

Reason, Conflict and Violence: John William Miller's Conception of Philosophy

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The purpose of this paper is to call attention to the conceptions of philosophy articulated and defended by John William Miller (1895-1978). Both this conception and this thinker deserve more careful consideration than they have received; such, at least, is what I hope to make plausible in this paper. While Miller has been characterized as "an American original" (Fell 1983-84, 123; cf. Brockway 1980, 160), the innovative way in which he appropriated and refashioned the "idealistic" approach of his two most famous teachers, Josiah Royce and William Ernest Hocking, is largely unknown even to the best informed students of American philosophy (Brockway 1980, 160; Corrington 1986, 165-66). Thus, it would be appropriate to begin our discussion by indicating who Miller was and what he accomplished or, at least, strove to accomplish. This seems especially fitting in this context, since Miller himself maintained "all philosophy is biography, a Pilgrim's Progress" (MS 8). Yet, as we shall see, this does not reduce philosophical reflection to a merely private affair; for the central task of philosophical inquirers is to exhibit the potentially universal character of even their most personal crises (PH 10).

1.

John William Miller was first and foremost an undergraduate teacher at a small college in New England. He received his B. A. from Harvard in 1916 (the year in which Josiah Royce died) and, after serving in the Ambulance Corps in World War I, Miller returned to his alma mater to pursue an advanced degree. He received his Ph. D. in 1922, having written a dissertation entitled "The Definition of the Thing." He began his teaching career at Connecticut College (1922-1924) but soon moved to Williams College, where he taught from 1924-1960. Of his retirement (1960-1978), one of his students wrote that "for the next eighteen years, until his death on Christmas Day 1978, he talked philosophy with his former students, for whom his house was always open and to whom he wrote marvelous and marvelously voluminous letters, some more than a hundred pages long" (Brockway 1980, 155). However, his professional publications were as scant as his personal correspondence was voluminous: "Until a few months before his death he had published only four essays," and one of these appeared in an undergraduate magazine (Brockway 1980, 155). Then, just before he died, Miller published his first book, *The Paradox of Cause and Other Essays* (1978; abbreviated PC). In the years following his death four other volumes have appeared: *The Definition of the Thing* (1980; DT), *The Philosophy of History* (1981; PH), *The Midworld of Symbols and Functioning Objects* (1982; MS), and *In Defense of the Psychological* (1983; DP). In his review of these five

works, Joseph Fell writes:

I do not know whether these volumes will gain the place due them, or whether they will receive only limited notice and then be forgotten. If the latter, it would be a serious mistake. For those steeped in the problems of the post-Kantian philosophical situation and faced by the specter of nihilism—which may be all of us—Miller offers a response that is original and positive without being idiosyncratic or uncritical. (1983-84, 129)

I share Fell's positive assessment of Miller's potential contribution. Hence, my reason for calling your attention to Miller is not simply that he has been neglected. There are countless neglected figures in American philosophy who are, in truth, negligible: the content of their thought is unoriginal (1) and their manner of expression undistinguished. In contrast, the neglect of Miller is unfortunate since on both of these counts he is noteworthy. First, though he himself sometime claimed to lack style (Brockway 1980, 164), the truth is his writings reveal a masterful use of colloquial language and a painstaking concern for just the right expression. However, like Peirce, Miller was willing to sacrifice eloquence for precision (Peirce 5.13; Brockway 1980). Second, in a variety of contexts he suggests novel and illuminating perspectives from which to examine basic philosophical issues (cf. Fell 1983-84, 129). One such issue is the very nature of philosophizing itself. It is to Miller's handling of this issue that I now turn.

2.

As a first step toward appreciating Miller's approach to the practice of philosophizing, it is helpful to recall what John Dewey says at the conclusion of *The Public and Its Problems*. Here Dewey states: The "winged words of conversation in immediate intercourse have a vital import lacking in the fixed and frozen words of written speech" (1954, 218; cf. Plato's Seventh Letter). "The connections of the ear with vital and outgoing thought and emotion are immensely closer and more varied than those of the eye. Vision is a spectator; hearing is a participator" (1954, 218-19). It is the spoken rather than the written word which provides the most authentic medium for philosophical discourse. Indeed, philosophy is first and foremost dialogue in the literal sense of that term; it is the sort of exchange which occurs in a face-to-face conversation. In short, philosophy is what Socrates did (cf. Brockway 1980, 156).

