

The Humanism of Irving Babbitt Revisited

CLAES G. RYN

NO INTELLECTUAL TASK could be more urgent today than refuting the pseudo-scientific distinction between "facts" and "values" and restoring to the humanities and social sciences a sense of transcendent moral purpose.¹ In this effort we would be well-advised to reconsider the work of a great American whose ideas have yet to be fully comprehended and appreciated, Irving Babbitt (1865-1933). His is a contribution toward the revitalization and renewal of the classical Greek and Judaeo-Christian traditions which is not only original but highly relevant to present intellectual circumstances. Formally a professor of French and comparative literature at Harvard but also a man of formidable range, Irving Babbitt was the leading figure in the movement of ideas known as the New Humanism, which divided American academic opinion in the twenties and thirties. Unfortunately, his books are known today primarily through secondary sources. These do not for the most part deal in depth with his central ideas, and they are frequently unreliable. (See our discussion below.) For complex reasons, Babbitt en-

countered intense opposition as well as admiration among his contemporaries. Many of the available interpretations of his position were formulated in the heat of controversy and reflect an impatient and even intemperate wish to be rid of an uncomfortable opponent. There are also the misinterpretations of sympathetic commentators who have simply failed to grasp his meaning. Part of the blame must be borne by Babbitt himself. He did not always develop his ideas systematically, and he sometimes expressed them in an ambiguous manner. Although most certainly a leading philosopher by the criteria of insight, depth, and comprehensiveness, he was not a professional, "technical" philosopher.

We propose to contribute to the badly needed reinterpretation and assimilation of Babbitt's work by analyzing his notion of humanism as it relates to his central philosophical concept, "the inner check."² Speaking respectfully of Babbitt is not without its dangers. Even today the emotional momentum of the adverse reactions he met during his life has not been exhausted. One can only hope that the time

has come when Babbitt's work can finally be examined with a degree of scholarly detachment.

I

ONE OF THE main controversies surrounding Babbitt concerned his idea of humanism as a moral and intellectual discipline arriving at its values independently of religion. He was criticized on this point both by naturalists and secularists, who rejected his affirmation of a universal principle of good, and by Christians. It was argued against him by the latter that all moral norms must finally be sanctioned by religious faith.

Babbitt does not deny that the moral life may be strengthened by religion, but he insists that the genuine values of civilization do not depend for their justification on religious faith. There is a humanistic level of life with its own intrinsic standard of perfection above the pursuit of pleasure and all other kinds of private advantage, but still distinct from religion. The primary concern of humanism is to establish the existence of a certain quality of will in man which defines his true humanity. Insofar as this will is exercised in social life, Babbitt contends, civilization is realized. Genuine civilization requires no justification apart from the values immanent in it by virtue of its ordering principle. This self-justifying will in man is nothing other than Babbitt's much-debated, but poorly understood, "inner check." Its existence can be verified, he argues, without recourse to revelation. It is a datum of common human experience. In truth, it is the most immediate fact of human consciousness, concealed from view only by faulty moral theories.

Babbitt's idea of humanism is not intended to deny the claims of religion in its own sphere. What he disputes is the necessity for deriving the norms of justice from revelation. Humanism and religion are mutually supportive and yet separate orders of life.

Though humanism and religion both lie on the same ascending path from the naturalistic flux, one must insist that each has its separate domain. It is an error to hold that humanism can take the place of religion. Religion indeed may more readily dispense with humanism than humanism with religion. Humanism gains greatly by having a religious background . . . whereas religion, for the man who has actually renounced the world, may very conceivably be all in all. On the other hand, the man who sets out to live religiously in the secular order without having recourse to the wisdom of the humanist is likely to fall into vicious confusions—notably, into a confusion between the things of God and the things of Caesar. The Catholic Church has therefore been well inspired in rounding out its religious doctrine with the teaching of Aristotle and other masters of the law of measure.³

Drawing in part on Plato, Babbitt develops a dualistic view of human nature. Life presents us with the mystery of the One and the Many. Our most immediate awareness of reality, Babbitt argues, is of a universal tension between opposites which cuts right through our inner life. What we find in the world is simultaneous order and disorder. Life is not a mere chaos of events, a flux of unrelated impressions; it is an ordered flux. "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."⁴ Change and diversity are inseparable from life, but so are their opposites. At work in the flux of events is a principle of order which introduces coherence and harmony into the stream. There is in the world beauty as well as ugliness, truth as well as falsehood, good as well as evil. Set apart from the flux, and yet also in it, is a power which orders life to a purpose. Human nature is dual in the sense that man is a unity of opposing incli-

nations. He is, in Babbitt's terminology, a lower and a higher self. He is drawn, on the one hand, into impulses destructive of individual and social harmony, but able, on the other hand, to structure his impulses toward the opposite goal. Of primary importance to Babbitt, as to Plato, is the moral aspect of this tension at the core of existence. Standing against the human desires in their endless diversity is an unvarying sense of higher purpose which transcends all particular impulses. The same in all men, it harmonizes the individual circumstances of each. By restraining the merely partisan, particularistic wishes present in human society, it brings men together at a common center of value. It is this moral ordering of life, in its aspect as a civilizing force, that Babbitt calls humanistic self-control.

