

Projections Upon the Void:  
Irving Babbitt's Critique of Naturalism

by

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Irving Babbitt (1865-1933) is one of America's most creative, insightful, and underappreciated thinkers. He spent most of his career teaching literature at Harvard and counted T.S. Eliot among his students. Along with Paul Elmer More, Babbitt was the leading figure in the New Humanism movement in America. He wrote widely for academics and the public on topics including literature, higher education, aesthetics, political theory, and practical American politics. His best-known works are *Literature and the American College* (1908), *Rousseau & Romanticism* (1919), and *Democracy and Leadership* (1924). Shortly after his death, his translation of the Buddhist holy text *The Dhammapada* (1936) was published. Babbitt had many American admirers, and his lifelong interest in and knowledgeable use of ideas from Buddha and Confucius drew attention to his writings in India and especially China.<sup>1</sup>

The most significant conceptual aspect of Babbitt's humanism is his understanding of the mutually reinforcing relationship between imagination and will. For him, a person's imagination is the power that sews together a variety of ideas, impressions, and experiences into a complete vision of reality. Imagination works with the will to encourage a particular kind of conduct, but

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<sup>1</sup> Beginning in the 1980s, Babbitt has experienced a small, but sustained revival in the United States. Much of the credit for this goes to Claes G. Ryn, professor of politics at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. He has written numerous books and articles on Babbittian themes, and he has also authored introductions to a number of Babbitt's works. Ryn has also founded the Babbitt-friendly academic journal *Humanitas* as well as Babbittian research institutions such as the National Humanities Institute and the Center for the Study of Statesmanship.

Babbitt has also received renewed interest in China, especially in the last two decades. Zhang Yuan, a professor of comparative literature at Beijing Normal University, has done much to revive Chinese interest in Babbitt and his humanistic philosophy. She has published her own scholarly works on Babbitt and Babbittian topics as well as several new translations of Babbitt's writings, vastly superior in quality to translations known to people in China during Babbitt's lifetime. In 2012, she opened the Humanities Institute, *Renwen Yanjiusuo*, at BNU.

the will also makes known what type of intuitive perceptions it desires. What is true at the individual level is also true at the national level. It is a social or civilizational imagination, a shared understanding of the purpose of life and the nature of the world, that makes a people who they are. Babbitt believed the authority of the ancient and medieval imaginative symbols that made Western civilization and cultivated a particular type of character had been declining for centuries, but the political and moral desires that gave birth to those symbols remained. Much of the modern story, then, has been about grappling with the problem of imaginative decay and the need for renewal in the arts, religion, philosophy, and politics.<sup>2</sup>

Babbitt held his version of humanism had great potential to meet this modern challenge. At once distinctly modern and in continuity with the wisdom of the past, Babbitt thought expressions of the humanistic imagination were fully capable of cultivating a desirable individual character and civilizational unity. According to Babbitt, the predominant strain of modern imagination has not turned out to be humanistic, but what he calls naturalistic. Naturalism comes in scientific and sentimental forms. Scientific naturalism emphasizes reason, objectivity, impartiality, and research. Babbitt associated scientific naturalism with the seventeenth century English philosopher Francis Bacon. In Babbitt's thought, something like Enlightenment rationalism is a part of this kind of naturalistic imagination. Developing his interpretation of naturalism therefore strengthens this volume by placing the topic of rationalism within a broader imaginative context. Romantic naturalism, in contrast, disparages reason and celebrates irrationality, emotions, subjectivity, spontaneity, and sympathy. Babbitt identified sentimental or romantic naturalism above all with one of the first critics of the Enlightenment, the eighteenth

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<sup>2</sup> On these points, it is clear Babbitt and Eric Voegelin, a figure treated in the previous volume in this series, have some common ground. Voegelin wrote extensively about the symbols of order and disorder that have shaped human existence, but it was only at the end of his life that he began to grasp the role imagination plays in creating ordering symbols.

century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Such differences notwithstanding, both versions of naturalism have much in common when it comes to thinking about nature, human nature, and progress. Especially in politics, both forms of naturalism often fuse into what Babbitt calls humanitarianism.

In general, Babbitt sees naturalistic imagination as highly dangerous because it evades the experiential reality of the moral life, and the ethical preconditions for political order, while deliberately attempting a radical break with the human past. This chapter will explain in more detail Babbitt's assessment of naturalistic imagination and politics. It will begin by offering an understanding of central methodological and conceptual elements in his humanism. It will then focus on both Bacon and Rousseau to explain his critique of scientific and sentimental naturalism. The chapter will next turn to the ways Babbitt sees naturalism in the growth of humanitarian politics in the United States. Finally, Babbitt's sense of the lingering possibilities for a humanistic renewal of modern imagination and politics will be conveyed.

