Embodiment, Language, and Demonry in Miller's Actualism

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It is well known that twentieth century existentialisms, in their different expressions, take their cue from Hegelian phenomenology. Hegel's depictions of the dynamism of extending self-consciousness, of the social interaction at the heart of subjectivity, and of the activity that drives any realization of freedom—as well as vexing questions about Hegel's teleological commitments—comprise a radix from which a host of definitively modern systems and anti-systems draw. Less appreciated is an abiding engagement, within American philosophy, with existential themes drawn from Hegel and coupled with the transcendental insights of Kantian critical philosophy and the diverse methodologies of the early Pragmatists. I want to focus on one twentieth century American philosopher in particular, John William Miller (1875-1978), both because Miller managed to articulate a system that integrates otherwise diverse but fundamental concerns of late modern philosophy, and insofar as Miller's program is positioned to recondition some of the difficulties we have inherited from modern philosophy. Although this paper, even this panel as a whole, must remain a sketch, suggesting a few Millerian initiatives in bare outline, one may hope that it will convey something of the applicability of Miller's approach.

Miller spent his career as a philosopher tucked into the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts, writing prodigiously, but publishing almost nothing. With the posthumous publication of a number of his books and essays, the opening of his archive at Williams College, and a growing body of secondary scholarship on his work, it is now possible to appreciate proportionally Miller's style, with its blatant refusal of the professionalization of academic philosophy; Miller's role as a teacher—for his concentrated commitment to the education of several generations of philosophers has resulted in thousands of pages of personal correspondence, with some essayistic letters of up to a hundred pages at a stretch; as well as, most importantly, the range of Miller's own philosophy. Miller sometimes referred to his position as a "historical idealism" and sometimes as a "philosophy of the act"; I will follow one of his closest expositors in calling it *actualism*.[1]

Actualism hinges on active doing: human activities such as measuring, saying, seeing, defining (or in effect, activities described by present active participles), form the hub of all signification or meaningfulness, including our ability to grasp and analyze action as the locus of meaning. The kinds of activities Miller has in mind 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 (qua object) and is used to measure objects (qua condition) (M 33). The yardstick measures a space that is made relevant 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. This is no mere empiricism, for Miller shows that just as space (or any other universal category) becomes appercipient in and through activities of tangible functioning, such as measuring, the ready, semantic availability of the concept "space" conditions the possibility of

noticing, treating, or otherwise coming to terms with spatiality. It is in the act of measuring that measured unit, spatiality as such, and the knowledgeable, subjective measurer are made available for cognition. As in Kantian critical philosophy, here there is no experience or knowledge of any thing in itself, unbound by mental configuration. Yet Miller argues that the categories that frame experience are neither given nor spontaneous. The environment is "declared" or "uttered" into being as an object of notice, so any given experience is tied directly to an endeavor utilizing some functioning object. As such, the primary functioning object is the body. One first uses eyes or ears to take awareness, or voice to distinguish order from an indefinite manifold. The body and its organs, as functioning objects, Miller calls the "original symbols"; the body is the "condition of all knowledge of bodies," but what one knows of one's body, one ascertains by understanding it (or something it does) as a component within an organization (M 155ff).

The ubiquity of functioning objects and the relevance of their sphere of activity, which Miller calls the *midworld*, establish the framework of actualism. By looking closely at our cognitive and existential dependence on functioning objects, and by demarcating the sphere of all such conditions of appearance as the midworld, Miller presents the concrete, historical trajectories that inevitably animate depictions of universality and form.

For Miller, local control of one's environment is always and foremost control of one's body.

One's own body cannot be fully objectified, but even in the effort, one continues to see, hear, and otherwise organize sensory data, and in this activity the immediacy of functioning can be made manifest. With the functioning of body, what one notices is not its separate sphere of activity, but its permeation with the stuff of the world: "The body is the functioning center of all declared environment, yet it is not isolated but continuous with air, light, and the ground … functioning discovers its environment as it discovers itself" (M 44). As the condition for ordering experience and its medium, the body locates one in nature and in history; qua embodied, one is necessarily positioned in direct relation to the possibilities for control that inhere in the particular situation at hand.[2] And since the functioning of the body conditions all subsequent symbols, the symbols we use to discuss ordered forms of knowledge connect thinking inescapably to the primacy of functioning bodies.

