

John William Miller and the Metacritical Initiative

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The junction at which this study begins will be familiar to any student of philosophical idealism, from its transcendental expression in Kant, through its absolute and dialectical manifestations in different lines of post-Kantian philosophy, and onward to the reception of idealism in its early American context, once Emerson encountered Kant and his idealist successors via the works of Coleridge and Carlyle. This is the convergence of German and American idealism; it is the meeting of eighteenth and early nineteenth century idealism with the idealisms of the mid-nineteenth through the twentieth centuries; and it is the transformation of idealism as systematic, aprioristic metaphysics to what some have called “historical idealism,” which attempts to account for the contextual, iterative embeddedness of cognitive categories and other acts of intelligible ordering. In a sense, much of modern philosophy after Kant can be characterized by its attempt to complete the critical turn, taking on reason’s earthly context to elucidate the immanence and rootedness of mental acts and the world they organize. Yet within the modern tradition a distinctive approach to epistemic authority has exercised a particularly profound if subterranean influence; this is the approach called metacriticism or metacritique (*Metakritik*) by J.G. Hamann, who coins the term in the eighteenth century. Hamann is responding to Kant, parodying the *Critique of Pure Reason* in a review he cheekily titles the “Metacritique of the Purism of Reason.” Responding directly to the newly renovated notion of critique, metacritique charges that to be accepted, epistemic procedures must be warranted both with a standard that guarantees their veracity, and with stable criteria for their assessment. In other words, metacriticism begins with the contention that any positive philosophical assertion, argument, or system must be grounded first in the clear establishment of its knowledge claims. Where, for example, the a priori or innate status of some idea, principle, or category is alleged, metacritique looks to the procedures used to justify the claim, exposing any deeper, decidedly non-aprioristic liabilities they sustain. For it would be self-undermining to claim a priori knowledge if the procedures used to cull and evaluate that knowledge were saturated with the particular, the historically-specific, and the linguistically-directed. Hamann concludes that where the only procedures with which we can verify knowledge claims are shown to be reliant on contingent circumstances, those claims ought to be met with skepticism. Hamannian metacriticism is initially offered to show that Kant’s transcendental procedures, after all, fail to deflect Humean doubts about the essential capacities of human reason.

Hamann therewith inaugurates a metacritical tradition distinctive not merely for its skepticism, but specifically for its relentless pursuit of reason’s actual conditions of possibility. Hamann is interested in the requisite context of acts of reasoning, especially in our attempts to analyze or defend these acts. His concern with the practical dependencies of human reason is thus an interest in the necessary conditions for any metaphysical argument or transcendental deduction.

Through Hamann, metacriticism begins its characteristic analysis of the linguistic forms and historically specific norms that attend accounts of cognition and reasoning.

Following Hamann, the metacritical endeavor is partially appropriated by thinkers from Herder to Hegel, but it remains discernible in merely an embryonic form until it crosses the Atlantic and is put to work by a little-known American philosopher of the last century, John William Miller. Miller was philosophically productive from the 1920s until his death in 1978. With Miller, American philosophy struggles forcefully, and with remarkable practicality and imagination, with the demands of the German idealist tradition. Miller does not so much respond to Hamann as to retrace his steps, as well as those of the German Romantics, of Herder, Fichte, and of Hegel, in appraising the aprioristic and ahistorical character of Kant's idealism. But uniquely, Miller utilizes the metacritical method to arrive at, and then to substantiate, an exceptional philosophy of human action—one that converges around the entitlement of semiotic order in general and of knowledge claims in particular. Here, I want to reconstruct some basic terms of Miller's position. I will trace Miller's assumption of the metacritical commitment and mention the philosophical difficulties it addresses, and that it might yet address. By drawing out Miller's metacritical inheritance in more detail, I will be making a historical case, viz., that Miller's work presents an extraordinary extension of the idealist project. But I also mean to suggest Miller's significance for contemporary theoretical initiatives, specifically because of his ability to treat constitutional, universal modes of thought in light of the exigency of history and the contingency of individual experience.

