

THE ACTIVE LIFE

Miller's Metaphysics of Democracy



Michael J. McGandy

THE ACTIVE LIFE

SUNY series in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences

Lenore Langsdorf, Editor

THE ACTIVE LIFE

MILLER'S METAPHYSICS OF DEMOCRACY

Michael J. McGandy

State University of New York Press

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

© 2005 State University of New York

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. No part of this book may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means including electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission in writing of the publisher.

For information, address State University of New York Press,
194 Washington Avenue, Suite 305, Albany, NY 12210-2384

Production by Judith Block
Marketing by Michael Campochiaro

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McGandy, Michael J.

The active life : Miller's metaphysics of democracy / Michael J. McGandy.
p. cm. — (SUNY series in the philosophy of the social sciences)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7914-6537-3 (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-7914-6538-1 (pbk : alk. paper)

1. Miller, John William. 2. Act (Philosophy) 3. Democracy—Philosophy. I. Title.
II. Series.

B945.M4764M34 2005
191—dc22

2004062623

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Preface	vii
Abbreviations	xv
Introduction: The Active and Contemplative Lives	1
Chapter 1. A Metaphysics of Democracy?	13
1.1 Senses of Democracy	15
1.2 America's Antimetaphysical Tradition	19
1.3 Rorty's Challenge	22
1.4 Miller's Antimetaphysical Sympathies	26
1.5 Revisions of Metaphysics and History	28
1.6 Reinvigorating Criticism	33
1.7 Conclusion	36
Chapter 2. Action	39
2.1 Disclosure of Action	40
2.2 Dialectic and Definition	47
2.3 Dialectic and Action	55
2.4 Action as Constructive	60
2.5 Conclusion	69
Chapter 3. Symbol	71
3.1 Symbolic Environment	72
3.2 Signs and Symbols	78
3.3 Symbols and Artifacts	84
3.4 Interpretation	93
3.5 <i>Res Publicae</i>	103
3.6 Conclusion	108

Chapter 4. History	109
4.1 History as Constitutional	110
4.2 Fate, Demonry, Nemesis	118
4.3 Conflict, Revision, Action	124
4.4 Reflection and Autonomy	131
4.5 History and Philosophy	138
4.6 Conclusion	144
Chapter 5. Democracy	147
5.1 Metaphysics of Morals	149
5.2 Liberal Democracy	161
5.3 Universality and Process	166
5.4 Democracy and Philosophy	172
5.5 Conclusion	182
Epilogue: The Scholar and the Citizen	185
Notes	193
References	215
Index	223

Preface

This book begins with two suppositions: The idea of the active life is worth retrieving and the philosophy of John William Miller commands serious attention. Neither the idea nor the philosophy is given much consideration in current discussions. Yet the possibility of a viable and compelling metaphysics of democracy is liable to attract attention and strike many as worth some intellectual effort. My claim here is that the strength and viability of a metaphysics that comports with and informs democratic life comes by way of joining the ancient idea of the active life with the contemporary thought of Miller. If we are to undertake a serious reflection on our democratic way of life, we will be well served by turning our attention to Miller's recuperation of the active life as a leading philosophical idea.

The last thinker to give serious consideration to the active life was Hannah Arendt. Across all of her philosophical writings, but most especially in *The Human Condition*, Arendt articulated the state of contemporary affairs (political, social, and psychological) in terms of how persons understood and held themselves in relationship to action and contemplation. Thus, for her, there was nothing old about the ancient distinction between the active life (*bios politikos* or *vita activa*) and the contemplative life (*bios theoretikos* or *vita contemplativa*). Arendt thought there was nothing more diagnostic of the meaning of life than what we (individually and collectively) thought about these two modes of existence.