*Babbitt's Humanism: Method and Concepts*

In various writings, Babbitt states his desire to be a "complete positivist."<sup>3</sup> While his choice of words here may be more confusing than illuminating, all he means by this is modern people are inclined to look for experiential validation of truth claims about various topics. He is very comfortable with articulating the reality of the moral life on such terms. A problem he sees with most modern people is a tendency arbitrarily to restrict what counts as evidence in ways that preemptively dismiss accounts of the ethical life as mere opinion. He argues, "the proper procedure in refuting these incomplete positivists is not to appeal to some dogma or outer

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<sup>3</sup> For an explanation and analysis of Babbitt's unfortunate use of the term "positivism," see Claes G. Ryn, "How We Know What We Know: Babbitt, Positivism and Beyond," *Humanitas*, Vol. VIII, No. 1 (1995): 6-25.

authority but rather to turn against them their own principles.”<sup>4</sup> Following such a process, one learns “the constant element in life is, no less than the element of novelty and change, a matter of observation and experience.”<sup>5</sup> For him, it is a matter of immediate perception that “life does not give here an element of oneness and there an element of change. It gives a *oneness that is always changing*. The oneness and the change are inseparable.”<sup>6</sup> Human beings become aware of universality through its concrete manifestations.

Babbitt accounts for the immediate experience of the ethical life by contrasting what he calls, somewhat confusingly, the “natural law” and the “human law.” By natural law he means the laws and facts that govern the physical world, including those studied in natural sciences such as biology, chemistry, and physics. By human law he means the perpetual human encounter with the moral truth of existence, which any person can verify. The human law shows human nature is dualistic. A “civil war” rages in the soul of each person as higher and lower desires compete for attention. It is with such an inner conflict in mind that he writes “I do not hesitate to affirm that what is specifically human in man and ultimately divine is a certain quality of will, a will that is felt in its relation to his ordinary self as a will to refrain.”<sup>7</sup> Over the course of a life, exercising the “will to refrain” leads a person not only to increased happiness, but also to increased knowledge of the nature of that happiness.<sup>8</sup> A failure to use the “inner check” drags a person in the opposite direction. Civil law can help regulate the actions of those who will not govern themselves, but the human law is not ultimately statutory. It is existential.

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<sup>4</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2002), lxxi.

<sup>5</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, lxxii.

<sup>6</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, lxxiii. Emphasis in original.

<sup>7</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1979), 28.

<sup>8</sup> By happiness, Babbitt has in mind something like Aristotle’s *eudaimonia*, or St. Paul’s “peace of God, which passeth all understanding.” He does not mean the hedonism of utilitarianism or the sentimentality of romanticism.

When experience includes the historical experiences of others, among cultures and across time, Babbitt argues his claims about the ethical check and human moral dualism only strengthen. In *Laws*, for example, Plato describes the soul as a place where cords made of dubious metals seek to drag a person into misery, but there is a golden cord, delicate in comparison, that invites a person to move toward justice and happiness. It is this golden cord a person must “hang on to, come what may,” if the good life is to be lived.<sup>9</sup> In his Epistle to the Galatians, St. Paul also captures this conflict within the soul when he depicts the battle between the flesh and the spirit. The flesh wills drunkenness, envy, anger, and hatred; the spirit wills peace, patience, self-control, and love.<sup>10</sup> The Christian life is one of cooperating with God’s grace to will the fruits of the spirit. For Buddha too the ethical life consists of avoiding evil, doing good, and purifying the heart.<sup>11</sup> In *Dhammapada*, it is written, “if one man conquer in battle a thousand times a thousand men, and if another conquers himself, he is the greatest of conquerors.”<sup>12</sup> Such a conqueror needs no master because he is “the lord of self.”<sup>13</sup>

Babbitt’s humanistic efforts to embody the modern critical spirit by making creative use of the past to articulate the truth about the moral life are shaped by his understanding of imagination and reason. The imagination “reaches out and perceives the likenesses and analogies” among various experiences and weaves together a unified pre-rational vision of life and its possibilities.<sup>14</sup> Although the imagination always presents a unity, such a unity is not always grounded in reality, that is, consistent with the human law. The imagination can account for enduring truths about the moral life in its many historical manifestations, but it can also play

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<sup>9</sup> Plato, *The Laws*, trans. Trevor J. Saunders (New York: Penguin, 1970; Reprint, 2004), 31.