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Miller spent his career as a philosopher tucked into the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts, writing prodigiously, but publishing almost nothing. With a number of his works brought out posthumously and now in print, it is possible to appreciate not only the degree to which Miller rejected what he took to be the scientism of his contemporaries' "empirical" and "behaviorist" models, and not only his relative lack of interest in their allegedly idealist and realist disputes, but also Miller's genuine alternative. Miller was aware that his contemporaries were inclined to reject as needlessly metaphysical any attempt to validate epistemic procedures with a foundational standard. He calls the "aversion to metaphysics" characteristic of his age, and notes a concomitant failure to identify the basis of cognitive distinctions or to give good reason for their rejection (PH 128). Yet the refusal of metaphysical explanation, Miller writes, itself requires justification. It requires demonstrably superior principles as well as greater explanatory compass, neither of which appears with current forms of positivism or linguistic philosophy.(1) If one aims to provide a model of human intellectual facility, then one must clarify how mental acts arise and with what cogency they shape and are shaped by sensuous experience. Likewise, one must ascertain the role of mental acts in the understanding and communication of the theory of cognition itself. These are essentially critical, even metacritical demands, and Miller's ability to meet them stands with his principle metaphysical conception, the "midworld of functioning objects."

Miller's midworld hinges on active doing: human activities such as measuring, saying, seeing, attaching, defining, or suspending; in effect, Miller begins with the activities that are described by present active participles. The activities designated with present active participles utilize as their instruments "functioning objects," entities that are both objects and the condition of other objects—as, in one of Miller's favorite examples, the yardstick may be made of pine or metal

(qua object) and is used to measure objects (qua condition) (M 33). The yardstick measures a space projected into relevance in the act of measuring; “space” as an object of thought, or an allegedly pure form of intuition, is a consequence of the use of an actual yardstick or measuring tool. Neither space nor any other apparently universal category becomes apperceptive without activities of tangible functioning (such as measuring). Functioning objects, by definition, must be actually utilized, and they mediate between agents and their environments, demarcating both spheres in the process. For Miller, as for Kant, there is no experience or knowledge of any thing in itself, unbound by mental configuration. Yet for Miller, any given experience is tied directly to an endeavor performed. One cannot say either that the world is “really” spatial or that one happens to get on with the pure intuition of space. Miller asserts his metacritical principle in establishing that neither type of claim can be verified over and against the other. An intuition of space in itself—the concept of space as a universal—is always the outcome of particular acts of gauging.

As such, the primary functioning object is the body, specifically one’s own, individual body. One first uses eyes or ears to take awareness, or voice to distinguish order from an indefinite manifold. Just as fundamentally, language and its individual elements are geared to functioning; indeed, Miller uses the word “utterance” to characterize all functioning acts. The functioning object imposes form, but always in a way that determines particular content (the yardstick projects space by measuring this particular length; the clock projects temporality by telling this particular time). Thus, any functioning object is in effect a symbol; in its concrete utilization, it represents a more universal order. When one uses numerals to count numbers, for example, particular digits conscript the presence of an “infinite continuum” and the universal (quantity) is made manifest. As is the case regarding every universal, quantity can only be thought as a corollary of the utilization of a particular; in this case, numerical symbols. Functioning objects, then, are symbolic actions that establish order by regulating an otherwise inconceivable immediacy. And the order established by our employment of functioning objects is precisely what conditions the introduction of all data.

So whereas cognition stalls on its inability to account for its own derivation and capacity, the midworld allows us to distinguish the instigation of cognitive acts in functioning activity. Again, functioning activity necessarily projects a semiotic order; the midworld of functioning objects is a sphere of human deeds, as they are formed by their symbolic conditions. The functioning activity of the midworld, as Miller writes, thus “launches, spurs, and controls all cognition” (M 13). As the set of all functioning objects, the midworld is both a matter of experience and a metaphysical condition for experience, which accounts for its inherently symbolic character.