How is it that man is not just swept along by the stream of desires? How is it that he is presented with an opportunity to interfere with his own impulses and create new behavior in consonance with a higher goal? The appearance of the inner check, Babbitt maintains, is finally a mystery, but it is an indisputable fact nevertheless. Although our finite intellect cannot fathom the "ultimate nature" of this ordering principle, it is known to us in immediate experience. "The higher will must simply be accepted as a mystery that may be studied in its practical effects. . . ."⁵ Those effects are described by Babbitt as follows: ". . . 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."⁶ The "ordinary" self is Babbitt's term for man's impulsive life as unordered by moral considerations. The tendency to act without regard for the good of the whole he also calls, depending on the context, the "lower," "natural," or "temperamental" self. To the extent that man rises above his ordinary self by acting from inside the inner check, the latter becomes more firmly established, not only as an ir-

refutable fact of experience, but as the very center of meaningful life.

Babbitt's theory of "the inner check" has led to vast misunderstanding. Does he mean that morality is a completely negative act, some sort of ascetic self-denial? One of the reasons why this concept has caused so much confusion is that Babbitt's readers have frequently failed to put it in the proper context. The term is employed by him in opposition to all of those who would forget the duality of human nature and identify the moral good with particular human intentions. He is sharply critical, for instance, of the moral sense school of thought associated with Shaftesbury. Another of his main opponents is Jean-Jacques Rousseau whose morality of the heart vests the good in unrestrained impulse. Our moral will, Babbitt asserts repeatedly, must not be confused with gushes of "sympathy" or "pity." It is better described as an inhibition on our outgoing impulses. "As against the expansionists of every kind," he separates the ordering principle from that which is ordered. Not only is the urge of the moment frequently in conflict with the good, so that morality requires an act of self-restraint; but in those cases when our impulses do harmonize with the moral end and are thus not censured by the inner check, they are still transcended by that principle itself. There is nothing more certain, Babbitt believes, than that morality is a creation of will, an overcoming of obstacles. It is through spiritual activity, not through some easy yielding to the impulse of the moment, that good is brought into the world.

Civilization is something that must be deliberately willed; it is not something that gushes up spontaneously from the depths of the unconscious. Furthermore, it is something that must be willed first of all by the individual in his own heart.⁸

There are no shortcuts to the genuine values of social life. Tradition and social reform can aid, but never replace, individual moral effort.

In spite of Babbitt's emphasis on civilization as the fruit of humanistic exercise of the higher will, it has been alleged again and again that he has a purely negative conception of the good. The following comment by Edmund Wilson is typical of this strangely unperceptive reading of Babbitt: "... how can one take seriously a philosophy which enjoins nothing but negative behavior?"⁹ In a similar vein, Allen Tate believes that he has exposed "the negative basis of Professor Babbitt's morality. The good man is he who 'refrains from doing' what the 'lower nature dictates,' and he need do nothing positive."¹⁰ Henry Hazlitt writes: "The insistence, you will notice, is always on the purely *negative* virtues."¹¹ Babbitt's real theory is that morality has two aspects, renunciation and affirmation of impulse. These acts are two dimensions of one and the same effort to realize good. In its relation to what is destructive of our spiritual unity, the higher will is felt as a restraint. The moral end is advanced by censuring what is opposed to it. That Babbitt pays much attention to this "negative" side of morality is due to his assessment of what truths our time needs to hear the most. The main threat to the values of civilization today is not an excess of renunciation of the world, but an excessive release of the "expansive desires." What modern Western man needs to hear the most is not that the good is achieved through affirmation of impulse, although that is a part of the truth, but that man's true humanity lies in his ability to put checks on his desires. In the Middle Ages, with its strong emphasis on otherworldliness, the point that good can be advanced by positive human acts would have deserved more attention.

