

Introduction to John William Miller's "For Idealism"

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John William Miller did not publish much during his lifetime, yet he wrote a number of important papers and letters which contained the ingredients for a coherent and powerful philosophy. Just prior to his death in 1978, and shortly thereafter, five books were published containing the essence of his idealist perspective.⁽¹⁾ Throughout, his concern was with defending his unique form of idealism in the face of a number of competing philosophies. While this paper focuses on realism and skepticism, Miller was also concerned with refuting positivism, behaviorism, and what he took to be a misguided extension of Dewey's pragmatic naturalism. Referring to his own teacher, Josiah Royce, Miller articulated an idealism which rejected an Absolute in favor of a self-corrective and critical analysis of signs and symbols as they serve to exhibit the contour of what he later came to call the midworld.

Miller's idealism without an Absolute affirms the supremacy of contingency, limitation, and criticism. Philosophy is the systematic analysis of concrete immediacies that are embodied in symbols. Unlike the dogmatist, the idealist recognizes that all content is bounded by contingency and limitation. But the idealist goes beyond the skeptic by insisting that affirmations are possible even in a contingent universe. The skeptic flees living immediacies in a puritanical drive to become free from the alleged constraints of alien content. Idealism stands between the extremes of dogmatism and skepticism by emphasizing the critical role of categories in giving shape to the basic traits of the midworld.

Miller's idealism no more denies the independent status of nature than it overstates the role of mind in determining the contour of things. Rather, it acknowledges the sheer locatedness of the human mind in a world which cannot be reduced to the totality of our finite categorical projections. The world becomes knowable through the critical control of categories rather than through self-evident intuitions. For the idealist, form is prior to content. But it does not follow from this that the world is an unknowable thing-in-itself which merely receives the impress of whatever categories are currently employed. What does follow is that the world becomes known through critical formal operations which give shape to living immediacies.

In his later writings, Miller developed the concepts of "local control" and the "functioning object" in order to show how the categories of an idealistic metaphysics receive their validation. Particular objects in our immediate environment function to impose form and order on other objects through a control exercised by the human self. His favorite

example is that of the yardstick which imposes local spatial form on other immediate objects. From such immediacies, other forms of control, less local and delimited, emerge to give shape to other orders of analysis and criticism. For Miller, the human process moves outward from the local to the global through a series of steps all tied to functioning objects and events.

In Miller's words, "idealism prescribes the very arduous analysis of the finite point of view." This analysis moves between a Roycean Absolute atemporal Self and an extreme skepticism which would deny an valid contour for the world in favor of a celebration of the projective prowess of the alienated individual. Miller's finite self uses critical categories in order to achieve tactical stabilities amid the expanding world of symbols and functioning objects. This idealism of the finite self attests to the power of mind to comprehend the world. At the same time, it shows us a way beyond that barren skepticism which marks so much contemporary thought.(2)

This hitherto unpublished article was found among Miller's papers after his death. It was written around 1938, and is a typical expression of Miller's thought at this period.

Endnotes

1. *The Paradox of Cause and Other Essays* (1978), *The Definition of the Thing with Some Notes on Language* (1980), *The Philosophy of History with Reflections and Aphorisms* (1981), *The Midworld of Symbols and Functioning Objects* (1982), and *In Defense of the Psychological* (1983). All of these books are published by W. W. Norton & Co. In addition, he published an important Afterword to Ortega y Gasset's *History as a System* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961).

2. Readers interested in secondary literature on Miller can consult: George P. Brockway, "John William Miller," *The American Scholar* 49 (1980): 236-40; Joseph P. Fell, "An American Original," *The American Scholar* 53 (1983-84): 123-30; Robert S. Corrington, "John William Miller and the Ontology of the Midworld," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 22 (1986): 165-88; and the book review essay by Vincent Colapietro in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 1(3) (1987): 239-256.