Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/11/2026 04:34:43

KULTURA I WARTOŚCI
ISSN 2299-7806
NR 4(12)/ 2014
ARTYKUŁY, s. 87–104

(cc) BY-NC-ND

TO PHILOSOPHIZE IS TO REVISE, OR, HOW GERMAN IDEALISM BECAME HISTORICAL IN THE WORK OF ONE SECLUDED AMERICAN THINKER

Katie Terezakis

In the works of relatively unknown twentieth century American thinker, John William Miller, Kantian idealism is both utilized and transformed into a historical, linguistically focused philosophy of symbolic action. I argue that Miller's system should be understood as native to the detranscendentalizing project of philosophical modernity as well as to concerns about German idealism that typify early American philosophy. I link Miller's methodology to a metacritical assessment of Kant's work that is nearly as old as the first *Critique*; I also link Miller's approach to concerns about human action and agency that characterize the pragmatist tradition. I make the case that Miller revises the Kantian project, and the notion of regulative ideality in particular, with his presentation of a "midworld of functioning objects". The Millerian midworld, I maintain, demonstrates the historically and linguistically contextual establishment of cognitive categories, including the Kantian forms of intuition. In so doing, Miller demonstrates what a genuinely critical philosophy must look like and he sidesteps difficulties regarding fallibilism and finitude, which continue to reappear in contemporary theorizing. Miller sees philosophy as an utterly historical, ongoing work of revision; he also shows how other forms of human endeavoring do well to return to philosophy to address the problems that have come to define them. Miller's system aptly demonstrates both the historicity of critical philosophy and the practical application of a working philosophical methodology to contemporary dilemmas.

Keywords: John William Miller, Immanuel Kant, Jürgen Habermas, Johann Georg Hamann, Idealism, Actualism, Pragmatism, Metacriticism, Midworld of Functioning Objects

I. Introduction

The first English-language journal devoted solely to philosophy was the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*; it was launched in 1867 by the "St Louis Hegelian" and future United States Commissioner of Education, William T. Harris, with the avowed purpose of extending

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/11/2026 04:34:43

the reach of German idealism in the United States[1]. The members of the triumvirate credited with establishing American pragmatism, Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, were soon publishing there, which was fitting given that Dewey associated his earliest philosophical influence with neo-Kantianism, while Peirce cut his philosophical teeth on Kant's first *Critique*[2]. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, German idealism was alive and kicking in the US, along with various stripes of neo-Hegelianism, neo-Kantianism, and British empiricism. This brew and its effect on the development of American pragmatism and Anglo-American analytic philosophies is the subject of recent, occasionallyclashing yet consistently acute study[3]. Reflecting upon the *Zeitgeist* of the period – which after all remains our conceptual moment – both Jürgen Habermas and Richard J. Bernstein have characterized it as one of *detranscendentalization*[4]. For Habermas and Bernstein (among others) the movement of detranscendentalization insists upon the iterative, social embeddedness of subjects in a life world, while authenticating the conditions of meaning and human action in a way that remains fallibilist and revisable. This is a commitment to account for the structures which, though not *transcendental* in the full Kantian sense, may be understood as universal, binding, and constitutive. In other words, a coming to terms with idealism, including its host of internal criticisms and attacks from thinkers hostile to the very project, characterizes much of American philosophy from the outset. In particular, early American philosophy is characterized by the recognition that we lack an adequate

[1] See R. J. Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2010, p. 6 (hereafter, "PT"), and A. E. Murphy *Reason, Reality and Speculative Philosophy*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1996, p. xlvii. W. T. Harris's *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* was the not the same entity as the current *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. Harris's journal lasted until 1893; the currently publishing JSP was launched in 1987 by Pennsylvania State University Press.

[2] See Bernstein (PT, 2010) and Ch. Misak, *The American Pragmatists*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013. Peirce writes of spending several of his college years immersed in the first *Critique* and says that although eventually he became dissatisfied with Kantian idealism, when he "was a babe in philosophy my bottle was filled from the udders of Kant". *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* Edited by C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss, Vol. 2, Belknap Press, Cambridge 1902, p. 113.

[3] I am referring for example to Misak (2013) and Bernstein (2010) and to L. Menad's popular work *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America,* Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York 2002.

[4] PT, p. 170 ff. Bernstein analyzes a number of Habermas's works in the chapter devoted to "Jürgen Habermas's Kantian Pragmatism". Here, the reference is to Habermas's *Truth and Justification*, translated and edited by B. Fultner, The MIT Press, Cambridge 2003, pp. 88–90.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/11/2026 04:34:43

explanation of the ways that cognitive structures appear to impose themselves on experience categorically, even while their *givenness* resists explanation, and even while human bodies, language, history, and culture warrant inclusion in our account of their conceptual conditions. The question of detranscendentalization – or the degree to which detranscendentalization is necessary and achievable – is the radix from which much of subsequent philosophy branches off.