Babbitt's frequent, indeed, too frequent, use of a certain term, "the inner check," to denote moral effort should not conceal the fact that in one aspect man's higher will is not just experienced as a negation. In the person who has followed Aristotle's admonition to develop sound habits and a taste for moral values, the impulsive life tends to merge with the higher will. The sense of

purpose which is experienced as a "check" on morally destructive impulse becomes a feeling of acting in consonance with one's own true humanity. The result of thus having brought one's character into harmony with a transcendent principle, Babbitt and Aristotle agree, is happiness. This is the affirmative, "positive" side of the moral life. Even here, however, there is justification for using the term "the inner check" to describe man's higher will, for human acts are never identical to what gives them ethical direction. Higher than particular instances of moral behavior, higher even than man's most noble acts, is the ultimate standard of perfection itself. The tension between immanent and transcendent is never completely removed.¹²

II

GRANTED THAT self-discipline of some kind is necessary if man is not to get lost in complete chaos, must not that discipline be tied to some outside standard, external to man himself? The principle of moral order, Babbitt contends, is found within the human self. But without an external image of perfection, does not that self-discipline have to be exercised at random? Throwing up his arms in puzzlement, T. S. Eliot exclaims, "What is the higher will to *will*. . . ? If this will is to have anything on which to operate, it must be in relation to external objects and to objective values."¹³ Eliot is familiar with Babbitt's view that in its humanistic dimension the inner check is "a will to civilization," but he has great difficulty finding any definite meaning in this idea. Babbitt's "civilization" appears to leave the goal of life an empty form.

It seems, on the face of it, to mean something definite; it is, in fact, merely a frame to be filled with definite objects, not a definite object itself. I do not believe that I can sit down for three minutes to will civilization without my mind's wandering to something else. I do not mean that civilization is a mere word; the word means something quite

real. But the minds of the individuals who can be said to "have willed civilization" are minds filled with a great variety of objects of will, according to place, time, and individual constitution; what they have in common is rather a habit in the same direction than a will to civilization.¹⁴

This passage is clear evidence that Eliot has not grasped the meaning of Babbitt's "inner check." Ironically, Babbitt would agree almost completely with these sentences, which Eliot believes to be a refutation of his position. Babbitt wholeheartedly agrees that civilization is marked by the diversity of emphasis and perspective of those who contribute to it. What joins those who will civilization is indeed "a habit in the same direction." Babbitt would say that it is a habit which brings unity into a multiplicity of activity. Eliot's mistake is in opposing to this "habit" what Babbitt calls "the will to civilization." What he does not see is that civilization as Babbitt understands it is defined by the quality of will which brings it into existence, namely, "the inner check." This unifying ethical activity is equally well described as "a habit in the same direction."

Perhaps we may best explain "the inner check" as a certain spirit in which men can act. Ethically speaking, there are two ways of structuring conduct. The immoral one is to insist on one's own private advantage or the advantage of one's own group to the detriment of everybody else. A special case of the same basic category of action is to seek one's own advantage in an enlightened manner. The intelligent egotist is willing to compromise with others as a means of securing his own maximum satisfaction over time. The other way to act, the moral way, is to seek to rise above mere personal or group advantage and bias. We are referring to the genuine wish (in the sense of a "divine discontent") to transcend all partisanship. The two ways of human action are thus defined in contradistinction to each other. There is action that is moti-

vated by the self in man which puts individuals and groups in conflict with each other, and there is action inspired by that other self which tends to bring men into harmony with all who are similarly motivated. It is the spirit of the latter, supra-individual self that Babbitt gives the name "the inner check."

It should perhaps be added that in viewing the inner check as the spiritually unifying principle of civilization Babbitt is not denying that there are other aspects of the civilizing effort than the purely moral. His point is that the final measure of the success of this effort is the extent to which the various pursuits of the good society, such as science, literature, art, and politics, advance the moral end.

The goal of civilization stays forever indefinite or "open" in the sense that the higher will is manifested in the unique circumstances of emerging situations. In another sense, however, the end is *not* indefinite. All truly moral acts are performed in one and the same spirit. Man's higher self wills the special quality of life which can be created when selfishness is restrained. Civilization refers to something quite definite: the good life of community. But the particulars of that quality of life depend on the circumstances out of which the higher will is trying to shape good. It does not work in the abstract, but on the concrete material of given situations. The nobility of its creations is likely to be enhanced by its being able to work in the context of sound tradition. Although the individual is never saved from moral perplexity by such favorable conditions, but has to create his own moral synthesis out of the unique situation facing him, that synthesis is helped along by the general directives contained in the inherited norms of his society. His attempt to articulate ethical intuition can draw on previous attempts to give definite human form to man's sense of higher purpose. In a genuinely civilized society, tradition enriches the individual's moral imagination.¹⁵ Eliot has not understood that the will to civilization is actually a tran-

scendent spirit in which man creates new behavior. It is itself the "external" standard for which he sees a need. It is "external" in that it transcends all individual circumstances and in that it is never exhausted by human action.

