

Review of Miller's Five Books

by Vincent M. Colapietro

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Five volumes of John William Miller's writings have appeared thus far, one shortly before his death in 1978 (*The Paradox of Cause and Other Essays* [PC]) and four posthumously (*The Definition of the Thing with Some Notes on Language* [1980 [DT]], *The Philosophy of History with Reflections and Aphorisms* [1981 [PH]], *The Midworld of Symbols and Functioning Objects* [1982] [MS], and *In Defense of the Psychological* [1983] [DP]). In addition, there is an important essay, "The Ahistoric and the Historic," which appears as the "Afterword" to José Ortega y Gasset's *History as a System* ("The Ahistoric and the Historic" [AH]). Of the five volumes, only *The Definition of The Thing* is a systematic whole; it is in fact largely a reprint of Miller's dissertation (Harvard, 1922). The other volumes are collections of "essays" organized thematically by someone other than Miller. Nonetheless, the five volumes comprise a complementary set of variations on several themes.(1)

Prior to the appearance of *The Paradox of Cause* Miller only published four essays. Nonetheless, he wrote incessantly, more often than not letters he did not send or essays he did not finish.(2) Moreover, he left detailed notes for original courses in numerous areas of philosophical concern.(3) The result of all this is a vast wealth of manuscripts at various stages of completion; in effect, these manuscripts are entries made in the log of Miller's philosophical journey. Basing one's judgement solely on these entries, there is little question that here is a bold explorer and careful observer. Indeed, the five volumes of Miller's works confront the reader in a manner somewhat analogous to the way in which *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* challenge students of Peirce's thought: widely scattered writings are brought together in such a way as to suggest a deeply integrated vision, a vision which touches upon virtually every dimension of human existence. However, these writings are brought together with too little information about the chronology of the pieces. Moreover, one is not always certain whether one is reading a portion of a letter, a draft for an article, notes for a lecture, or a finished essay. Even so, George Brockway, the editor of these volumes and a student of Miller's at Williams College, deserves gratitude far more than criticism for his efforts in making Miller's writings available to us. In terms of both style and substance, the pieces he has selected are, virtually without exception, of a high quality; in addition, they are arranged in ways which make good sense.

Nonetheless, there is a problem of accessibility. Given the character of the volumes, this problem would not be most effectively met by offering a summary of each book. Rather my purpose in this paper is to provide an overview of Miller's works which addresses precisely the problem of accessibility by identifying the fundamental themes and the underlying problem of the five volumes under review. In the words of William James,

"[a]ny author is easy if you can catch the center of his vision."(4) My aim here is nothing less than to catch the center of John William Miller's vision.

Since Miller himself stressed the cultivation of a historical consciousness, it is fitting that we see his works in their historical context. His time was, as ours is, a time of conflict. The illumination of conflicts—more precisely, the dialectical resolution of what he called "constitutional conflicts"—was at or, at least, near the center of his vision (cf. DT 58). In fact, Miller defined philosophical reflection as the deliberate concern with the various loci of constitutional conflict (PC 122-23). An example of such a conflict is the opposition between might and right (PH 144-46). "Morality without force is as formless as force without morality. The former decays into inaction, and the latter into arbitrary action, and hence again into lack of will and discontinuity of deeds. They [i.e., force and morality] are dialectical" (PH 146). In general, a "dialectical opposition is not solved by exclusion of one of the terms or propositions; it is solved by *uniting* them, by showing their mutuality" (MS 185-86). The exclusion of one of these terms threatens to plunge us into unintelligibility and even worse. "Violence, when it goes beyond the flare-up of a passing passion, is occasioned by these radical conflicts over the controls of our reason, and so of our commitments" (PC 191). The task of philosophy is to understand and also to reconcile the radical or constitutional conflicts of human reason and commitment: "Philosophy is the reason that seeks to comprehend the loci of the breakdown of reason" (PC 191). In doing so, it seeks to reduce the occasions for violence.