As in the phenomenologically inflected existentialism of Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir, this approach hinges on the body as the fulcrum on which experience of the world and the other depends; Miller's actualism offers a critical metaphysics of the body in its lived situation. And like the French Existentialists, Miller insists that human finitude and embodiment are inextricably linked, and linked, too, with any authentic expression of freedom, insofar as authentic action acknowledges finitude and the situatedness of embodiment. As Miller writes upon encountering de Beauvoir's work in 1948:

> There is an old western tradition of securing immunity to fortune by avoiding all hot identification with the limit. But there is another tradition, too, one which finds the expenditure of effort, health, and life as the very locus of the disinterested, as the source of the distinction and glory with which human nature may be crowned. Simone de Beauvoir observes: 'The individual has to find himself, and to assume the task of being what he is in the jeopardy and glory of his lonely freedom.'[3]

Miller likewise shares with de Beauvoir the understanding that embodiment—the mediator of all possible experience—is encountered in a mediated form, though never treats the gendered body in particular.[4] Like de Beauvoir, Miller cautions against the urge to disregard the body's actual situatedness and vulnerability. The body, he writes, is a receding, enigmatic immediacy. Insofar as it becomes the object of meaningful utterances, the body's significance is conditioned by the same functioning actuality that governs every symbolic regime. All of the ways we might define the body are reflective; it cannot be treated as a rationally transparent object, because any attempt to "treat" and "define" it requires its participation. Actualism is geared toward showing that "*res gestae* ["*things done*" are] present in what seems not only barren of action but also deliberately and tenaciously preserved from action" (M 17).

Miller is quick to note that pragmatists, too, have embraced the consequence of the actual, of *res gestae* / *things done* and thus things that might have been done otherwise:

> In America, it is the pragmatists whose doctrine comes closest to the existential position. […] A remark of William James will emphasize this. 'For pluralistic pragmatism, truth grows up inside of all finite experiences. They lean on each other, but the whole of them, if such a whole there be, leans on nothing. All homes are in finite experience; finite experience, as such, is homeless.' Pragmatism is an optimistic version of the existentialist emphasis on the primary position of life and thought. Finitude seems to James an opportunity, not a menace. … Universal order at the expense of limited personal reality seemed to James the refuge of the 'tender-minded' (ME 5).

Yet distinctively, the activities with which Miller is most concerned are linguistic utterances. Miller moves from the firstness of embodiment to the second-order body of language, with an argument for the dialectical interdependence of encountering the body and the acts of utterance through which that encounter is actualized. For example, the fundamentality of the body engaged in measuring may be most evident when we use a term such as "foot" for measurement—ancient sources tell us that length was formerly measured according to the human foot, forearm, hand, and finger—but Miller argues that even where the original terms of usage are unpreserved, our abstract expressions tend to refer to material circumstances, and most specifically to the embodied experience that remains manifest in the terms themselves. Whether or not language is overtly analogically extended in terms as readily detectable as a "foot" of measurement or an idea "grasped" by thought, Miller holds that linguistic utterance is always a reference back to the immediacy of embodied experience.

Thinking, identifying, noticing (etc.) rely on the functioning of the body, and their primary achievement, whether active perception or higher order cognition, requires cognitive markers to order information *as* information. These markers work as functioning objects, whether or not they become audible words, and they relate foremost to the functioning, experiencing body. At the same time, the body's functioning would be indiscernible without them. Utterance, the action of the functioning body, is actual, in the sense that its essence is to happen (the rational discernment of it is already the evidence of it), and it is constitutional, in the sense that utterance is the premise of all data, discoveries, and judgments.

Like Merleau-Ponty, Miller roundly rejects the behaviorist model in which the words of speech are read as meaningless responses to stimuli. Both deny the claim that language is merely the inessential shell or casing of thought.[5] Thought cannot be identified with language, but as utterance, Miller

argues, language accomplishes thought—just as the act of utilizing a yardstick accomplishes our coming to terms with space. Miller's assimilation of functioning act and symbolic action dictates that any experience or understanding, including understanding utterance itself, relies upon a system of signs. Utterance is manifestly articulate and communicative; it is, by definition, the creation of a symbol and its placement within a symbolic order. Whereas action, qua functioning, may be designated with metaphysical firstness, action is always embodied and must make use of functioning objects. And while the primary functioning object is the body, the body engages in its functioning symbolically, because the body takes awareness and makes available for discernment via cognitive markers that it situates in a meaningful continuum—in other words, it remains as dependent upon signs as any signs remain conditioned by the body. The discrimination of objects achieved in functioning activity is a matter for signs and for language, yet language cannot be just another possible episode in our experience of the world, for we can neither abolish it nor, strictly speaking, control it (TM 217).