One particularly misleading rendering of Babbitt's thought, which has been reprinted several times, has been offered by Allen Tate. Babbitt's morality, Tate alleges, "is only an arbitrarily individualistic *check upon itself*. . ."¹⁶ This interpretation does nothing less than turn Babbitt's ideas upside down. T. S. Eliot, too, although reading Babbitt in a more sympathetic frame of mind, is suspicious of his view that the human has its own intrinsic standard of perfection which can be ascertained without relying on "outer" authority, such as Church doctrine. This, Eliot argues, is an invitation to arbitrariness. The source of order must be outside the individual:

The sum of a population of individuals, all ideally and efficiently checking and controlling themselves, will never make a whole. And if you distinguish so sharply between "outer" and "inner" checks as Mr. Babbitt does, then there is nothing left for the individual to check himself by but his own private notions and his judgment, which is pretty precarious.¹⁷

Babbitt would agree completely that there is always a tendency in man to act according to his own "private notions" and thus with an egocentric bias. What Eliot does not see is that *it is on precisely this inclination that the higher will is a check*. To the extent that it is exercised, therefore, it does have the effect of turning "a population of individuals" into "a whole." ". . . the individual who is practising humanistic control is really subordinating to the part of himself which he possesses in common with other men, that part of himself which is driving him apart from them."¹⁸ Those who take on that discipline are harmonizing their lives with reference

to the same center of value and moving toward communion.

III

THE MAIN REASON why it is difficult for Eliot and some other Christians to understand Babbitt's idea of the inner check is that they are accustomed to thinking of the ultimate principle of good as the will of a personal God set apart from the human. Babbitt is perfectly willing to grant that this ultimate standard is external to man in the sense of his "ordinary" or "natural" self. He ranges himself "unhesitatingly on the side of the supernaturalists."¹⁹ But the human, Babbitt argues, is *not* just man's "ordinary" self. To be a man is to be able to impose order on the flux, most importantly to give moral structure to life. Traditional Christianity maintains, and Protestantism with particular emphasis, that it is by God's grace that man is able to rise out of sin. No one could insist more than Babbitt that within the context of Christianity the doctrine of grace is indispensable to the moral life. When speaking within that framework he even equates his own notion of the higher will with grace.²⁰ But he is also interested in the religions of the Far East and trying to find a common denominator. For that reason he usually prefers to speak about the higher will without emphasizing the Christian interpretation of it. His ambition is to establish the reality of the fact itself without referring to dogmatic formulations based in part on revelation. Whether it is by the grace of a personal God or some other factor that man is able to temper his egocentric inclinations, his having that ability is an irrefutable fact. If the ethical will were not in some sense *in* man, it would be nonsensical to speak of him as a moral being. Whatever else the capacity for self-discipline may be, it is part of man's knowledge of himself. It helps to define the human.

Some Christians have been disturbed by Babbitt's philosophy of humanism because

it seems to build up man at the expense of God. And yet Babbitt repeatedly argues that humanistic self-discipline is grounded in the very opposite of spiritual arrogance. Man's higher will, he argues, transcends the individual and humbles him by holding out the image of his own perfection. If the two Christians, Eliot and Tate,²¹ had really understood his moral philosophy, one may doubt that they would have regarded it as a threat to religion. They failed to grasp that Babbitt's "inner check" refers to the same intuition of higher destiny which Christianity has given a certain theological formulation calling it "the will of God" or "the Holy Spirit." Babbitt differs from many Christians, firstly, in that he is primarily interested in the manifestations of this higher will insofar as it relates to the good life on this earth, and, secondly, in that he wants to establish its existence and compelling nature without having recourse to revelation. A person may reject Christian dogma, but there is no way, short of obscurantism, to deny the spiritual reality itself for which dogma offers an interpretation. "The Holy Spirit" is something known by man in immediate experience. It is because in a sense *in* man, that he can act in its spirit.

It should be carefully noted that in emphasizing the humanistic dimension of the inner check Babbitt is not playing down the importance of religion. He always seeks to relate humanism to what is above it. Much of his writing is devoted to defining the level of religion.²² His reason for giving most of his attention to outlining the elements of humanistic discipline is his belief that "the world would have been a better place if more persons had made sure they were human before setting out to be super-human."²³ To be civilized is difficult enough, indeed, frequently has proved too difficult even for those who have had at their disposal the guidance of sound tradition.

I differ from the Christian . . . in that my interest in the higher will and the

power of veto it exercises over man's expansive desires is humanistic rather than religious. I am concerned, in other words, less with the meditation in which true religion always culminates, than in the mediation or observance of the law of measure that should govern man in his secular relations.²⁴

As humanistic discipline, the inner check establishes the rule of justice, *i.e.*, those conditions which make for social and individual harmony, "but it may be carried much further until it amounts to a turning away from the desires of the natural man altogether—the 'dying to the world' of the Christian."²⁵ The first concern of religion is otherworldliness. "My kingdom is not of this world." As we have indicated, Babbitt regards these two aspirations as mutually supportive. The values of humanistic discipline and religion "are after all only different stages in the same ascending 'path' and should not be arbitrarily separated."²⁶ The law of charity in which religion culminates is the highest manifestation of the inner check. The law of justice applies only to the creation and maintenance of the good life on this earth. Given the flawed nature of man this means something much less than turning the other cheek or walking the extra mile.