The very possibility of conflict depends upon the actuality of some deed: apart from acts, conflicts are impossible. In addition, the very possibility of *constitutional* conflict depends on the actuality of at least some deeds as themselves *constitutional* (a term of large but vague significance in Miller's writings). This suggests the *primacy of the actual*, the "actual" being here understood as that which emanates from the pure (i.e., unenviored or unconditioned) acts of some unique person. Miller proposed "the actual as the neglected source of order and selfhood" (PC 127). No self is discoverable apart from his acts, nor is any impersonal order of natural occurrences discoverable apart from the probings and activities of the self (DP 181).

No orderly region of human experience is *given* to us apart from our actions. "A world without action is a world without form" (MS 45). "The world is actual insofar as the world is maintained by action" (MS 174). No region of order is a fact [a datum: something given], but rather the resultant of functioning. Nature is a blank apart from the artifactual or symbolic controls that, in functioning, imply that sort of order" (MS 188). Indeed, "[n]ature and self are *both* utter blanks apart from the media that in their function lead to them" (MS 189; cf. MS 154). "We do not know others, or ourselves, directly, that is, without a vehicle or medium by which we disclose what we have in mind" (DT 187). The story of the growth of the mind is the same as the story of the revision of its vehicles" (DT 189). These vehicles, the most important of which is the body, are the means by which we *act* and, thus, the source from which order emerges (MS 155). But any order we establish through our acts is always partial and precarious; it contains within itself the seeds of conflict.

While constitutional acts project a formal order which contains within itself the possibility of conflicts, history discloses the consequences of acts. History is a formal process which generates inescapable consequences. "It is the story of the consequences of our commitments. For this reason it is a region of ultimate risk. It is the property of history which gives it both fascination and terror" (PC 186). In light of these considerations, there is warrant for describing Miller's philosophy as a philosophy of the act and also as *essentially* a philosophy of history.⁽⁵⁾ Since we cannot escape acting, we cannot (as Lincoln noted and Miller delights in recalling) escape history (PH 150). The ontology of finite actuality is most thoroughly explored in *The Paradox of Cause* and *The Midworld of Symbols*, while the humanistic implications of this ontology are most fully considered in *The Philosophy of History* and *In Defense of the Psychological*.

Act in Miller's sense is not a response to an environment but rather the very projection of an environment: "The act *declares* the environment and articulates it. The act is *unenviromed*." (MS 14). Pure activities are not psychological activities, i.e., not accidental [or conditioned]. They are environment determining, not environment determined" (MS 174). Acts in this sense are not to be explained in terms of anything more ultimate, but rather are themselves the most *ultimate* categories in terms of which everything else is to be explained: "The categories are the basic acts. They are verbal [i.e., instances of utterance]. They require present active participles" (MS 65). While philosophy has not traditionally viewed the finite as a category (i.e., as constitutive of the real), this was precisely what Miller proposed to do. He sought to grant categorical status to finite actuality. (In this he appears to be closer to James than to Royce, although he had deep reservations about Jamesian pragmatism). Thus, an understanding of Miller's metaphysics of democracy") demands that we explore his conception of actuality (PC 74). Since finite actuality is, in itself most concrete form, a particular mode of incorporate activity—in short, an act (e.g., measuring with a yardstick or navigating with a map)—it is best to begin by focusing on the act. In order to grasp what Miller means by an *act*, it is helpful to see how the term and its cognates (actual, actuality, etc.) primarily acquire their meaning from three contrasts: (a) the actual versus the behavioral; (b) the actual versus the factual; and (c) the actual versus both the real and the apparent.

The first contrast has already been broached in the distinction between activities which are determined *by* an environment and those which are *determinative of an environment*. *Behavior* is the name for activities determined by an environment, while *action* in the strict sense is the name for activities determinative of an environment (PH 169). In other words, behavior is a conditioned response, while action in the strict sense is an unconditioned utterance. To describe action as "unconditioned" is, in truth, to depict it as a self-conditioning: an action is a deed for which the agent is *essentially* responsible (MS 64). Thus, to insist upon the unconditional and, accordingly, self-conditioning character of action is simply a way of underscoring the absolute responsibility of agents for their acts. To equate action with utterance (MS 76) implies that act in this context does not signify an exertion of brute force but a potentially infinite continuum of meanings (cf. DT 58, 67). The act *qua* utterance addresses some other and, thereby, invites the possibility of being addressed—even rebuked—by this order. The act *qua* utterance projects what is not present but continuous with the present (MS 124). That which the utterance projects

is often referred to by Miller as a totality, an order inclusive of all that is potentially present in the *actual* present. Some totality is necessarily implicit in any presence, a point to which I shall return in a moment.

