How We Know What We Know: Babbitt, Positivism and Beyond

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American academia is generally not friendly to systematic and "technical" philosophy. Although American intellectual culture has produced thinkers of international stature, it typically tries to get by with theoretical generalities. A lack of philosophical discipline, depth and continuity accounts for the ease with which inferior doctrines get their time in the sun.

The theory of knowledge has long seemed to American intellectuals an especially unappealing and arduous subject, but in recent years the winds of fashion have created a surge of interest in "epistemology." That surge has produced criticisms of teleology, structure, doctrine, system, etc., which are seen as representing "violence," tyrannical power, exhaustion, false security, or other denials of life. Sometimes these critiques have been salutary counters to rationalism, the disingenuous certainty of dogmatism and other evasions of real existence. More often they have been ideologically inflamed and themselves blatant examples of the mentioned dangers. Frequently extreme and indiscriminate in their opposition to intellectual structure, they have brought to new heights the old resistance to philosophical discipline of any kind. Because so much of the recent epistemological writing has been abstruse, esoteric, lingoistic and distant from concrete life, it has at the same time fed the traditional American disdain for "philosophical abstractions."

Whatever the weaknesses of the approaches now in fashion, epistemology must not be shunned. Careful, in-depth attention to

questions of knowledge is one of the preconditions for a reinvigoration of the humanities and social sciences. In the study of man as a social and cultural being, how is knowledge obtained? What is pertinent evidence? For about a century the dominant answers to those questions have been provided by positivism of one kind or another. When the dust settles after the current epistemological controversies, positivism is not likely to have been driven from power. Disillusionment with the element of faddishness and frivolity in so much current academic discourse may give a stale doctrine a new lease on life.

A Thinker for Our Time

Young scholars sensing the need for fundamentally rethinking the epistemology of the humanities and social sciences do well to examine for themselves certain thinkers from this century whose reputations were shaped largely by their opponents or whose ideas may have been taken in unintended directions by others. One such thinker is Irving Babbitt (1865-1933), the professor of French and comparative literature at Harvard whose work formed an indictment of America's intellectual and cultural elite. Although his writing is chiefly addressed to aesthetical and moral questions, it is highly significant for the theory of knowledge. In fact, his work is directly relevant to much present epistemological discussion.[1]

Babbitt's resilience and continuing appeal.

Babbitt was an intellectual maverick whose challenge to the dominant trends of his time made him the focus of intense and persistent hostility. Although his reputation suffered at the hands of leading academic and literary figures, he never lacked admirers of intellectual substance. Three generations after his death new editions of his books and an expanding secondary literature testify to the resilience and originality of his work. Scholars in America and abroad are taking a fresh look at his thought. Babbitt is found to have identified and addressed cultural and social problems long before their seriousness was widely recognized and to have formulated ideas which, in often extreme and superficial versions, were to become fashionable more than half a century later. Some of his characteristic ideas are even finding their way into more general circula-

[1] For a consideration of how Babbitt can both enhance and subvert postmodernist discussion, see Michael Weinstein, "Irving Babbitt and Postmodernity," *Humanitas*, Vol. VI, No. 1 (1992/93).

tion. Scholars who in the past saw no reason to cite him or feared to do so now mention or discuss his work.

One reason for the current resurgence of interest in Babbitt is undoubtedly a desire for alternatives to the present flow of extremism and shallowness in academia and the arts. At a time of moral, intellectual and aesthetical fragmentation and idiosyncrasy, bordering sometimes on madness, Babbitt has appeal as one who criticizes similar phenomena and explores sources of restraint, sanity, and common meaning. He does so while stressing the centrality of the imagination and while recognizing, in a way that an older Western tradition did not, the importance of individual creativity and freedom in moral action and art. For him the self-control that marks all genuinely centering experience does not extinguish but selectively affirms and enhances the personal uniqueness of the agent. Another attraction of Babbitt today is that his thought is informed by and tethered to great literary and historical learning. He has no propensity for esoteric theoretical abstractions, seeking instead to understand actual life and letters. Another of his strengths is that he opposes Enlightenment rationalism and scientism while at the same time embracing other aspects of modernity, notably the spirit of critical inquiry.