I begin with this sweeping portrayal of a *Zeitgeist* in order to call to mind the mode of philosophical receptivity that bookends American philosophy from the founding of some of its earliest journals and university departments to the present. To rephrase Kant speaking of certain questions faced by human reason, Kantian idealism itself becomes a matter that later modern thinkers can neither fully resolve nor ignore. Into this trajectory, I'd like to introduce the thought of a little-known American philosopher who wrote from the more concealed nooks of academia. John William Miller (1895–1978) spent his career tucked into the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts, teaching at Williams College, writing on most every major thinker, school, and epoch in philosophy, and quietly developing his own philosophical system. Miller sometimes called his approach a *historical idealism*; his recent commentators have termed it *actualism*[5,6]. Though Miller's work is still relatively unfamiliar to professional philosophers, it is remarkable for its synthesis of the Kantian critical project and key initiatives in early pragmatism. Indeed, Millerian actualism shows how a philosophical approach can meet the de-

[5] M. J. McGandy introduces the term "actualism" in his Introduction to *The Active Life: Miller's Metaphysics of Democracy*, State University of New York Press, Albany 2005, p. 1, and continues to use it throughout the book. J. P. Fell originally calls Miller's position a "philosophy of the act", but he adopts "actualism", following McGandy, for example in *Some Thoughts on the Modern Mind*, "Journal of Speculative Philosophy" 2012, Vol. 26, no. 4, (hereafter, "MM").

[6] Miller refers to his overall position as *historical idealism* but continues to mention his inability to settle on a sufficiently descriptive name. He also tries out *naturalist idealism* and *concretism* – e.g., in *The Definition of the Thing with Some Thoughts on Language*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 1980, p. 149 – and he sometimes just calls his philosophy *earthy*. In a short piece for the "Williams Alumni Review", J. P. Fell stresses the fact that Miller rejects the premise of any extant distinction between idealism and realism: *The Philosopher of Elm Street*, "Williams Alumni Review" January 2008, p. 9–12. Fell extends that explanation in *Miller: The Man and His Philosophy*, [in:] *The Philosophy of John William Miller*, Bucknell University Press, Lewisburg 1990, pp. 21–31, where he also coins the term "philosophy of the act". V. M. Colapietro argues that Miller's position can be rightly called a "historicist humanism" in *Fateful Shapes of Human Freedom: John William Miller and the Crises of Modernity*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville 2003, p. 168.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/11/2026 04:34:43

mands of immanence that Habermas associates with detranscendentalization, while accounting for the symbolic conditions that attend human thinking and action necessarily. Although one could piece together a number of basically Millerian designs from a diverse group of contemporary and later thinkers, I think that Miller's formulation attains a level of integration and critical savvy – especially regarding the temptations away from fallibilism, historicity, and human finitude – that is extraordinary. So I would like to further set Miller's work into a brief historical context and to describe the major elements of his system in order to make a few claims about it achievement, its consequence, and its potential for elaboration.

II. John William Miller's Milieu and Midworld

Miller's writings stretch to thousands of pages, comprising finished essays, weighty correspondence with colleagues and former students, as well as significant but informal notes. He published only a fraction of his work during his lifetime. In spite of encouragements to publish from early in his career, Miller seems to have eschewed academic recognition and he generally declined invitations to broadcast his own position to any but his personal interlocutors[7]. Even as he aged into a valued correspondent with powerful contacts in academia and publishing, he refused their solicitations. At the end of his life and after years of petition from friends, colleagues, and former students, Miller allowed one book, *The Paradox of Cause*, to be published by W.W, Norton & Company, then the under the leadership of Miller's former student, George P. Brockaway. In 1980, Norton brought out a posthumous volume including Miller's Harvard dissertation and related tracts; it then published three further volumes over the next three years. A wide-ranging collection of Miller's essays published two decades later; secondary scholarship on Miller has advanced slowly but steadily as these volumes appeared[8]. Even without visiting Miller's impressive archives at Williams College, then,

[7] In a remarkably self-effacing comment to former student and future professional colleague Cushing Strout, who wrote asking Miller if he would pursue publishing more during his retirement, Miller assesses his own originality: "One should start earlier in life, and with a more fluent command of language than I possess. Probably, too, with a different temperament. Besides, I do not find that I have any ideas not already published […] When the Truth Is in the Telling" in J. P. Fell (1990), p. 156.

[8] Detailed bibliographical information on Miller's published and unpublished works as well as on secondary sources can be found on the website connected to Miller's archives at Williams College, http://sites.williams.edu/miller/writings-and-publications/publications/.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/11/2026 04:34:43

it is now possible to find a representative and rich portion of his work in print.

Miller sometimes ridicules the word *transcendental*, but he embraces Kant's critical formalism. Miller writes often of his goal of historicizing Kant; he describes a philosophy able to do for history what Kant does for reason: "to disclose the organization in terms of which all reports of action get told"[9]. Hegel, Miller judges, though he comes close to the same idea, oversells the capacity of Spirit to disclose those terms, for "*Geist* is not a local control"[10]. Miller realizes that the local control he seeks to explain in terms of its ideal conditions is instantiated in activities in which an agent imposes her control while utilizing a certain kind of object. Local control, as executed in actions such as telling time and measuring, is undertaken purposively but usually not by paying any special attention to its instruments – instruments which turn out to be vital for Miller's system. Miller calls this class of instruments *functioning objects* and he goes about showing how we establish the forms necessary to comprehend (other) objects only via the employment of functioning objects. One of Miller's favorite examples, the yardstick, might be made of pine (qua object), but insofar as it is used as a yardstick, it is used to measure other objects (qua condition)[11]. Similarly the face of the barometer vis-à-vis our grasp of atmospheric pressure or the hands of a clock as compared with the comprehension of time. "I say, too", Miller writes, "that space (or Space with a capital S) is the extension of functioning, the implication of the actual yardstick. *Functioning object* is an awkward term perhaps but the best I can do in familiar English"[12].