"Psychology has not been at all clear on the idea of action, and not infrequently it aspires to be considered a natural science studying the changes of alleged organisms when bells ring, lights flare, and electric currents annoy" (PH 148). *In Defense of the Psychological* provides both a thoroughgoing critique of the behaviorist attempt to reduce action to behavior and an attempt to clarify the idea of action as action. In general, for anyone interested in the philosophy of the social and behavioral sciences, this volume is well worth careful consideration.

The second contrast is between the actual and the factual. Miller tended to think of facts as brute data, as objects *given* to the perception of a passive spectator, and acts as articulate utterances, as projects generated by the exercise of local control through the medium of some functioning object (PH 176). "Facts" in this sense are simply *there*, prior to any activity, waiting to be discovered. While the act is that which is constitutionally enacted, the fact is that which is simply found.

However, for Miller, "facts" in this *sense* do not exist. "The word today is 'data', where every datum is discrete and miraculous. Ours is a cult of passivity" (MS 146). Miller's rejection of the concept of "fact" must be seen as part of his opposition to this cult of passivity. This cult of passivity is also one of irresponsibility, since the idolaters of data refuse to see the work of their own hands in the making of facts. (Two of the best discussions of this and related points are "Functioning Objects, Facts, and Artifacts" [chapter 9 of *The Paradox of Cause*] and "Facts and Artifacts" [chapter 13 of *The Midworld of Symbols*].) For this cult, even acts are to be treated as "facts." "But the act is not a 'fact' in the sense of an object come upon. It is a 'factum.' If no act, then no fact" (MS 196). "We must be equipped with artifacts if we are to discover the facts" (PH 148). Thus, while Miller insisted upon acts being prior to facts, he equally insisted upon acts being inseparable from artifacts.

Objects are not data, things given to a passive spectator; rather they are things revealed to an active subject as a direct consequence of some local control exerted by that subject through the intermediary of some functioning object. "Objects, indeed, become significant objects only through activity and *exploration*. One does not have them apart from the activity that *defines* them. They are a dynamic concept. *Their being is their being found or made*" (DP 171).

The third contrast concerns Miller's attempt to distinguish the actual from *both* the real and the apparent. "The actual is the watershed that permits the distinction of appearance and reality and generates both" (MS 89). "The midworld is the actual, neither appearance nor reality" (MS 169). In order to be clear about what Miller is saying in this context, it would be helpful to draw a distinction between the way the distinction between appearance and reality functions in reference to actuality, on the one hand, and the way this distinction is alleged to exist apart from and even prior to actuality, on the other.

Miller's position is that if we take actuality to be fundamental, then it is possible to assign perfectly intelligible meanings to the terms "appearance" and "reality"; however, if we take either appearance or reality as fundamental, then we render both it and its opposite unintelligible (MS 115). Appearance as primordial (rather than derivative from actuality) designates something which appears to a subject but in such a way as not to insure that it is the appearance *of* anything else; reality as primordial signifies something which exists in itself but in such a way as not to require that it be an appearance to some other being. On either of these terms, the dilemma of dogmatism and scepticism is inevitable: Either we dogmatically privilege some class of appearance as *the* revelations of reality or we reject the possibility of appearances ever disclosing anything beyond themselves. However, in the midworld, appearance-and-reality is a functional distinction entailed by the very use of functioning objects. There is no pure subjectivity (purely subjective apparitions without any potentially objective import), any more than there is pure objectivity (reality apart from the possibility of appearance). Pure subjectivity would be absolute inwardness, while pure objectivity would be absolute otherness; however, both amount to the same thing—absolute impenetrability. While Miller refused to deny either inwardness or otherness, he sought to make them intelligible rather than completely mysterious. He sought to do this by making them distinguishable aspects of functioning objects or, what amounts to the same thing, objectified functioning. The *objectified act* is the basis of all objectivity and subjectivity too" (PH 185). Once the split between the inner agent and the outer fact [between subject and object] is made not all the King's horses and all the King's men can patch together the pieces" (DT 72). Miller's conception of the midworld is a refusal to rend asunder the dialectical pair of subject and object.