<sup>10</sup> Gal. 5:17-23

<sup>11</sup> Irving Babbitt, trans., *The Dhammapada* (New York: Oxford UP, 1936; Reprint, New York: New Directions Books, 1965), 30.

<sup>12</sup> Babbitt, *Dhammapada*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Babbitt, *Dhammapada*, 26.

<sup>14</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 363.

a pivotal role in ignoring or explaining away the ethical responsibilities of human existence. In other words, imaginative unities can be of different moral qualities, and there must be a way to separate the wheat from the chaff. Babbitt believes the most important task reason performs is determining the relationship between an imaginative expression and reality. At its best, reason, “the power in man that discriminates,”<sup>15</sup> tests the truth of an imaginative unity in a Socratic process of “right defining” that “divides and subdivides and distinguishes between the diverse and sometimes contradictory concepts that lurk beneath one word.”<sup>16</sup> In so doing, reason is “working not abstractly, but on the actual material of experience.”<sup>17</sup>

With this understanding of imagination, reason, and experience in mind, Babbitt states, “the only thing that finally counts in this world is a concentration, at once imaginative and discriminating, on the facts.”<sup>18</sup> Even though reason plays an important role in this process, reason alone is incapable of breaking through to reality if the primary materials upon which it operates come from distorted imagination and misleading experience.<sup>19</sup> The presence of sound imagination is necessary for the proper functioning of reason. When rational analysis, imaginative perception, and concrete human experience align, one can be as sure as is humanly possible that contact with reality has been made. If upon rational investigation a particular imaginative expression rejects the hard-won historical lessons of the ethical life, then, regardless

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<sup>15</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 36.

<sup>16</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College: Essays in Defense of the Humanities* (Washington, DC: National Humanities Institute, 1986), 72.

<sup>17</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 36.

<sup>18</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 36.

<sup>19</sup> Claes G. Ryn’s *Will, Imagination and Reason* is the definitive account of the epistemological dimensions of Babbitt’s thought. About the relationship between imagination and reason he writes, “Epistemology can learn from Babbitt that for a person to be receptive to truth, his intuitive-volitive orientation must predispose him toward reality. No amount of argumentation will overcome a faulty theory of man and society unless the arguments are designed to undermine the imaginative construction dear to the heart which energizes and give appeal to the theory.” Claes G. Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1997), 158.

of its allure, it needs to be exposed as false rather than true vision. Babbitt is critical of naturalism because, despite its appeal, it is fundamentally sham vision.

*Babbitt's Critique of Naturalism: Scientific and Sentimental*

Babbitt associates scientific naturalism with Francis Bacon because Bacon's understanding of science, nature, and progress has become common among scientists and non-scientists alike, whether or not they have read or even heard of Bacon.<sup>20</sup> In *The New Organon*, Bacon writes, "the true and legitimate goal of the sciences is to endow human life with new discoveries and resources."<sup>21</sup> Bacon considered the record of human scientific achievement up to his time as mixed. Previous technological innovations were good, but they were produced by "animal instinct" and "chance" rather than the results of "reason, hard work, direction and concentration." The lingering authority of a destitute scientific past stood between the world as it had always been and the world as it should be.<sup>22</sup> If a new scientific method for investigating the natural world could be developed, one that would combine rational theorizing and practical experiments, then the ensuing progress would give humanity nothing less than "the power to conquer and subdue [nature], to shake her to her foundations."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Babbitt is far from alone in so highly estimating Bacon's influence. In the centuries since Bacon's death, B.H.G. Wormald writes, "he was acclaimed as hero of a scientific revolution. He was hailed and celebrated, not as prophet only, but as agent and perpetrator of a great transformation." On Bacon's legacy, Stephen Gaukroger argues, "it is now the scientist, rather than the philosopher, who lays claim to a 'theory of everything' . . . and although this shift was consolidated only in the nineteenth century, the influence of Bacon has been such that it is to him, more than anyone else, that we must trace its origins." See B.H.G. Wormald, *Francis Bacon: History, Politics and Science, 1561-1626* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1, and Stephen Gaukroger, *Francis Bacon and the Transformation of Early-Modern Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>21</sup> Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, eds. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 66.