I take my cue from Arendt and place this distinction at the heart of the project of crafting a metaphysics of democracy. My claim is that this distinction is also central to Miller's thinking about philosophy and democracy. I assert this despite the fact that Miller did not write much directly about the active and contemplative lives. There are, to be sure, passing mentions here and there. Moreover, like Arendt, Miller thought that the Greek experience in the polis served as a touchstone for all public philosophy. Yet Miller's interest in the active life did not begin to approach the degree of articulation that one finds in Arendt. The idea was alive in Miller's thinking but always implicitly and partly concealed in an alternate

vocabulary. Here I undertake to make the implicit clear and highlight the power of Miller's political thought by borrowing a little light from Arendt. This is especially so early on when, in the introduction, I rely on her clear statements and penetrating insights in order to state succinctly the historical and intellectual background of Miller's innovation in the relationship of action and contemplation.¹

The apparent divide as well as the fundamental bond between the active and contemplative lives provide a basis for this investigation into a metaphysics of democracy. Some terms of reconciliation between action and thought have to be offered if one is to bring together *metaphysics* (the height of contemplation) and *democracy* (the most vigorous form of politics). There is no escaping a consideration of this distinction if one is to understand Miller's philosophy and its political importance. Moreover there is no gainsaying the significance of looking at politics in light of this distinction.

Prior to embarking on this course, the reader deserves an introduction to Miller, a philosopher who remains relatively unknown. A précis of Miller's intellectual biography situates his early career at the end of what is known as the Golden Age of American philosophy and his mature period amid the reign of the contrary philosophical stances of positivism and existentialism. Given the fact that he came into his own intellectually at such a time of transition, it is not surprising that Miller's philosophy was a hybrid. His philosophical influences included pragmatism, idealism, existentialism, and phenomenology. (The positivism of the Vienna Circle was never accepted by Miller but was a constant point of contrast as well as an object of criticism.) This hybrid philosophy, which goes under the name *actualism*, was given coherence by Miller's overriding interest in action and history. Each philosophical influence was filtered through these interpretative skeins. His paramount concern was finding a way of thinking that best comported with responsible and history-making agency. Thus the attention that Miller gave to the various schools of thought that touched his thinking was anything but doctrinaire, and his writing was far from dry scholarship.

The details of Miller's biography are presented in various places.² A brief sketch of his intellectual biography shows Miller's philosophical life to be defined by his association with two institutions—Harvard University and Williams College. Miller (1895–1978) was born and educated in Rochester before arriving as an undergraduate at Harvard University in 1912. These were the waning years of the influence of William James and Josiah Royce, but Miller was fortunate enough to take at least one class with Royce during this period. After completing his B.A. in philosophy in 1916, Miller declared himself a conscientious objector to World War I and then volunteered for service in the ambulance corps in which he saw active duty in France. In 1919 he returned to Harvard to begin graduate studies in

philosophy. Among his teachers were William Ernest Hocking, Edwin Bissell Holt, Clarence Irving Lewis, and Ralph Barton Perry. During this period Miller worked closely with Hocking and it was under Hocking's direction that Miller wrote his dissertation. The work, titled "The Definition of the Thing," earned him his doctorate in 1922. Following a short time teaching at Connecticut College, in 1924 Miller took up an appointment at Williams College. He would remain at Williams (excepting sabbaticals and visiting teaching appointments) until his retirement in 1960. At Williams Miller taught courses across the whole philosophical curriculum, served as department chair from 1931 through 1955, and was named, in 1945, Mark Hopkins Professor of Intellectual and Moral Philosophy (a title inherited from his colleague and predecessor as chair, James Bisset Pratt).

Both Harvard and Williams were, for Miller, defining institutions. At Harvard University Miller was steeped in a philosophical culture and became intimately familiar with a set of philosophical problems—many of which were the personal property of James and Royce. One of the tasks of graduate students at Harvard in the 1920s was resolving the Battle of the Absolute that had been waged by these genial adversaries. (Indeed one important way of conceiving of Miller's actualism is as a synthesis of pragmatism and idealism.) While he would change many of the terms and would venture into new philosophical territory, the intellectual charge of making sense of the dispute that animated the Harvard Philosophy Department remained with Miller the whole of his philosophical career.