IV

THOSE WHO HAVE not with sufficient intensity experienced the sense of higher purpose which is known to most men in some degree will forever dispute its final reality, claiming that there are only subjective standards of good. For those, on the other hand, who seek to exercise that special quality of will, life is a steady growth in the hold on life and in happiness. To them, the denials of the reality of the higher self becomes the height of unreality. According to a central tenet in Babbitt's thought, all moral theories will ultimately have to be judged by the fruits they bring forth. Sound principles are validated by the spiritual harmony they afford the individuals who follow

them. Spurious moral theories are revealed as such by not keeping what they promise when put to practice. To those who doubt the intrinsic value of civilization Babbitt would say: If you are not willing to accept on authority the superiority of certain principles of life, which would save you much time and disillusionment, then judge for yourself the fruits of the programme of private advantage and the programme of ethical self-control.

Against the modern positivist who is pre-occupied with studying the world of physical objects and trying to reduce man to the same level of explanation, Babbitt urges "a more complete positivism." Let us indeed be true to the facts, but not just some partial array of evidence. One dimension of experience is man's "inner life," including moral experience. This aspect of life is arbitrarily ignored by many modern scholars. According to Babbitt, "the proper procedure in refuting these incomplete positivists is not to appeal to some dogma or outer authority but rather to turn against them their own principles."²⁷

The modernists have broken with tradition partly because it is not sufficiently immediate, partly because it is not sufficiently experimental. Why not meet them on their own ground and, having got rid of every ounce of unnecessary metaphysical and theological baggage, oppose to them something that is both immediate and experimental—namely the presence in man of a higher will or power of control? I use the word experimental deliberately by way of protest against the undue narrowing of this word by the scientific naturalists to observation of the phenomenal order and of man only in so far as he comes under this order.²⁸

Our "inner life" warrants attention even more than physical nature, for its reality is more securely established in experience than anything else. It is more immediately known to us than the subject-matter of physical science.

According to Mr. Walter Lippmann, the conviction the modern man has lost is that "there is an immortal essence presiding like a king over his appetites." But why abandon the affirmation of such an "essence" or higher will, to the mere traditionalist? Why not affirm it first of all as a psychological fact, one of the immediate data of consciousness, a perception so primordial that, compared with it, the deterministic denials of man's moral freedom are only a metaphysical dream? One would thus be in a position to perform a swift flanking movement on the behaviourists and other naturalistic psychologists who are to be regarded at present as among the chief enemies of human nature.²⁹

Babbitt wants to retain the modern emphasis on referring questions of truth and falsehood to practical verification, but only after having broadened it to take in the specifically human type of experience. "The supreme maxim of the ethical positivist is: By their fruits shall ye know them."³⁰ The existence of the higher will as a self-justifying principle of conduct is conclusively demonstrated by acting on it.

Babbitt would like to be as "experimental" as possible also when dealing with the divine. As against those who would associate religion very closely with dogma, he wonders "whether one's religiousness is to be measured by the degree to which one brings forth the 'fruits of the spirit' or by one's theological affirmations."

If one maintains that the theological affirmations are a necessary preliminary to bringing forth the fruits, early Buddhism (not to speak of other non-Christian faiths) supplies evidence to the contrary. If I had indeed to give an opinion, I should say . . . that Buddhism has had as many saints as Christianity and that it has, moreover, been less marred than Christianity by intolerance and fanaticism.³¹

Babbitt's point of view in regard to re-

ligion may be summed up in these words: "Knowledge in matters religious waits upon will."³²

It would be a mistake to regard Babbitt's view of religion as anti-dogmatic. He is quite willing to admit that more can be true in spiritual matters than can be positively verified in general human experience. His ambition is to articulate what the great religious and ethical systems have in common. They have all emerged, he argues, in response to one and the same intuition of transcendent purpose. In the West, one of the most pressing tasks is to find the bond between men of different religious denominations and those who, while friendly to religion, have not found it possible to embrace a particular theology. They can be joined ecumenically against the forces destructive of civilization. If Christianity is losing its hold in the West, it may still be possible to save many of the values it has articulated and supported. For those who are ultimately concerned about reviving religion, the first step ought to be to promote the kind of elementary spiritual discipline without which all spiritual values are threatened. There is no pressing need for the humanist to take sides decisively between competing theological claims. For his purposes, Babbitt prefers to leave open the question of the theological rendering of that divine reality into which the ascending path of morality tends to bring the individual.

