

John William Miller, 1895 - 1978: A Memorial Minute

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With the death of John William Miller on Christmas Day, the profession lost one of its most extraordinary teachers and a philosopher of singular depth of mind. He had for thirty-five years taught at William College.

Miller received both undergraduate and graduate degrees from Harvard. He may well have been the last surviving member of the profession to have studied with Royce. Plainly, Royce influenced the development of Miller's mind. But his debt was greater to Fichte and the Hegel of the *Phenomenology*, and in some respects to Bradley. He found his thought, however, throughout the history of philosophy, which he interpreted as the record of the progressive self-definition of the human mind, and in unsystematic writers, such as Emerson and Conrad, whom he regarded as expressing the philosophical idea as generated in actual life and history.

Miller personified the dignity and depth of his philosophy. He was a commanding and distinguished individual with a fine sense of humor and a capacity for enduring affection. The quality of his life might well be taken as evidence of the truth of the philosophy that he both taught and lived by—an Idealism stressing the centrality of will, the act, the individual, the local, finitude and history. It was his singular merit to maintain the principle of Idealism without yielding to the temptation to make an entity of its ultimate concept or losing sight of the fact that the mind maintained in philosophical reflection is finite and individual, virtually Heidegger's *Dasein*. Miller often anticipated insights that have since come to be identified with major philosophers of our time Sartre, Jaspers, Tillich, Ortega y Gasset, and even the later Wittgenstein.

The truth of Miller's philosophical position was further demonstrated by its extraordinary power to illuminate and deepen thought on every subject upon which he directed it—the political art, science, religion, psychology, history, education, current affairs. This power was in part derived from his constant attention to the existential grounds of philosophical reflection and truth.

Although Miller wrote continually, he was not until his last year willing to publish more than a few essays. He did not want to incur the obligation to defend himself against merely destructive criticism; and he was over-concerned to find the exactly right turn of phrase of literary allusion to make the expression of his thought memorable and gracious and to endow it with the feeling associated with its meaning in life.

As an instinctively great teacher, Miller's concern was less to state outright than to enable other minds to generate the thought for themselves. His method of teaching was essentially dialectical and aimed at progressively exposing the inner logic of a subject as deeply as the student could follow. His lectures, which were embellished with his own aphorisms and often eloquent, were highly systematic, and they depended on much out-of-class conversation. He had a way in these conversations of respectfully revealing the superficiality of the student's best ideas, so that no matter how many times the student returned, he seldom left without having discovered an underlying issue or a deeper dimension of his thought.

Although many of Miller's students went on to graduate work in philosophy, his best usually went, with his encouragement into other professions. He did not see this as an evidence of failure. For he had intended only to contribute to the development of mind in any realization. And, as he never tired of pointing out, it is in the world that they articulate and maintain, and not in the classroom and journal, that philosophical truths live and prove themselves. In his own view, he had neither failed nor succeeded; he had simply done his best to attend to the reflective conditions for the making of such distinctions in the actual world.