

Miller: The Man and his Philosophy

by Joseph P. Fell

(Posted with the permission of Bucknell University Press and Associated University Presses, as well as Joseph P. Fell. The essay originally appeared in *The Philosophy of John William Miller*, 21-31. Ed. Joseph P. Fell. Lewisburg PA: Bucknell University Press, 1990. The pagination of this version does not conform to the pagination of the original document.)

The American philosopher John William Miller was born in Rochester, New York on January 8, 1895. After attending public schools in Rochester, he studied at Harvard College in 1912-13. For financial reasons he transferred to the University of Rochester for the years 1913 to 1915, then returned to Harvard for his senior year, receiving his A. B. degree in 1916. After working for a year in a Rochester electric company he volunteered for ambulance corps duty in France with Base Hospital 44. In 1919, motivated to enter the field of philosophy by his experience of the First World War, he returned to Harvard as a graduate student in philosophy, receiving his master's degree in 1921 and his doctorate in 1922. Among his teachers were R. B. Perry and E. B. Holt, both of the realist persuasion, and W. E. Hocking and C. I. Lewis on the more idealist side; it was in the tension between these philosophical camps that Miller worked out his own stand.(1)

From 1922 to 1924 Miller taught at Connecticut College, during which time he married Katherine S. Gisel. In 1924 he moved to Williams College where, apart from interludes of summer teaching at the University of Rochester and Boston University and serving as acting professor of philosophy at the University of Minnesota in 1938-39, he spent the balance of his teaching career. The Millers' son Eugene was born in 1925 and became editor of a Connecticut newspaper; their second son, Paul, born in 1928, became a professor of philosophy at the University of Colorado. Miller chaired the Williams Philosophy Department from 1931 to 1955. From 1945 he was Mark Hopkins Professor of Intellectual and Moral Philosophy, an august title inherited from his predecessor and colleague James Bissett Pratt. He retired in 1960, characteristically refusing to be celebrated, and died on December 25, 1978 after a quiet but philosophically active retirement.(2)

For all of Miller's thirty-five years at Williams he was one of the greatest of American teachers. Yet, apart from the dedication of a number of books to him by former students, his profound influence on generations of students went largely unrecorded until 1980 when George P. Brockway published a vivid and accurate account of Miller's teaching in *The American Scholar*.(3)

Miller's career was amply justified by his classroom teaching. Prior to the last year of his long life, he had published only four papers/articles, and no one who benefited from his instruction thought that more was necessary. It seemed an evident case of a man whose wholehearted devotion to teaching had precluded reams of publication. Yet over the years he had in fact written a substantial number of essays which he apparently never submitted

for publication, and he had conducted an elaborate philosophical correspondence. Toward the close of Miller's life, George Brockway persuaded him to release this material for publication, and the initial volume, *The Paradox of Cause*, appeared in 1978, only months before Miller's death. The second volume, *The Definition of the Thing*, consisting of Miller's 1922 Harvard dissertation plus some later notes on language, appeared in 1980, to be followed by *The Philosophy of History* (1981), *The Midworld of Symbols and Functioning Objects* (1982), and *In Defense of the Psychological* (1983). Brockway served as editor of all five volumes, in some cases able to work from indications left by Miller for ordering the essays, in some cases faced by the sort of difficult organizational decisions that confronted the editors of the papers of C. S. Peirce.

The result is a most intelligently organized thematic selection comprising a complementary set of variations on a single theme that occupied Miller from first to last: the epistemological and ontological unity of persons and things. However, it is neither a critical nor a complete edition. For dates of the essays, and so a sense of the chronological development of Miller's thinking, the scholar must for the time being consult Miller's manuscripts in the Williams College Library.(4)

Why had Miller withheld the bulk of his work from publication? The self-imposed demands of his teaching seem to have been only part of the reason. Another was his "dated" style of writing; his essays were fashioned in a deceptively simple, almost colloquial prose—sometimes reminiscent of Lincoln's and Emerson's though far harder to understand. But the primary reason was that Miller knew his thinking to be as unfashionable as his prose. At a time when others had abandoned philosophical idealism, he sought to revise it. He stuck to his guns as wave after wave of anti- or post-idealist positions swept the American philosophical scene: critical realism, behaviorism, instrumentalism, logical positivism, linguistic analysis, existentialism. Characteristically, he found reasons for taking all of these stances seriously, yet in the last analysis he found most of them "ahistorical" in orientation, and he found none of them capable of coordinating the human and the natural in a manner that did justice to both. On these points he was insistent.