<sup>22</sup> Bacon, *New Organon*, 85, 64.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin Farrington, *The Philosophy of Francis Bacon: An Essay on Its Development from 1603 to 1609 with New Translations of Fundamental Texts* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 1964), 93. About Bacon's hopes for a new scientific method, Gaukroger explains, "[Bacon] does not offer a theory of method as something that any individual who wants to proceed in natural philosophy must follow. As indicated by the institutional reforms and radical purging of the mind that are required for overcoming, respectively, the external and internal impediments, what is at stake is the transformation of a whole mentality." In Babbittian terms, Gaukroger suggests Bacon's central aim was recasting the imagination of society and its members. See Gaukroger, *Francis Bacon and the Transformation of Early-Modern Philosophy*, 160.

Babbitt also sees Bacon's influence in the naturalistic understanding of human nature, ethics, and work. Bacon was ambivalent about the effect his scientific vision would have on those who attempted to make his dream a reality. On the one hand, he compared those who would shepherd human beings through the many stages of scientific progress to bees. Just as bees worked and took pollen from flowers to make honey, Bacon's followers would work and convert knowledge of nature into useful objects.<sup>24</sup> Bacon's "true sons of the sciences" were called to ascetical lives of science, eschewing pleasure and celebrity, as an act of boundless charity toward all.<sup>25</sup> Bacon gave vivid imaginative expression to his model scientific society in the utopian tract *New Atlantis*. On the other hand, Bacon expressed occasional worry that those who succeed in following his path could become intoxicated with power and detached from religion and morality. Thus he prayed, "that the human may not overshadow the divine" and that "the darkness of unbelief in the face of the mysteries of God may not arise in our hearts."<sup>26</sup> Still, Bacon seemed inclined to believe that in most cases duty to serve humanity would overcome selfish individualism.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed the modern science Bacon inaugurated made human beings miserable rather than happy. He set out to rescue the imaginations of modern people from the tyrannical hold of Baconian naturalism. Rousseau's nature covers both the natural world and human nature. Unlike Bacon, Rousseau saw physical nature as an idyllic and ordered moral good in no need of improvement. Human nature is also good. He claims, "there is no original perversity in the human heart" and "the first movements of nature are always right."<sup>27</sup> In the

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<sup>24</sup> Bacon, *New Organon*, 79.

<sup>25</sup> Bacon, *New Organon*, 30, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Bacon, *New Organon*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Letter to Beaumont," trans. Judith R. Bush and Christopher Kelly, in *Letter to Beaumont, Letters Written from the Mountain, and Related Writings. The Collected Writings of Rousseau Vol. 9*, eds. Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2001), 28.



*Second Discourse*, Rousseau depicted the natural human being as “satisfying his hunger under an oak tree.”<sup>28</sup> For ages too numerous to count, humans lived in such ways and “man remained ever a child.”<sup>29</sup> Then something changed. Humanity fell away from its natural goodness. This occurred, in part, through the development of reason. It was reason that opened human eyes to the ways in which people could exploit nature, and each other, for personal benefit. Thus, human beings moved from solitary happiness to social existences rife with anxiety. Enmity, flattery, ruthlessness, and self-deception came into the world. This was not progress. It was a crime.

Rousseau devoted his political theorizing to recapturing the original spirit of nature. Reason and social life were dangerous, but they could not be abolished. Human beings had evolved to depend on them for survival. The best path forward would be a political project, initiated by a wise lawgiver, in which rationality and sociality were completely transformed to allow the good of all to be pursued while each person obeyed “only himself and remains as free as before.”<sup>30</sup> This is what Rousseau proposes in the *Social Contract*. The content the lawgiver puts into the general will functions as the community’s imagination, guiding citizens toward the correct use of reason and their own true interests. Rousseau was aware of the difficulty of such an undertaking. He recommended extensive institutional protections for the general will including forced freedom, various voting schemes, emergency dictatorship, censorship, and civil religion. Even though Rousseau rejected the idea of progress as understood by Bacon, it is not a stretch to suggest he would consider as true progress any successful efforts to combine total unity and complete autonomy, thereby reclaiming the essence of human nature.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality,” in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), 40.

<sup>29</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality,” 57.

<sup>30</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “The Social Contract,” in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), 148.

