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John William Miller in 1952

Finite Idealism: The Midworld and Its History

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JOHN William Miller's conception of the midworld provides a metaphorical and categorial framework for redefining and strengthening idealism. Accepting the voluntarism of his teacher Josiah Royce, Miller struggled to find a proper locus for the realm of signs and symbols as they themselves illuminate the elusive features of nature and history. Unlike Royce, however, he rejected the sovereignty of pure consciousness and stressed the instrumental aspects of the emergence of the midworld. In what follows I explore several aspects of Miller's finite and historical idealism and raise some questions concerning the status it accords to nature.

In defining finite idealism it is important to distinguish between several possible understandings of the role of categories in generating and sustaining a portrayal of reality. On one understanding, categories can function as transcendentals that govern and locate all subaltern configurations in a necessary and universal conceptual array. Another conception of categories would stress their heuristic and inductive potency to render the precarious more stable for human apprehension and manipulation. On yet another interpretation, categories function as mere projective fictions that color and mask the deeper and more elusive traits that lie forever beyond human awareness. This third perspective is most commonly found in frameworks that embrace the so-called crisis of postmodernism. Miller's understanding of the role of categories does not fit into any of these more common models. Instead, he argues that the basic categories of philosophy are structures of criticism and derive their validation from practical and local control. In his 1938 essay, "For Idealism," he makes this clear:

Categories are not transcendental, nor are they psychological or accidental. They are the structure of criticism, the dynamic of expanding meanings according to law. Thus, idealism asserts no Absolute, but

rather denies the possibility of any assertion immune from the order of contingency. It is that order which is absolute.¹

The contingent events and structures of the world assume stability through the expansion and application of critical categories to more and more orders, as, for example, in the growing scope of the category of causality. Miller's idealism does not, however, mimic the instrumentalism of Dewey, which would have a seemingly similar view on the evolution of stability and meaning in instrumental control. Miller takes the claims and forces of history far more seriously than Dewey and sees the rise and spread of local control as part of the inner dynamism of history.

Dewey would deny that the environment is the human self writ large and insist instead that the momentary stabilities of the organism are the result of social and natural habit grooved into the fabric of nature. For Miller, the inner meaning of the environment can only be found through an analysis of the human will. In a letter written in 1949 he asserts:

The environment is the self in its objective mode. The self does not assert itself, know itself, or maintain itself apart from it. Self-assertion in all its forms is also environment-assertion. Thus the environment is will.

It is "pure" will. It is the will in its generic form, not particular, but universal and essential.²

Where Dewey would limit the human will to problem solving and an occasional quest for qualitative integrity, Miller places the will right in the heart of the environment and insists that the self creates a realm of meaning that transcends bare instrumentalities.

Absolute idealism ignores the precarious and problematic qualities of the made environment and refuses to take novelty and contingency seriously. The finite human will, imposing form onto the contents of the environment, creates novel and spontaneous configurations. Such genuine novelties lie outside of the purview of absolute idealism. Miller contrasts his own perspective to that of Bradley and Royce, with particular reference to the status of the accidental:

The pressure of this problem is evident in the type of solution which leading idealists like Royce and Bradley have proposed. At the last they present an absolute who is a "problem solver" with all the answers known, a mind no longer open to surprises, no longer confronted by its "other," no longer beset by that restless incompleteness without which it fades into an inarticulate totality, without focus, and so without limitation. To the absolute mind all is immediately given, and even

time is metamorphosed into a "totum simul" where it ceases to have any of those features of form without which idealism is bankrupt.³

Form only emerges from the human will and its struggles to find an ordered but finite totality within the environment. The atemporal absolute has no limitation and hence no form. It cannot function in any meaningful way within or through the midworld of signs and symbols. Problem solving is the provenance of finite human minds rather than locatable within some alleged absolute beyond the ravages of time and the accidental.

Finite idealism rejects this ahistorical and detached Absolute of earlier idealisms and insists that all critical control serves the fitful but fairly determinate forces of history. Realism errs in underplaying the role of the human will in building the basic contour of the midworld. Skepticism, on the other hand, errs in denying the environment-constituting powers of the self and in encapsulating consciousness in its own "deluded" projections. Finite idealism stresses the power of form over that of content but not in such a way as to make all forms independent of their natural corollaries. The formal and the critical use of categories gives rise to an ordered finitude that has its own internal logic and that moves outward toward greater degrees of encompassment.