Merleau-Ponty would recognize in Miller the idea that our shared linguistic world is the product of the sedimentation of social practices: countless, multiform, and congealed in the languages into which we are born, and which seem to emerge from us without intentional control. Yet Miller emphasizes as aspect of linguistic command that brings him closer to the Sartrean and Heideggerian handling of reification. Reification in Sartre is a kind of bad faith in which something otherwise produced by human consciousness is regarded as if beyond that consciousness. For his part, Heidegger concludes the whole of *Being and Time* with concerns about the dangers of reifying consciousness: *"Why* does this reification come to dominate again and again? … Is the 'distinction' between 'consciousness' and 'thing' sufficient at all for a primordial unfolding of the ontological problematic?"[6] In other words, for Heidegger the question of fundamental ontology entails at its crux this question about the threat of arrested thinking.

Miller speaks of the way a person may become "possessed" by the order projected in symbolic functioning as the commitment to some universal becomes fanatical or "demonic"—a term he appropriates from Paul Tillich. Miller first uses the term "demonry" in an attempt explain the mystification whereby human, historical practices come to appear as fixed, objectified things, taking as his initial example the commodity form. But he comes to argue that the demonic works through an internalization linked to the fundamental activity of functioning itself. In demonry, we invest an ideal, actualized and named in the process of functioning, with primacy and a solidity that denies its own active, human generation. Miller mentions nationalism and religion as examples, among other. In all cases, Miller writes, the demonic is both a consequence of our existential solitude and a testing ground for our ever-temporal, ever-profane assays at legitimate value. We posit the ideas that become demonic in our attempts at local control, and our attempts to universalize that control engender demonry.

Arresting its object in a universalized, reified form, demonry precludes history and with it, an understanding of ourselves as those for whom coming to know, judging, and acting is a historical process. We experience our freedom through the institutions that allow us to think it and practice it; all freedom is as situated as it is manifest in norms, languages, and of course, actual and inevitably limited bodies.[7] It is the very *situatedness* of freedom that demonry denies, even if it may fetishize some given expression or vehicle of freedom. Demonry, then, is the result of a historical process; it is that which arrests or seeks to arrest the historical process; and it is that which, in its paralyzing treatment of history, creates the conditions for conflicts that will bring an event to notice, allowing it

to become fully historicized. Miller associates the modern philosophical reckoning with historicity with the currents that meet in existentialism. He writes:

> The existentialist theme also appears in the rapidly developing idea of history. History is a study of events branded by time. There is no history in eternity. Nor is there history in the concepts which define physics. … [History] defines no utopia, but perpetual endeavor and revision. … It is a dimension of life both terrible and glorious, and if the paths of glory lead but to the grave then, *a fortiori*, they are the paths of a supreme self-assertion (ME 5-6).

Clearly, and characteristically for later modern philosophy, Miller's actualism holds that no human epistemic measure is sufficient to ascertain the strength of a transcendent guarantee. Yet with its close, dynamic account of the functioning structure of action and reflection, actualism also shows why this must be so.

"We are on our own," Miller writes, and "in consequence our acts and purposes lack adequate authority" (HH 169). In a handwritten addendum scratched on the back of his short essay on the topic, Miller adds: "Existentialism, like all voluntaristic doctrines, is forced to reject the intellectual ideal of utopian order. The world of action is a broken world, composed of many centers of endeavor […] To be finite, to act, to be free, is all the same …" (ME, a).

Miller allows that it is understandably commonplace to seek ever newer ways to crown some higher ideal sovereign, when faced with the terror and grief that tend accompany the thought of contingency. "Make what you will of it," he writes, "men have no stomach for obliteration" (ME 4). Nonetheless, promises of eternity undermine the only genuine expressions of rational and moral agency with which we can recognize contingency and take on our freedom.[8] "This is an unavoidable corollary of ethical theory," Miller insists (MA, a). "So far as I can tell, the reaffirmation of selfhood always occurs as the willing, if desperate, acceptance of limitation. In self-criticism and its laws, man finds his finitude, but also his freedom" (MA 4).

