

John William Miller, C. I. Lewis, and the Inheritance of the Golden Age

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We have been engaged in tracing a genealogy of idealism. This genealogy is been by no means complete, but it is broad and representative, addressing both the European and American scenes. Our story of idealism is not definitive but, I would venture, it is a telling description of the logic and trajectory of idealism. With my paper I situate the development of idealism within a distinctively American context. That context is, in its institutional frame, Harvard University in the first two decades of the 20th century. The situation, described argumentatively, is the Battle of the Absolute inaugurated by James and Royce in the class on metaphysics that they taught as a team in the first decade of the 20th century. The challenge, described conceptually, is to decide between or otherwise reconcile the claims of pragmatism and idealism.

Philosophers of a Certain Age

Clarence Irving Lewis (1883-1964) and John William Miller (1895-1978) are *rough* contemporaries in terms of the chronology and shape of their lives. Lewis was 12 years Miller's senior and he described himself as "an up-country New England Yankee" raised just 20 miles from the mills of Lowell, Massachusetts (quoted in Murphey, p. 19). Miller was born and raised in Rochester, New York, an industrial city shaped by its proximity to the Great Lakes and the transport and processing of the agricultural produce of the Midwest. Both men would come of age as thinkers during what Bruce Kuklick defines as the period of initial professionalization in American philosophy and both would teach for more than 30 years at a single institution of higher learning.

They are *true* contemporaries, however, by virtue of their early and lasting associations with Harvard University. Lewis came to Harvard as an undergraduate in 1902 and returned for his graduate studies. He completed his doctorate in philosophy in 1910 and, after a sojourn at University of California, Berkeley, he took an appointment at Harvard where he taught until his retirement in 1953. Miller began his undergraduate career at Harvard in 1912 and in 1919 he came back to Harvard where he took classes with Lewis and, 1922, wrote a dissertation under William Ernest Hocking. Following a two-year appointment at Connecticut College, Miller took a position at Williams College in western Massachusetts. He taught at Williams until his retirement in 1960. On two occasions, in 1948 and 1951, Miller presented papers before the Harvard Philosophical Club.

Lewis and Miller are, then, philosophers of a certain age. That age is the Golden Age of American philosophy and their intellectual heritage was the Battle of the Absolute. Lewis had the fortune to attend the famous class in metaphysics taught by James and Royce—James arguing for an empiricism of experience and Royce pushing for an encompassing concept of mind. By the time

Miller arrived at Harvard, James was deceased but Royce continued to teach and the intellectual reverberations of his collegial battle with James persisted. Both men understood that the contest between James and Royce was not a matter of who was right and who was wrong; the stakes were greater than mere correctness. Indeed, both were most impressed by the way each thinker took the other seriously and, in time, revised his position to consider what was stubborn, genuine, and important in the stance of the other. Most influential, for both Lewis and Miller, was Royce's eventual fashioning, in *The Problem of Christianity* (1918/1968, p. 279), of "a sort of absolute pragmatism" that, by incorporating the voluntaristic strain he shared with James, sought to reconcile the absolute with action, will, and history (i.e., real change over time). Equally important for Miller, and something that was less thoroughly explored by Lewis, was Royce's insight into what Miller called "the community of symbolic power" (Miller Papers, 14:13). This critical appropriation of Charles Sanders Peirce's pragmatic semiotics enabled Royce to articulate his sense of the Universal Community in terms of a theory of interpretation organized around signs and symbols (Royce, 1918/1968, pp. 343ff.). For both Lewis and Miller, Royce always remained the leading mind of Harvard. This, again, was not because he was right but because his thought expanded more readily in response to James's provocations and because Royce revised his philosophy so as to be more inclusive without losing any of the "cogency" that Lewis so admired (quoted in Murphey, p. 22).

It was the shared intellectual fate of Lewis and Miller that they were compelled to address the differences of pragmatism and idealism. What each man eventually fashioned was a creative and compelling hybrid. Miller, at one point, called his thought a "naturalistic idealism" (1980, p. 149). Lewis referred to his philosophy, inspired by Peirce, as a "conceptual pragmatism" (1970, p. 13). These very terms of description show that their minds were oriented toward synthesis.