To grant actuality ontological primacy or categorial status is, in effect, to make the act *absolute* "reality." This is precisely what Miller did: "to deny that the act is free—that is, absolute—is necessarily to assume some more-or-less articulate condition in which it appears, such as nature or God. Neither can be explained or understood through the act. Thus one should not make nature empirical, or define God through recourse to our own volitional experience" (PH 141). However, to sever nature from experience or God from volition would be to render them unintelligible. While the dominant tendency in western philosophy has been to make God or nature the absolute or unconditioned ground of all finite actualities (including human agents), Miller attempted nothing less than to reverse this perspective entirely.

The *free* act, the act which projects the environment, is an actuality within which the agent is immediately present; however, the presence of the agent in an act does not preclude the projection of the agent beyond the present. In fact, present activity necessarily projects a fateful totality. "We want the *moment*, but not the *momentum*. We want to be heard and seen but resist arithmetic and logic as confining. Any actual moment [however] is also a momentum" (MS 14). Fantasy is the moment which attempts, always unsuccessfully, to avoid the momentum of its own commitments. It is, accordingly, a flight from the actual, since momentum is part of the actuality of any moment. "It is the cultus of feeling that has no consequences" (MS 14). In opposition to this cultus, Miller maintained that: "Totality and presence stand or fall together" (MS 10). What this means, in part at least, is that truly to accept the immediate moment in its

immediate actuality requires us to embrace the projected totality implicit in any present act. (History is the process in which this implicit and largely hidden totality becomes more explicit and readily visible.)

As we have seen, the act as such (i.e., the act as an actual presence entailing a projected totality) is unenviored. However, it is not disembodied; in fact, apart from some form of embodiment, there is no act. Actuality "is no mysterious relation of subject and object. It requires a vehicle of which the very distinction of subject and object is an inherent consequence. This vehicle is what I have called the midworld [of symbols]" (MS 123). The measuring subject and the measured object require a measuring stick (e.g., the yardstick, one of Miller's favorite examples of functioning objects); it is in reference to such "functioning objects" and the activities which they embody that a calculable order is projected. Apart from the midworld, apart from the operative presence of functioning objects, the subject has no foothold in the world and the world has no bearing on the subject. Miller stresses that: "A yardstick is for measuring. Note the present active participle, the verb" (MS 41). In general, such verbs designate the acts which make knowing possible. Thus, Miller insisted that cognition does not rest upon itself but upon the act: "The noncognitive basis of cognition is the act" (MS 11). Such acts are themselves possible only through the functioning of a certain type of object, namely, an object which is itself a condition for other objects (MS 33). The yardstick is an object which makes a region of objects (namely, space) possible. "Short of measuring there is no space" (MS 180). Moreover, without tools of measurement there is no measuring. So, too a sundial is an object which also projects an order in which objects can be identified and investigated. The functioning object "is an actuality, finite yet demanding endless application. It embodies the absolute modes of experience and also of reality. It defines the necessary, including the necessity of the accidental. For, as actual, it is itself caught in the accidental, bespeaking finitude and particularity" (MS 35).

Miller explained his use of "midworld" to describe the region of human artifacts or functioning objects by noting that this region "is exclusively neither the self nor the not-self, neither consciousness nor its object" (PC 106). In addition, an inquiry into this region demands an exploration "lies between epistemology and metaphysics and is the bridge between them" (PC 106). There is no conflict between subject and object, mind and body, purpose and cause [i.e., teleology and mechanism], once the functioning artifact [or object] is accepted as a category" (MS 189). In other words, we can overcome the constitutional conflicts or the destructive dualisms that have plagued modern thought *only on the condition* that we grant categoreal status to functioning objects.