Miller will say, at certain critical junctures, "I don't like" such-and-such an idea.(5) This isn't an intrusion of arbitrary preference into his argument. It is rather a recognition that arguments are made by persons who are themselves at stake in their arguments, and Miller displays an uncanny ability to isolate the often-unspoken personal premises behind the arguments of a number of philosophers and psychologists. He was thoroughly impatient with that misallocation of philosophical energies which consists in analysis of particular arguments at the expense of attention to the personal "utterances" or basic takings of a stand that are "constitutive," that really control the use made of the arguments. He frequently reminds the reader that the objective or natural, an impersonal order, is revealed in consequence of a human will or demand or it doesn't turn up at all. The "paradox of cause"(6) is that in a world which comprised only natural causation, natural causation could not be disclosed. Subjective purposes and objective nature are mutually implicative, or their relation is "dialectical." To attempt to understand the personal entirely in terms of the impersonal is to rule out of court the very will and

understanding that demand a stable and independent environment, thus launching the idea of an impersonal order in the first place. Those, such as B. F. Skinner, who wish to have an ordered environment but discredit free human agency, fail to recognize their own inevitable role in disclosing that environment.(7)

Miller characteristically reaches his own conclusions about the interrelation of man and nature by means of probing examinations—both sympathetic and critical—of the major interpretations of the self-world relation that have been generated in the history of philosophy. He sees each of them as an essay in "control"—a proposal of a general order (an "infinity" or "form") in terms of which man has tried to disclose the nature and interrelation of the particulars ("content") of his world. It is only by this will to control (to know, to utilize) his environment that man is able to gain real control (self-knowledge and personal efficacy) over himself. Thus, spiritualist and voluntarist philosophies arise out of the demand for a world in which purposes count (can be regarded as "ontological" or "constitutional"). Naturalisms arise out of the need for an environment independent of all purposes, one of ascertainable causes and predictable effects. Subjectivist and objectivist philosophies each arise from a demand that must be met, yet each destroys the other if it takes itself to be the whole story. The recognition that one needs both "purpose-control" and "cause-control" is the strong suit of the philosophy of dualism, which refuses to sacrifice cause to purpose or purpose to cause. But dualism fails in its inability to show how an originative human will and a natural order can co-exist or interact. Post-dualistic (post-Cartesian) positions such as empiricism, idealism, and pragmatism are shown to be efforts to interrelate the order of purpose and the order of natural causation.(8) Thus far, Miller's tracing of the development of types of philosophy is reminiscent of, and frankly indebted to, the thought of Hegel and of Miller's teacher William Ernest Hocking. The history of philosophy exhibits philosophy's revision of itself by a dialectical development in which each successive type of philosophy satisfies a demand hitherto unmet, yet remains only part of the story of the human will to order itself and its world insofar as it takes its own particular story as the final or self-sufficient one. Philosophical revision thus has the form of a process of both persistence and change, in which the legitimate demand of each major (9) philosophy is inherited and preserved, while the claim of each philosophy to be the whole story is canceled. Although Miller's philosophy, essentially a philosophy of history, is in these respects indebted to Hegel, he cannot accept Hegel's claim that this odyssey of self-revision culminates in "the absolute"—a final knowledge in which the human being has risen to the standpoint of God. Fond of Lincoln's assertion that "we cannot escape history," Miller remains humanistic and skeptical of all claims to theological finality. He was, he often said, wary of "mountain-top experiences." His temper is Kantian, with some affinity to American pragmatism, in that he argues that knowledge does not depend on completeness and absolute certainty. Insist in advance that truth be final and incorrigible and you doom yourself to skepticism. Philosophy must come to terms with finitude, contingency, the accidental. He wanted, he said, to "affirm the moment," to "give ontological status to finitude."