In the case of Williams College, Miller was not captivated by a philosophical figure or school. He was transformed and redefined by teaching. Research and scholarly interests were made subordinate to the primary task of liberal education and Miller's own sense of scholarship—that is, the thoughtful apprehension of the conditions of one's endeavors. Miller's interest was in educating responsible citizens who would bring philosophy to life in the worlds of art, business, law, or politics. Thus it was that his own academic scholarship declined while his energies were poured into class notes, philosophical correspondence, and philosophical essays. As Miller's bibliography illustrates, little of his writing was published prior to his death and the majority of the works that have appeared posthumously are *occasional* pieces in the best sense of that term—that is, philosophical writings directed toward a specific individual or that deal with philosophical questions apropos of some matter bearing on personal action. Abstract philosophy—written for no one in particular and cut off from action—became anathema to Miller. If at Harvard University he was steeped in *philosophical issues*, at Williams College he was steeped in an *educational culture* that profoundly influenced his philosophy.

In light of this account of Miller's philosophical life, there is no doubt that this book runs the risk of being too *scholarly* (in the pejorative sense of the term). This

risk is unavoidable. One basic claim of mine is that Miller is a *systematic* thinker. Actualism is not just an insight into the disclosive and constructive functions of action but is also an articulate philosophical whole that can be understood as a *metaphysics of democracy*. While Miller left behind no finished philosophical system, his published and unpublished writings provide more than the rudiments of a philosophy that does conceptual justice to the matter of metaphysics while maintaining the existential integrity of the active, democratic life. If Miller's writings were occasional, the occasional style of an essayist is inappropriate to composing a philosophical whole out of the brilliant essays, letters, notes, and single dissertation penned by Miller. If these pages do not quite capture the flavor of Miller as a teacher, essayist, and letter writer, I hope this deficiency is more than made up for by the scope and detail of the philosophical argumentation.

What follows is forthrightly a work in philosophical construction. While it is a study of Miller's actualism, this book is also a creative venture that forms a philosophical whole out of what are rich and suggestive fragments. Here I act as Miller's interpreter and advocate—putting together a cohesive account drawing from arguments spread throughout his published and unpublished writings, elaborating on concepts where he was philosophically terse or opaque, and sometimes speaking for him in areas of political philosophy that he alluded to often in his writings but never addressed in detail. Readers will not find much in the way of criticism here. To others I leave the task of detailing Miller's philosophical blind-spots. Weaknesses in any one of Miller's arguments, whenever noted, have been buttressed by stronger arguments and examples drawn from another essay. If one of Miller's accounts was thin, I have done what I can to provide a richer and more compelling version. No clear line of demarcation can be drawn indicating where Miller's thinking ends and my thinking begins. Yet I assure readers that in every instance they are meeting with Miller's thought. (Ample citations lead back to the source materials.) My goal is to highlight, amplify, and unify his philosophical outlook by organizing it around the ideas of the *active life* and a *metaphysics of democracy*. In doing so, I have not substantially changed Miller meaning or tortured his thought to serve my own aims. As far as I understand them, Miller's and my own philosophical interests are one in the same.

The book is organized in the following manner.

In the introduction I frame the argument in terms of the long and conflictual career of the paired concepts of the active life and the contemplative life. After a review of the history of this conflict, I find that in the late twentieth century a polemic has been undertaken on behalf of the practical life that has served to undermine the contemplative bases of responsible action. This has been done by attacking all forms of theory, reflection, and abstraction. As a correction to this trend, I propose Miller's actualism because it provides us with the conceptual

resources for affirming the fundamental connection that exists between the practical and theoretical lives.

Over the course of chapter 1 I assess the appropriateness of venturing a metaphysical interpretation of democracy. This assessment is undertaken in light of the antimetaphysical tradition of American political thought. Richard Rorty's pragmatism is situated within this tradition and then used as a foil for clarifying what *metaphysics* does and does not mean, as well as what it does and does not contribute to our understanding of democracy. While I find a substantial amount of agreement between Rorty and Miller on the limitations of ahistorical modes of metaphysics, I find Miller's actualist metaphysics to be more adequate for articulating the sort of responsible, critical, and autonomous agency that is central to a democratic identity. This conclusion founds the project of rehabilitating metaphysics as well as integrating the contemplative life with the active life.