This is why Miller accepts the designation of his project as idealist, but only after clarifying that his is a thoroughly historical form of idealism. Following the work of one of Miller’s foremost commentators, Joseph Fell, Miller’s system can also be called *actualism*, because of the way it pivots on the argument that both ideality and reality are conditioned by actuality. Only in the utilization of some functioning object, and through its mediation, do objects and their universalized frameworks appear; [or as Miller writes] “it is in the actual that the ideal is immanent” (MP 22:7).(2)

As I mentioned, the metacritical impetus to ground epistemic procedures transparently in actuality is provoked, initially, by Kant’s newly minted transcendental approach. Let me review the gist of Hamann’s response to Kant. Hamann argues that epistemic procedures must be

patently justified, along with the criteria for their assessment. He explains that Kant acknowledges the requirement of such clarity, which is precisely why Kant attempts to base cognitive objectivity in the concept of subjective universality—subjective universality is supposed to be absolutely shared and manifestly substantiated. Yet Hamann charges that Kant’s allegedly self-critical notion of reason still fails to ground epistemological principles independently, insofar as Kant erroneously vacuums from his notion of reason all of reason’s actual entanglements.(3) Hamann focuses on three “purifications” in Kant’s system: the first endeavors to establish reason outside of human tradition and custom; the second to detach reason from experience and “everyday inductions”; and the third is the attempted expurgation of language from the operation of thought. All the while, Hamann shows, Kant must use linguistic figures to construct reason’s ideal propositions, and he fails to notice that language, which belongs to both sensibility and intuition, is their shared root.(4)

The underlying insight—or at least the fundamental suspicion—behind Hamann’s metacritique cuts a passage through subsequent idealism and phenomenology.(5) Time will not permit much discussion of that lineage, but let me just mention Kant’s former student, Herder, who, in response to Hamann, labors to demonstrate the historical character of reasoning activities and their interdependence with linguistic signs.(6) Hamann and Herder motivate a generation of thinkers focused on the enterprise of linguistic theory, many of whom share their impression that nothing outside of our natural languages can be shown to sustain transcendental procedures or categories of the understanding.

Likewise, Fichte’s attempt to reinstate a dynamic system on the foundation of the fact-act (*Tathandlung*) attempts a positive response to Hamann’s demand for self-evident certainty, by portraying the subject self-constituted in its own activity.(7) Hegel, too, acknowledges Hamann’s metacritical demand to justify epistemic procedures by reckoning with reason’s actual conditions. He also concedes that in attempts to deal with Hamann’s mandate, the same assumptions Hamann censures are generally reinstated to begin answering Hamann’s contentions.(8) Hegel thus attempts to incorporate the metacritical position—at least in its most skeptical, negative register—into an account of the vicissitudes of Spirit, while openly affirming that the “real” must be comprehended in and through human history and language.

Miller has a place within subsequent congregations of thinkers who attempt to fully historicize (or *actualize*) Hegel’s phenomenology.(9) Like Marxists, existentialists, and pragmatists, Miller seeks to retain Hegel’s insights into the intersubjectivity and historicity of cognition, while placing any conception of the Absolute within an immanent framework. Yet Miller’s position is explicitly metacritical, in a sense that he says is never sufficiently achieved in Hegel. Miller complains that “Hegel did not make good on his claim that he found the energy internal to the spectacle.” And Miller insists that, even given Hegel’s efforts, history has as yet “no Kant to disclose the organization in terms of which all reports of action get told” (PH 140-141, 161, 181).(10) In taking on the task of such disclosure, Miller holds that only in light of our utilization of functioning objects can we really explain the historical character of reasoning activities, and thus their interdependence with language, tradition, and experience.