---

[9] J. W. Miller, *The Philosophy of History with Reflections and Aphorisms*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 1983, pp. 140–141; 161; 181 (hereafter, "PH").

[10] "R. W. Emerson far surpasses Hegel in his grasp of the ontological status of the actual. In the end Hegel did not make good on his claim that he found the energy internal to the spectacle […] *Geist* is not a local control". R. W. Emerson, *The Owl*, "Transactions of the Charles S. Pierce Society" 1988, Vol. 24, p. 402.

[11] J. W. Miller, *The Midworld of Symbols and Functioning Objects*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 1982, p. 33 ("M" in the text), systematically presents the notion of *functioning objects* and the *midworld* as the totality of functioning objects. Miller continues to develop the consequence of this fundamental notion throughout all but his earliest works. My description of functioning objects is brief, but it has been well explained in the literature on Miller, for example in Colapietro (2003), McGandy (2005), J. P. Fell, *The Philosophy of John William Miller* (1990). Regarding both the midworld of functioning objects and many more fundamental Millerian ideas, Colapietro, McGandy, and Fell provide absolutely vital essays and introductory sections to their collection of Miller's essays, *The Task of Criticism: Essays on Philosophy, History, and Community*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 2005 (hereafter "TC.").

[12] M, p. 33.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/11/2026 04:34:43

Miller devotes much of his writing to showing that no universal category becomes appercipient without tangible activities of functioning. Functioning objects are pragmatic objects, defined by their utilization, and they are symbolic objects, insofar as they specify the conceptual terms on which individual actions can be understood as meaningful. The symbolic administration of the yardstick exists insofar as it is used to measure (not, for example, when one uses it as kindling); only as such does the yardstick unite the universal form of spatiality with the particular instance of space. Miller calls the sphere of activity in which functioning occurs the *midworld*; the *midworld of functioning objects* becomes the axis of his system. He sometimes uses the term *utterance* synonymously with *midworld*, drawing attention to the way that functioning activity works as a kind of language, as well as to the way that words themselves are commonly used as functioning objects. The utilization of a functioning object always projects a meaningful order, rendering an agent both the creator of order and the recipient of the ordered.

The capacity of this formulation is easy to miss; Miller's descriptions of it can be both arduous and deceptively simple, and one might wish – though the wish would remain discontented – that Miller had devoted more text to an explicit comparison of his midworld and better-knowndesigns. Yet the midworld deals with an otherwise recalcitrant problem for all inquiries into human knowledge; a problem known by many names, but always aimed at the question of how anything external or objective shows up for comprehension as a particular kind of thing.

Miller is focused on the principles according to which we organize thought and experience; he calls these principles *constitutional* in the sense that a constitution demarcates the rules according to which anything (such as a law or institution) exists. Like Kant, Miller argues that human understanding actively shapes experience, imposing orders that make it relevant, or even noticeable as experience. But unlike Kant, Miller's constitutional concepts are themselves packed with the history of their usage. Millerian constitutional concepts explain the empirical not by a deduction of its ideal conditions, but by the actual instruments through which ideality manifests. Functioning objects, foremost the human body and the embodiments of language, and extending to all instruments of measurement, allow us to pursue our purposes by imposing meaningful orders, as the clock allows us to gage the time by calling up the concept of temporality. Successful recognition, discovery, and understanding – and even attempts at successful understanding – proceed as we define the world within which our discovery takes place, and those

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/11/2026 04:34:43

definitions are acts that utilize functioning objects. By looking closely at our dependence on functioning objects, and by demarcating the sphere of all such conditions of appearance as the midworld, Miller provides a way to confront the concrete, historical trajectories that animate depictions of universality and form.

Miller's insistence on the ubiquity of the midworld of functioning objects leads to a set of tightly related implications. First, the Millerian midworld shows that all conceptual organization, including our ability to reflect upon that organization, is based in localized action. Second, it suggests that the condition for the meaningfulness of a localized action is its abstract context. Third, it indicates that the Kantian categories aptly describe certain conditions of thought and experience, though it also maintains that the Kantian categories are incomplete and insufficiently self-critical. Again, Miller's criticism is that Kant leaves his categorical framework historically unmoored and so leaves his own metaphysics insufficiently *critical*. Joseph P. Fell makes plain Miller's finding: "[…] Miller takes the major problem bequeathed by Immanuel Kant to his successors [to be] 'universality without actuality,' the absence of the historical act as the union in practice of form or concept and material content. This union affords 'local control' through certain artifacts, as for example the clock or the yardstick […] inasmuch as [they] are *embodied universality* […]"[13].

So Miller remains an idealist – or of a Kantian temper, as Fell says elsewhere – in that he uncovers the presence of necessary and universal concepts or orders conditioning appearances[14]. Yet for Miller, any universal concept is historical as the sited, embodied activity of particular act of functioning[15].