Miller's Hegelian twist on demonry adds the argument that the reification achieved in the demonic form actually forces a testing of ideals and their antipodes. Such testing takes place in historical conflicts, and these conflicts are constitutional for us *as* effective agents, or as the beings who may create human values in the face of valuelessness. Miller calls the demonic a "testing ground for the effectiveness of finitude," whereas finitude is what any form of demonry considers a "great metaphysical heresy" and seeks to deny (HH 169). In this contest between promised ideal and permanently incomplete action, Miller finds, articulate utterance is essential. Responsibility is taken and agency won only in the locally controlled, situated practices of investing oneself in meaning-making action (PH 176). Miller calls these practices "constitutional conflicts"; we become who we are by staking ourselves, and by making explicit our positions, in circumstances that seem to both necessitate and deny those positions. For Miller, philosophy is the study of constitutional conflicts, their conditions, and their consequences; and it is often the staging, sharpening of, and engagement with such conflicts (CHE 92ff; HH 168ff).

Miller ties the thought of demonry explicitly to language both insofar as linguistic terms come, with ready ease, to reify and obscure the activities they name, and insofar as we may become accustomed to repeating language unreflectively, and thus to abnegating our own agency. The active search for reality is the search for the self, Miller writes, and "where the self is not actualized in that search, it has not yet put in an appearance." When, in lieu of this process, or as a substitute for its limitations,

we merely adopt the readymade thought of others, then "the self becomes conventional, irresponsible, and dogmatic" (AH 186). This "conventional" self is the sort most likely to accept the ahistorical certainty promised by a demonic ideal.

But lest we pronounce condescending judgment on this poor, passive dolt, Miller reminds us that we are each in the same position:

> We are in league with meanings in ourselves that our own experience has not produced. We do not, therefore, know what our words mean unless we search out those experiences of others by which they have come to mean what they now mean to us. […] We inherit a confusion of symbols and a confusion of tongues (PH 187).

To be "thrown into language," as Heidegger shows, is to belong to a world in which the readymade is ever-present. Miller's response to the problem is not literary—he is not interested in experimenting with new forms of attention-grabbing language—nor does he think it can "dissolved" with careful attention, as if the problem of language would fully disappear after clarity is momentarily achieved. On the contrary, Miller's dialectical angle on the work of the negative through the demonic takes up both the functioning and the dysfunction of language as the proper task of philosophy, and the stuff of our shared self-inquiry and agential development. To recognize our pervasive limitation by language is to begin to grasp the actuality of limitation itself. Miller's position leads to the conclusion that reification will happen to every act of meaningful language, and it challenges us to deal with the seizure of meaning by confronting the shared source of the critic's authority and the power arrested in authoritarian assertion. Miller's existential actualism shows that by embracing the actual crux of our finitude, our historicity, and our embodiment, we may discern the stealthy claim made by reified language on consciousness. Miller's Hegelian optimism is apparent in the parallel claim that the situatedness of our freedom only becomes apparent, and available for re-appropriation, where it is first reified in denials of the primacy of functioning action.

Notes

1. Miller also calls his philosophy a "historical idealism," a "naturalist idealism" and a "concretism." I take the term "actualism" from Joseph P. Fell, "Miller: The Man and His Philosophy," in *The Philosophy of John William Miller* (1990), 21-31, where Fell also coins the term "philosophy of the act."
2. Michael J. McGandy draws this point out in *The Active Life: Miller's Metaphysics of Democracy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 86.
3. "Motives of Existentialism," 6. (Hereafter ME)
4. Judith Butler writes compellingly of the role of relationship between the body and gender norms in "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*" *Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical Reader*. Edited by Elizabeth Fallaize. (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).
5. Merleau-Ponty *Phenomenology of Perception*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) See the chapter "The Body as Expression and Speech."
6. Martin Heidegger *Being and Time*, Translated by Joan Stambaugh. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 397-398.
7. McGandy makes this point in his introduction to Miller's "The Ahistoric and the Historic" in *The Task of Criticism*, Edited by Joseph P. Fell, Vincent Colapietro, and Michael J. McGandy (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), pp. 183-184.

8. Miller writes: "Those who live in the eternal can do nothing for its own sake—neither play nor work, neither manual nor intellectual labor. There is something trivializing in this inability to love or hate thoroughly. … In consequence, the most profound of all schisms takes place in the personality as the temporal becomes opposed to the eternal. One becomes incapable of action …" (PH 182-3).

Works by John William Miller Cited

M *The Midworld of Symbols and Functioning Objects*. John William Miller. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982)

TM "The Midworld," *The Task of Criticism*, Edited by Joseph P. Fell, Vincent Colapietro, and Michael J. McGandy, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005).

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ME "Motives in Existentialism" (1948).