Miller’s actualism shows that the functioning of the midworld is irreducible and interminable, yet Millerian utterance likewise renders the fundamental, conditioning process whereby symbolic action can carry the universality to which objects of cognition and experience conform.(11) Miller insists as well that the “heuristic force of symbols pervades all forms of language” (M

160). Language itself is not just analogically related to utterance, it is the seat of semiotic functioning and control. Words are material (graphic, vocal) and they are conditioning instruments of will, thought, and action.⁽¹²⁾ Alone among ontological proofs, of language it is self-evidently true to say that essence entails existence: the actuality of utterance is present in any definition of it, however abstract.⁽¹³⁾ As we recall, Hamann first held against Kantianism the skeptical, metacritical position that nothing outside of our natural languages can be shown to sustain transcendental procedures or epistemological categories. Hamann follows Hume in ridiculing philosophy's failure to establish the categories of causality, necessity, and relation, adding that all of these are nonetheless structural features of the natural languages upon which we rely. I have claimed that the problem Hamann identifies persists throughout the post-Kantian tradition. Yet distinctively, Millerian actualism explains why we tend to see transcendental categories in natural languages: it is because abstract categories, words, and elements of syntax are actualized or uttered together, in the symbolic actions that establish universality and concrete particularity. Causality, necessity, and relation are not solely structural features of natural language, as Hume and Hamann imply; they are established by the functioning act, or the operation of the midworld, which extends to the symbolic order that encompasses natural language.

Miller argues that the only way things (whether external objects, other people, or ourselves) become available for cognition is in our marking or distinguishing them. Here again, Miller follows Kant. Yet unlike Kant, Miller makes the case that these distinctions are necessarily linguistic, and therefore amenable to linguistic analysis. Cognitive marking does not occur in passive perception, nor is it an "accident of structure"; rather, it occurs functionally.⁽¹⁴⁾ Objects show up for discernment together with words and the syntactical associations that contextualize them, so our experience of language and of objects is coeval. Likewise, abstract or universal categories such as "length," "weight," "time," "every," or "none" depend, to the last, on functional rather than passively perceptual activity. As ideas built from the self-referential ability of language to analogically point at, and build upon, its own resources, such abstractions are deeply metaphorical; they are signs for what can only be encountered as a functioning particularity. The notion of temporality arises when a gauge to differentiate and compare particular instances of "before" and "after" actually functions; each use of the notion "time" contains this reference at its crux. Thus, contra Hume, Hamann, and Herder, Miller shows that since the midworld of functioning objects subsumes natural language, cognitive categories (such as those discovered by Kant) submit not only to the structure of language, but to the acts of functioning and local control with which language arises.

This points to the underlying challenge of thinking the metaphysical precedence of functioning and of the midworld, because while abstraction remains essential for orientation in thinking, in its most "perfect" form (causality as such, time as such) abstract universality tends to obscure the finite human activity in which it is situated. Miller's is a metacritical commitment to focus on, rather than attempt to overcome, the way that the infinitude of any abstract form remains bound to its finitude, while the finitude of any particular functioning object tends to be articulated into an apparent infinity, as when adding together particular units launches the world of numbers and mathematics.

Miller did not give a linguist's attention to the implications of this notion of "utterance"—or that which should explain the formal ordering of semiotic processes—neither for a theory of universal grammar (or of general constraints on the diversity of language), nor, conversely, for a

theory defending the cultural specificity of linguistic structures and meanings. But he does go to lengths to show that while certain forms (such as spatiality) appear universally, their appearance is dependent upon particular applications (such as measuring), which tend to reflect the context of application. Language as utterance is distinctively able to generate patterns of general significance, even as it is bound to respond to the contingencies of circumstance. Millerian actualism clearly denies that the content of mental acts can be determined a priori, since mind and world dynamically constitute one another in acts of functioning. But one might allow for this and retain an aprioristic bottom line, by maintaining that even as the flux of experience continues, the ways we apply the rules that allow us to make sense of it are fixed. Those who argue for such a position today generally do not use the term “a priori,” given its metaphysical debts, but usually prefer to say that our application of certain rules, leading to certain structures, is “innate.”(15) The language of innateness may helpfully emphasize the evolved character of our cognition, but it does not significantly change the consequence of the a priori, as those who argue for the innate application of certain syntactical (or other) rules understand them as spontaneous, definite, and invariant. Moreover, whether one speaks on behalf of aprioristic metaphysics or of a generative linguistics asserting that innate structures become fixed as language-learning occurs, one arrives at the same decisive point: if the number of organizing rules is constant and our employment of them unchanging, then in a crucial sense it does not matter what the specifics of our circumstances are, for the principles according to which we must administer perceptual and cognitive experience will reveal its full range of possible meaningfulness.