---

[13] TC, p. 91.

[14] "His temper is Kantian, with some affinity to American pragmatism, in that he argues that knowledge does not depend on completeness and absolute certainty". J. P. Fell, *Miller: The Man and His Philosophy* (1990), p. 24.

[15] This approach led Miller as well to a close consideration of the Hegelian framework; indeed, throughout his authorship, Miller combats the Hegelian vision of the Absolute even while employing the finite negations of the Hegelian dialectic. Ultimately though, as much as Miller appreciates the attempted historicity of the Hegelian dialectic, he judges it insufficient. He writes, for example, that "Of all things, *Geist* has no phenomenology" and "The current need of philosophy is to do away with owlishness. The philosopher must be a universalist but also a localist and the localist is not to be patronized. The repute of philosophy has suffered because it has had no way of combining the universal with the local. Their common element is the medium, the functioning object, and that is always an utterance that is a self-extending immediacy" (TC, p. 226). For in-depth studies of Miller's engagement with Hegel, see especially V. M. Colapietro's (2003).

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/11/2026 04:34:43

III. Regulative Ideality and the Metacritical Turn

Miller's assimilation of functioning act and symbolic action dictates that any experience or understanding of utterance relies upon a system of signs. Utterance is manifestly articulate; it is, by definition, the creation of a symbol and its placement within a symbolic order. Miller does not recognize static ideas; he is especially shrewd about identifying how claims to sure facts (or stable categories) are established in and through human activity, and how they continue to bear the signatures of human acts. Action is always embodied and must always make use of functioning objects. 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 – again, it remains as dependent upon signs as any signs remain conditioned by the body. Embodied experience may be immediate, but our discernment of it is patently mediated. The awareness 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 even as language is *how* we control self and world, and remains the evidence of acts of control, we can neither abolish it nor every fully control it[16]. Miller writes: "The yardstick is an utterance. It is a control. It commands. It projects an infinity, one sort of infinity. But so does logic, for which one must have words. The same applies to numbers. Wherever purposes are arrested by the conditions of formulating and executing them, one has an artifact. […] Like a yardstick, the Constitution […] proposes a world of action. It aims to state the *form* of action. No more than a yardstick does it serve an ulterior purpose. It launches purposes; it controls them"[17].

This notion of active, embodied *utterance*, or the functioning of the midworld, marks Miller's most constructively critical appropriation of Kant. For Miller is restoring body and history to the Kantian *regulative idea* by showing how regulative ideality hinges upon what Miller calls *organization words*.

[16] See Miller's essay *The Midworld* in TC, p. 217 as well as Miller's *The Paradox of Cause,* W.W. Norton & Company, New York 1978, p. 113 and p. 122. For Fell on language as the evidence of human control, see MM pp. 611–612.

[17] TC, p. 109.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/11/2026 04:34:43

Within the Kantian system, regulative ideas turn out to be vital for each major class of judgment Kant distinguishes, and in each of the three *Critiques* he devotes to them. There are still arguments over how best to understand Kant's presentation of principles that seem to have both a transcendental and a regulative status; the character of regulative ideality has been a matter of some dispute since soon after the first *Critique's* first publication. Here I will not do justice to the complexities of these discussions, but will simply confess my own interpretative stance by maintaining that Kant utilizes regulative ideality both practically – in explaining what *should* happen, practical reason posits the reality of our freedom to do it; as well as theoretically – in explaining the possibility of progressive knowledge, theoretical reason applies categories whose function Kant explains in terms of the unity of reason. In both cases, an ideal anchors the investigation, and a key part of what makes Kant's critical project *critical* is the understanding that reason employs the ideal because we need it for orientation in thinking; not because freedom or unity have been discovered as independently real or as transcendent of the world.

The case of reflective judgment and the form of aesthetic and teleological reasoning is perhaps the most understandable in Kant and the least disputed in the literature. In the third *Critique*, Kant describes the regulative positing that explains how we can act *as if* we know what is true or purposive without a commitment to its ontological purposiveness. But already in the first *Critique*, Kant portrays the principle of reason's systematic unity as the analogue or analogy of a schema, which allows us to gain orientation through approximation: "The hypothetical use of reason, on the basis of ideas as problematic concepts, is not properly *constitutive* […] for how is one to know all possible consequences, which would prove the universality of the assumed principle if they followed from it? Rather, this use of reason is regulative, bringing unity into particular cognitions as far as possible and thereby approximating the rule of universality"[18]

For Kant, the systematic unity of reason is a projection; it is a species of transcendental illusion that cannot be determined aprioristically but that must posited. The transcendental philosopher bears in mind the character of this necessary and illusory projection. As Henry Allison emphasizes in a vivid exposition of the Appendix of Kant's first *Critique*, the "widespread misunderstanding" that Kant means to render regulative principles incompatible with transcendental principles stems in part from

[18] I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 647/B 675.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/11/2026 04:34:43

the sense that regulative principles are "merely heuristic or optional"[19]. In fact Kant understands the regulative use of reason to be "indispensably necessary"[20,21].