The human body occupies a privileged position among functioning objects. "The original symbol is the body and its organs . . . It is the original instrument and actuality of experience" (MS 155). "The basic functioning object is the body, not a body, but the body. The body is not an object among all other objects. . . It is an immediacy. It is the immediacy of function" (MS 43). The body *is the absolute artifact*, that is, it is the artifact that in its basic functioning crates all other artifacts and symbols" (MS 42). "The body is the functioning center of all declared environment, yet it is not isolated but continuous with air, light, and the ground for walking. Functioning discovers its

environment as it discovers itself. Neither is separable from the other" (MS 44). In fact, the history of thought is clear: Divorce functioning and nature, and each becomes a dogma and a mystery (MS 44).

Nature is, consequently, known only through our symbolizations, taking this term in the widest possible sense to include our measuring instruments as well as our mathematical symbols. "*Destroy the symbol and one loses nature*. I mean destroy yardsticks, clocks, balances; destroy names and words, written numbers and logical notation. . . and nature reverts to chaos" (PC 61). In short, "[t]he symbol generates nature" (PC 61). It is perhaps easy to misunderstand the force of such assertions as symbols *generate* nature or acts *project* an environment. What Miller is not saying is that the individual agent creates a world over which s/he has absolute control; what he is saying is that such an agent projects an order in which local control and, hence, real error become possible. "Without persons, no environment, since it is the organization of their acts and utterances" (MS 88). Such an organization is *always* threatened by disorganization, such order is always endangered by chaos. While the maintenance of the self demands the maintenance of an environment, the disintegration of the environment threatens the disintegration of the self. "The claims of action as constitutive could not be satisfied unless it had generated its own antagonist [or other]. That, of course, is a 'dialectical' process noted by Plato and made more explicit by Hegel" (MS 45). This antagonist or other appears both as other persons and the natural world. Both society and nature are *constituted* by our actions, the former being the form of action when personal and the latter the form of action when impersonal (DP 178-79). In other words, nature is the impersonal order of human action and society the personal order of such action.

Order is impossible apart from action, and action is impossible apart from artifacts. "All action occurs apropos of this midworld" (MS 18). In other words, finite actuality is always *incorporate* actuality. The midworld is nothing other than the region of such actualities; as such, it is the locus and embodiment of control (MS 6). In addition, as the embodiment of local control, the midworld is the only basis for a responsible humanism (PC 119). Hence, Miller's insistence upon the categorical status of finite actuality as well as his insistence upon the primacy of the midworld must be seen as grounding a humanistic vision. In this vision, the acceptance of finitude as a category entails acknowledging the hazardous character of all human endeavors and accepting our absolute responsibility for even our most hazardous undertakings. In short, it is a humanism which underscores risk and responsibility. "Security of any sort, made absolute, is the stifling of freedom. A risky, but creative advance is man himself" (PC 105).

What is, in my view, Miller's deepest philosophic concern can perhaps be best illuminated in reference to his humanism. He was struggling to maintain a radical form of the humanistic perspective (a vision of persons as truly autonomous, of humans as the ones who provide the *ultimate* authorization for even their highest ideals); and he was attempting to maintain this form of humanism in opposition to the authoritarian, on the one hand, and the nihilist, on the other. *The problem generating Miller's exploration of the midworld is a particular historical form of the inevitable constitutional conflict between order and chaos.*(6)"No human acquisition," according to José Ortega y Gasset,

"is stable."(7) This includes the forms of order we have established by means of our actions. All order is threatened by the possibility of collapsing into chaos. Recall that, for Miller, "where there is no local control neither is there general order. The manifestation and evidence of a general order requires a local control" (DP 68). However, "[t]he local efficacy that would proclaim the general order, and would stand as its evidence and warrant, is not [now] permitted. And so there is no general order, We are nihilists" (DP 69).