As I have noted, Miller published very little during his lifetime. And it is significant that much of what has been published are excerpts from personal letters and lecture notes, forms of writing very close to the exigencies and rhythms of conversation. A number of points might be made in this context, points regarding (for example) the politics of academic publishing and the hegemony of analytic philosophy. Indeed, it is worth noting an ironic aspect of the linguistic turn: Those who fled a political hegemony in Europe in many cases shared the responsibility for setting up an intellectual hegemony in America (cf. Bernstein 1986, 5 ff.).

One might argue that American philosophical thought both benefited and suffered from the influence of, first, the positivists and, then, the analysts of professional philosophy in the United States. However, Miller's own attitude was one of deep antipathy toward what he saw as the essentially ahistorical approach of the dominant positivistic and analytic philosophies (Brockway 1980, 159; Fell 1983-84, 123). Speaking of Russell and Ayer, Miller noted: "The success of these men shows the depth of our ahistoric temper" (DP 150), a temper exhibited in both a search for a timeless perspective and a disdain for past philosophers. However, in any past (even our philosophical past), there is *something* sacred (cf. Corrington 1986). "It is the barbarian who lays his hand on monuments. These intellectuals [i.e., Russell and Ayer and their followers] did not burn books, but it amounted to that" (DP 150). Here it is highly instructive to recall that Hume, one of the few heroes of both the positivists and the analysts, declared in the famous concluding paragraph of his *Enquiry*: If a book does not contain abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number or experimental reasoning on matters of fact and existence, "[c]ommit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion" (cf. Miller 1961, 263). Thus, while Russell and Ayer did not themselves destroy books, "[t]hey were personally annihilative" (DP 150). Miller's deep antipathy toward the analyst's annihilative attitude led to what was, in effect, a self-exile not from philosophical authorship itself but from the professional forums in which one would naturally expect a writer of Miller's talents and credentials to participate.⁽²⁾ While this self-exile was by no means a complete isolation from his professional colleagues outside of Williams College (e.g., Miller presented papers to the Harvard Philosophy Club), his participation in such circles was very limited. It is quite appropriate then, that his philosophical "writings" both grew out of and into actual conversations, the sort of discourse characteristic of Socrates.

However, there is an important distinction which must be drawn between Miller's approach to philosophizing and the ordinary understanding of the Socratic approach. Ordinarily, the Socratic approach is construed as argumentative; at its core is the *agon* (or contest) of argument and counter-argument. In contrast, Miller's approach is conceived as exhibitivistic; while this approach encompasses argumentation, it is first and foremost a form of narration (cf. Buchler 1979, 121 ff.). For example, in *The Philosophy of History*, Miller notes that one of the themes of this book is "the sort of knowledge that is found in history or any of the humanities" (PH 101). However, as he confesses: "All I can do with the theme is tell a story. I can't argue. Nobody is just plain wrong. To keep the story-telling mood is hard for me. The story *contains* argument but is not contentious in itself. It can't prove anything; it can only *show* something" (PH 10; Fell 1983-84, 124).

Philosophy is a story of conflicts—deeply personal, broadly cultural, and perhaps even potentially universal. More fully, "philosophy is the actuality of those conflicts which establish the grounds upon which arguments occur and by which they are regulated. That lies beyond argument and proof. It is the career of the self-conscious and the generation of outlooks" (PC 74). Philosophy is the career of self-consciousness (cf. Hegel 1981, 1-45; also Dewey 1968, 7; 10), a career which has its impetus in the struggle of the self to maintain itself against the inevitable collapses due to the finite self's inherent limitations. The finite self is thrust, precisely because of its own finite character, into an infinite

struggle, a struggle at once unavoidable and constitutive of the very fabric of the self (MS 187). In this unending struggle to maintain its precarious integrity, the finite self is forced to *alter* itself—to become other than it now is. Thus, the conservation of the self's integrity can be purchased only at the price of a revision of itself. Accordingly, self-identity entails self-alteration, self-maintenance implies self-revision (MS 85).