The concept of the midworld is logically connected to that of finite idealism. While absolute idealism would drive beyond the external world of mere description toward the atemporal realm of immediate appreciation, finite idealism insists that actuality lies somewhere between the finite subject and the environment that surrounds that subject. Pure appreciation is replaced by the critical and local use of instrumental categories. The power of the midworld is to some extent derived from its rootedness in history. This history lives on in the immediate present and fills that present with authority and a sense of necessity. In his 1960 "Afterword" to Ortega's *History as a System*, Miller argues:

For now as in the past we call that our world which gives status and authority to the immediate. The record of these endeavors is history. There the modes of self-definition become explicit and serve as the vehicles for an understanding of what we have become.⁴

The midworld is the locus for the growth and movement of history. Insofar as the human process becomes open to the unfolding of history, it becomes aware of and permeable to the midworld that is the haven for history's self-presentation.

It is not sufficient to speak of the midworld as if it were merely a

horizon of meaning that rides on the back of nature. The midworld is constituted by signs and symbols that themselves derive their potency from functioning objects, some of which are concrete artifacts. History seems to concentrate its energy into the realm of immediate functioning objects. If we are to escape from the ahistorical we must return to the immediacy of the artifactual and reassert our local control over the present manifestations of the midworld. Miller, again in his "Afterword," makes this connection between history and artifacts clear:

To a larger extent than we are aware we live through the past tense. The modes of this continuum are obvious enough, but they lack accredited status. We need a new epistemology, one that does not shrink from giving ontological status to artifacts. The past rides on them, and they are symbols and voices.⁵

Absolute idealism, at least in its Hegelian form, would seek for the past in the various shapes of self-consciousness as they unfold before the phenomenological observer who lives outside of the movement of those shapes. Finite idealism moves more fitfully and slowly through the concrete artifacts that live as embodiments of the midworld. Consequently it cannot gain a perspective outside of the midworld even if it can gain some sense of how the midworld has been shaped and expanded. Miller's position lies between Hegelian panlogism, which would gather up all shapes of self-consciousness into the dialectic of the categories, and historical skepticism which would see history as a realm without internal continuity. The midworld is not ahistorical but it does have its own dialectic, even if that dialectic will never produce a final consummation.⁶

Absolute idealism has been compelling in the history of philosophy because of a deep human fear of limitation and the constraints of finitude. Miller argues that our own reluctance to accept finite idealism comes from this existential failure to live within the actualities of the midworld. In his "Afterword," he links philosophy to this human attitude:

The mistrust which philosophy has frequently encountered appears on the surface to be the consequence of extravagant conclusions: but its deeper source lies in the dislike, or even the dream, of maintaining the actuality of limitation. For that is self-consciousness and reflects its urgencies and responsibilities. A search for reality has also been a search for the self.⁷

Finite self-consciousness cannot escape from the ravages and responsibilities of history. The history of philosophy, while man-

ifesting positive and progressive revision of the midworld, also represents a variety of strategies for ignoring the primacy of the midworld. The more positive conception of philosophy invoked by Miller would make the full meaning of finitude transparent to the self and at the same time provide practical mechanisms for transforming those conditions that do not support the deeper needs of the human process.

Philosophy needs to recapture the realms of immediacy from the flight that drives either toward a hard-edged and merely reactive 'realism' or toward the alleged comforts of the ahistorical. Using Hegel's arch metaphor of the owl of Minerva, Miller seeks to return to those daylight artifacts that give rise to culture and human history. If most of the history of philosophy is analogous to the nighttime flight of the owl, the philosophy of the midworld is the return to daytime presence and totality. In his essay from the 1960s "The Owl," Miller argues:

The owl is a spectator, not a participant. He has no present. He looks for, and claims to find, a control within the spectacle. But this reverts to what is not local but all-embracing. On the positive side, there are reasons for owliness: the failures to give the local an ontological status and to recognize in the functioning object the vehicle of all control and of all failure.⁸

The functioning object lives out of the heart of the midworld and derives its actuality from the powers of the human will as those powers work on the materially given. Miller's voluntarism again insists that no object is real that is not first the result of human manipulation and control. Unlike Fichte, who would envision an Absolute Ego as the source of the world-creating will, Miller insists that all acts of will come from the finite self in its drive to move outward from the local to the regional. Yet even in this drive for greater degrees of scope, the finite self does not attain an all-encompassing perspective. The functioning object serves as a constraint on the drive for encompassment.

