

Archie Bahm

(Aug. 21, 1907 – March 12, 1996)

Archie John Bahm was born in the tiny town of Imlay Michigan on August 21, 1907 (pop. about 1,000) at that time, and passed away on March 12, 1996 at the age of 88. He received his bachelor's degree from Albion College and his M.A. in 1930 and Ph.D. in 1933 from the *University of Michigan*. He was a Fulbright Research Scholar at the University of Rangoon and in the history of Indian philosophy at Banaras Hindu University. He taught at the *Texas Technological College* (now Texas Tech) 1934-1946. He was an associate professor at the University of Denver from 1946-1948. In 1948 he became a professor of philosophy at the University of New Mexico where he remained for the rest of his career. He served as Acting Chair of the University of New Mexico's Department of Philosophy from 1954 to 1955 and from 1964 to 1965. He organized the Albuquerque Chapter of the *Southwest Regional American Humanist Association* in 1954. He was also the organizer, past President and past secretary-treasurer of the *New Mexico Philosophical Society*. In 1949 he founded the *21 Club* at the *University of New Mexico* to establish a dialogue between each of the 21 departments at the university at that time. He established the *Directory of American Philosophers* and was the primary editor until 1994. In 1933 he contributed his own supplement in *The New Humanist* titled "A Religious Affirmation" to Roy Wood Sellars' 1933 *Humanist Manifesto I*. He also signed *Humanist Manifesto II* in 1973. He was a major force in promoting [comparative philosophy](#) devoted to the comparison of philosophical views from the East and the West. In 1967 he was appointed as editor of the southwest *Journal of Thought*. He was the author of about 21 books, depending on how one counts, and countless articles, on a wide range of topics, Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Yoga, world religions, value theory (including ethics, business ethics, and aesthetics), axiology, epistemology, metaphysics, existentialism, comparative philosophy, Marxism, the nature of philosophy, ecology, teaching methods, the plight of indigenous peoples, and applied philosophy. He authored a practical book on Yoga for business executives and professional people. He also authored an introductory logic text.

Organicism

His own philosophy, which he called "[organicism](#)," is a philosophy of *interdependence*. It is difficult to overestimate the influence of Roy Wood Sellars on his organicism. In an 1958

essay titled “Evolutionary Naturalism” Bahm wrote that he selected the University of Michigan for graduate study so that he could study with Sellars, be associated with Sellars as student, as a fellow, and as a teaching assistant for 5 years, and considered Sellars his major professor. He considered himself a “naturalist, an evolutionist, a humanist, and, with modifications, a critical realist” (“Evolutionary Realism”). Evolutionary naturalism, a species of emergent evolutionism, and critical realism (the view that, first, human beings normally perceive independent objects with their sensations but do not perceive sensations, and, second, human beings must interpret their sensations), and humanism are Sellars’ signature positions. Bahm praises many of his contemporaries that might also be called organicists, in particular, A.N. Whitehead, John Dewey and George Herbert Mead. However, Bahm eventually sought in each case to distinguish his mature view from all of these views. If there is one major difference between Bahm’s view and that of all of these much-admired philosophers, it is that Bahm seeks to combine the insights of Western science and organicism with the inspiration he derived from the great Asian philosophies.

On Bahm’s version of organicism, “to exist is to be interdependent.” His model of interdependence is based on analogy with the interdependence of different aspects within a living organism. Bahm applies this idea in every area of his thinking. One of these applications is in his understanding of the relation between Eastern and Western philosophies. For Bahm, Eastern and Western philosophies are not irreconcilable opposites. Each represents a part of the human organism that must, if properly appreciated, be united with the other. His philosophical view is distinctive in that it incorporates inspiration from the East and West in roughly *equal* measures (and he did this at a time when this was not in fashion). Since each culture is a development of certain tendencies inherent in human beings, a foreign culture represents a development of certain tendencies that are present, but undeveloped, in oneself. Thus, when a Western philosopher finds himself in the presence of an Eastern philosopher (or vice versa), the appropriate response is not to see the other as some alien incomprehensible being that one must somehow tolerate in order to keep the peace, but rather to ask what these “others” can teach one about parts of oneself that one’s own culture has not fully developed. Specifically, Bahm sought to combine the rational, analytical and scientific emphasis from Western philosophy with the intuitive spiritual, religious and mystical views present in many Eastern philosophies. He held that neither side is complete without the other. Bahm unwaveringly applies this emphasis on interdependence to every area of thought that he discusses: political philosophy, metaphysics, epistemology, logic, philosophy of science, philosophy of value, philosophy of religion, theology,

philosophy of education, and psychology. Only Bahm's view on a few of these can be discussed here in order to illustrate Bahm's organicist method.