In these passages and themes, we can clearly hear echoes of the tradition in which Miller was trained, the idealistic or dialectical tradition of such thinkers as Hegel, Royce, and Hocking. Yet Miller was not content simply to appropriate this perspective; even as a student, working with Royce and Hocking, he was, in the best "tradition" of absolute idealism, engaged in an immanent critique of the idealistic tradition itself. This critique focused upon the ways in which Absolute Spirit, especially as portrayed by Hegel and Royce, swallowed up finite actuality (cf. DT 110-11; cf. Peirce 5.436). Accordingly, Miller announced: "The idealism of the future will be a philosophy of history, of action, of self-generating, lawful finitude. Such are the conditions of a metaphysics of democracy" (PC 74).(3) This suggests one way of depicting what Miller was striving to accomplish—the transformation of idealism into a philosophy of history. While this depiction is true and (I hope) helpful, let me suggest another which I find even more illuminating.

Mention has already been made of Miller's philosophy representing a response to the intellectual crisis embodied in the post-Kantian period. This crisis can perhaps be summed up thus: The discovery of radical subjectivity (the recognition of ourselves as, *at root*, subjects—beings in control of our own becoming) seems to entail a denial of objective knowledge. Put another way, the discovery of subjectivity appears to imply that human knowledge is nothing but a useful fiction, useful no doubt, but a fiction nonetheless (cf. Fell 1983-84, 130). The fact that we have a hand in the discovery of nature or a voice in the telling of truth has seemed to warrant the view that nature and truth are something fabricated and, thus, nothing real; they are simply figments of our minds. One way to resist this conclusion is to deny that we *actually* participate in the disclosure of nature or the narration of truth; but, besides flying in the face of our own experience as inquirers and scholars, this denial makes knowledge something forced upon us *ab extra*. But this view of knowledge reduces the knower to an object, i.e., the knower is no longer a subject, a being genuinely in control of its own processes of becoming (including the processes of inquiry), but an object, a being completely at the mercy of forces outside of itself. Thus, we appear to be confronted with a dilemma: *Either* we recognize the subject as such and thereby obliterate the objective character of human knowledge *or* we insist upon the objectivity of our knowledge and thereby liquidate the subjectivity of the knower.

Miller proposes to go between the horns of this dilemma. That is, he offers a *via media* between the extremes of skepticism (internal disorder and the dissolution of any sense of objectivity) and authoritarianism (arbitrary order and the denial of any truth in subjectivity) (cf. Colapietro 1987; Fell 1983-84, 130).(4) In Miller's own words, "metaphysics in its search for the real must escape the subjective; but this cannot mean that it must escape the subject" (PC 53). In short, the recognition of subjectivity does not

entail any commitment to subjectivism. In fact, an adequate approach to human subjectivity is possible only by granting primacy to the midworld of symbols, that region of artifacts which "is exclusively neither the self nor the not-self, neither consciousness nor its objects" (PC 106). Miller also describes the midworld as "utterance in all its many modes, the locus and embodiment of control and of all constitutional [categorical] distinctions and conflicts" (MS 6). These utterances provide "the basis for the very distinction between subject and object, a distinction that otherwise has no basis" (PH 175; cf. PC 63). Subjectivity is, hence, discoverable only in reference to the midworld; put more concretely, it is only in their use of artifacts and their participation in institutions that human beings reveal anything at all about themselves (MS 154).

3.

In describing Miller's own philosophy as a *via media* between skepticism and authoritarianism (between subjectivism and objectivism), I am calling attention to the specific "constitutional conflict" (an expression to be explained in a moment) which, more than any other factor, defined his personal philosophical project. However, according to Miller, *all* philosophy has its origin in such conflicts. If we accept finite, human actuality as that which *authorizes* our projects,(5) then we are forced to take seriously the task of appropriating the past as well as that of revising our inheritance. The "progress of philosophy must wait on historical events. As we build our lives and states upon some view of order, we let loose upon ourselves the consequences of any flaw in that point of view. If a man's world runs smoothly he can have no philosophical problems" (PC 72). And the fact is that "different persons find their world coming apart in different places" (PC 178). (This explains to some extent why all philosophy is biography.) Accordingly, philosophy's "authority and compulsion must wait upon each person's acknowledgment of his own identity with its problems" (PC 72). Put another way, the force of a philosophical argument depends upon the acceptance of the fateful consequences of our personal commitments: If a person does not identify with these consequences s/he will be unmoved by argument. An individual is someone only if s/he stands somewhere; however, once an individual stands somewhere, that individual, in effect, stands against some forces which have the potential to overwhelm the individual.(6) It is in this light that we can appreciate Miller's fondness for the following quotation from Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*: "In the destructive element immerse" (PC 136).(7)