Here we arrive at a great temptation for some recent expressions of metaphysics as well as for generative linguistics, and thus at an urgent problem for our contemporary philosophy of language. For here rings the epistemic promise of traditional metaphysics, now accompanied by the idea that the study of natural language will be sufficient to reveal the innate truths traditional metaphysics proffers. Yet here too we have an example of the force of Millerian metacritique in action. Because Miller shows that even the application of a rule—better yet *especially* the application of a rule—is first won in a functioning activity that cannot be dissociated from its particular exercise. Whether or not an innate tendency to apply the rule exists, insofar as we may test for it, describe its mechanisms, or otherwise look to verify it, the rule or universal form is ascertained only via the utilization of some actual, functioning object. To the assertion that the rule is nonetheless necessary, Miller would raise no objection; to any declaration of its a priori or innate status, however, Miller would oppose the metacritical demand that the criteria used to determine such status be justified—which is exactly where he could again reveal functioning in action. So the idea that cognition and language necessarily follow ascertainable rules, and that language is linked to cognition by these rules, is an upshot of actualism or historical idealism. But a further corollary of this same position shows that our ability to ascertain such rules, to replicate and verify them, and thus to justify their primacy with scientific rigor, depends upon an inevitably *more* primary mode of activity. Accordingly, Miller’s system, renewed by metacritique, returns us to a truly Kantian notion of *critique*, as the self-critical and self-limiting reasoning that freely explores and maintains its field of practical possibility.(16)

Actualism’s handling of controlling action, from the authoritative to the authoritarian, will remain dependent upon this account of functioning and the symbolic order it conditions, but that must remain a topic for another day.

Endnotes

1. Miller writes: “Cognition need[s] a basis, which it [cannot] supply from its own resources. That basis occurs...in an action” (M 11).
2. Miller also calls his “historical idealism” a “naturalist idealism” and a “concretism” in DT, 149. Joseph P. Fell explains why the language of “idealism” falls short of Miller’s intended meaning. In a short piece for the *Williams Alumni Review*, Fell stresses the fact that Miller rejects the whole distinction between idealism and realism, “The Philosopher of Elm Street,” January (2008): 9-12. Fell extends that explanation in “Miller: The Man and His Philosophy,” in *The Philosophy of John William Miller* (1990), 21-31. Colapietro argues that Miller’s position can be rightly called a “historicist humanism,” (2003), 168.
3. For an elaboration of the metacritical position, see *Metacritique: The Linguistic Assault on German Idealism*, edited and translated by Jere Paul Surber. (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2001).
4. Kant distinguishes between sensibility and intuition, the “two fundamental sources in the mind,” at A50/B74. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 193. Hamann is the first (though clearly not the last) to issue this charge against Kant, yet from his day until the present, Hamann is insufficiently credited for introducing the criticism. This is probably, or at least in part, because Hamann’s notoriously obscure written style, along with his constant references to his own religious enthusiasm (or *Schwärmeri*), tend to cloak his arguments in a bewildering form.
5. Although Hamann is not always credited with inaugurating the metacritical position, compelling defenses of his influence, in addition to the work already cited by Surber, have been made by Isaiah Berlin, in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (Princeton University Press, 2000), *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton University Press, 1999), and in “The Counter-Enlightenment” *Against the Current* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1979), 162-187; by Fredrick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason* (Harvard University Press, 1987); by Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, Philosophical Papers I (Cambridge University Press, 1985); and by John H. Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant’s Critique of Judgment* (The University of Chicago Press, 1992).
6. Herder’s linguistic initiative begins with the “Treatise on the Origin of Language” and is followed by several related works, available in Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, translated by Michael N. Forster (Cambridge University Press, 2002). A later formulation may be found in *Against Pure Reason*, translated by Marcia Bunge (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). Herder’s lifelong occupation with linguistic, and in some cases metacritical analyses may be surveyed in his complete works: *Werke in zehn Bänden*. (Frankfurt: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, 1985). I analyze Herder’s (and Hamann’s) linguistic critique of Kant in *The Immanent Word: The Turn to Language in German Philosophy 1759-1801* (Routledge: 2007).
7. Tyman’s (1993) discussion of Fichte, in this regard, is instructive.
8. Hegel’s only published review of Hamann’s corpus both obfuscates and evinces his debt to Hamann. See *Hegel on Hamann*, translated and introduced by Lisa Marie Anderson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008).