The Meaning of the Real

How a philosopher addresses *the real* is diagnostic. Assessing where Lewis and Miller stood on this matter is crucial for comparing their philosophies as well as for situating them relative to a third strain of thought that was then vital at Harvard. The New Realist movement was led by Ralph Barton Perry, a student of James, who joined the Harvard faculty in 1902 and taught in Cambridge for 44 years. Perry's movement, also championed by Harvard psychologist Edwin Bissell Holt, was fashioned as a successor in the contest between pragmatism and idealism, and it was quite influential in the 1910s and 1920s. While I cannot treat New Realism in detail (the core statement of which is the 1912 book, *The New Realism: Cooperative Studies in Philosophy*), using the concept of the real as a means to articulate how Lewis and Miller developed their philosophies allows me to suggest where they stood in relation to Perry's New Realism.

While Perry vigorously held onto the principles of realism, Lewis and Miller were cognizant of the conceptual traps of a rigorous subject-object distinction in which mind was challenged to be adequate to its object while the object was left uninfluenced by mind. That said, Lewis remained committed to working, with some modification, within the bounds of realism. Late in his career, in 1954, Lewis wrote that his "own metaphysical convictions are, as it happens, realistic" (1970, p. 333). Yet, in the same article, he immediately went on to explain that he had found it most fruitful to address basic matters of metaphysics *outside* the parameters of dualism, idealism, and phenomenalism. In *Mind and the World-Order*, his defining work of the 1920s, Lewis stated his fundamental orientation—joining the language of metaphysics with that of epistemology—in this way:

However, the alternatives accepted are false alternatives. This whole historical development, so far as it turns upon them, has been a mistake. There is no contradiction between the relativity of knowledge and the independence of the object. If the real object can be known at all, it can be known only in relation to a mind; and if the mind were different the nature of the object as known might well be different. Nevertheless the description of the object as known is true description of an independent reality. (1929, pp. 154-155)

Here, then, is both a break from and conservation of the dilemmas of reference. The break comes in the form of an acceptance of the mind as a conditioning (and not distorting) factor in the knowledge relationship. The conservative element is the assertion of the constitutive role of the *given* (1929, pp. 36-66). (The *given* is Lewis's clear inheritance from Perry who wrote that the core insight of the New Realists was that "sense perception . . . [is] an act in which the existent object is *given* or *disclosed*" and that "knowledge is a way of *taking* rather than *making* objects . . . [in which] there is a division or alternation of emphasis between empirical, existent objects and logical, non-existent object" [Perry, 1926, pp. 199-200].) Lewis saw the legacy of strict dualism as an intractable problem which required a change of fundamental terms. He also found that one must maintain the bite, the solidity, and the independence of the real unless our knowledge of the world become weak and viciously relativistic.

For Lewis, like Kant, categories without content are empty and perception without categories is blind (1929, p. 39). So he began with a basic idealist formulation. Yet, while it can be analytically distinguished from the concept, in concrete experience the given is always *this* or *that* thing and thus it only appears within the frame of categories (1929, p. 52). What we know about reality—i.e., beyond the barest analytical distinction of the given from the categories—comes about in and through acts of inquiry and experimentation. The great body of knowledge arises out of the trials of experience pushed onward by demands for more useful habits of mind and action. The *workable* is what is crucial here. Indeed knowledge for Lewis is, following Peirce, a matter of prediction (1929, pp. 117-153, esp. p. 140). The real, in the form of the given, is a constituent part of the knowledge relationship but is not that against which ideas are judged. As knowers, then, we seek *validity* (1929, p. 2), and validity is an experiential and social concept. Establishing validity as a core epistemological concept also necessitates a frank recognition of change over time—i.e., revision of aims and practices that offer new perspectives and a developing interpretation of the given of the world.

The full explication of knowledge must then involve categories and the exigencies of practical activity because categories are essentially practical ways of *taking* the world (1929, pp. 262-263). For Lewis, disagreements about reality cannot be decided by reference to what is *given* but rather have to be sorted out on pragmatic grounds of what works (1929, p. 271).

It is important to underscore that the real and the quality of reality are conserved in Lewis's account. First, we have the given as the posited external object and this means that Lewis's position in important ways conforms to New Realism. Second, the world of experience and action shaped by the categories is itself a regular, reliable, and very much "real" world. Sandra Rosenthal refers to Lewis's philosophical stance as "process realism" in which "there are real modes of behavior that govern what occurs" (2007, p. 102). The categories that arise from and give shape to practical experience are not ephemeral or episodic. Rather they are enduring habits of conceptual and practical behavior that organize not just what we experience now but also what we can anticipate experiencing in all places and times. Our world is socially and practically constituted but it is no less durable or consistent. Indeed, our social agreements far exceed our disagreements (1929, p. 115).

