

John William Miller and Henri Bergson on Activity and Consciousness

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Idealism is a philosophy that has apparently seen its day. It belonged to a moment when the Enlightenment ideal of evidential knowledge reaching into in all facets of human life was still strongly held. But idealists were among those who refused to concede to empirical science the dominance it was already gaining, and still holds today. They sought to retain the prerogatives of free speculative thought, of *insight*, of intellectual intuition, and held to the task of systematizing this thought into an overarching schema. The principal theme soon became that of synthesis, however this should be obtained, and with whatever degrees of admixture of freedom and necessity that could be held in balance. Nowadays where science or its philosophical correlate in conceptual analysis does not hold the field, the void is filled by a scattering movement like postmodernism. But postmodernism shares with those intellectual dispositions to which it is still, if only inversely, correlated a fragmenting skepticism in relation to the synoptic gaze and synthetic activity for which idealism became famous. This is symptomatic of a general cultural disposition in relation to the idealist project. And so idealism has found its way to the back pages of history as another movement which promised too much and delivered too little.

In this milieu it hardly seems promising to bring up the thought not only of another idealist, but one who came too late to begin with. I suggest, however, that John William Miller does have something important to say to a contemporary audience. Admittedly the theme which I propose is not on its face the most promising one for the interests of a philosophy moving in the element of the ideal. The theme is *experience*, which entails as an irreducible dimension of itself the occasional, the ephemeral, the unexpected and unpredictable, the untoward circumstance, the glancing blow of fate. Within this domain, however, I want to single out not simply the actuality of experience, but the deeper and perhaps largely untapped potential of experience within the broadest parameters of consciousness. If I am not mistaken, there is included within this potential the prospect of meaningful transformation of the human condition.

In this regard, Miller's thought has a particular interest to it. Miller predicates his idealism decisively on the viability of what he calls the *act* which exhibits the power of local control. I see in this formulation a promising angle of attack in relation to issues idealism has traditionally held central even at the cost of overstating its claims. This is true particularly with regard to the flexibility it maintains in advancing what might be called the irreducible moment of free engagement with the as yet unrealized ideal. This, or something very much like it, I take to be the fundamental source-point of the commitment that idealism in its sundry forms has always held to be the inviolable point. It is through its commitment to the ideal of freedom in act, and the conditions this carries in train, that idealism has distinguished itself as a posture having lasting viability for philosophical thought. The power to act and act effectively, and the discovery and encouragement of the propensity to act responsibly, are the central matters to be engaged.

One could with profit linger upon these matters alone, as there is much that here stands in Miller's favor. For example, one could work out the implications of Miller's theory that local control has to it not only an essentially outward-looking relation to the concerns of an inter-subjectively accessible world, but also the inward, self-reflexive reaches of subjectivity, both normal and abnormal, still only haltingly accessed by psychology. However, to remain within these expository parameters would leave us in the position of advocacy. I do not seek to advocate Miller's philosophy, but to explore it, to probe it, to put it to the test. One problematizes a philosophy never so well as when one challenges it on a central point. Here that is the concept of act itself—the act that is the bearer of the very control Miller calls "local."

This points to a conundrum that can be seen in relation to consciousness itself: the fact that it is self-assertive as a human act, but has also a disclosive dimension, both of worldly revelation and self-discovery. We might refer to such a zone of mediation as an *Ereignis*, an appropriative engagement, or we might follow Miller's own preference and reference it in light of its interactive region, what he calls the "midworld." In any event, we have opened conceptual access to a domain not so much of answers as of problems. To aid me in framing these within a revealing set of questions—to problematize this concept complex, as it were—I propose to bring Henri Bergson into the discussion.

Bergson's notion of *durée*, which leads into the notion of lived time, has proven useful in studies of consciousness. Its reach extends into phenomenology, where, in certain of its forms, the spirit if not the letter of idealism itself has enjoyed a kind of after-life. For us the particular point of interest, however, is that Bergson distinguishes here between a reflective function of consciousness and an active deployment, and takes the latter to distort rather than exemplify the true character of consciousness. This will raise questions reaching to the crux of the problem I wish to engage here.

We begin by admitting this much: the notion of *durée* yields for reflection a field that is both experientially accessible and the site of an originary articulation of *qualities* that inform consciousness in an essentially fluid way. Consciousness at its purest functions is an immediate intuition of the flow itself. The flow, in being mediated by the emergent differences that punctuate and mark its passage, is also in this process endowed with a kind of internal architecture, with different levels of recursive functionality and even some hidden compartments. Qualitative distinctions are given as immediate data and can be understood as constitutive of the process of self-articulation on the part of consciousness itself. Bergson, in fact, repeatedly insists that qualities are properly to be thought as differences in *kind*, not in *degree*, and concludes from this that they are not subject to a common denominator, causal derivation, or univocal explanation.