But how to do this? While Miller apprentices himself to the history of philosophy and finds it far more than a record of naïve errors, he is an original thinker. He refuses, in fact, to see apprenticeship and originality as anything but complementary—another sign of the

dialectical cast of his thinking. Responsible and relevant originality lies in "revising" an inheritance, and Miller sees a moral urgency in this. He maintains that the sole possible locus of defensible order and lawfulness is human history, but finds many of his contemporaries guilty of discounting it, suspicious of the precarious, all-too-human sort of order that history exhibits. His response: if you want an order that owes nothing to the human being, you'll end up with no real order at all. The quest for the safety and security of an ahistoric finality overlooks our own collective responsibility for maintaining an ordered environment. "If we want reverence, anything sacred and imperative, we must advance now to history. There is the common world, the actual one."(10)

History is precisely the region of human originality, of those human *res gestae* or "utterances" that "declare a world." No extra-historical or extra-philosophical conditions can account for these originitive (or "unenviored") utterances, for it is these utterances themselves that first propose or "project" the formal orders (e.g., mathematics, logic, causation) which are the prerequisites for finding causal conditions. Without this human history, no natural history; without this philosophical projection of the formal conditions necessary for knowledge (e.g., identity, difference, antecedent and consequent, etc.), no sciences. Such acts of will or utterances propose the controlling "norms" or "rules" presupposed by any particular disclosures. Anything that presents itself as real, fact, or datum can do so only within a formal order which determines what is to count as real, fact, or datum. In arguing for such free and "constitutive" formal ordering, Miller clearly sides with one particular part of his inheritance, philosophical idealism. The genuinely basic and formative historical crises, whether in science or in society, are philosophical—not conflicts in detail but those in which one conception of the order of the whole is pitted against another. Here originality comes into play. Such constitutional crises are "the loci of radical disagreement." Philosophy is the history of these conflicts, a fate which thought must undergo once it has committed itself to the search for intelligibility and lawfulness, and to responsibility for its utterances and their consequences.

Hence the central problem posed by Miller's philosophy, and by post-Kantian thinking in general. If human proposals of an ideal order are prerequisite for the disclosure of real particulars, and if such proposals conflict with each other and none has any ahistoric or absolute guarantee, then must we not conclude that these proposals are simply competing human fictions? Miller allows that this is the historical juncture we seem to have reached, but holds that "The chaos of today [nihilism and skeptical relativism] is the historical consequence of a metaphysical lapse, a consequence of the account of the world that the learned propagate. For them the actual has no authority and rates no reverence because it is not recognized."(11) Miller's bold and original crusade is for "the as yet unacknowledged actuality of the midworld."(12) Miller rightly regards his treatment of "the midworld" as his primary accomplishment (though he finds it prefigured in Hegel and in Royce) and hence the 1982 volume of essays devoted to this topic is the apex of the series. The notion of the midworld, or region of the actual, challenges at its roots the inherently dualistic presumption that the sphere of human formal utterances is simply a sphere of "subjective" fictions or simplifications which has nothing in common with the region of natural reality from which these utterances allegedly cut us off. As Miller's most original notion, the midworld was met with incomprehension by most of his

contemporaries. In an important letter of 1974 he wrote:

My metaphysic requires what I have called "The Mid-World," i.e. the Actual. It is a statement that has brought me puzzlement and rejection. So, I am neither Realist nor Idealist. Locally it was held that since I was no Realist I must be an Idealist of the "Subjective" or the "Objective" sort. At the University [Harvard] it was assumed, or argued, that not to be a Realist was to be an Idealist. You had to be one or the other. What is instead required, Miller goes on to say, is a "middle ground which could account for the genesis of the different."⁽¹³⁾ This middle, the actual, has at once real and ideal characteristics that are abstractable from it. If Miller, as he did, sometimes consented to the labeling of his thought as an Idealism, it was only with a qualifying adjective: "Historical Idealism," or, as in his Harvard dissertation, "a naturalistic idealism."⁽¹⁴⁾ Any adequate interpretation of Miller's philosophy must, to grasp his originality, understand how and why these qualifying adjectives rule out any simple assimilation of his thought to traditional philosophical idealisms.

I shall not succeed here in doing justice to the idea of the midworld; the interested reader will want to consult at very least the entirety of the 1982 volume, and preferably the many implicit and explicit references to the notion occurring throughout the remaining Norton volumes as well. The importance of the notion for Miller is reflected in the frequency of its occurrence in scholarly essays on his philosophy. For a start, it is important to recognize that Miller doesn't pull the notion of the midworld out of thin air; he finds it illustrated again and again in the history of science and technology, as well as in ordinary experience. Thus the midworld is already present. The task is to recognize it and so take it into account philosophically. That it is difficult to recognize, and that philosophical talk about it sounds so strange, is owing to an "intellectualism" that has strayed from the nature of human action and its objects, chiefly because it has been felt that if you wanted an ordered world you had best keep the potentially unruly human element out of it. It has not been well understood that the conditions that permit disorder and error are the very same conditions that make possible avoidance of error and genuine knowledge of the real.