Since we cannot appeal to a global history or to some elusive "history of Being" (*Seinsgeschichte*) it becomes necessary to find and articulate specific environment-building acts. For Miller the past is the order of growth and manifests distinctive human purposes. History exhibits diversity and variety as the products of local control. "History deals with acts. Hence with purpose."⁹ This purpose is not, of course, that of the absolute will that would move all finite actualities toward an ideal consummation or convergence. All finite human purposes are subject to endless revi-

sion and reconstruction as the realms of experienced immediate totality feel the pressure of the past.

History is the career of the will and can only be recaptured and appropriated through further acts of will. We clarify the various meanings of history through local control of those artifacts that seem to carry past acts of will. In a striking sense, the local artifact is the concretion of historical will and purpose. By placing his emphasis on the artifactual, Miller downplays the Roycean emphasis on an imperial self-consciousness that would swallow up all finite embodiments of itself.¹⁰ The oftentimes fitful career of the past cannot be reduced to one infinite purpose any more than it can reveal a single set of meanings. Local control helps to reshape and redefine the very meanings and values that the past will have. Like Gadamer, Miller insists that the past can only become efficacious through specific interpretive acts in the present. These acts serve the larger purposes of local control and the generation of an environment of instrumentalities and meanings.

Finite idealism is historical idealism in that it limits the reach of the will to specific actualities that appear in the present as that present reactualizes the purposes of the past. Unlike Deweyian naturalism, which would replace the concept of will with that of habit, finite idealism places a fairly high priority on the importance of the human process as it imposes itself on the environment. The midworld, as the 'field' where finite idealism operates, is that side of the environment that is part and parcel of the human self in its quest for intelligibility and control. The midworld is precognitive in that it launches, spurs, and controls all cognition. "Unenviored, it projects the environment."¹¹ Absolute idealism has the world in its entirety as its 'field' of operation. Finite idealism is correlated to the historical embodiments (incarnations) of the midworld. In a very real sense, finite idealism, with its legislation of form and partial totality, lives as the motor force for the growth of the midworld.

Human acts declare the environment. Miller's pervasive voluntarism seems to put undue emphasis on the manipulative side of the human process and thereby downplays or ignores the assimilative and reactive dimension of the self. Put in other terms, finite idealism sees the world as a made world and does not acknowledge all of the deeper senses in which the world gives itself to the finite self. In what remains I will explore this difficulty and indicate ways in which Miller's project needs internal modification.

Miller uses three technical terms that seem to operate separately: "nature," "environment," and "midworld." His overall per-

spective seems to privilege the concept of the midworld and understate the concept and reality of nature. The concept of the environment functions as a linking term between nature and the midworld, just as the concept of the midworld links the self and nature. In what follows I will concentrate on the concepts of nature and the midworld. There exists a tension between the voluntarism of local control and the sovereignty of nature. Is nature merely that upon which we exert control or does it have its own integral contours that impress themselves on the midworld? In some passages he seems to argue that nature does exert a kind of pressure on the processes of control. In an unpublished paper from 1949 he states:

Nature always carries in its pocket a veto for any human act. When one says, then, that a natural condition is a factor in historical events, one means that history is impossible apart from the silent support of nature.¹²

Nature can veto any act that violates its own integrity and manifest this veto through its silent support of an alternative act. Nature in itself does not make utterances but helps us to choose between and among our utterances. It is unclear just how this support is manifest in any given case, but the validation structures seem to operate at a level 'beneath' the sum of all human acts.