<sup>31</sup> Arthur M. Melzer captures the goal of Rousseau’s political philosophy when he writes, “[Rousseau] seeks to embolden humanity to take control of its own destiny. When people see that evil derives from society rather

Babbitt is critical of naturalism on several grounds. Both Bacon and Rousseau reject much of the human past. This leads them to give faulty accounts of nature. Baconian naturalists have learned much about the natural world, Babbitt acknowledges, but they tend to mistake physical nature for the whole of reality. Modern science has become false by dogmatically insisting its knowledge of the natural law can be “a substitute for the human law.”<sup>32</sup> If the Baconian has an incomplete view of nature, then the Rousseauist simply fabricates a nature out of whole cloth. In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau admits this is what he is doing. He writes, “let us therefore begin by putting aside all the facts, for they have no bearing on the question.”<sup>33</sup> Babbitt has such a statement in mind when he describes Rousseau as a man “busy in creating a new set of myths that have, in their control of the human imagination, succeeded in no small measure to the old theology.”<sup>34</sup>

Romantic and scientific naturalism also omits or distorts important facets of human nature. Rousseau repeatedly declares the goodness of individuals, creating a “new dualism” by recasting the “civil war in the cave” of each individual’s soul as a conflict between the good person and evil society.<sup>35</sup> If society is seen as ignorant rather than wicked, then Babbitt believes the typical follower of Bacon holds the same view of human nature as Rousseau. He writes, “by his worship of man in his future material advance, the Baconian betrays no less surely than the

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than from their sinful natures and that it may be cured or ameliorated through human as distinguished from divine action, they will recover a sense of freedom and dignity, a feeling of responsibility for their lives, and a moral determination to improve them.” Claes G. Ryn would agree with this characterization of Rousseau’s ambitions, but he points out the serious dangers inherent in such idyllic notions. Ryn argues, “No amount of utopian assurances about the goodness of the spontaneous will of the people can remove the only too real and persistent lower inclinations of human nature as we know it in history.” See Arthur M. Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau’s Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 19, and Claes G. Ryn, *Democracy and the Ethical Life: A Philosophy of Politics and Community* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 1990), 149.

<sup>32</sup> Irving Babbitt, *The New Laokoon: An Essay on the Confusion in the Arts* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1910), 213.

<sup>33</sup> Rousseau, “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality,” 38.

<sup>34</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 98-99.

<sup>35</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 130.

Rousseauist his faith in man's natural goodness."<sup>36</sup> For Babbitt, ethical dualism is experientially verifiable. The inner check serves as the anchor of sound imagination. Because they either ignore or deny these truths about the human person and the moral life, both the Baconian and the Rousseauist fail imaginatively and ethically where Babbitt thinks it matters most.

Naturalism also has a strained vision of progress. Babbitt does not deny the material progress achieved through modern scientific research and invention, but he argues naturalists have been too quick to equate scientific and moral progress. The former does not guarantee the latter, especially when historical wisdom is repudiated. Babbitt explains, scientific progress "gives the airship, for instance, but does not determine whether the airship is to go on some beneficent errand or is to scatter bombs on women and children."<sup>37</sup> To stick with Babbitt's example, the person who has made real ethical progress knows how to use the "airship" to bring life's enduring moral imperative to bear on a given set of circumstances. Rousseau's concern for "the welfare and progress of mankind in the lump" is no more a credible substitute for the ethical check than the assumption science will be used only for good.<sup>38</sup> Believing either technological progress or the diffusion of fellow feeling makes concerns about the inner life old hat is a symptom of moral breakdown, not progress.

*Babbitt and the Politics of Naturalism: Humanitarianism in America*

Babbitt was no disinterested observer of the times in which he lived. He was deeply troubled by several cultural and political developments, at home and abroad, during the first few decades of the twentieth century. He connected his concerns about the United States and its people to the growth of naturalistic imagination. Like Plato and Aristotle, Babbitt articulates a

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<sup>36</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 138.

<sup>37</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 344.

<sup>38</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 30.

political anthropology in which a particular character type and corresponding quality of imagination is inseparable from the character of the regime. In the American context, he argues humanistic and naturalistic understandings of the relationship between city and soul have been present since the “American experiment in democracy” began, but one or the other has tended to prevail in different historical periods.<sup>39</sup> According to Babbitt, Thomas Jefferson expressed most clearly the naturalistic side of the American imagination during the Framing period.

Like Bacon and Rousseau, Jefferson “has faith in the goodness of the natural man.”<sup>40</sup> Jefferson’s belief in human natural goodness is grounded in his understanding of reason as a widely available faculty with great liberating powers. In a letter written a month after the French Revolution began, Jefferson declared, “I am never afraid of the issue where reason is left free to exert her force; and I will agree to be stoned as a false prophet if all does not end well in [France].”<sup>41</sup> If such good and reasonable people were empowered, as Jefferson believed they had been in the United States, then governing would require little more than “absolute acquiescence in the decisions of the majority—the vital principle of republics.”<sup>42</sup> For Jefferson, there is no civil war in the cave of each person’s soul. Trusting the people with political power therefore accords with common sense, justice, and true democracy.

