known that Hegel, for all his dialectical brilliance, was not a very reliable authority concerning Asian philosophy. He depicted it according to his schematization of four stages of World History, beginning with that of "unreflected consciousness" during the "the childhood of History" in "the East," and culminating in the fourth stage of History with the fully "adult" Germanic World. Hegel had no familiarity with major Buddhist philosophers such as Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti, or Tsong Khapa, and he defended his Orientalist philosophical speculations with hasty generalizations based on scant textual evidence and extrapolations from European perceptions of the Mysterious East.

Biehl's Hegel quote is a particularly unfortunate one, for it gets things precisely backwards. Buddhist thought, far from advocating "abstract universality," holds a radically anti-essentialist position, and vehemently rejects any idea of "abstract universals." Hegel might be to some degree excused for holding such seriously defective views concerning Asian philosophy 200 years ago, when little of the relevant philosophical literature was translated. Today, however, there is an enormous body of scholarly work on these matters, in addition to helpful and accurate elementary texts for those like Biehl who are not familiar with the meaning of basic concepts in Buddhist philosophy (such as *sunyata* or emptiness).

Biehl faithfully follows Bookchin's project of discrediting Asian philosophy by sweepingly depicting half of humanity's philosophical inquiry as no more than a form of escapism and quietistic withdrawal from the world. It is instructive to see how she applies this to Zen. "To her mind," she informs us, "paradoxes like those of Zen speak to the *vita contemplativa*." Biehl is unaware of the fact that Zen is in reality scathing in its attack on what has been called the "*vita contemplativa*." Hannah Arendt, in the classic discussion of that concept, associated such a life with the "experience of the eternal" and said that it "occurs outside the realm of human affairs." Madhyamaka, the tradition of Nagarjuna, is defined classically as "the Middle Way" between "eternalism" and "nihilism," and Zen, as the practice of this same perspective, has no patience with imaginary transcendent realms and non-existent eternal realities.

Buddhism holds that everything is impermanent and that the reality that is most relevant to us, indeed the only one we really encounter, is the one found here and now. It directs us to the *tathata*, the "thusness" of things, and teaches mindfulness, full *presence* of mind. As a well-known Zen saying goes, "before enlightenment, chopping wood, carrying water; after enlightenment chopping wood, carrying water." As Zen puts it, nirvana is samsara, and samsara is nirvana; there is no distinction between the "ultimate goal" and that which we confront most immediately in everyday life.

Zen is dialectical precisely because it challenges and explodes such dualities as Biehl's conventional distinction between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*.

Biehl on Bookchin and Dialectic

Biehl cites a well-known passage from Hegel that stresses the radical negativity inherent in dialectic: "As Hegel wrote in *Logic*, dialectic is 'this immanent going beyond, in which the one-sidedness and limitedness reveals itself for what it is, namely, as its negation. It is the nature of everything finite to sublimate [*aufheben*] itself.'" It is a useful passage, for it exhibits strikingly how little of the spirit of such radical dialectic can be found in Bookchin's work, which overwhelmingly treats dialectical development on the model of immanent teleology. In "Domesticating the Dialectic" I give numerous examples of how consistently Bookchin follows this paradigm. It is noteworthy that while Biehl quite reasonably credits Hegel with having a larger view of dialectic, she does not present counterexamples of Bookchin's own use of dialectic in ways that stress radical negativity and striking dialectical reversals, as opposed to the unfolding of potentialities immanent in a being.

Instead, she concentrates on defending Bookchin's use of the acorns into oak trees analogy. Biehl claims that Bookchin uses this image merely as an example of "development," as if his readers needed to know that what an acorn does when it becomes an oak tree is "develop" into it. But in fact this image serves a quite specific purpose within what Bookchin conceived of as his dialectical project. Quite clearly, its function was to help establish his paradigm of dialectical development as the unfolding of the potentiality that is inherent within a being.

Biehl attempts to defend Bookchin by demonstrating that there are differences between the development of an oak tree and the development of human society. She believes that she is pointing out one such difference when she notes that "Human beings may contain the potentiality to create a free, rational, ecological society, for example, but that doesn't mean they will inevitably do so." In fact, there is no "inevitability" in the development of an acorn into an oak tree; only a miniscule percentage of acorns grow into fully developed oak trees. They only do so when the necessary and sufficient preconditions for that development exist. However, the crucial issue is in any case not about inevitability and non-inevitability. It's also not about DNA. No one has ever accused Bookchin of believing that societies have DNA, and if anyone ever does I will certainly defend Bookchin vigorously on this point.

The crucial question about Bookchin's analogy does not concern the quite obvious ways in which the two terms in the analogy *differ*, but rather the ways in which Bookchin thought that they were *similar*. It is the question of whether Bookchin thought that that he had uncovered an immanent teleology within human society that is analogous to the realization of potentialities for development in organic life forms, not only in plants, but in animals also. This question was answered quite clearly in the affirmative by Bookchin, when he states, for example, that "humanity actualizes a deep-seated nesis in evolution toward self-consciousness and freedom" and that this provides "the grounding for a truly objective ethics."