A developed concept of action is basic to articulating a metaphysics of democracy. Chapter 2 analyzes Miller's sense of action so as to distinguish it from reductive empiricism as well as airy voluntarism. I focus on the arguments Miller puts forward in *The Definition of the Thing* and develop an understanding of action as a principle of disclosure and organization. Action is revealed not by a direct empirical reference but rather in the form of our world. These descriptions of action in terms of processes of definition are then linked to the practical need of persons to establish local-control. Action thus connects (and is connected to) the universal as well as the radically first-person elements of our experience.

In chapter 3 I turn to Miller's concept of the symbol. Symbols are embodiments of action by which the organization implied by action becomes durable and, ultimately, an object for reflection and criticism. In order to understand the symbolic function I turn to Miller's idea of the *midworld* and articulate not only the basic difference between signs and symbols but also the more subtle qualities of the different types of symbols. As persons we live in a symbolic environment—surrounded by, shaped by, and shaping the enduring forms of our actions and those of our predecessors. This environment is itself a process of interpretation in that symbols, as means of definition, are bearers as well as objects of interpretation. In this interpretative process a communal and historical conception of agency comes to the fore. Moreover I argue that, because of this interpretative process, symbols function as *res publicae*—that is, means of expression, representation, and reflection joining the practical and theoretical.

For Miller the career of the midworld of symbols is nothing other than history. Chapter 4 establishes a series of connections that shows why history is fundamental for understanding the meaning of action, the import of symbolism, and the form and possibilities of democracy. To this end I explore the paradox that

history, so often considered the antithesis of metaphysics, is the basic metaphysical category in that it is the condition of all disclosure. Following on that I describe important features of historical experience with an eye toward how each aspect contributes to the connection between history and the exercise of autonomy. The equation of history and philosophy is, as I show, the end at which Miller's reflections arrive. Both history and philosophy address and support what is most important to democratic agency—that is, self-control. History is thus where the practical and theoretical are reconciled.

In chapter 5 the matter of the preceding chapters is revisited and given a new reading in order to establish a metaphysics of democracy. I begin by developing Miller's account of morality (undergirded by identity, agency, and history) as the condition for a *community of power* found in the liberal democratic state. The liberal democratic state is the condition not only for the expansion of individual agency but also for the sort of self-control exercised by free persons. Important features of the state are described in order to show how the liberal democratic state provides the conditions of and is a model for an autonomous and self-reflective will. It is here that democracy and philosophy coincide. Democracy is the model for all communities of power in that democratic communities recognize, engage, and augment the will of persons. This creates the possibility for an engaged philosophical life. Moreover in such communities of power not only is the ancient antithesis between the practical and theoretical dissolved but so too is the equally ancient division between democracy and philosophy.

The epilogue condenses the foregoing account of Miller's metaphysics of democracy into two representative figures—that is, the scholar and the citizen. The scholar and the citizen exemplify two key aspects of the active life. The scholar is the figure of reflection while the citizen is the figure of action. However, as I show, scholarship and citizenship meet in the paradigmatic activity of criticism where thoughts and deeds flow together. The aim of philosophy is the aim of democracy—that is, to encourage people to take account of the conditions of their endeavors and to lend a hand in the reshaping of those very conditions. Action of this sort cannot proceed without reflection and reflection of the sort that Miller recommends is always a mode of action. The scholar and the citizen are, effectively, one in the same.

Several people and institutions deserve my thanks for their contributions to this book.

I extend my greatest thanks to the John William Miller Fellowship Fund for its contribution to my scholarship in the form of the Miller Essay Prize and the Miller Fellowship. These awards provided material support as well as significant encouragement during the researching and writing of this book.

Joseph P. Fell, now chairperson of the Fund Committee, deserves particular mention among the members of the John William Miller Fellowship Fund. Across the whole writing process I have received from him support, generous editorial comments, and philosophical criticisms that have been invariably helpful. This book has been significantly improved by his contributions.

The late George P. Brockway, Vincent Colapietro, Christopher Gowans, and Judith Green all offered commentary on earlier drafts of this book and each added to my thinking regarding Miller.