The midworld is to be seen as an historical process, to be identified by an analysis that goes back from the subjective and the objective, the ideal and the real, to their common genesis in concrete human activities of grappling with nature: "A genetically [historically] produced end [such as a science of nature] must not scorn the base degrees by which it has risen."⁽¹⁵⁾ Miller warns the reader that his account of the origin and justification of the categories on which knowledge depends will be thoroughly "earthy." Either these categories originate in common human action and also find their justification there, or else they will be alleged to have a "transcendental" origin (as in Plato, or Kant) that renders their application to the here-and-now experience of nature problematic—a kind of imposition from above. In other words: if thought and reality are not intrinsically conjoined from the beginning, there is no possibility of ending up with a thought that truly discloses reality. Formal thought and reality emerge together, in the act. The only possible basis, or orientating point, for any philosophical analysis is human action in

history. (It would thus not be amiss to call Miller's position a Philosophy of the Act, or of Actuality.)

Miller defines the human act broadly, so that it is coextensive with what he calls "utterance." In so doing, he intends to recognize that distinctively human action not only sees and uses but names (gives form or identity) to what it uses. Language is not a kit of tools which one might or might not use, but is rather the proposal of an order that organizes things as things in the first place.⁽¹⁶⁾ No language, no intelligible world. In saying that this act of uttering is "original" Miller is claiming that it neither precedes nor follows the disclosure of things, contrary to most of the usual accounts of the relation of language, and action, to things. Absolute idealism or rationalism, holding that thought generates universal categories independently of experience, is wrong. Absolute empiricism, holding that experience of data occurs independently of thought, is equally wrong. The act or utterance, then, is the simultaneous disclosure of form and content, of universal and particular, of idea and datum.

For this to make much sense or have any plausibility, examples are needed. Miller generously supplies them. Many of them are drawn from mathematics— but not from "pure mathematics," for Miller holds that mathematics begins as, and has its final justification in, the disclosure of things. These examples are thus concrete illustrations of a primary Millerian thesis: that the pure/applied and form/content distinctions are derivative or abstractive ones. Utterances, including the utterances of mathematics and logic, are in their origins at once pure and applied. Form (universality, the systematic) occurs in an action that discloses content (particularity, the contingent). Example: he who so much as counts his toes has disclosed both the number of toes he has (a particular content) and the order of mathematics (an ideal or formal order). Another example (a favorite of Miller's): the creation of a yardstick not only to measure the distance between two points but to disclose objective space. Thereby the real puts in an appearance ("these trees five yards apart") and an ideal order is warranted (a system of mensuration). Miller asks us to attend closely to the "ontological status" of the yardstick as a typical example of the actual. One cannot choose between regarding it as ideal and regarding it as real, subjective or objective, psychological or physical, human or natural, form or content, universal or particular, mathematical or material. No traditional "dyadic" account of it can tell us what it is; it challenges our usual habits of thought. It is, in Miller's terms, "triadic" or "actual." What is still missing in Kant is the story of the genesis of forms and categories in the actual, in historical utterances, and it is here alone that their validation can be found. The actual is, as the term would indicate, the correlate of an act—in this case, the act of mathematical utterance. What is ontologically primary is actuality. The actual is neither a mere personal function nor a mere impersonal object; it is a "functioning object" or "embodied utterance" or "incarnate word" or "unit of account," of which one important type is the artifact. While it is the embodiment of a human will to order, it is at the same time a "critic" of the merely subjective: the tree I thought to be 50 yards from my house turns out to be 75. The act not only launches purposes but controls them. The world of words, numbers, time and space, of volts, atoms, and miles, of microscopes, telescopes, and clocks, is a midworld. The primary functioning object is the human body. The crucial point is that the actual isn't an adding of the ideal to the real,