In late eighteenth century America, Jefferson’s naturalistic imagination was a minority view. By the early twentieth century, the majority of Americans had come around to intuitions about human nature and politics that resonated with Jefferson’s notions. This imaginative shift gave birth to the naturalistic politics of humanitarianism. Babbitt claims humanitarianism is

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<sup>39</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 273.

<sup>40</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 272.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to Diodati, August 3, 1789,” in *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Viking, 1975), 444.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801,” in *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Viking, 1975), 293.

defined by “preoccupation with the lot of the masses” and commitments to service and progress.<sup>43</sup> Domestically, he saw humanitarianism as the driving force behind various reforms to voting and elections designed to increase direct mass political participation. Humanitarianism also inspired the proliferation of laws governing more and more areas of conduct. Babbitt thought the Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution a quintessentially humanitarian remedy for a serious problem. To ban booze, Americans ratified a national constitutional amendment, then drafted and passed national legislation to carry out the popular will expressed in the amendment, and then finally empowered various national agencies to enforce the legislation made possible by the amendment. The scientific humanitarianism of centralization combined with the sentimental humanitarianism of national service in an effort to solve a problem of moral character on the largest imaginable scale. The practical results of this attempt fuse the spirit of Bacon and the spirit of Rousseau were disastrous.

Given the previous paragraph, it may sound rather odd to link Jeffersonianism with humanitarianism. In terms of policy, it is difficult to imagine Jefferson endorsing something like prohibition, especially on a national scale.<sup>44</sup> Looking at the deeper level of imagination, Babbitt thinks the connection makes sense. Like Jefferson, the humanitarians typically see human nature as good, and they tend to deny the reality of ethical dualism. Jefferson thought a minimal state would be up to the task of governing such people, but humanitarian politics suggests the opposite is true. When political or social disorder appears, neither Jefferson nor the humanitarians can appeal to the cultivation of the inner check as a remedy. The only recourse available is

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<sup>43</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 157.

<sup>44</sup> It should be noted Jefferson’s comfort with political power fluctuated depending on the issue and on who controlled government. As George Washington’s secretary of state, he argued chartering a national bank was unconstitutional. As John Adams’s vice president, he voiced disapproval of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 by authoring, anonymously, the “Kentucky Resolutions,” a document claiming nullification of federal law as an aspect of State sovereignty. During his own presidency, Jefferson doubled the size of the United States through the Louisiana Purchase, despite what he saw as his ambiguous constitutional authority to do so.

legislation.<sup>45</sup> Because they substitute social control for inner control, Babbitt is not at all surprised to see some of the fruits of humanitarianism in the United States as the simultaneous growth of laws and lawless behavior.<sup>46</sup>

Humanitarian politics also has global ambitions. As president, Woodrow Wilson justified his invasion of Mexico on humanitarian grounds, stating, “we want to serve the Mexicans if we can, because we know how we would like to be free, and how we would like to be served if there were friends standing by in such a case ready to serve us.”<sup>47</sup> Four years later, he described the American entrance into World War I as an act of service in defense of democracy and “the rights of mankind.”<sup>48</sup> Babbitt thought people who imagined politics in these terms were deceiving others, and perhaps themselves, about what lurks beneath such ostensibly compassionate commitments. He argues the humanitarian understands foreign policy as an extension of charitable service to the world, but “it is more difficult than [the humanitarian] supposes to engage in such a program without getting involved in a program of world empire.”<sup>49</sup> In Babbitt’s view, humanitarian democracy has a strong tendency not toward liberation but toward sentimental imperialism, around the world and at home.<sup>50</sup>

An age that marveled at its vast knowledge, technological improvements, and moral enlightenment concluded the time for true freedom, unbreakable bonds of brotherhood, and universal peace must finally have arrived. As far too many people in the early twentieth century

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<sup>45</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 277.

<sup>46</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 337.

<sup>47</sup> Woodrow Wilson, “Address at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, May 11, 1914,” in *The Politics of Woodrow Wilson: Selections from His Speeches and Writings*, ed. August Heckscher (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956; Reprint, New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 240-241.

<sup>48</sup> Woodrow Wilson, “Address to the Congress, April 2, 1917,” in *The Politics of Woodrow Wilson: Selections from His Speeches and Writings*, ed. August Heckscher (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956; Reprint, New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 278.