Bahm's organicism was built on a rejection of Cartesian dualism. Indeed, Bahm sees most dualisms are untenable. Further, an important part of Bahm's organicism is [emergentism](#), the view that certain organic wholes are, so to speak, qualitatively "greater than the sum of their parts." A human being is *qualitatively* much more than a structure of hydrogen, carbon, oxygen, etc. These higher-level properties of human beings are emergent and cannot, therefore, be reduced to the properties of their material parts. Reality is a hierarchy of levels each of which is emergent from the lower levels but in which items in each level are interdependent with items in the other levels. Bahm holds as a general principle that within the context of an organism, opposites *complement* each other. For this reason, he retains an emphasis on *polarity* and *dialectic* as fundamental organicist categories. It is in the organic *process* that the *appropriate* balance of these polar opposites is sorted out.

Sellars and Whitehead

A great insight into Bahm's philosophy can be found in the way he resolves the conflict between Sellars and Whitehead. Whitehead, who titled his philosophy as "a philosophy of organism," rejected the old "substance metaphysics," which, he believed, was founded on a faulty Aristotelian logic, and *replaced* it with a logic suited to a *process* philosophy. By contrast, Sellars, who claimed that his philosophy better deserved the title "philosophy of organism," insisted, contra Whitehead, that one absolutely *cannot* do away with the concept of substance. In typical fashion, Bahm holds that one need not choose one side in this dispute. Rather, Sellars' emphasis on substance and Whitehead's emphasis on process must be *combined* into a single unified account in which each is given its due. In the case at hand, Bahm sees the cosmos as, roughly, a process in which different substantial agencies emerge and play a role in the further development of the organic process. Thus, Bahm sees each of Whitehead's and Sellars' views as partly right but, in different ways, as *incomplete* versions of organicism. Whereas Sellars is right to emphasize the importance of reason and science in his account of the cosmos, he is weak on the intuitive, the spiritual, and subjective. Whereas Whitehead is right to emphasize the importance of feeling and the subjective (his "prehensions"), he is weak on the objective and the scientific. Indeed, Bahm at one point says that Whitehead's organicism failed because he attempted to develop an organicist philosophy with an inorganicist logic (an obvious reference to the logic Whitehead had earlier developed with Bertrand Russell in *Principia Mathematica*).

Philosophy of Education

Bahm's views on the philosophy of education also offer excellent insight into his method. Whereas the "conservatives" argue that education should inculcate the young in discipline and traditional values and the "progressives" argue that it should inculcate tolerance and free thinking into them, Bahm holds that each of these polarities, conservative and progressive, answers to a fundamental tendency in the human organism. To deny either its appropriate place in the educational process will produce an incomplete unbalanced human being. Rejecting the typical Western philosophy of exclusion, Bahm holds that one must seek to appreciate the appropriate place of each in the whole educational process.

Eastern Philosophy

Bahm's view that these various polar opposites, whether in metaphysics, epistemology, political philosophy, value theory, etc., must be reconciled, derives in large measure from his understanding of Eastern philosophy. Whereas the West emphasizes the *exclusionary logic* of non-contradiction and excluded middle, Eastern philosophies often hold that such seeming opposites compliment one other (see, for example, Nishida Kitaro's [Logic of Place](#)). Each is necessary because each is incomplete. Significantly, Bahm holds this not only about substance and process, subjectivity and objectivity, or conservatism and progressivism, etc., but about Western and Asian philosophies themselves. It is an entire mistake to ignore or diminish the emphasis on logic and science in the West, but at the same time, it is equally an entire mistake to diminish the emphasis on intuition and spirituality in the East. Rather, these seeming polar opposites must also be combined into a coherent balanced view of the world.

Conclusion

Bahm's signature contribution to philosophy is, with his eternally cheerful indefatigable spirit, to foster a dialogue between the various hostile philosophical camps, but most importantly, between Eastern and Western philosophy. It is safe to say that the face of philosophy in America is different because of Archie Bahm.

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Note: A Complete list of the Bahm’s published works from 1937-1993 at the University of New Mexico archives can be found at

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