Peter Hare provided important criticisms of the penultimate draft of the book and previously, in his capacity as editor of the *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, kindly considered and published two of my essays on Miller. (Sections 3.2 and 3.3 were originally published in a different form, in the *Transactions* [vol. 34, 1998] as “The Midworld: Clarifications and Developments.”) I thank Hare and the Charles S. Peirce Society for maintaining a forum in which the ideas contributing to the American philosophical tradition can be shared and explored.

Much of the research that contributed to this book was undertaken in the John William Miller Papers that are preserved in the Williamsiana Collection of the Williams College Archives. College Archivist Sylvia Kennick Brown made great efforts to facilitate my archival work and I am indebted to her for assuring that my trips to Williams College were always fruitful. Lynne Fonteneau-McCann and Linda Hall also assisted me in the archives and both deserve my thanks.

A final word of appreciation goes to my editor, Jane Bunker, for entertaining my book proposal, shepherding the manuscript through the review process, and, along with her editorial staff, overseeing the editing and production of the book.

Michael J. McGandy
Brooklyn, New York
February 2005

This page intentionally left blank.

Abbreviations

Abbreviations will be used when citing the writings of John William Miller.

PUBLISHED BOOKS

- DP *In Defense of the Psychological*. New York: Norton, 1983.
DT *The Definition of the Thing with Some Notes on Language*. New York: Norton, 1980.
MS *The Midworld of Symbols and Functioning Objects*. New York: Norton, 1982.
PC *The Paradox of Cause and Other Essays*. New York: Norton, 1978.
PH *The Philosophy of History with Reflections and Aphorisms*. New York: Norton, 1982.

PUBLISHED ESSAYS

- AH "Afterword: The Ahistoric and the Historic." In José Ortega y Gasset's *History as a System* (Trans. Helene Weyl), 237–69. New York: Norton, 1961.
CRW "On Choosing Right and Wrong." *Idealistic Studies* 21 (1992): 74–78.
FI "For Idealism." *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 1 (1987): 260–69.
TO "The Owl." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 24 (1988): 399–407.

UNPUBLISHED ESSAYS

- CB "Communication in Beauty" (1933). Miller Papers, Box 9: Folder 10.
EC "Ethics and Cosmology" (1955). Miller Papers, Box 52: Folder 12.
EPE "Economics, Politics, and Ethics" (1949). Miller Papers, Box 3: Folder 6.
IH "Sources of Interest in the Idea of History" (undated). Miller Papers, Box 7: Folder 11.
MM "Moral Man" (undated). Miller Papers, Box 6: Folder 13.

- NL "The Natural Law" (1956). Miller Papers, Box 4: Folder 21.
 NS "The National State" (1945). Miller Papers, Box 3: Folder 3.
 OES "Obstacles to Ethical Study" (undated). Miller Papers, Box 6: Folder 13.
 RMF "Rejection as a Moral Factor" (1957). Miller Papers, Box 4: Folder 24.
 RPR "How to Render Passion Responsible?" (1942). Miller Papers, Box 12: Folder 3.
 SC "Solitude and Community: A Meditation" (1973). Miller Papers, Box 26: Folder 17.
 SF "History and the Sense of Fate" (1955). Miller Papers, Box 4: Folder 15.
 TI "The Individual" (1972). Miller Papers, Box 24: Folder 21.
 TR "Translation" (1956). Miller Papers, Box 4: Folder 19.
 TS "The Symbol" (1950–52). Miller Papers, Box 4: Folder 13.

PAPERS COMPILED BY EUGENE R. MILLER

- PL "Papers and Letters of John William Miller," edited and transcribed by Eugene R. Miller. This unpublished compilation of papers will be cited according to the pagination of Eugene Miller's typescript. The typescript is available in the Miller Papers (Box 55).

MISCELLANEOUS UNPUBLISHED WRITINGS

- MP John William Miller Papers, Williamsiana Collection, Williams College. Writings contained in the Miller Papers but not listed above will be cited by means of their location in the box and folder system of the collection; the box number will precede the folder number separated by a colon. For example, MP 3:1 indicates that the cited writing came from the first folder of the third box of the Miller Papers. See the bibliography for a more complete description of the Miller Papers.