V

IRVING BABBITT's call for "a more complete positivism" that encompasses man's "inner" life offers a challenge to those who pride themselves on accepting as true what can be verified in concrete experience. Since Babbitt is broadening the meaning of the term "experience" in relation to how it is used by modern empiricists, there is no guarantee that his approach will make a dent in the positivistic armor. But it would seem that the time is ripe for a fundamental questioning of the modern ten-

dency to submerge the human in the world of objects postulated by natural science. Babbitt is suggesting a way out of scientism. He proposes a new sensitivity to the nature of specifically human experience while trying to take over what is valid in the modern commitment to critical inquiry.

Although Babbitt's attempt to focus attention on the facts of man's inner life merits careful study, it also suffers from some weaknesses which need to be remedied. We may refer briefly to his shortcomings in the field of logic. In spite of the fact that Babbitt's outlook is centered in a dualistic interpretation of life, he never comes very close to discovering the existence of the dialectical philosophical reason which alone is adequate for dealing with the paradox of self-experience.

The person who is familiar only with modern symbolic logic or the old school book logic of Aristotle is likely to object to Babbitt's moral theory that its assumption that man is a unity of two selves is a case of blatant self-contradiction. How could man be at once a higher and a lower self? He would have to be either one and the same or some sort of split personality, living now in the one self and then in the other, which is nonsense. What can be said against this objection is that Babbitt's view of human nature develops a theme as old as human self-knowledge. Among the philosophers, Plato emphasizes the tension inside the soul. Among the religious sages, St. Paul espouses a similar dualistic view: "For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me."³³ This paradoxical use of the word "I" has forced itself on men in all ages. What it indicates is that man is a tension between incompatible wills. The recognition of this fact is reflected in our everyday way of speaking about ourselves. "I am not myself." "I did not want to do it." What appears to the formalistic modern logicians to be a contradictory use of the word "I" is still a statement of fact. The objection by symbolic logic to

dualistic moral philosophy is dispelled by reality itself. Apparently its type of reason is not equipped to handle the facts of self-experience. It may be well-suited to dealing pragmatically with a world of objects, but about the world of the specifically human it can say nothing. What is needed in order to give a faithful account of immediate experience is a dialectical logic, one that does not deny the paradox of the human self, but simply *thinks* it. Babbitt does use such a logic when he develops his ethical theory, but this fact is never brought to full philosophical awareness. "Reason" for Babbitt connotes reifying, pragmatic rationality, that is, the kind of logic which cuts up reality into separate objects. This explains his dissatisfaction with it as a means of ethical inquiry. It also explains why he feels a need to give another name to the knowledge by which we grasp the paradox of our being. He calls it "intuition."

In a certain sense, Babbitt is quite justified in regarding our perception of moral reality as something other than rational knowledge. Before we can formulate a philosophical concept of "the ethical" we must somehow know its referent in concrete experience. To act morally is not to philosophize, but to create new reality. The role of philosophy is to examine the nature of what has been willed. But in another sense Babbitt is not correct when he looks at ethical insight as a non-rational process. Reason does have a role to play beyond the one he assigns to it. Babbitt's own examination of the moral life is an attempt to give a theoretical account of the facts. Although his various arguments seek verification by an appeal to our actual moral experience, he is also developing *concepts*, such as "the inner check," "the lower self," "humanistic discipline," etc. By what theoretical process does he formulate these concepts? Their source is not reifying reason. They are based on a type of thought which does not treat the subject-matter of self-experience as a collection of "things," but as what it is, an irreducible paradox. Although not

fully aware of it, Babbitt is using the reason of philosophy.

It is not possible here to outline the elements of a dialectical logic and show how it is appropriate to the duality of life. Our purpose is only to indicate one area in which Babbitt's thought is deficient. It would be unfair to blame him for not having explicitly incorporated into his moral theory the kind of logic which is its natural supplement. Very few thinkers in the twentieth century, even among the professional philosophers, have discovered it. Babbitt does deserve credit for seeing that reason, as understood by his contemporaries, cannot accommodate the facts of self-experience. His rejection of pragmatic rationality as a tool of spiritual insight is an important step toward a sound ethical philosophy. Still, his legitimate reaction against the exaggerated claims of reifying reason, because not balanced by recognition of another, genuinely philosophical kind of thought, pushes him further in the direction of "intuitionism" than is necessitated by the truths he is trying to convey. If Babbitt had seen that philosophy has the means of bridging, although not closing, the gap between theory and practice, he would not have felt quite the same need to reduce the pretensions of the intellect. He would have been in a position to rest his case for the higher will, not just on "affirmation," but on philosophic-scientific *reasoning*. Discovery of dialectical logic might have transformed Babbitt from a philosophically very important literary scholar to a philosopher in the full sense of the word. As coupled with a new logic, his position offers a powerful challenge to morally relativistic or nihilistic pseudo-science in the humanities and social sciences.³⁴