Local control and *general* order are inseparable: a general and formal order has its ultimate basis in a local and personal control exercised through some functioning object; in turn, local control acquires its ultimate liability in some formal order. The midworld is the only region in which mistakes are truly possible. While it is impossible for either disembodied minds or mindless bodies to commit errors, there is "no difficulty in locating error apropos of the artifactual, in the yardstick in use, or in words. If one cannot find error in the pure object, neither can one in the pure subject. You have to *make* a mistake. It needs a vehicle" (MS 189). Given such vehicles, collisions of all sorts are inevitable; indeed, errors abound in the midworld.

Nihilists reject and occasionally even destroy the forms of local control and, then, deny the reality of any general order (DP 69). The nihilist sees that the authorization of our activities depends on nothing other than those activities themselves and the media through which they are executed; from this, s/he concludes that our activities are unauthorized. The authoritarian essentially agrees with the nihilist that if our activities are not authorized by something or someone other than human agents in their finite actuality, then these activities are unauthorized. However, the authoritarian is one who posits a source of legitimation outside the finite actuality of functioning objects and human subject. In opposition to both the nihilist and the authoritarian, the humanist embraces finite actuality as providing a legitimate warrant for its own ongoing endeavors. To be sure, "[t]he actual exacts a high price, and it has nothing to offer but itself. If one is not willing to be defined in one's actuality, one reverts to disorder or to the timeless" (PH 179). Nihilism is an attempt to escape order, while authoritarianism is an endeavor to escape history (PC 185).

At the level of explicit philosophic consciousness, the problem to which Miller was responding was the constitutional conflict between dogmatism and scepticism; at the level of actual cultural experience, it was the constitutional conflict between external authority and internal anarchy—dogmatism simply being one form of external authority and scepticism one manifestation of internal chaos (MS 125). The cultural conflict itself might be expressed in terms used immediately above; that is, it might be expressed in terms of the opposition between authoritarianism and nihilism. Other than authoritarianism (i.e., an ultimately uncritical appeal to an essentially external authority), is there any way of avoiding the nihilism toward which some of the most powerful forces of contemporary culture are driving us? Are our only choices nihilism or heteronomy? Is there a *via media*, perhaps some conception of autonomy which traces both facts and values to the commitments and actions of the person, without eradicating the objective status of facts or the normative function of values? Miller thought that he had disclosed

such a *via media* in the midworld of symbols, a region of hazardous and limitless expanse made possible by our own exertions and commitments.(8)

The task of the philosopher includes establishing the importance and ascertaining the status of this midworld. Even so, the opening chapter of *The Definition of the Thing* bears a significance it is easy to overlook. The title of this chapter is "The Scope of Philosophy"; its significance resides in the fact that, near the heart of Miller's project, was an attempt to reconstruct philosophy as a mode of discourse. It is possible to talk about talk as though discourse were simply one *object* among many; however, such a manner of speaking destroys the very character of discourse as such. For this reason, Miller insisted that philosophy is *just* talk, and not talk *about* talk (MS 59-77). That is, "much talk is not 'about' a prior state of affairs known quite apart from a saying. It appears that such talk is enjoyed, valued, and, in the case of math, given great authority" (MS 61). Indeed, "[t]he demand that we talk 'about' what is no way defined by talk, what goes its own way *whatever* we say, or *whether* we say anything at all, has backfired and left it impossible to give any account of what we talk about" (MS 61). Quite simply, "talk is not to be found. I join in it. Talk is not another item of common experience" (MS 63), rather it is the constitutive activity of an unconditioned agent (MS 64). Just as one does not find talk among objects, one does not encounter objects apart from discourse: "without the word no one perceives the object. Object is a status within discourse" (MS 64).