Miller develops upon the *indispensable necessity* of regulative ideality by looking at how any regulative idea is established, maintained, and subjected to revision. Moreover, he insists that we attend not only to the positing of an idea for orientation, but to our ability to criticize and revise the very ground of our previous acts of positing. What, Miller asks, are the actual conditions of the regulative posit? What are its media or artifactual tools? For these situate the idea itself, just as a set of conditions and special kind of tool will attend its critical revision. This investigation is perhaps the most fascinating of Miller's proposals, for it brings together his sense of the symbolic conditions of understanding as well as his judgment on what philosophy can actually achieve. In order to present the thought in Miller's own words, I want to provide a relatively long citation from his (even longer) argument, from which I will separate the unnecessary elements with ellipses: "The sticking point in the understanding of post-Kantian idealism is precisely this claim that structure is absolute. It seems clear that no absolute can secure logical demonstration. There can surely be no point of view that could ever *certify* the pretension of necessity[…] All postulates refer to order and its elements. None refer to particulars […] They are not about structure, for structure is neutral of all possible particulars. This state of affairs has given positivists their inning […] Nevertheless, from the beginning of philosophy there has been a search for these *organization words*. […] What is the peculiar urgency that invents so perverse an idea? […] Instead of proposing the unconditioned as an answer, let it be considered the property of a problem. This would be a problem about structure, for it is only in structure that thought shows its authority. […] A problem marks disconcertment. It is the claim of idealism that some disconcertments are constitutional, not accidental. […] The history of philosophy is the record of such necessary conflicts. […] These conflicts bring out the factors of structure in discourse. They indicate the

[19] I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 644–45/B 672–73. See H. E. Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense*, Yale University Press, Yale 2004, p. 432. (See especially the chapter *The Regulative Function of Reason*, pp. 423–448).

[20] Allison (2004) cites from and closes interprets this passage, in which Kant analogically connects the image of a *focus imaginarius* with the beneficial illusion allowed by positing regulatively the unity of reason.

[21] See too D. Henrich, *The Unity of Reason: Essays on Kant's Philosophy*, ed. by, R. Velkley, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1994.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/11/2026 04:34:43

ways of thought, and hence the elements of organization and of criticism. […] The force [of philosophy] is derived from the discovery that all compulsion occurs as the demand of some aspect of organization. […] Only as events with which [one] has identified [oneself] and one's hopes threaten one's outlook with destruction can one begin to take stock"[22].

As abstract as that discussion might initially appear, in order to bring it to life one need only reread it while imagining Socrates in dialogue with any number of interlocutors, sure of their positions, and then, increasingly, unsure. Miller suggests that we envision the Platonic dialogue, asking what it achieves, in the end, if not the staging of a constitutional conflict and the structure of discursive thinking in action. Regulative ideality may allow us to suppose our freedom as well as the unity of reason, but it does so, Miller finds, through different organization words harnessed in different contexts. Likewise, new organization words will be used to describe the order of experience as we need them, for we will always again need them, and eventually we will need to revise them.

Before turning more explicitly to the nature of that necessary revisionism, I want to note that Miller's appropriation of the Kantian regulative also answers a *metacritical* demand first issued even before the *Critique of Pure Reason* saw print. Indeed, what I am now calling *metacritique* is the true forebear to the project that Habermas associates with *detranscendentalization*.

I take the term *metacritique* (*Metakritik*) from Johann Georg Hamann, who uses it in a cheeky but devastatingly canny review of the first edition of Kant's first *Critique*. Hamann titled his essay *The Metacritique of the Purism of Reason*. It was written in 1784, after Kant's publisher sent Hamann the pre-press proofs of the first *Critique*; Hamann never published the essay[23]. In it, Hamann issues Kant a challenge that has returned continually, in subsequent treatments of the transcendental project (most of which were unfamiliar with Hamann's essay). In the words of Jere Paul Surber, this is the concern that since transcendental or critical philosophy is also "a set of specific linguistic practices and constructions, a sort of

[22] TC, p. 254–257.

[23] English translations of Hamann's "Metacritique" are available in G. G. Dickson, *Johann Georg Hamann's Relational Metacriticism*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin–New York 1995, and in K. Haynes, *Hamann: Writings on Philosophy and Language*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007. The German edition is available in J. G. Hamann's *Sämtliche Werke, Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe*, Vol. III, ed. by, J. Nadler, Herder Verlag, Vienna 1949–1957, pp. 283–289 as well as in Hamann's *Schriften,* ed. by, K. Widmaier, Insel Verlag, Leipzig 1921.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/11/2026 04:34:43

'language game'", then it is not just appropriate but necessary to inquire further, into *its* "grounds for possibility" in a way that parallels Kant's own argument[24].

Although Hamann's coinage is sardonic, he is right to hold that the Kantian notion of *Kritik* justifies metacritique, insofar as Kantian critique insists upon the open justification of epistemic procedures and the criteria for their assessment. This is why Kant attempts to base cognitive objectivity in the concept of subjective universality, which should be both commonly shared and demonstrably substantiated. According to Hamann, however, Kantian reason fails to ground epistemological principles realistically, because the Kantian notion of reason has been "purified" of all of reason's actual, worldly entanglements[25]. Hamann's short review of Kant is both theoretically valuable and a case of comic genius. Here I will only excerpt from it the understanding – as it first entered the literature – that of all the things one might find most revolutionary and still most disturbing in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant's greatest bungle is over the interdependence of reason and language.