Yet Miller also argues as if nature is without specificity until it becomes molded into the midworld. Nature is impersonal or prepersonal and lives as the form of finitude. In his "Afterword" he implies a kind of dialectical relation between the infinity of nature and the finitude of the self:

Nature is not another object upon which we expend a bit of attention to the imprudent neglect of household chores or to the damage of higher purposes. Nature is the articulate objectification of finitude in its impersonal mode. The infinite is the form of finitude; and, conversely, the finite is the actuality of the infinite. Form is not fact, but function.¹³

In what respects can nature, qua the infinite, serve as the form of the finite given that Miller insists that true form is a product of finite acts of will? Is nature a kind of potential form that can only be actualized in the finite? If so, what constrains the way in which this unique pre-form becomes manifest? This passage seems to be in tension with his other statements concerning the mechanisms by and through which form becomes actualized in the midworld. Nature might be little more than bare possibility or, on a more

dynamic conception, the realm of potencies that must become actualized through the midworld. Does nature need the midworld for its fullest expression? If so, this seems to make the midworld the inner telos of nature.

We can find some answers to these questions when we examine two other passages in Miller's writings that denude nature of anything formal or distinct. In this following passage, history is dramatically privileged over nature:

History thus defines nature. Nature is both the cause and the limit of every unconditional resolve. Without history, nature remains a phantom, an appearance only, arbitrary and incoherent, a set of thoughts, without capacity to resist the will because not defined through the will.¹⁴

Here Miller sees nature as the spur toward those acts that move from the indeterminate to the determinate. His concept of definition is tied to his concept of the act. To define something or some complex is to carve it out from the vast matrix of nature and to locate it within the history of the midworld. If history defines nature, then history is the genus of which nature is the species. This startling inversion of the two realities places a great deal of pressure on the midworld as the actualization of nature's potencies.

Insofar as nature has an order, or, more specifically, exhibits innumerable integrities and orders, and it is not clear from the above how it can, such orders are manifest through the use of artifacts. In this second passage, Miller again privileges the artifactual and historical over the natural:

Nature gives us infinite scope, yet even so, we must have telescopes properly housed, and apparatus to our hands that these hands have made. We must be equipped with artifacts if we are to discover the facts. Nature itself is not what we see and hear unaided. Its order, without which we do not identify it, is the order of these symbolic instruments, these functioning objects, which are the actual representatives of its structure.¹⁵

Nature seems to give us the 'space' within which to exert our artifactual control and historical reappropriation but is without any integrities of its own. Of course, facts emerge from local control, but the ontological realm of these facts remains ambiguous. Facts are certainly not antecedent to local control, this much is granted by Dewey, but they do not seem to have any standing outside of the signs and symbols of the midworld. Again we are

compelled to ask about the specific ways in which nature exerts its "silent support."

If all form is finite then the concept of infinite form is a contradiction in terms. Nature cannot be a form of forms or a shape of shapes that somehow gives itself over to the midworld as an articulated sum of complexes and orders. The most that can be said, given Miller's overall conceptual structure, is that nature is a 'realm' of prearticulated possibilities or potencies. While there are many midworlds and many environments, there can be only one nature, even if it is difficult to render it into the categories of local control. Finite idealism, in spite of its obvious advantages over absolute idealism, remains one step away from the orders of nature that it struggles to serve. Of course, there is nothing wrong in talking of nature interpreted or of the world as an interpreted-world-for us. The question becomes that of establishing more clearly the senses in which our interpretive choices are intimately governed and compelled by the innumerable complexes of nature. The concept of the midworld is crucial to the inner logic of historical idealism, but it has become severed from the reality of nature.

I am not suggesting that we reject the basic insights and strategies of finite and historical idealism. What is required, however, is a larger metaphysical vista that will accommodate these insights without sacrificing the more basic and fundamental reality of nature. Finite idealism must be located within an ordinal naturalism that will show the precise ways in which the midworld is generated and sustained with the help of the innumerable orders of the world. This entails a de-emphasis on the powers of the human will and on the manipulative dimension of the human process. The self assimilates and endures the sheer otherness of nature and is grooved and molded by the traits that emerge from a realm beyond the sum of its willful acts.