VI

OUR ANALYSIS of Babbitt's idea of humanism has left important questions unanswered. What may be hoped is that our remarks will help to dispel some awkward interpretations of his thought which have

probably been an obstacle to renewed scholarly interest in his work. It would be unfortunate indeed if analysis of Babbitt's ideas did not move beyond the rather sterile debate about humanism which took place in the twenties and thirties. That debate somehow never got down to a careful examination of his real position. Much of the time it revolved around what he was mistakenly *supposed* to have said. In addition, most of his critics *asserted* the invalidity of his ideas rather than *argued* against them.

There is a right way and a wrong way to deal with Babbitt's work as with that of any serious thinker. The proper question for scholars to ask would appear to be: Do Babbitt's various concepts faithfully account for the facts of human experience? In other words: Is he providing a scientific analysis of life? The wrong way of dealing with Babbitt's ideas, so much in evidence

in the twenties and thirties, would be to judge them on the basis of whether they happen to conform to one's own favorite preconception of truth. If there is any point in studying him, it would have to be that he might have something original to offer. It does not advance philosophical scholarship for positivists, for instance, to attack him because his notion of a "fact" is different from the empirico-quantitative. It must be shown instead exactly how he fails to do justice to the facts of the human. It would be equally fruitless to complain that Babbitt fails to endorse some particular religious dogma, unless that complaint can be stated in the form of a philosophical challenge. It is incumbent on the critic to show just how he violates the available evidence. The pertinent question is if he can be refuted *on scientific grounds*. Revelation and philosophical proof, it should be remembered, are different things.

¹This statement of scholarly need should not be confused with the proposal, much in vogue at the present time, to infuse the various disciplines with so-called "value-preferences" in order to make up for scientific indifference to burning moral questions. A cacophony of subjectively derived "value-commitments" is precisely what is not needed. ²Among those who should be commended for trying to draw attention to Babbitt as a social thinker in the last decades are Russell Kirk and Peter Viereck. See, for instance, Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* (New York: Avon Books, 1968), pp. 399-411, and Viereck's *Conservatism* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1956), pp. 104-105. There are many others who have been deeply influenced by Babbitt but who have chosen not to acknowledge formally their intellectual debt. Among the most distinguished are Richard Weaver and Walter Lippmann. Weaver's Master's thesis, "The Revolt Against Humanism," was accepted by Vanderbilt University in 1933. His various books, for instance, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948), show the unmistakable traces of Babbitt's ideas. Babbitt's influence on Lippmann, a former student of his at Harvard, is discernible, for instance, in *The Public Philosophy* (New York: Mentor Books, 1955), especially chapters 7-11. ³Irving Babbitt, "Humanism: An Essay at Definition," in Norman Foerster, ed., *Humanism and America* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat

Press, 1967; first published 1930), pp. 43-44. This essay suffers from some of the weaknesses of Babbitt's writing, but it is still useful in understanding his position. ⁴Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1955; originally published in 1919), p. 7 (emphasis in original). ⁵Babbitt, "Humanism: An Essay at Definition," p. 40. ⁶Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1952; originally published in 1924), p. 6. ⁷*Ibid.*, p. 6. ⁸*Ibid.*, p. 229. ⁹Edmund Wilson, "Notes on Babbitt and More," in C. Hartley Grattan, ed., *The Critique of Humanism* (New York: Brewer and Warren, 1930), p. 46. ¹⁰Allen Tate, "The Fallacy of Humanism," in *Ibid.*, p. 141. ¹¹Henry Hazlitt, "Humanism and Value," in *Ibid.*, p. 95 (emphasis in original). ¹²A more extensive analysis of "the inner check" as happiness is given in my own forthcoming, *Democracy and the Ethical Life* (LSU Press). ¹³T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960), p. 425 (emphasis in original). Eliot's various criticisms of Babbitt should not conceal that he was also profoundly impressed and influenced by Babbitt as a thinker and as a person. A former student of his at Harvard, Eliot has commented as follows on Babbitt's forceful, idea-oriented instruction and work as a whole: "I do not believe that any pupil who was ever deeply impressed by Babbitt, can ever speak of him with that mild tenderness one