Having said this, however, Bergson would be the first to grant that virtually everything we recognize as knowledge is predicated on reckoning with the world of the quantum. The principle of individuation, the material principle itself, in effect acknowledges within its innermost structure the primacy of the quantum for the order of knowledge. Admittedly Bergson exempts from this characterization his central theme: that in its duration consciousness is able to recognize itself, and is in this capacity always the radiant core of life experience. Holding fast to this point, his first task then becomes one of explaining how it is that the quantitative orientation to worldly experience should arise in the first place, and how it is that it should have become so dominant that, for the most part, it attitudinally covers over the more primordial life-experience such that the latter can go largely unnoticed. Bergson meets this challenge with one simple thought: as part of our need to *act* in

the world, we have instinctively brought the effect of the quantum into play. We do this simply by focusing differentially and objectifyingly on certain facets of the experiential plenum that have assumed importance in an emergingly intelligent estimate of our power of effective action. Over time a fuller elaboration of the implicit conditions of this objectification yields a concept of a world of extension, a world of matter. For Bergson, however, it is essential to recognize that the quantifiability we construe as making this possible is a contribution of our representational function. It is the product of a mindset originating in the instinct to act, an instinct buried deep in the unconscious. The propensity to think in terms of the primacy of the quantum functions as a distinctively human *a priori*; indeed we can carry on quite well with the business of living *as if* this configuration represented the complete truth. Only when we reflect upon the more intimate movements of our subjective life---its free and fluid character as well its essentially qualitative disposition---do we access another, deeper, dimension.

However, this is not the whole story. This domain that Bergson is inclined to treat as that of immediate data is not static. Data are always already suffused both with intelligence and with *élan*, life-force. But this life-force is distributed, strangely, from both sides of a telling divide. Bergson at times identifies this as the division between mind and matter. Since matter as he understands it is associated with extension, the region of the quantum, the distinction between quality and quantity (as well as that between activity and receptivity) gets reinscribed as a primordial disposition within *durée* itself.

Consciousness is individuated by being embodied, and in this capacity is already put in relation to the material principle represented by the figure of spatiality. The body carries an instinctive orientation to certain modalities of activity, which predispose consciousness to frame its world in certain characteristic ways. But consciousness is also capable of refraining from being pulled forward into such activity; then it discovers its more originary condition. This condition features a blending and fusion of its elements or, more precisely, its moments. This primordial fluid state, however, is soon again eclipsed by the need to act in relation to an environment often perceived as hostile and threatening, and in any case in need of being *worked* for simple purposes of survival. There arises an imperative not only for action itself, but for the universal imposition of a frame of reference adapted to this acting, and set up in such a way as to facilitate its development. It is in the service of this imperative that spatiality itself first arises, as Bergson says, as something “*thrown under*” the plenum of experiential qualities, an ontological primacy being given over to what is taken to subtend programs of active engagement with environment. The propensity for this active projection is strong, and constitutes a lasting *impediment* to the more reflective access to its ownmost nature that consciousness always still seeks. Only a philosophy which has learned to put its instinct projectively to act out of commission can become informed about the more intimate and less distorted flow of consciousness and the essentially qualitative life that thrives therein.

Bergson does not deny that what mostly counts as knowledge are things discretely quantifiable, “facts.” In this capacity they persist in objectively configured formations set over against the flow of conscious life: thus they register *as* something. The *as*-structure *suggests* the presumption of the ontological priority not of the flow, but of that which announces itself within it. The flow itself is therefore easily taken as something self-effacing and accidental. What is real is what is objectified within the flow, and it is in relation to things so objectified that human projects may be undertaken. And one might well suppose that this is precisely the place that what Miller calls local control can be effectuated.