The political implications of this position became increasingly clear in Bookchin's later work. In "The Communalist Project," for example, he attacks the contemporary anarchist movement for its "chilling eclecticism, in which tentative opinions are chaotically mismatched to ideals that should rest on objective premises." He explains for the uninitiated that by "objective" he means "potentialities that can be rationally conceived, nurtured, and in time actualized into what we would narrowly call

realities.” In other words, his own post-anarchist “Communalist” politics can, he thinks, be “rationally” educed to be the path toward the unfolding of the immanent teleology of human society, and those who reject his politics can be dismissed as relativistic enemies of Reason.

One of the most serious confusions in Biehl’s response pervades her discussion of the meaning of this key term, “teleology.” I presented a number of examples of the way in which Bookchin consistently misused the term, defining it as connoting a kind of preordained, necessary development and stating that he was not a teleological thinker because he rejected necessary development. Biehl ridicules my citation of one of the many standard philosophical works that define the word clearly as having no implication of necessity and connoting, among other things, “tendency.” She notes that this is “one of the words Bookchin used frequently” and she incomprehensibly concludes that this fact shows a contradiction on my part.

In reality, her observation only verifies the claim that Bookchin was confused. If, in fact, as Biehl concedes, what “the word [teleology] really means” is not “necessity” but rather “tendency,” and if, as she observes, “*tendency* is one of the words Bookchin used frequently,” then she has proven the obvious, that Bookchin was confused when he said “I’m not a teleologist, I don’t believe that any development is inevitable.” On Biehl’s own assumptions, Bookchin is a teleologist *malgré lui*, and contrary to his protestations, his belief that development is not inevitable is irrelevant to the issue of his being one.

There are further confusions in Biehl’s discussion of teleology. She quotes Aristotle’s statement that the final cause is “the end, that for the sake of which a thing is done” and then speculates that Gary Snyder’s statement that in a natural ecosystem “plankton ... call for salmon,” constitutes an instance of Aristotelian teleology. The much more obvious interpretation of Snyder’s statement is that it is an example of mutual determination in nature. A species that might be naively looked upon as a merely passive food source is in fact an active determinant of the nature of a species that preys upon it. This is a dialectical view; it reverses Spinoza’s famous formulation by pointing out the manner in which “negation is determination,” the way in which a thing *is* that which it *is not*. It is dialectical in that it challenges our unreflective, static ways of thinking about processes in nature and points out the internal relations between things.

In invoking Aristotelian teleology to interpret Snyder, Biehl would presumably have us believe that he is claiming that the *raison d’être* of salmon is to serve the needs of those plankton that “call” for them. This is an extremely dubious interpretation, since it is the plankton that serve as food for the salmon. Accordingly, the “purpose” of salmon would be, rather bizarrely, to satisfy the need of plankton to be eaten. Moreover, even were we to accept the entirely implausible idea that Snyder posited such a teleology, it would be just the opposite of the teleology found in the Aristotelian *scala naturae*, in which beings that are lower in the natural hierarchy serve the needs of those that are higher. There’s a certain air of desperation in Biehl’s attempt to defend Bookchin from accusations of Aristotelianism through such a contrived attempt to find Aristotelianism in Snyder’s statement.

Biehl on Dialectic

Biehl’s own view of dialectic duplicates precisely the problems that I pointed out in Bookchin’s position. In her book *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*, she explains that dialectical naturalism is an approach that “above all focuses on the transitions of a developing phenomenon, which emerge from its potentiality to become fully-developed and self-actualized. These transitions, in turn, arise

from a process of ‘contradiction’ between a thing as it is, on the one hand, and a thing as it potentially should become, on the other.” This faithfully follows Bookchin’s reduction of dialectic to immanent teleology.

She explains the meaning of this “dialectical contradiction” in relation to *an organism* by positing a “tension between what that organism could potentially be when it is fully actualized” and “what it is at any moment before that development is fulfilled.” Next, she addresses “dialectical contradiction” in the development of the *human being*, in that “there is a tension that exists between infancy, childhood, adolescence, and youth, until the child’s abilities are fully actualized as a mature being.” Finally she applies the same view of dialectical development to *society*. Explaining that overcoming internal contradictions and achieving full actualization is equivalent to rationality, she notes that “the same can be said to apply to society.” Thus, Biehl, like Bookchin, applies the “unfolding of potentiality” model of dialectical development to organisms in the natural world, to human beings, and to human society.

Biehl has consistently adhered to the same view of dialectic as immanent teleology that I criticized in Bookchin, and her response to my critique of that view does nothing to vindicate it. “Dialectical reasoning,” she has said, proceeds by “eduction,” which “aims to understand the *inherent logic* [Biehl’s emphasis] of a thing’s development—that is, the point from which it started, where it is now, and where by *its immanent developmental logic* [my emphasis] it should go.” This is a good depiction of precisely what is wrong with Bookchinite “eduction.” It is in fact the *reduction* of radically subversive, anarchic, wild dialectic to tame, safely domesticated processes of immanent teleological unfolding. Dialectic in its most radical and critical moments tells us that there is *no point* at which anything starts, that it *never is* “where it is now,” and that sweeping pronouncements about where everything from an acorn to the course of World History “should go” reduce either to pointless banality or to sterile dogmatism.