STUDENT NOTES

- PH 5, 1931 "Philosophy of the State." Philosophy 5, Williams College, 1931. Transcribed by M. Holmes Hartshorne. Miller Papers, Box 22: Folder 7.
 PH 7, 1933 "Philosophy of History." Philosophy 7, Williams College, 1951–52. Transcribed and edited by Joseph P. Fell, 1993. Miller Papers, Box 53: Folder 2.
 PH 1–2, 1950–51 "Types of Philosophy." Philosophy 1–2, Williams College, 1950–51. Transcribed and edited by Joseph P. Fell, 1991. Miller Papers, Box 53: Folder 1.

- PH 8, 1951 "American Philosophy." Philosophy 8, Williams College, Spring 1951. Transcribed and edited by Joseph P. Fell, 1997. Miller Papers, Box 53: Folder 2.
- PH 19–20 1952–53 "Maintaining Criticism: The Metaphysics of Ethics and Epistemology." Philosophy 19–20, Williams College, 1952–53. Transcribed and edited by Joseph P. Fell, 1998. Miller Papers, Box 52: Folder 16.

Student notes are cited by the class taught by Miller (e.g., PH 8 was American Philosophy in the old Williams College system), the year in which the class occurred, and the page number of the cited passage as it appears in the transcript maintained in the Miller Papers.

This page intentionally left blank.

THE ACTIVE LIFE

This page intentionally left blank.

Introduction

The Active and Contemplative Lives

It is therefore not so trivial a matter, as it seems to some, whether philosophy starts out from a fact or an act.

—Fichte, *Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Scientific Knowledge*

John William Miller provides us with a *philosophy of the act* that is the basis for and ingredient to the active life.¹ This is a life of deeds and legislation, power and responsibility, as well as originality and fate. It is a way of life that looks askance on the divine and the eternal and elevates the political and mortal. The active life is inseparable from history and various modes of historical understanding including remembrance, fabrication, and narration. A philosophy of the act, or *actualism*,² necessarily takes up all of these elements. It is a form of metaphysics that, in seeking a reflective apprehension of the conditions of one's endeavors and the order of one's world, turns not toward the eternal but rather to the temporal. Actualism is a philosophy of persons, a philosophy interested in making the actual "shine" and establishing the "eloquent presence" of the authoritative individual (MS 191). "The acknowledgment of the actual," Miller writes, "is also the recognition of the individual" (DP 160).

The concern with the active life is of course an ancient one. The term descends from Aristotle's distinction between *bios politikos* and *bios theoretikos*.³ Yet the difference between the life of shared words and deeds enacted in the political community and the life of intellect and wonder exemplified in the life of the mind was noted prior to Aristotle's naming of these two lives. Presocratics such as Parmenides considered the qualities and aims of these two lives. Plato assessed democracy in the *Republic*, found it wanting, and supplanted it with the autocracy of philosophy. Following on the Greeks, the Romans picked up on the current of Platonism and appropriated the distinction stated as a difference between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. The Fathers of the Christian Church and their medieval descendents adapted the distinction to suit their monotheistic interpretation of the origin and aims of human existence. With the advent of modernity, the terms themselves began to fall out of use but the importance of the distinction was preserved as its logic, fraught with tension, was worked out

over the centuries with contemplation giving way to action even as the meaning of action itself was redescribed. The development of that logic determined the proximate heritage of our contemporary period of historicism, naturalism, post-modernism, and skepticism.

The active life and its complement, the contemplative life, establish a basic system of concepts and distinctions forming the texture of our contemporary experience. As Hannah Arendt has masterfully shown,⁴ not only can the history of philosophy be written in their terms but an examination of the contemporary mind also can be fruitfully undertaken by considering the tensions and implications of these two modes of human being.