Like Hamann, Miller begins with the inability of cognition to provide a cognitive account of its own derivation and capacity. As we saw, Miller holds that the verification of cognitive foundations can only proceed *as* an action that takes account of its own, limited but bindingly structural activity[26]. This approach allows us come to concrete terms with the way that "it is in the actual that the ideal is immanent" even as we identify our own contributions to that actualization, or our agential activity[27,28]. This form of study is geared to record structurally binding facts about

[24] J. P. Surber, *Metacritique: The Linguistic Assault on German Idealism*, ed. by J. P. Surber, transl. J. P. Surber, Humanity Books, Amherst 2001, p. 11.

[25] See Hamann's, *Metacritique of the Purism of Reason*, [in:] Dickson (1995) and Haynes (2007), or see Hamann's *Schriften*, pp. 244–255. For an elaboration of the metacritical position, see Surber (2001).

[26] M, p. 11.

[27] MP, 22:7. References to Miller's unpublished writings, the "Miller Papers" (MP) are made by box and folder number, as they are organized in the Miller Archives at Williams College.

[28] Miller writes: "The form that was empty without content and the content that was blind without form find their union not in appearance, but in the symbol. The symbol is heuristic because it embodies content and legislates on the determinate form of the same region of content to which it belongs. *The symbol is a legislative actuality*. But its legislation is not from above, or outside, but upon the same region in which *alone* it actually exists" (M, p. 160). See also: "The defect of Kant's categories occurs in the assumption that they are properties of pure reason, that is, that they are laws of order, of order without specific focus. Every category has a focus, such as a yardstick or a clock, a thermometer, etc." (M, p. 33–34).

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/11/2026 04:34:43

cognition together with the historically influenced, physically sited ways we encounter them.

On the one hand, Miller's proposal plays upon something that many thinkers have noticed, but that few have known what to do with: this is the insight that alone among ontological proofs, of language it is self-evidently true to say that essence entails existence; the actuality of language is present in any definition of it[29]. On the other hand, Millerian actualism offers an unprecedented explanation of *why* we tend to see transcendental categories in natural languages. It is because abstract categories, words, and elements of syntax are actualized or uttered together, in the symbolic actions that establish universality and concrete particularity. Causality, necessity, and relation are not solely structural features of natural language, as Hamann (and David Hume) imply; they are established by the functioning act, or the operation of the midworld, which extends to the symbolic order that encompasses natural language. Miller does not fall back upon the religious zeal (*Schwärmeri*) of Hamann or the skepticism of Hume, nor does he embrace Dewey's instrumentalism: for in response to the same basic questions they raise about absolute structure, Miller proposes the functioning practices we must both study and undertake in order to engage that structure. For Miller, it is of indispensable necessity that such endeavoring begins locally, in material practices such as measuring and naming designations, and that it engages a world and a language that is always already *in medias res*, or actively underway.

IV. To Philosophize is to Revise

Modernity might be rightly described, as it often is, as a time in which traditional metaphysics and the guarantees of religion have loosened their grip, but the task of accounting for an apparently autonomous world and for ourselves as free (or relatively free) agents seems to return with each new philosophical initiative. An independently real world is a world that functions according to natural law and not human awareness, yet human freedom must be something more than what natural law

[29] Miller writes: "Language of all sorts is not the *means* of communication, but the *actuality* of communication" (DT, p. 189). Also: "The word must be its own warrant" (DP, p. 161). See too: "Every specific act emerges from a matrix of commitment, a commitment necessary in principle but accidental in content" (PH, p. 33). Hamann makes essentially the same point in his Metacritique. The idea is probed by G. Agamben in *The Idea of Language: Some Difficulties in Speaking About Language*, "Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal" Spring 1984, Vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 141–149.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/11/2026 04:34:43

describes to warrant the designation. Philosophy and science each have a protracted history of attempts to deal with the apparent divergence the between real world of determined law and the human experience of freedom. Miller shows the divergence itself to be the result of a functioning act. Freedom begins with the study of how we pose and analyze the terms with which we attempt, ideally with progressive clarity, to describe the world as it is, and to posit the possibility of freedom within it. Millerian actualism shows that we cannot come out from this web of participation; there is no described world independent of our functioning measures and no agential awareness without the artifactual tools that Miller calls functioning objects, at work in the world. Correspondingly, Miller shows that philosophy's genuine role is critical, despite its greatest longings. As he writes, "What Kant proposed was the capacity of thought to police itself. He did not carry out that idea. Since then the idea of history has been brought into the open. […] The idealism of the future will be a philosophy of history, of action, of a self-generating, lawful finitude"[30].

By way of a conclusion, I would like to indicate how the notion of a critical revision brings together Miller's principle initiatives. Earlier I quoted at length from an argument in which Miller links the revision of outlooks both to the discipline of philosophy and to our capacity for freedom. I return to that argument: "What shows men to be free is their capacity to recognize and revise the grounds of their choices and their opinions. […] Freedom is not […] in choice; it is rather in the revision of the basis of choice. But philosophy is the actuality of those conflicts that establish the grounds on which arguments occur and by which they are regulated. […] It is the career of self-consciousness and the generation of outlooks. […] This is the base of a philosophy of freedom"[31].