Outside of infrequent periods of radical revision, our practical habits/categories form a stubborn and reliable order of experience that supports common-sense notions of the real and knowledge as mere correspondence between thought and object. Thus some conceptual and experiential elements of realism are conserved in Lewis's outlook.

While Miller shared the assessment that it is a false option to choose from among dualism, idealism, and phenomenalism—all of which rely on dyadic concepts of reference that “destroy knowledge in the very posing of the problem about it” (1982, p. 24)—he differed from Lewis in that he had no interest in conserving the language of realism. His goal was to push toward the noncognitive basis of cognition found in action and, in doing so, he crafted an alternative philosophical vocabulary. That vocabulary allows one to avoid a whole set of commonplaces which, while they ring true to common sense, keep one from reconciling the Jamesian pluriverse of experience and the Roycean universe of mind. Both positions contained important clues about pragmatic action, but neither took action—that which stands between the discrete object and the encompassing mind—seriously enough.

Miller looked to the activity of definition in order to clarify his metaphysics. Early in his career he wrote *The Definition of the Thing* in which he inquired into “the common factor of ‘thisness’” (1922/1980, p. 41). What he found was that, in order to maintain distinction and thus definition, “any object or concept constantly acquires new relations as a condition of its separate existence and distinctness” (1922/1980, p. 43). Those relations are driven by pragmatic demands for control and intelligibility, and that process of generating and maintaining control is indefinite in its temporal and predicative extent. Refinements in definition are always possible and constantly needed. Thus what a thing *is* will change. Sometimes the change will be subtle. Sometimes it will be radical. But so long as the thing—natural object, fabricated object, or conceptual object—remains relevant within a system of meaning and practical action, it will undergo development. Completely static definitions are useless definitions (at best tautologies).

What a thing is, then, is what Miller termed a *relative permanence* (1922/1980, pp. 50-53). The demand for an epistemological substrate—something against which to assess specific claims to knowledge—is not addressed by reference to the given, but, rather by “the *distinguishability of a process*” (1922/1980, p. 50; italics in original). For Miller that process is, in keeping with Lewis, fundamentally social. This conclusion points us toward what Miller frankly called a broad “doctrine of relativism” (1922/1980, p. 110). But with both history and social agreements as controls, this relativism is not a cognitive free-for-all. (Here Miller shares Lewis's interest in maintaining the common sense affirmation of the general reliability of our everyday experience.) Rather, the recognition of relativism, in which “no final or absolute discovery can be made,” is an affirmation of the importance of action and inquiry, of the ongoing process of taking, doing, and clarifying. If “the fact does not reside outside the swirl of contingency” (1922/1980, p. 110), as Miller stated, then it also resides within in the scope of pragmatic action and human responsibility which only find their places within the contingent mix of order and disorder (and not the Jamesian pluriverse of sense intuitions or the Roycean universe of mind).

Thus Miller made an emphatic break from the realist tradition, eschewing its language and its conclusions. He followed the lead of idealism in affirming the constitutive role of categories, which he also called “organization words” (1978, p. 189). Because categories are means of definition and control, the process of definition involves dynamic categories. Kant's insight into the categories of experience is modified to allow for someone *telling* time (note the gerund) and, thus, for changes in

the very concept of time. Like Lewis, then, Miller placed the Kantian categories in history and fashioned a historical process philosophy.

The Milieu and Media of Action

Key terms of the early conclusions of both Lewis and Miller are: dynamic categories, social processes, and pragmatic actions. In the 1930s, each went a different way, however. Lewis responded to the influence of logical positivism and refined his synthesis of idealism and pragmatism with a focus on empirical justification. Miller, by contrast, articulated a concept of symbolism (inspired by Royce) and developed a novel phenomenology of embodied experience.