The fact that the terms *active life* and the *contemplative life* have now fallen out of use is important. For Miller's interest in appropriating a distinction that has long ceased to flourish in our explicit discourse might suggest that his philosophical project is an exercise in antiquitarianism. Nothing could be further from the truth. In crafting a philosophy that sets the human deed in the place of prominence, Miller is, certainly, undertaking a work of philosophical *retrieval*. Just as was the case for Arendt, however, Miller's interest in the ancient heritage of the idea (and the actuality) of action is neither nostalgic nor scholarly. The aim is to reanimate a concept that has never ceased to function in our basic understanding of our world and ourselves. It is a gross misunderstanding to suppose that, if an idea or term has ceased to be current, its *existential logic* has also lost energy or even become moribund. It is not too large a claim to state that the idea of the active life cannot be dissociated from Western civilization. Moreover the idea cannot be separated from the practices and institutions of democracy. There may be no greater irony, then, in a day when democratic institutions have achieved such prominence and influence, that the concept of action receives relatively little attention in strictly philosophical discourse as well as broader public debate.⁵

The active life presupposes the irreducible originality of words and deeds (MS 69–70). They are principles of order, revelation, and self-expression. Miller refers to the original principles in many ways—*act*, *discourse*, *res gestae*, *talk*, *utterance*, *verb*, and *vox*. The appeal and force of the concept of action draws on its deep historical roots in animism (MS 56) and points toward our interest as democratic citizens in understanding our energies to be fundamental to the form of our common world (MS 86). In action persons establish a world that is distinct from the neutrality of nature and eternity of the divine, a world in which persons are guided by the monuments of the past and in which they claim the authority to reconsider those monuments and thereby shape the future conditions of action. The actual world is born in original acts and it is the condition of an existence that is both free and authoritative.

When describing what it might mean for the human word to be, as Miller writes, “its own warrant” (DP 161), it is useful to consider the Greek sense of action and the political life. Arendt made the important assertion that, for the ancient Greeks, *bios politikos* was closely attached to the ideas of originality and birth (1959, p. 10). Her claim is both compelling and perplexing. The political life is, of course, the life of mortals par excellence. It is the life of those who, different from nature and the divine, must die. The mortal is, as we read in Homer, equated with the futile—his actions, his artifacts and monuments, and his life are all passing phenomena. Death and futility thus seem to be the hallmarks of the political life. Yet even as *mortality* is underscored as the defining trait of humanity so too must the idea of *nativity*. Humans must perish but, as the chorus of *Antigone* reminds us, “numberless wonders, terrible wonders walk the world but none is the match for man.” Persons are unique and astonishing. Nature, as the Greeks understood it, endures and is ever the same. Human existence is defined by the tumult of novelty in which one always begins anew and acts in unexpected ways with unknown consequences. Nativity and mortality form a pair.

The common political life of the polis was organized around the union of nativity and mortality. Indeed the political life embraced the fragility of human life and, as fragile, ennobled and immortalized it. The reason for the polis was not then simply the management of human affairs—management was more properly the concern of the household—but rather the creation of a space for deeds, remembrance, monuments, and, ultimately, history (Arendt, 1959, p. 176; 1968, p. 71). The polis was the condition of that form of immortality allotted to the mortal—the doing of great deeds and saying of compelling words that become part of the collective memory of the community (p. 19). That is to say, the polis fostered and preserved nativity. The political life extolled that which, under other considerations, seemed to determine human existence as humble and pathetic. Its concern was not with memorializing labor or craft (two other modes of human action) but with the most pointless of human actions—words and deeds. The polis was the product and the condition of the impractical expenditure of human energies. In the political life, however, the futility of human existence was transcended and the ephemeral character of actions was transmuted into freedom and authority.

The relationship between nativity and mortality marks, in Arendt’s estimation, the enduring difference between political and metaphysical thought (1959, p. 11). In political thought action is authoritative. In metaphysical thought action is futile, distracting, and misleading. This old story of the philosophers and the contemplative life will be addressed in a moment. Here it is important to assert that in harkening back to this heritage of political thought, Miller is allying himself with the very source of *humanism* and the origin of the

valuation of that which is intrinsically human. Action in the form of words and deeds is the expression and revelation of the human as human. Similarly the political life is the condition for the valuation of the human as human. By contrast, in the necessities of labor the human sinks to the animal and becomes immersed in an unthinking cycle of natality and mortality. In the rhapsodies of contemplation the human transports herself beyond the human and comes to disparage natality and mortality. In the political life, however, persons embrace the complex pair of natality and mortality and thereby transfigure human existence in daring acts that both call attention to themselves and start something anew. Action is heroic futility and the political life the condition of its ennobling.