What emerges out of these considerations is the following conception of the philosophical enterprise. Constitutional conflicts are the fatalities of our actual commitments (8) "and it is the philosophical task to lend itself to these fatalities in order to understand, and so as to reconcile them. The pathos of our antagonisms lies in this fact, that they are always the signs of what we must respect, namely some essay at a rational world" (PC 191). "Philosophy is [thus] the reason that seeks to comprehend the loci of the breakdown of reason" (Ibid.). Just as the breakdown of reason is inevitable, so too is the struggle of reason to maintain itself. The specific loci of rational collapse and the corresponding struggles of rational agency to maintain itself are personal and historical

affairs which, nonetheless, possess a significance transcending the individual or the epoch in which they are actually present.

All of our enterprises (e.g., art, science, politics, philosophy) have a history, i.e., a career in which there is a more or less self-conscious struggle to attain a fuller grasp of the meaning of the enterprise itself (PC 167). History *is* just that process in which the very meaning of the process—the concrete, peculiar meaning of this actual, temporal movement—becomes problematic. In short, it is a process prone to crisis; and, thus, it is *either* a process in which meanings are grasped more fully and destiny is controlled more firmly or one in which incoherence overwhelms the mind and impotence the will. For Miller, philosophical reflection in its most authentic form is the intellectual struggle of historically situated agents to grasp their meanings more fully and to control their purposes more firmly, precisely at those moments of conflict in which the integrity of the self and the stability of the world (distinguishable but inseparable aspects of a single actuality) seem to be whirling toward disintegration.

These moments of conflict are not forced upon the self *ab extra*: They are rooted first and foremost in the commitments and loyalties of the self. The finite self, as an inevitable consequence of its own finite character and constitutive commitments, is thrust beyond itself into a limitless region of absolute hazard (PC 22; cf. PC 186). This is one of the reasons why Miller speaks of them as "*constitutional* conflicts." While these conflicts are not forced upon the self *from without*, they are struggles in which the self encounters an order *other than* its own desires and perceptions (e.g., MS 43). Hence, nature (for example) is an order which is simultaneously rooted in the self's commitment to such artifacts as measuring instruments (sundials, yardsticks) and classificatory schemes *and* yet irreducible to the self's ideas about nature. Miller confessed: "I find this difficult to say. Nature may be the 'Not-Me' (Emerson), but this 'Not-Me' is no present 'datum,' no magical apparition nor yet absolutely alien region. Nature is a historical achievement" (MS 90; cf. PC 103; PH 26).(9) The natural world conceived precisely as something intrinsically impersonal and irreducibly other is a region we have in the course of our history come to establish and continue to maintain.

Miller defended the actual unity or interdependency of self and other (be that other the impersonal order of nature or the fateful development of history). Indeed, such unity of self and other is part and parcel of his insistence upon the primacy of the midworld. However, he rejected the *absolute* identity of self and other, at least as this identity was conceived by such thinkers as Bradley and Royce; for these thinkers conceived this identity as one in which all of the struggles of self and other are *actually* overcome and the unity of the two is fully established. For Miller, the true *absolute* resides only in the living moment of personal assertion. However, this moment "is no *fait accompli*, but an endeavor, and a procedure" (PC 41). It is the endeavor not of an atemporal spectator but of "the finite participant in improvised deeds, adapted to the time, suitable for maintaining a precarious present" (PC 132).

Here we encounter some of the most novel features of Miller's transformation of idealism into a philosophy of history, namely, his views that finitude must be granted categorical

status and that the absolute is *constitutionally* incomplete (see, e.g., MS 118-26). If there is any actuality which deserves to be characterized as absolute, it is not a completely comprehensive and finished totality but rather some form of order *in the making*. Against Royce, Miller argued that there "is no fact save in the making; [and] no final and absolute discovery can be made" (DT 110). Thus, no complete and absolute mind can be found. Against James, he maintained pluralism is no *contingent* fact about the actual universe but rather a *constitutional* feature of any possible universe.