Miller rightly wishes to rescue the accidental, the novel, and the spontaneous from the older idealisms of Bradley and Royce. His rejection of the absolute in favor of local control and functioning objects is certainly to be commended. Yet his consequent conceptual elaboration drastically narrows the scope of philosophy to the realm of culture and its history (Hegel's realm of "objective spirit"). More basic than will is that natural grace that comes to us from a spirit-filled nature. This grace cannot be experienced if nature is reduced to a kind of potential and preformal manifold. A kind of militant Kantianism blunts Miller's drive toward conceptual comprehensiveness. History is only one dimension of

nature and is subaltern to other orders. Nature is that than which nothing greater can be envisioned. Consequently, the midworld is but one order within the innumerable orders of the world. While this order is unique and has its own novel array of traits, it is not sovereign. There are nonhistorical orders and orders forever beyond the reach of local control. Yet these orders are equally real and equally efficacious in defining the meaning and direction of the human process. The concept of the midworld, for all its metaphoric and conceptual fecundity, becomes omnivorous and attempts to totalize something that is at best regional and related to the inner dynamics of the human process.

Nature's support is not always "silent." The midworld doesn't exist in order to validate and define nature. The sheer survivability of any given midworld is determined by its inner acknowledgment of the articulate and demarcated orders of nature. The midworld lives in and through the grace of nature and serves that nature whenever it becomes permeable to the spirit that lives at the heart of nature. The midworld is certainly the 'place' where nature assumes human shape and utterance. But the power and richness of that utterance is only secured when the midworld opens itself to the sustaining orders within which it lives. Miller's eulogistic and heroic conception of the will must be chastened by the austere and life-giving potencies of nature. These potencies are not indefinite or bereft of form. They give the midworld its 'matter' and compel it to serve an articulated infinite that empowers all finite acts of will. Finite idealism is the perspective that analyzes and exhibits the outward face of nature. But it is not broad enough to encompass and exhibit the innumerable complexes of the world.

The midworld is only one gift of the spirit. If it becomes the place where nature itself appears, then it will serve the deeper needs of the human process. History is always nature's history. While local control can help to shape and embody this history, it remains embedded in the larger instrumentalities of nature. The birth, growth, and death of the midworld is one of nature's gifts. But this precarious gift points toward the heart of the nature that is the source of all grace. The midworld can best be seen as only one of nature's ejects and functions to enhance the plenitude of meaning in the universe. To confuse this product of nature with nature's sheer providingness is to efface one of the most fundamental distinctions of thought. On a deeper level, it represents a basic impiety against that primal ordinality which is the enabling condition for all orders.

Notes

1. J. W. Miller, "For Idealism," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, N.S., 1, no. 4 (1987): 267.
2. J. W. Miller to Edward Hoyt, 21 March 1949, p. 5; in Box 20, Folder 2, Miller Archives.
3. J. W. Miller, *The Paradox of Cause and Other Essays* (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 42–43.
4. J. W. Miller, "Afterword: The Ahistoric and the Historic," in José Ortega y Gasset, *History as a System and other Essays toward a Philosophy of History* (New York: Norton, 1961), p. 241.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 261–62.
6. I owe this insight to my colleague Henry Johnstone, Jr., who refers to Miller's position as expressed in his Philosophy 1–2 course. See his essay in this volume.
7. Miller, "Afterword," p. 239.
8. J. W. Miller, "The Owl," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 24, no. 3 (1988): 403.
9. J. W. Miller, *The Philosophy of History with Reflections and Aphorisms* (New York: Norton, 1981), p. 32.
10. The relation between Miller's perspective and that of Royce is fairly complex. In a number of passages, Miller seems to be referring to Royce's pre-1912 metaphysics that articulated a more traditional view of the absolute as atemporal and ahistorical. Yet in other passages, Miller pays tribute to the semiotic and triadic understanding of the ideal interpreter in Royce's 1913 *The Problem of Christianity*. In this essay, I am concentrating on Miller's negative assessment of the so-called early and middle Royce (i.e., the Royce of 1885–1911). See Vincent Colapietro's essay in this volume.
11. J. W. Miller, *The Midworld of Symbols and Functioning Objects* (New York: Norton, 1982), p. 13.
12. J. W. Miller, unpublished paper, "The 'Cause' of an Historical Event," par. 21b; in Box 3, Folder 16, Miller Archives.
13. Miller, "Afterword," p. 248.
14. Miller, *The Philosophy of History*, p. 43.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 148.