<sup>49</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 296.

<sup>50</sup> See William S. Smith, *Democracy and Imperialism: Irving Babbitt and Warlike Democracies* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2019) for a thorough analysis of Babbitt’s foreign policy thought.

learned, sentimental and scientific humanitarianism failed to deliver on its promises. Instead of a heaven made by human hands, the humanitarians produced “the crowning stupidity of the ages—the Great War.” Babbitt writes, “no more delirious spectacle has ever been witness than that of hundreds of millions of human beings using a vast machinery of scientific efficiency to turn life into a hell for one another.”<sup>51</sup> Springing forth from naturalistic imagination, humanitarian politics is appealing precisely because it appears to offer a permanent escape from the human moral predicament. In Babbitt’s estimation, humanitarianism is so far removed from reality that, sooner or later, it brings about conditions where the absence of ethically mature individuals united by the will to refrain is felt finally in a rain of bullets and bombs over people who wonder how such violence is possible when so much progress has been achieved.

The signs and wonders of Baconian science, along with the thrills of Rousseauistic emotionalism, have given many people the impression old limitations, including moral constraints, no longer apply because human nature is good and anything is possible. The general human capacity to focus is limited, and moral maturity requires sustained concentration as well as action. In Babbitt’s estimation, naturalism and humanitarianism have captivated many modern human beings with potent imagination only tenuously connected to the real world. Naturalism succeeds because it flatters people without asking them to do much. But scientific naturalism does not confer wisdom so much as it stimulates “the lust for knowledge.” Romantic naturalism does not liberate natural benevolence so much as it encourages “the lust for feeling.” Combined, these types of naturalism unleash “the lust for power” in the guise of humanitarianism.<sup>52</sup> None of these lusts can be satisfied. No wonder Babbitt believes, “man is in danger of being deprived of every last scrap and vestige of his humanity by this working together of romanticism and

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<sup>51</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 367.

<sup>52</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 346.

science.”<sup>53</sup> When his thoughts on humanitarianism are considered, it is clear his criticism of naturalism is no mere intellectual concern. It goes to the heart of how individuals and nations live and dream.

*Conclusion: Babbitt’s Humanistic Alternative to Naturalism*

Babbitt’s analysis of naturalism strikes at the very essence of the main imaginative unification of modernity. Although he identifies ideas of value within the minds of some of its representatives, for him, naturalism as a whole is rotten at the core. Numerous events since Babbitt died would only strengthen his sense that naturalism and humanitarianism cannot be rehabilitated or met half way.<sup>54</sup> They must be abandoned because the defining characteristic of the movement is avoiding the central problem of existence, that is, the individual responsibility to will the good, practice restraint, and live the ethical life in community with morally mature people.

Viable alternatives to naturalism have existed in the past, including the American past. In the United States, Babbitt opposed to humanitarian imagination a constitutional imagination such as the one that held sway during the American Framing. With characteristic bluntness, John Adams rejects human natural goodness, writing, “bad men increase in knowledge as fast as good men; and science, arts, taste, sense, and letters, are employed for the purposes of injustice and tyranny, as well as those of law and liberty; for corruption, as well as for virtue.”<sup>55</sup> In “Federalist No. 55,” James Madison draws attention to human ethical dualism, stating, “as there is a degree

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<sup>53</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 262.

<sup>54</sup> Claes G. Ryn has made connections to more contemporary political events, especially to American neoconservative foreign policy and to prospects for peace among nations, that either directly or indirectly draw upon Babbitt and lend credence to this claim about how Babbitt might interpret various events, particularly in the United States, since the early 1930s. See Claes G. Ryn, *America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2003), and Claes G. Ryn, *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003).

<sup>55</sup> John Adams, *Discourses on Davila*, in *The Political Writings of John Adams*, ed. George W. Carey (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2000), 357.



of depravity in mankind, which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust: so there are other qualities in human nature, which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence.”<sup>56</sup> Guided by such an understanding of human nature, the Framers committed themselves to a form of democracy rather different from Jefferson’s ideal.