In a later lecture devoted to *Freedom as a Characteristic of Man in a Democratic Society*, Miller presses the same idea: "[In] static guise the truth always enslaves. It is rather in the *revision* of truth that freedom is found. […] One can inherit neither truth nor freedom. Every heritage must be understood in its own creative motives and then overpassed in amendment and revision"[32]. Miller's essays and personal letters return often to this understanding of our ability to revise the grounds or basis of our doctrines, which Miller associates with an *existential* reckoning that we

[30] TC, p. 259.
[31] TC, p. 258.
[32] TC, p. 267.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/11/2026 04:34:43

must have the *honesty* and *responsibility* to face, and to face philosophically. Or as he says, "we cannot escape attempting to clothe finitude in the forms of criticism"[33]. Philosophy, for Miller, is a locus of control, and even more, it is the way we come to better control the ideas and actions that we have initially merely assumed or inherited: "To control better what comes naturally is the occasion of any philosophical study"[34].

Control, here, is a kind of revision, just as revising an idea and the actions associated with it is a matter of imposing control. Miller tells us that we do not escape our embodied and historical circumstances, any more than we ever shake off the need to reorganize or revise them. As Miller knew, this is still the age of criticism; it is the still age of detranscendentalization, for detranscendentalization is a contested and incomplete project. Reading Miller reminds us that there is no such thing as the time "after finitude", though there is always the matter of why the yearning for such things anneals into assertions of their reality. Even more interestingly, there is the question of how we organize such assertions to lend them whatever authority they will maintain. Miller's system gives us a sense of how a thoroughly critical, historical philosophy will look; without overreaching into scientism or religion, it delivers a promising method for investigating, revising, and extending what Miller calls the potentially "infinite forms of our finite actuality".

Bibliography

Agamben G., *The Idea of Language: Some Difficulties in Speaking About Language*, "Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal" Spring 1984, Vol. 10, no. 1.

Allison H. E., *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense*, Yale University Press, Yale 2004.

Bernstein R. J., *The Pragmatic Turn*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2010.

[33] TC, p. 323. See too *The Portrait of Man*: "History is constitutional revisions, not addition of new information or the correction of errors from an assumed base. It is wholly and entirely concerned with actions, not with objects, not with purposes. It is the revision of outlook in the enlargement or defeat of artifactual controls" (TC, p. 109). And *The Scholar as Man of the World*: "We have established societies, and now at last free societies, that deliberately propose to make change possible in an endless reinterpretation of the conditions of freedom. […] History is […] the story of the consequences of our commitments. […] We cannot escape commanding our circumstances" (TC, p. 323).

[34] TC, p. 43.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/11/2026 04:34:43

Colapietro V. M., *Fateful Shapes of Human Freedom: John William Miller and the Crises of Modernity*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville 2003.
Dickson G. G., *Johann Georg Hamann's Relational Metacriticism*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin–New York 1995.
Emerson R. W., *The Owl*, "Transactions of the Charles S. Pierce Society" 1988, Vol. 24.
Habermas J., *Truth and Justification*, ed. by B. Fultner, transl. B. Fultner, The MIT Press, Cambridge 2003.
Hamann J. G., *Sämtliche Werke, Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe*, Vol. III, ed. by J. Nadler, Herder Verlag, Vienna 1949–1957.
Hamann J. G., *Schriften,* ed. by K. Widmaier, Insel Verlag, Leipzig 1921.
Harris's W. T., *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Pennsylvania State University Press, New York 1987.
Hartshorne C. and Weiss P., *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* Edited, Vol. 2, Belknap Press, Cambridge 1902.
Haynes K., *Hamann: Writings on Philosophy and Language*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007.
Henrich's D., *The Unity of Reason: Essays on Kant's Philosophy*, ed. by R. Velkley, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1994.
McGandy M. J., *The Active Life: Miller's Metaphysics of Democracy*, State University of New York Press, Albany 2005.
Menad's L., *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America,* Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York 2002.
Misak Ch., *The American Pragmatists*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013.
Fell J. P., *Some Thoughts on the Modern Mind*, "Journal of Speculative Philosophy" 2012, Vol. 26, no. 4.
Fell J. P., *The Philosopher of Elm Street*, "Williams Alumni Review" January 2008.
Fell J. P., *Miller: The Man and His Philosophy*, [in:] *The Philosophy of John William Miller*, Bucknell University Press, Lewisburg 1990.
Fell J. P., *The Philosophy of John William Miller*, Bucknell University Press, Lewisburg 1990.
Miller J. W., *The Midworld*, [in:] Miller J. W., *The Task of Criticism: Essays on Philosophy, History, and Community*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 2005.
Miller J. W., *The Portrait of Man*, [in:] Miller J. W., *The Task of Criticism: Essays on Philosophy, History, and Community*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 2005.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/11/2026 04:34:43

Miller J. W., *The Scholar as Man of the World*, [in:] Miller J. W., *The Task of Criticism: Essays on Philosophy, History, and Community*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 2005.
Miller J. W., *The Task of Criticism: Essays on Philosophy, History, and Community*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 2005.
Miller J. W., *The Philosophy of History with Reflections and Aphorisms*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 1983.
Miller J. W., *The Midworld of Symbols and Functioning Objects*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 1982.
Miller J. W., *The Definition of the Thing with Some Thoughts on Language*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 1980.
Surber J. P., *Metacritique: The Linguistic Assault on German Idealism*, ed. by J. P. Surber, transl. J. P. Surber, Humanity Books, Amherst 2001.