In order to free himself from a "block universe" William James would have no universe at all, but a pluriverse in which no limit could be set without forfeiting an uncontrolled "variety." But in [such] pluralism there is no constitutional incompleteness because nothing constitutional can be allowed. [Cf. DP 60] On the other side, the complete constitutionalists [e.g., Royce] have had notorious difficulty with any aspect of disorder, with evil, with failure [e.g., the "problem of error"], with life and death. (MS 125)

"We cannot escape history and we cannot escape the study of history" (PC 92). However, to be in history entails not only sharing in the incomplete (PH 178); it also requires seeing "the present as a historical fate, not as above or outside the momentum of the actual" (PH 192). This makes history "the story of the consequence of our commitments" (PC 186). And since we can no more escape the study of history than we can escape history itself, the fateful consequences of our constitutional commitments (especially the conflicts generated by these commitments) demand a study which grasps these consequences in both the most general and personal terms possible. Philosophy is just this attempt to grasp the widest and deepest consequences of our commitments, as these consequences are revealed historically in our actual efforts, individual and collective, to preserve and revise the distinctive modes of human functioning.

There is an intrinsic connection between the breakdown of reason and the outburst of violence or, at least, the possibility of such an outburst. "Violence, when it goes beyond the flare-up of a passing passion, is occasioned by these radical constitutional conflicts over the controls of our reason, and so of our commitments" (PC 191). The recognition of this connection leads to an awareness that philosophy is far more important and urgent than is frequently supposed. For it reveals that philosophy springs not from some esoteric interest but from a humane concern to grasp the roots of human destructiveness (cf. MS 190).

In an article entitled "The Rage Against Reason," Richard J. Bernstein asks: "Why is there a rage against Reason? What precisely is being attacked, criticized, and damned? Why is it that when 'Reason' or 'Rationality' are mentioned, they evoke images of domination, oppression, repression, patriarchy, sterility, violence, totality, totalitarianism, and even terror" (1991, 33)? As Bernstein himself notes near the conclusion of this article, "if we take a cold, hard look at the discursive practices that underlie so much of modern 'humanism' and the human sciences, we discover power/knowledge complexes that belie what their ideologues profess" (1987, 206). However, what is reason if not the capacity to

distinguish between the genuine and the counterfeit, the reality and the appearance? There is no question that much of what presents itself as reason is nothing but a mask for relationships based on exploitation and oppression and, thus, on violence. Yet it is nothing other than reason which allows us to unmask this fact; in addition, it is this same power which demands the distinction between, on the one hand, something which deceptively (often self-deceptively) calls itself "reason" and, on the other, something which is deservedly called "reason." Reason in its most genuine is not a mask for oppression and intolerance but, in truth, the only means of unmasking the loci of unreason and anti-reason and, thus, the sources of violence.

For Miller, philosophy is a way of life based upon a loyalty to reason, where reason is defined not in terms of any particular form or specific strategy of interrogation but in terms of an abiding willingness to engage in query (cf. Buchler 1979, 168-69). Reason in this sense questions many of the claims put forth in its name; indeed, it tells us that what calls itself reason may be something very different from and, in fact, deeply opposed to reason. So, too, it tells us that what calls itself philosophy is often something very different from the love of wisdom.

It would appear that reason reveals itself most authentically in the spoken question respectfully posed to some particular person, a question which holds the possibility of empowerment, not a claim which conceals the actuality of a will to dominance. Accordingly, the most genuine form of philosophical discourse—in fact, the most authentic form of human interaction—is a one-on-one, face-to-face exchange (cf. Brockway 1980, 164). In such face-to-face conversations with flesh-and-blood human beings, the exchange of bodily gesture and facial expression contributes to the course and significance of what is expressed. Here we witness no dance of bloodless abstractions but the revelations of incarnate words (MS 123). The conversations and, somewhat ironically, the writings of John William Miller point this out in a clear and persuasive way.

Endnotes

1. However, cf. Peirce: "I take pride in the entire absence of originality in all that I have sought to bring to the attention of logicians and metaphysicians" (8.213). Or Myers: The "history of philosophy includes many 'original and fruitful' ideas that are quite outrageous. . . . Philosophers seem to have been motivated as much by the desire to forge a unique route to truth as by the desire to find truth itself, and have thus bequeathed us with many exciting but indefensible ideas" (1986, 316).