In 1956 and near the end of his life, Lewis presented a series of lectures on “the social inheritance of mankind.” In that work, eventually published as *Our Social Inheritance*, he stated that he was inspired by Royce (1957, pp. 7-8). In *The Philosophy of Christianity*, Royce articulated his notion of a Community of Interpretation that redescribed the Absolute, over which he and James had contended, in terms of history, plurality, and sociability. Royce argued that this Community tended, over the Peircean long-run, toward unity. However, taken at any given time, the hallmarks of Jamesian pragmatism were evident. Royce wrote:

Such a process of interpretation involves, of necessity, as infinite a sequence of acts of interpretation. It also admits of an endless variety within all selves which are thus mutually interpreted. These selves, in all their variety, constitute the life of a single Community of Interpretation whose life comprises and unifies all the social varieties and all the social communities which, for any reason, we know to be real in the empirical world which our social and historical sciences study. (1918/1968, pp. 272-273)

Yet Lewis, lecturing with Royce on his mind in 1956, remained at the level of high generality. He addressed *man*, *Western civilization*, and *history* but avoided people, civilizations, and specific historical moments. Rather he elaborated on the abstract concept of social process that he had developed in the 1920s. In *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, his master work of the 1940s, and other works of the 1940s and 1950s, Lewis made technical advances in epistemology but set aside the imperative to join the plurality of lived experience with the cogency of idealism.

For his part, from the 1930s onward, Miller looked carefully at pragmatic action, its milieu and its media. Two key and novel ideas developed in and through this interrogation: the *functioning object* and the *midworld*.

Having set aside the dyad of subject and object, Miller examined what was, so to speak, in-between—action. Moving toward the specific, he inquired into the means of action and he found that action and understanding-through-action always required instruments and symbols. Drawing from Peircean semiotics he asserted that a *third* element was the means of intelligibility and order (including the order that is the subject-object distinction). For Kant or Lewis, this third element would have been comprised of mental categories. Miller reinterpreted the categories in an actualist mode and called the media of intelligibility *functioning objects*:

What, then, are those objects that are not objects of cognition but control cognition? They are functioning objects. They are utterances, embodiments, which determine what is known.

They are actualities, not realities or appearances To such functioning objects I gave a name. It was the “midworld.” The midworld meets the two conditions: it is not cognitive, and it launches, spurs, and controls all cognition. . . . Unenviored, it projects the environment. (1982, pp. 12-13)

Among functioning objects he identified the human body (which he called the original functioning object), cognitive symbols of language and mathematics, and instruments such as measures and gauges that, for example, articulate space and register air pressure. The total class of functioning objects—ranging from the natural to the technological to the conceptual—forms a *midworld of symbols and functioning objects*.

The midworld, on its face, seems abstract if we take the commonplaces of realism as our guide. But on closer inspection, it is the media of the midworld and the ubiquity of action that are most concrete, whereas independent objects (givens) and subjects (minds) are the true abstractions. The midworld thus reorients our understanding of the empirical and suggests the immediacy of that which (including the body and its senses) mediates or discloses the Jamesian “immediate.” Furthermore the midworld leads us toward and not away from the Roycean mind. Functioning objects are mind at work—i.e., the only sort of mind here is and the very means of intelligibility disclosing the world by means of what James Diefenbeck called “categories on the move” (1990, p. 50). Action and its instruments are not different from the categorical. Rather, for Miller, action is always intelligent as well as practical.

The Community of Interpretation, Royce’s own reconciliation of his idealism with James’s pragmatism, can, on Millerian terms, be revised and understood as a “community of symbolic power.” The symbols of the midworld—our means of disclosure, interpretation, and communication—are social and shared. The larger process of interpretation which Royce highlighted occurs in and through natural objects such as human bodies, artifactual objects such as scientific instruments, and conceptual objects such as words.

The Idealist Legacy

In this genealogy of idealism, as we have seen, the language of the subject-object distinction remained strong and philosophers have had difficulties construing the process of disclosure in a way that did not result in either ahistorical subjectivism (Kant) or world-historical objectivism (Hegel and the early Royce). The meeting between pragmatism and idealism at Harvard in the persons of James and Royce was thus a crucial moment in that pragmatism, with its emphasis on action and social processes, provided idealist thinkers with new means to describe and break from the subjective-objective trap. Both Lewis and Miller took up the challenge of crafting something new and powerful from the Battle of the Absolute. Both reshaped idealism in ways that far better comported with the actualities of our shared, social lives. If, in the end, I find Miller’s actualism a more robust response to the Jamesian challenge, that should not cause us to overlook the creative work done by Lewis in the larger process of developing idealism.

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