9. Colapietro has made a strong case for understanding Miller as an inheritor of the overtly Hegelian dialectic (2003) 41-46.

10. See also PL 55:514. A fuller excerpt of the quote asserts that Ralph Waldo Emerson “far surpasses Hegel in his grasp of the ontological status of the actual. In the end Hegel did not make good on his claim that he found the energy internal to the spectacle ... *Geist* is not a local control,” “The Owl” *Transactions of the Charles S. Pierce Society* 24 (1988), 402. See too Tyman (1998), especially pp.102-105.

11. Miller writes: “The form that was empty without content and the content that was blind without form find their union not in appearance, but in the symbol. The symbol is heuristic because it embodies content and legislates on the determinate form of the same region of content to which it belongs. *The symbol is a legislative actuality*. But its legislation is not from above, or outside, but upon the same region in which *alone* it actually exists” (M 160). See also: “The defect of Kant’s categories occurs in the assumption that they are properties of pure reason, that is, that they are laws of order, of order without specific focus. Every category has a focus, such as a yardstick or a clock, a thermometer, etc.” (M 33-34). See too Tyman’s discussion of universalization in Kant (1993), throughout the chapter “Ethos and Responsibility.”

12. McGandy (2005), 72, draws out the distinction between “psychological” and “ontological” actions: ontological action is free, creative, and responsible, whereas psychological action is determined or causally bound. To McGandy’s helpful partition, I add that utterance, in its form as a declaration or proposition of natural language, merits both the free ontological and the determined psychological delineation.

13. Miller writes: “Language of all sorts is not the *means* of communication, but the *actuality* of communication” (DT 189). Also: “The word must be its own warrant” (DP 161). See too: “Every specific act emerges from a matrix of commitment, a commitment necessary in principle but accidental in content” (PH 33). Hamann makes essentially the same point in his *Metacritique*. I examine the implications of this insight in (2007) and in “Language and Immanence in Hamann” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 27:2, November 2006: 25-50. The same idea is probed by Giorgio Agamben in “The Idea of Language: Some Difficulties in Speaking About Language” in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 10:1, Spring 1984: 141-149.

14. M 74-75. The examples throughout this paragraph are taken from this section.

15. Probably the best known defender of a model of innate language acquisition is Noam Chomsky, who is credited with introducing the theory of universal grammar into linguistics. Chomsky’s position has been widely criticized, notably by Hilary Putnam. In a range of popular works and scholarly, scientific studies, Steven Pinker argues for the innate capability to learn and use language, though unlike Chomsky, Pinker focuses on the evolutionary heritage of both the human instinct for language, and the development of different linguistic forms and conventions. Pinker defends the more discerning position that while the capacity for language is, indeed, innate, that capacity develops through the contingencies of human evolution, including the evolution of social behaviors.

16. Tyman's analysis of Miller's approach to the Kantian program of morality is also useful here, in that it elaborates the way that morality, too, submits to the metaphysical demands of actuality (1993) p.65ff.