or of thought to matter, as if we had prior separate experiences of the ideal and the real and, somehow, subsequently brought them into relation with each other. Miller's claim, on which his entire position stands or falls, is that both the ideal and the real appear thanks to the actual. "Both assured form and assured content derive from actuality."(17) In an important sense this isn't idealism—as opposed to realism or to naturalism—at all. It is a way beyond the idealist-realist controversy. The ideal and the real are mediated in the functioning object. Through a complex series of arguments, Miller is able to show how the functioning object or actuality enables us to generate, to distinguish between, and properly to interrelate, appearance and reality, error and fact, contingency and formal order, purpose and cause, mind and body, even the humanities and the sciences. These arguments comprise the most adequate resolution known to me of the still-vexing problems posed by Cartesian dualism. If it is at all true, as is often claimed, that the philosophical dilemmas of the last three centuries are primarily the consequence of Cartesian formulations, Miller's concept of the midworld of functioning objects deserves an important place in the history of modern philosophy. One index of a fruitful philosophical concept lies in its enabling us to see a whole range of other notions in a new light, and in the course of Miller's writings such light is shed on many problematic notions, such as stimulus and response, freedom, fate, the moral, democracy, law, the accidental, sign and symbol, myth, quality, organism, intersubjectivity.

I do not know whether Miller's philosophy will gain the place due it, or whether it will receive only limited notice and then be forgotten. The latter eventuality would be a tragedy. 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 while neither idiosyncratic nor uncritical. In my judgment, we find in Miller's thought a compelling answer to the question of what remains of philosophical idealism once it is freed of its rationalistic excesses, its claims to ahistoric absoluteness—excessive claims that still haunt Edmund Husserl's transcendental idealism. After Miller, it is necessary to say that Marx, Nietzsche, and the existentialists have only tempered the claims of idealism, not destroyed them. Miller has demonstrated the original and ineliminable role of freely proposed categories in the constitution of human experience, but as actual conditions of objectivity rather than as subjective, idiosyncratic, or fictive bars to knowledge. The manner in which Miller has reconciled the claims of mind and its ideality with the claims of nature and its reality makes him one of the more provocative successors of Kant and Hegel. If his way of talking takes some getting used to, what he says is thoroughly contemporary. If he rejects all metaphysical claims of transcending history and its contingency, he nonetheless shows genuine science to be possible. I know of no saner *via media* between skeptical relativism and metaphysical certitude.

Endnotes

1. Miller's dissertation committee consisted of Hocking, Perry, and Lewis. Among Miller's other teachers were Raphael Demos and L. T. Troland. For analysis of the positions taken by Lewis, Hocking, Holt, and Perry on the idealism/realism issue, see Joseph L. Blau, *Men and Movements in American Philosophy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1952), 196-99, 276-93.

2. Some of the foregoing biographical data come from the 25th Anniversary Report (1941) of the Harvard Class of 1916. I am indebted to Robert Corrington for calling my attention to this Report. For further information I am grateful to Katherine Miller.
3. George P. Brockway, "John William Miller," *The American Scholar* 49 (Spring 1980): 236-40. Reprinted in Joseph Epstein (ed.), *Masters: Portraits of Great Teachers* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 155-64.
4. See Section F of Henry Johnstone's bibliography at the end of *The Philosophy of John William Miller* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1990). It is likely that a complete listing of the dates and sources of all of the essays in the five Norton volumes will be published in the foreseeable future, together with a comprehensive index to these volumes.
5. E.g., *In Defense of the Psychological*, 127.
6. See *The Paradox of Cause*, 11-18.
7. Miller's critique of Skinner can be found in *In Defense of the Psychological*, passim.
8. I am here drawing, in part, on Miller's lectures in his introductory course, "Types of Philosophy," as given in the academic year 1950-51. This course forms the main subject of Henry Johnstone's paper in *The Philosophy of John William Miller*. Robert E. Gahringer's extensive (106 pp.) notes on the first semester (Philosophy 1) of this course as delivered in 1947-48 can be found in: Box 22, Folder 13 of the Miller Archives. Some of Miller's own notes for the course can be found in Box 10, Folder 3; Box 15, Folders 3-4; and Box 17, Folder 22.
9. Where "major" means that it responds to a significant, defensible, or unavoidable human "demand" (e.g., for an ordered and intelligible environment, for the recognition of originative personal thought and agency), including the demand that an inherited philosophy be purged of defects incurred in its attempt to meet some demand.
10. *In Defense of the Psychological*, 151.
11. *Ibid.*, 105.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Letter of 10/-/74 to Robert E. Gahringer, page 1 (Box 22, Folder 14).
14. *The Definition of the Thing*, 149.
15. *The Midworld of Symbols and Functioning Objects*, 8.

16. The claim that language is a tool is also effectively criticized by Justus Buchler. Cf. *Nature and Judgment* (Lanham, MD: University Presses of America), 41-49.

17. The Midworld, 178.