Bergson demurs when it comes to investing the conditions of enactment with decisive ontological significance. This leads to idealism, which Bergson rejects. When one looks at the condition for the possibility of the act, one is liable to postulate too strong a conception of the creative capacity of freedom. Just as little as he is inclined to support the reductive materialism of his day is Bergson inclined to embrace idealism. He writes:

We have repudiated materialism, which derives [mind from matter]; but neither do we accept idealism, which holds that [matter] is constructed by [mind]. We maintain, as against materialism, that perception overflows infinitely the cerebral state; but we have endeavored to establish, as against idealism, that matter goes in every direction beyond our representation of it, a representation which the mind has gathered out of it, so to speak, by an intelligent choice. (*Matter and Memory*, 235-236)

Bergson seeks a middle course between the extremes of materialism and idealism. Both positions he finds reductive, one to matter, the other to mind. To avoid reduction, Bergson holds both markers in place. This yields a preliminary dualism. It is a dualism, however, which in the course of his analysis he mediates in favor of his monistic notion of *durée*. This already makes Bergson's final orientation closer to idealism than to its opposite. The similarity is enhanced by the prominence he also accords to freedom. But, for Bergson *durée* serves as a kind of situating principle for mind— its *environment*, we might say, in relation to which it must be passive in order to receive it as a given.

Here, it seems, we *have* left Miller behind. The first imperative of mind is to act, and the act, he insists, is unenviored. As free, it is either its own absolute source-point or it is nothing. It conditions, but cannot itself be conditioned. That is the meaning and measure of freedom.

Does this mean that mind *creates* its own world? Is this not indeed the suspicion lying behind the popular revulsion for idealism, that it takes matter to be a figment of mind? It is well to note here that in the idealist development of freedom in relation to mind, moving from Kant to Hegel, and thence to Fichte, to Schelling and finally to Miller himself, the conclusion had long since been reached that something *like* "matter" does indeed "go in every direction beyond our representation of it." Freedom is invaded from every side by that which resists it. To no respectable idealist is mind closed upon itself. But neither is there something *else* with privileged ontological status to situate it.

The world, then, does exceed the concept. But the world is also capable of exceeding itself through the concept. The ideal reaches into the heart of the real and cathects its hidden energy, its living kernel and inner nucleus, as well as its untapped potential. The central project of idealism has always been to discover the other in the same as much as the same in the other, and to see in the convergence of both a glimpse of the hidden energy giving rise to forms of intelligent life. To say that the free and intelligent act is unenviored means simply that there are no conditions antecedently describable according to which it could be adduced or predicted. It does not mean, however, that the mind is a *solus ipse* without resources.

Miller acknowledges these resources in his concept of a midworld of functioning objects. Moreover, he sees this world as historically evolved and evolving. So why not call this the medium of mind, its immediate environment? The reason is that this environment can have no meaning at all, can offer itself in no intelligent construal, without the *engagement* of mind already in place, as something which

has preceded it, and specifically invoked it. Meaning at this level of intention invokes a *principle* for itself which is utterly self-grounding.

Self-grounding, however, does not obliterate the receptive capacity. Local control as Miller understands it has built into its structure an essential lack of closure, an openness, it might be said, to the flow itself. And one could go further by suggesting that it is through the practices of engaging with the functioning objects that furnish what he calls the midworld that one brings into relief the very qualitative articulations that Bergson attributes to the flow of consciousness itself. If we add to this the sense that, for Miller, functioning objects form a kind of historical *a priori*, we can see that their native element is, after all, experiential temporality. Have we then successfully completed a *rapprochement*?

Not entirely. For Bergson himself, as we have said, is of the view that human activity, presumably inclusive of what Miller sees as the active engagement that yields up his criterion and desideratum of local control, inevitably *distorts* rather than reveals the true character of *durée*. In particular, as we have indicated, activity tends to fasten upon objectivities represented as standing against lived time, and its malleable, interpenetrating, *flowing*, intensities. The reflective modality appropriate to *durée* cannot be integrated with the activity of engaging with the world. Dualism always arises again from any proposal of active engagement. It is this dualism which Miller challenges with his concept of functioning objects in a world made accessible through human acts of local control.

Miller thus seems to refuse the central plinth upon which Bergsonianism stands, the primordial givenness of *durée*. How absolute, however, is this refusal? Miller's point is that givenness has no purchase apart from its acceptance, or "takenness," so to speak. And this takenness cannot leave aside the agency of the one who takes. To mistake this agency is to lose one's way with one's ownmost responsibility, one's self-orientation. At the same time, however, one equally loses one's way if one arrogates to oneself a responsibility one cannot meaningfully assume. For Miller the mind cannot claim even itself as a possession. Instead, he argues for the structural centrality of ignorance, the central importance of historical mediation, and the utterly problematic role of the psychological. These admissions go a certain distance, perhaps, but not all the way towards bridging the gulf that exists between Bergsonian givenness and Millerian activity. The real mystery comes down to a question of the most delicate balance that has, over and over again, announced itself in Western thought: that between the act that reaches for the truth of what is given and the givenness of the truth reached for by the act of consciousness. Perhaps it is not nothing to have brought the matter to stand in such a conundrum as this.