In this context, then, two crucial questions are: What is the status of talk? (MS 63) and What is the price to be paid for the enfranchising of discourse? (PC 106). The status of discourse is essentially that of utterance as a unconditioned and constitutive *act* (MS 65). This is most plainly seen in reference to "organization words" as distinct from "denotative words" (MS 8; cf. 69). While denotative words (words that designate already existing objects) operate at a superficial level of discourse, organizing words (words or, more generally, symbols that project a region of discourse) function at the most fundamental level. Miller noted: "So, to be simple I emphasize yardsticks and clocks. They are verbal, not substantive [organizing, not denotative]. You handle a yardstick, you tell a tale, you tell time. But you do not 'react' to a yardstick unless someone uses it as a weapon, and then it has lost its *status* and functioning authority, as a commanding and momentous present" (MS 18; emphasis added). While organizing symbols or functioning objects are things we use, it is impermissible, even impious, to use them in any way whatsoever." It is impious in a deep sense to treat any item of the midworld as another inconsequential body--the body, or a laboratory instrument, the idol of a heathen" (MS 18). It is not insignificant that, for Miller, the status of the items in the midworld is such that they demand piety, nor is it significant that Dewey, in a very different context, articulated an uncompromisingly humanistic vision which also refused to abandon the historically religious attitude of piety.(9) There are forms of humanism which do not merely leave room but actually make room for the attitudes of piety and reverence. "Persons," according to Miller, "stir no emotion except as they are revelations, and this is the immediacy of the actual, of functioning, and of its manifestations" (MS 89). But persons *as revelations* stir the deepest emotions as do the means by which they reveal themselves.

Part of the price to be paid for the enfranchising of discourse is that we lose the comforts of atemporalism and infallibilism. We cannot attain a perspective above the sweep of history; nor can we secure a claim to knowledge immune to the liability of error. "Modern philosophy, influenced by physics rather than by history, has put on a determined search for the cognitively infallible" (MS 153). If we understand by *modern* philosophy that intellectual project of European origin which was most deeply influenced by natural science and committed to attaining a timeless perspective and infallible knowledge, then Miller was a post-modern thinker. Not natural science, but hazardous acts were what he sought to discover. However, in aligning philosophy more closely with history than with science, Miller was not disparaging the importance of science; moreover, in rejecting the possibility of infallible cognition, he was not advocating some form of scepticism. He was insisting upon never losing sight of the fact that human beings are unique agents in a hazardous world.

"Ancient philosophy gave no cosmic status to the [unique] individual. Ontology led *away* from the individual" (MS 36). It is no exaggeration to say Miller attempted to articulate an ontology which led *toward* the individual. "The individual is, in principle, not a case, not an instance, not repetitive. He is himself and not something else" (PH 72). The only ontology that can do justice to the individual in this sense is one which takes time seriously and views finitude categorically (PH 72). That is, the only way of giving cosmic status to the unique individual is by granting categorical status to the various modes of finite actuality, including human history. In *The Philosophy of History* Miller explores both the traditional mistrust of time and the humanistic alliance with time.

"A decent discourse empowers and invites criticism" (PH 125). And Miller's writings present us with precisely such discourse. Consequently, it would be appropriate to suggest at least one or two points of criticism. From the side of naturalism, one might object to Miller's characterization of action as unenviored. While the point behind this characterization may be conceded (namely, that human action is not reducible to a conditioned reaction), the characterization too easily invites misunderstanding. In deed, despite the fact that Miller's conception of the midworld represents a powerful critique of Cartesian dualism, his depiction of action as unenviored comes dangerously close to reducing the self to the *cogito*, that is, a disembodied and solitary ego. However, the finite human agent is an incarnate, social being. Miller might have exploited his own insights into the privileged position of the human body as the functioning object *par excellence* and, thus, have insisted that since the living body is always engaged in some action or other, all human action is always already situated in some environment or other. In short, we ought not to ignore the *situated* character of human agency.(10)Indeed, if we grant categorical status to finitude, then we should stress the situated character of our actions. From the perspective of theism, one might object that Miller's concept of action appears to rule out *a priori* the existence of the divine in any form.(11) However, it is conceivable that the absolute responsibility of human agents for their deeds and utterances may be compatible with the image of the divine, even if such responsibility is not compatible with the image of God-as-tyrant so dominant in certain historical religions.(12)