2. In a letter from Robert Gahringer (a student of John William Miller) to the author of this paper, the following claim is made: "Although Miller wrote continuously, he was not willing to publish more than a few essays until his last year. This was in part because he was unwilling to oblige himself to a defense against merely destructive criticism, which he abhorred. It was also because he carried self-criticism to the point of obsession" (10 November 1987). It would be appropriate to take this opportunity to note that Gahringer, along with George P. Brockway, Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., and Robert Elias, have been

extremely generous and helpful to me in this and other attempts to present Miller clearly and accurately.

3. The expression "metaphysics of democracy" is borrowed from Walt Whitman (PC 72-73). Even—or perhaps especially—in a democracy, sovereignty "needs sanction." "This sanction turns on the responsibility of the sovereign, and on reverence for his pronouncements. One does not escape tyranny by multiplying irresponsible and subjective arbitrariness. Every man may be a king; but in our time a king must be a *constitutional* authority. He must carry responsibility in his person. It is a great illusion to suppose that government will protect rights when actual individuals display nothing but desires in their wills, and nothing but opinions in their minds. Such doctrines paralyze resolve. They are degenerate, and they invite the conqueror and the despot. What shows men to be free in their capacity to recognize and revise the grounds of their choices and of their opinions" (PC 73).

4. Robert Gahringer has challenged my choices of "authoritarianism" in this connection, while Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., has commented on my use of "skepticism" to designate the contrasting position. The former wrote: "Miller's 'dogmatism' is better. 'Authoritarianism' suggests the political, while Miller's 'dogmatism' suggests the religious, which was always in the back of Miller's mind." However, "authoritarianism" can refer to the religious as readily as to the political; moreover, it brings into focus more clearly than "dogmatism" the dialectic between authority and autonomy so central to post-Kantian thought. (Regarding an aspect of this dialectic, see the following note.) According to Henry Johnstone, "skepticism has another distinct role in Miller's outlook: as the pivot point in the development of 'the career of thought' at which man for the first time becomes truly human" (Letter to Peter H. Hare, 20 May 1988).

5. Questions regarding what I call the "authorization" of discourse and action are central to Miller's project. For example, in one place, he writes: "What I propose is that we consider the price to be paid for enfranchising discourse. Discourse needs authority. It is this concern that lies at the core of the philosophy of history" (PC 106).

6. "The sense of the historical in the present is dependent upon very general uncertainty in thought and will. Perhaps it could be put, 'What do I stand for?' This, of course, is not the same as 'What do I want?' . . . History supposes the capacity to feel dissolutions in the absence of the ability to stand for something" (PH 91; cf. Brockway 1985, 34 ff.).

7. In a letter (27 October 1987) from George P. Brockway to the author of this paper, his former student recalled this of Miller: "What he looked for in politics, and in life generally, was commitment to the actual state of affairs. One of his favorite quotations was from Conrad's *Lord Jim*: 'In the destructive element immerse.'" In Brockway's own book, *Economics: What Went Wrong and Why, and Some Things to Do About It*, one gets a clear sense of how a thinker profoundly influenced by Miller would articulate a reflective commitment to the actual state of politico-economic affairs. Indeed, Brockway himself claims: "There is no idea presented here that is not directly or indirectly due to the teaching of the late Professor John William Miller. Even turns of phrases and

sentence rhythms are often his. . . . In addition, much of the material covered here was discussed with him in person or by correspondence" (1985, x).

8. In an issue of *Bucknell Review* devoted to John William Miller and edited by one of his students, Joseph P. Fell, the topic of "The Fatality of Thought" is explored by Henry W. Johnstone, Jr. (Fell ed., 1990). This essay discusses how Miller's concept of the fatality of thought figured in his course Philosophy 1-2 and also whether his concept played a systematic role in his own philosophical thinking. The reader is strongly urged to consult this essay.

9. History "defines nature. Nature is both the cause and the limit of every unconditioned resolve. Without history, nature remains a phantom, an appearance only, arbitrary and incoherent, a set of thoughts, without capacity to resist the will because not defined through the will. On the other side, the will vanishes when nature is given a merely intellectual or phenomenal status" (PH 43).

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