feels towards something one has outgrown or grown out of. If one has once had that relationship with Babbitt, he remains permanently an active influence; his ideas are permanently with one, as a measurement and test of one's own." From a Memoir by T. S. Eliot in Frederick Manchester and Odell Shepard, eds., *Irving Babbitt Man and Teacher* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), p. 104. ¹⁴T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p. 426. ¹⁵The moral imagination is a central and original concept in Babbitt's thought which would deserve separate treatment. Praising Edmund Burke, Babbitt writes: "He saw how much of the wisdom of life consists in an imaginative assumption of the experience of the past in such fashion as to bring it to bear as a living force upon the present. The very model that one looks up to and imitates is an imaginative creation. A man's imagination may realize in his ancestors a standard of virtue and wisdom beyond the vulgar practice of the hour; so that he may be enabled to rise with the example to whose imitation he has aspired." Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, pp. 103-104. ¹⁶Allen Tate, "The Fallacy of Humanism," p. 145 (emphasis in original). This essay cannot be considered one of Tate's better efforts. It compares unfavorably with interpretations of Babbitt offered by other Catholic writers. ¹⁷Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p. 424. ¹⁸Babbitt, "Humanism: An Essay at Definition," p. 49. ¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 39. ²⁰See the introduction to Irving Babbitt, *On Being Creative* (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1968; first published in 1932). ²¹Ironically, although Tate attacked Babbitt in the name of Christianity, he

was only nominally a Christian when he wrote what has been quoted. On the subject of Tate's religious development, see Monroe Spear, "The Criticism of Allen Tate," in Radcliffe Squires, ed., *Allen Tate and His Work*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972). ²²Babbitt has even contributed an English translation from Pāli of one of the original Buddhist holy texts, *The Dhammapada*, translated and with an Essay on Buddha and the Occident by Irving Babbitt (New York: New Directions Books, 1965; originally published in 1936). ²³Babbitt, "Humanism: An Essay at Definition," pp. 28-29. ²⁴Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, p. 6. ²⁵Babbitt, "Humanism: An Essay at Definition," p. 47. ²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 41. ²⁷Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, p. 5. ²⁸Babbitt, "Humanism: An Essay at Definition," pp. 44-45. ²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 39. ³⁰Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, p. 9. ³¹Babbitt, *On Being Creative*, pp. xxxiii-xxxiv. ³²Babbitt, *The Dhammapada*, p. 109. ³³*Romans*, 7:19-20. ³⁴The most sophisticated attempt to develop the logic of self-knowledge would seem to be the work of Benedetto Croce, especially *Logic as the Science of the Pure Concept* (London: Macmillan, 1917). Croce avoids most of the extravagant and highly dubious metaphysical extrapolations in Hegel. It should also be stressed that Croce's dialectical logic can be divorced from his questionable monistic assumptions which amount to a denial of the reality of evil. For a perceptive attempt to apply Crocean logic to ethical dualism, see Folke Leander, *The Inner Check* (London: Edward Wright, 1974).

Utopias and Ideologies: Another Chapter in the Conservative Demonology

ERIK VON KUEHNELT-LEDDIHN

I

CONSERVATIVES in Europe no less than in the Americas and, above all, in the English-speaking world have developed a specific dislike for utopias and ideologies and, at first sight, they seem to be right. *Colosseum*, a very bright English conservative journal of opinion in the 1930's once published a special number with the words "UTOPIAS ARE OPIUM FOR THE PEOPLE" all over the cover. There can be little doubt that utopias serve very often as secular substitutes for the religious concept of an other-worldly paradise or even for Paradise Lost here on earth: they stand for some sort of Edenism. The efforts to establish utopias have, without a shred of doubt, created untold harm; oceans of blood have been the consequence.

Nor can it be questioned that such utopias, even those of a religious nature, propagated by various Christian sects between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries, had a strictly leftist character. "Leftist" we call a political-social-economic concept of man and society which is immanentist, materialistic, egalitarian, "identitarian," *i.e.* imbued with a real hatred not only of inequalities, but even of variety—an outlook which

is hostile to transcendence, personality, local rights and of freedom based on order and tradition. Needless to say that the driving motor in the transformation of most utopian visions into reality is an ideology, as a rule a leftist ideology, a fact which generates the conviction that *all* ideologies are leftist. We hear that the Right has no ideology unless, of course, we consider National Socialists (and Fascists) to be representatives of the Right, which, in spite of a popular misconception, they obviously are not. The National Socialists (and Fascists) were supporters of collectivistic utopian mass movements: the ardent followers of Hitler were as typically leftist as the Communists. Their utopia was the millenarian "Third Reich" and they certainly had a fixed, freedom-hating ideology. Yet it is curious to see how so many people maintaining that they reject all extremes on what they consider to be the right and the left, admit the similarities between Communists and National Socialists, but derive their very obvious affinity from the belief that "extremes always meet."

To insist that "extremes meet" is a *fausse idée claire* (Tocqueville's expression): extremely far and near, extremely hot and