Let me conclude by considering a personal revelation which is found in *The Philosophy of History*. Here Miller expressed a wish not to know more, or less, or as much as some other person, but rather to join a community of learning (PH 123). However, given Miller's philosophy of the act, *joining* such a community was, first and foremost, a present active participle; indeed, "community" itself should be translated into such a participle—communicating. Thus, after revealing his desire to join a community of learning, Miller observed: "How to practice such community is the question" (PH 128). In reading the writings of John William Miller, one gets a lively sense of how to join the inquiring community. The first and most momentous step is exerting local control over our own personal utterances. "We can help what we say. We can correct whatever we may say, and judge whatever we may do. When we disavow that responsibility, we take refuge in one of the characteristic modes of avoidance, namely, dogmatism, skepticism, or mysticism. All these have a common denominator in their suspicion of finite experience" (PH 171). In a manner reminiscent of James and Dewey, Miller sought to show the power of finite human experience to generate the capacity for genuine autonomous control. Indeed, respect for experience is, at bottom, respect for persons (PH 173). Also like James and Dewey, he realized that we have a hand in the making of nature and a voice in the telling of truth.⁽¹³⁾ However, the fact we have a hand in the making of nature does not reduce nature to a figment of our imagination. Nature is that impersonal order in which personal mistakes become identifiable and, hence, controllable by the very acts and media which make this order possible. Miller was aware of the difficulty many people would have in accepting his claim that the world of nature depends on the midworld of symbols. He conceded that nature "seems now well established, so that it seems folly to propose a midworld as its condition" (PC 118). Nonetheless, he claimed that this commonplace conviction is a systematic illusion; "and it is surprising to see how rapidly it collapses once we suppose that, as a matter of course, our most solid realities would, of necessity, be precisely those whose infinity echoed the order inherent in the finite symbol. This midworld, I believe, robs nobody of nature. On the contrary, it is the means of saving nature from an arbitrary dominance, and of then preventing its inevitable dissolution in the acids of skepticism" (PC 118).

Moreover, the fact that we have a voice in the telling of truth does not reduce truth to the wish of the narrator. Just as the midworld does not rob us of nature but rather makes nature possible, so too this region of symbols does not destroy truth but establishes the possibility of making and correcting mistakes—in short, the possibility of discovering the truth in its distinctively human form. The ideal of truth has its warrant in the local control of and personal commitment to those incorporate actualities which comprise the midworld. According to Miller, "the pursuit of truth is itself a gesture of the will, and usually a very romantic affirmation . . . Truth is an enterprise, perpetually unfinished, tentative, hypothetical; and it seems blind to the point of perversity that those who try to tell the truth so often overlook the fact that they are *telling* it, and that they can denote no single proposition called true apart from the absolute affirmation of a will that proposes to discipline its ardor to this endless ideal" (PC 31). "Our truths and powers are based on the prestige of truth-telling, and on the persons who tell it. The truth is something told and carries the liability of articulate justification. Our truth is a social truth. At the same time, it is not a monotonous and uniform doctrine, but rather a fabric woven of

innumerable personal inquiries and acts, all responsible to the conditions of communication. It is these procedures, forever tentative and risky, sustained only by the energies of good will, that underlie the stubborn humanism of our time" (PH 172-73).

To read Miller is to encounter one of the most responsible spokesmen for such an uncompromising or, to use Miller's own objective here, "stubborn" humanism' and such an encounter is a confrontation with the scholar as a man of the world (PC 174-92) as well as a lesson in how to join the community of learning.

Endnotes

1. Joseph P. Fell, "Review of Miller's Works," *The American Scholar* 53 (1983-84): 123.
2. George P. Brockway, "John William Miller," *The American Scholar* 49 (1980): 240.
3. *Ibid.*, 236.
4. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 44.
5. Fell, Review, 124; 128.
6. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 338-39.
7. José Ortega y Gasset, *Man and People* (New York: Norton, 1963), p. 25.
8. Cf. Fell, Review, 130.
9. John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971), 25.
10. Cf. Justus Buchler, *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 175.
11. Cf. Robert S. Corrington, "John William Miller and the Ontology of the Midworld," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 22(2) (1986): 181 (note 36).
12. Cf. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 342; also Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 169.
13. It should be pointed out that Miller himself tried to distance his own position from that of James and Dewey (e.g., DP 156). Nonetheless, I think there is a deep affinity between Miller, on the one hand, and James and Dewey, on the other, regarding several fundamental points.