Zusammenfassung

Philosophie als Revidieren: Wie der deutsche Idealismus im Gedanken eines vereinzelten amerikanischen Denkers historische Dimension gewann

John William Miller, ein verhältnismäßig wenig bekannter amerikanischer Philosoph des 20. Jahrhunderts, benutzt in seinen Schriften den kantischen Idealismus, indem er ihn in eine historische und linguistisch orientierte Philosophie des symbolischen Handelns umwandelt. Ich stelle die These auf, dass das System Millers als eine Idee gelesen werden kann, die sowohl im detranszendentalisierenden Projekt der philosophischen Moderne angesiedelt ist, als auch in der Begeisterung für den deutschen Idealismus, das für die frühe amerikanische Philosophie charakteristisch war. Ich verbinde die Methodologie von Miller mit der metakritischen Beurteilung der Philosophie Kants, die bis zu seiner ersten *Kritik* zurückgreift. In Millers Ansatz finde ich auch die Sorge um das menschliche Handeln und seine Wirkungsmacht, die für die pragmatische Tradition typisch sind. Ich begründe die These, dass Miller das Projekt Kants, insbesondere den Begriff der regulativen Ideen, mit Hilfe „der mittelbaren Welt der Handlungsobjekte" revidiert. Ich glaube, dass anhand der mittelbaren Welt Millers vorgeführt wird, dass kognitive Kategorien, samt kantischen Intuitionsformen, in einem historischen und sprachlichen Zusammenhang verortet sind. Miller bezeugt auf diese Weise, wie eine wirklich kritische Philosophie aussehen soll. Dabei vermeidet er die in der gegenwärtigen Philosophie zurückkehrenden Fragen des Fallibilismus und der Endlichkeit. Miller meint, dass die Philosophie eine vollkommen historische und fortwährende Tätigkeit des Revidierens sei. Er weist auch darauf hin, dass man zu der Philosophie zurückkehren solle, um Probleme zu überwinden, die andere Handlungen des Menschen bestimmen. Millers System veranschaulicht sowohl die Historizität der kritischen Philosophie als auch praktische Anwendungen einer wirksamen philosophischen Methodologie bei der Lösung gegenwärtiger Fragestellungen.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/11/2026 04:34:43

Schlüsselworte: John William Miller, Immanuel Kant, Jürgen Habermas, Johann Georg Hamann, Idealismus, Aktualismus, Pragmatismus, Metakritik, mittelbare Welt der Handlungsobjekte

Streszczenie

Filozofia jako rewidowanie: jak niemiecki idealizm nabrał wymiaru historycznego w myśli odosobnionego filozofa amerykańskiego

John William Miller, stosunkowo mało znany dwudziestowieczny filozof amerykański, korzysta w swych pracach z Kantowskiego idealizmu, przekształcając go w historyczną i nakierowaną lingwistycznie filozofię działania symbolicznego. Stawiam tezę, że system Millera powinno się odczytywać jako myślenie osadzone w detranscendentalizującym projekcie filozoficznej nowoczesności, jak też w zainteresowaniu niemieckim idealizmem, które charakteryzuje wczesną filozofię amerykańską. Metodologię Millera łączę z metakrytyczną oceną pracy Kanta, która sięga aż pierwszej Krytyki. W podejściu Millera znajduję również troskę o ludzkie działanie i sprawczość, typowe dla tradycji pragmatycznej. Uzasadniam tezę, że Miller rewiduje projekt Kanta – a w szczególności pojęcie idei regulatywnych – za pomocą własnego "pośredniego świata obiektów działających". Sądzę, że Millerowski świat pośredni ukazuje, że kategorie kognitywne, łącznie z Kantowskimi formami intuicji, są usytuowane w kontekście historycznym i językowym. Miller pokazuje w ten sposób, jak powinna wyglądać prawdziwie krytyczna filozofia, omijając powracające w filozofii współczesnej problemy fallibilizmu i skończoności. Miller sądzi, że filozofia to całkowicie historyczna i ciągłe dzieło rewidowania. Wskazuje również, że należałoby powrócić do filozofii, by przezwyciężyć problemy, które określają inne działania człowieka. System Millera przekonująco ukazuje tak historyczność filozofii krytycznej, jak i praktyczne zastosowania skutecznej metodologii filozoficznej do rozwiązywania problemów współczesnych.

Słowa kluczowe: John William Miller, Immanuel Kant, Jürgen Habermas, Johann Georg Hamann, idealizm, aktualizm, pragmatyzm, metakrytyka, pośredni świat obiektów działających

KATIE TEREZAKIS, Associate Professor, Rochester Institute of Technology (USA).
E-mail: terezak@rit.edu

(cc) BY-NC-ND