This ancient Greek sense of action is ingredient in Miller's idea of the active life. In revising these traditional distinctions Miller essays two things. First he proposes a broader and inclusive definition of action that encompasses the threefold categorization of labor, fabrication, and political action.⁶ Second he brings semiotics to bear on action so as to provide a metaphysical description of the conditions of the possibility of action. In each case, the core notion remains the same—a basic affirmation of the natality of action. These developments have important consequences for the meaning of action, history, and politics.

Miller's tendency is to ignore the distinctions among the types of action that Arendt so patiently described in *The Human Condition*. Miller finds all action, in any mode, to be a form of disclosure and all instances of disclosure to be original exertions of authority. Thus *disclosure is action* and subsumes individual forms of disclosure in bodily activity, fabrication, and speech. Disclosure itself is given a systematic semiotic and, finally, metaphysical treatment in the idea of the *mid-world*. Here it is good to quote Miller at some length:

The act *declares* the environment and articulates it. The act is *unenvironed*. Functioning does not appear where something called "environment" has been *assumed*. Treat the eye as an object, and there is no looking and no eye to do it. No clock as another object measures time, and with no clock there is no time to measure. It is the barbarian who treats the functioning object as another content of consciousness. If words are "tools," why not burn books? (MS 14)

To such functioning objects I gave a name. It was the "midworld." The mid-world meets the two conditions: it is not cognitive, and it launches, spurs, and controls all cognition. It is actual. It is not "real." It is not "apparent." *Unenvironed, it projects the environment.* (MS 13)

The scope of Miller's sense of action is apparent. In these passages one finds action described as the property of an eye, a clock, and a book. The eye in seeing

is a form of bodily disclosure of the visible. The clock is a form of fabricated disclosure of time. The book is a form of written disclosure of the intelligible. In each instance, the act reveals a world or a part of a world. The fact that each reveals something different and has a different import does not override this basic disclosive function. Moreover one finds that action is always embodied, it always has a vehicle. These vehicles are *functioning objects* and the systematic organization of functioning objects is the *midworld* that is at the center of Miller's semiotic metaphysics. Thus while for Miller action is energy and has all of the traits of natality that the Greeks ascribed to it, that energetic expenditure is systematically linked with the discipline of form and structure (MS 65). In actualism, the premises of the active life become principles of metaphysics—that is, the order of one's world.

The active life transpires in a middle ground between the natural and the eternal. The glory of this life is that it makes a virtue of what, from other perspectives, are its manifest limitations. Arendt summarized the “frustrations” of action as follows: “the unpredictability of its outcome, the irreversibility of the process, and the anonymity of its authors” (1959, p. 197). Human acts build on one another in such a way that individuals apparently have little control over the career of action. In this light, individuals appear to be carried along by the forces of history and their agency diminished if not canceled. It is a paradox that another of the frustrations of action arises due to the fact that individuals also appear to have too much agency. The capacity for novelty becomes unruly and human affairs, organized around and directed toward novel acts, become confusing. Thus it is that Arendt stressed that the active life necessarily occurs in a condition of plurality—that is, a community of individuals in which each is free and authoritative (1968, p. 61). This plurality is compounded when one considers that there are not just a plurality of agents but also an indefinite plurality of moments in which agency is exercised. Each moment is an occasion of action, but each moment is itself within a historical environment of actions and their fateful trajectories. The fact of plurality requires, as Miller writes, that a price be paid:

What I propose is that we consider the price to be paid for enfranchising discourse. Discourse needs authority. It is this concern that lies at the core of the philosophy of history. History deals in what has been done in one way or another. . . . It is concerned, therefore, with finitude and its career. But in this respect, history seems to alienate itself from the traditional concerns of philosophy, which have tended to stress timelessness and the ahistoric, treating time as derivative and secondary. (PC 106–7; see also MS 66)