The Framers believed people were capable of governing themselves, but only if they did so within a constitutional system that acted as a political equivalent to the inner check. Thus, their democratic constitutionalism included separation of powers, bicameralism, and federalism, not out of contempt for the people or a commitment to abstract doctrine, but out of the concrete need to account for the best and the worst of which human beings are capable in politics. Further, and in contrast to Jefferson, the Framers took seriously the moral requirements of political leadership. In “Federalist No. 57,” James Madison explains, “the aim of every political constitution is, or ought to be, first, to obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society.”<sup>57</sup> Constitutional design and ethical political leadership are necessary but not sufficient to restrain the lower impulses of the people and allow desires emanating from the public higher will to become realized. In his Farewell Address, George Washington reminds Americans “of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.”<sup>58</sup> Widespread habits of ethical self-restraint, not widespread belief in innate human goodness, are vital to the cultivation of constitutional character and the practice of democracy.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> James Madison, “Federalist No. 55,” in *The Federalist*, The Gideon Edition, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, ed. George W. Carey (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2001), 291.

<sup>57</sup> James Madison, “Federalist No. 57,” in *The Federalist*, The Gideon Edition, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, ed. George W. Carey (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2001), 295.

<sup>58</sup> George Washington, “Farewell Address, September 19, 1796,” in *The American Republic*, ed. Bruce Frohnen (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2002), 76.

<sup>59</sup> Michael P. Federici elaborates the Framers’ constitutional political anthropology at length in *The Political Philosophy of Alexander Hamilton* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

Naturalism has laid waste to older imaginative unifications that were already in decline, and Babbitt never proposes literal returns to past eras of greatness, including the era of the American Framing. The circumstances of the present must always be taken seriously to ascertain plausible possibilities for moral action and imaginative renewal. And yet, as Babbitt argues, ethical dualism and the inner check are permanent components of human life. Such experiences can be formulated in distinct ways, but the experiences themselves are universal. Thus, when the ordering concepts and symbols that capture human moral experiences begin to atrophy, when the transmission of the habits of right conduct that generate and sustain a civilization begins to break down, Babbitt claims imaginative creativity and moral courage are needed most. He writes, “the answer to the enigma of life, so far as there is any, is not for the man who sets up some metaphysical theory, but for the man who, in some sense or other of the word, acts.”<sup>60</sup> Instead of the outer working typically recommended by both scientific and romantic naturalists and their humanitarian progeny, Babbitt has in mind here the kind of inner work according to the human law, known to the Framers, that he calls moral conversion.

For people who want to break free from the naturalism trap along the critical lines of Babbitt’s humanism, the process of conversion begins with exercising their higher will, however uncertain their understanding of it may be. As their experiential knowledge of the moral life grows, such people can work together and craft new imaginative symbols that will allow them to share their collective ethical wisdom with an even larger part of a given society. If these efforts succeed in transmitting over generations patterns of life grounded in a distinct set of beliefs that

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<sup>60</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 253. Babbitt’s emphasis on action over fine theory makes his contempt for the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the focus of a different chapter in this volume, all the more disappointing. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, Alyosha’s humble approach to willing the good where he is, contrasted with Ivan’s murderous solidarity with suffering humanity, is an imaginative depiction of just what Babbitt thinks most true about the ethical life! Instead of finding an ally, Babbitt dismissed Dostoyevsky as a romantic, largely because Sonya in *Crime and Punishment* seemed to him the stereotypical “hooker with a heart of gold.”

illuminates the universal moral imperative of life, then a preponderance of morally responsible people participating in and united by a living civilization is present.<sup>61</sup> Thus, coordinating the ethical striving of individuals is the key to broader cultural and political rejuvenation.<sup>62</sup>

Babbitt was aware that such a prescription might sound inadequate, even naïve, to Baconian or Rousseauistic ears. He admits, “to give the first place to the higher will is only another way of declaring that life is an act of faith.”<sup>63</sup> In his mind, such a humanistic faith is not built on dogmatism or credulity. When interpreted through rightly-ordered imagination, reason, and will, Babbitt believes his faith in the ability of human beings to govern themselves morally and politically is warranted by individual experience and the historical experience of humanity. Especially as an alternative to naturalism and humanitarianism, Americans and others could do far worse than to take Babbitt up on his invitation to get on with the work that makes for true happiness and union.

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<sup>61</sup> Irving Babbitt, “What I Believe: Rousseau and Religion,” in *Character & Culture: Essays on East and West* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1995), 243-244.

<sup>62</sup> The intellectual dimensions of such a task have been taken up in part in Justin D. Garrison and Ryan R. Holston, eds., *The Historical Mind: Humanistic Renewal in a Post-Constitutional Age* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2020). The book draws heavily upon Babbitt and Ryn to address various topics in the areas of culture, ethics, constitutionalism, and foreign policy.

<sup>63</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 252.