Because of Babbitt's originality and independence of existing schools, his contemporaries had difficulty placing him. Aestheticians advocating *l'art pour l'art* and political "progressives" assumed that he was some kind of reactionary, while some traditionalists found him disturbingly modern. Both groups read him carelessly. Distortions of Babbitt's thought gained wide currency, and there is a continuing need to guard against misunderstanding. Today his growing prestige adds the complication that scholars trying to validate their own position in academic disputes will claim him for their side on the basis of a limited grasp of his ideas.

Babbitt a Positivist?

Babbitt was well-versed in the history of philosophy and had much to say on central philosophical questions. Yet he was formally a professor of literature, and his style of writing was not that of the "technical" philosopher. Some of his comments on epistemological issues, though fully intelligible in the context of his work as a whole, are unclear and easily misunderstood. Several seemingly favorable

statements about positivism are a case in point. Those comments have been seen by some traditionalists as revealing dangerously modern leanings, by others as a sign of enlightened views. In the latter group today is Professor A. Owen Aldridge, a leading representative of comparative literature and eighteenth-century studies. Aldridge would like to claim Babbitt for positivism.

A return to positivism?

Positivism seems to Professor Aldridge to offer the most promise for a return to scholarly integrity in literary studies and criticism, fields that have been badly damaged in recent years by an assortment of extreme and politicized approaches. Aldridge discusses this subject in a consideration of Kenneth Craven's book *Jonathan Swift and the Millennium of Madness*. Aldridge points to similarities between phenomena satirized by Swift and the "theory explosion that has overturned literary criticism in the last two decades." He speculates that Swift would have regarded Jacques Derrida as the most prominent representative of "modern critical madness." Aldridge reflects that, while literary scholarship and criticism in general have suffered badly under structuralism, deconstruction, feminism, Marxism, multiculturalism, etc., his own field of eighteenth-century studies has been "relatively free of theoretical extremes." The mainstream of that field "is by and large grounded in positivism and formalism." He then suggests that what is sound in American literary scholarship can be extended and that the greatest need at present is for "a new positivism."[2]

Here Professor Aldridge singles out one person for emulation—Irving Babbitt. He sees Babbitt as being all the more relevant and appealing in the present academic situation for representing a "salutary multiculturalism," one different from what is prescribed by the enforcers of political correctness.

As one who has long called attention to Babbitt's virtues, I agree that this seminal American thinker-scholar and sage can help revitalize literary and other studies. I agree that Babbitt's type of multiculturalism is a sound and sorely needed alternative to what is so called today. When it comes to Professor Aldridge's characterization of Babbitt as a "positivist," I must enter a substantial demurrer.

It can be said in Professor Aldridge's defense that in claiming Babbitt for positivism he is not entirely without textual support. Even allowing for wishful thinking on Aldridge's part, the fact that

[2] A. Owen Aldridge, "Jonathan Swift's Message for Moderns," *Modern Age*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (1995), 170-71.

a scholar of his prominence can misread Babbitt in this regard points to a lack of precision in some of Babbitt's formulations and to the need for examining them within his epistemology as a whole.

In what follows I shall try to elucidate Babbitt's comments on positivism and demonstrate why it is misleading to describe him as a positivist, especially without explanation. Beyond advancing our understanding of Babbitt, analyzing his conception of knowledge lends itself to a consideration of issues of general epistemological interest. What are the methodological needs of the humanities and social sciences? What is the nature and range of the evidence proper to those disciplines? Clarifying Babbitt's relation to positivism will serve the purpose of advancing an alternative to that doctrine.

The Facts of Human Experience

It should be granted first of all that Babbitt's language in a few passages did seem to suggest that he considered himself a positivist, if only a positivist of sorts. But that rather ambiguous self-designation must not be taken out of context: his emphatic rejection of naturalism—of views of life that deny the existence of a universal, "transcendent" ethical dimension. He distinguished two main forms of naturalism, which were often joined in the same individual or movement, one "utilitarian and scientific" and one "emotional." He regarded Francis Bacon as emblematic of the first and Jean-Jacques Rousseau as emblematic of the latter.

Babbitt wanted to refute modern methodologies that reduce man to a part of the phenomenal nature posited by natural science or that otherwise neglect or distort what is distinctively human about man—methodologies that, most importantly, maltreat the moral and religious dimensions of existence. He believed that, in the effort to overcome the reductionistic intellectual tendencies in the modern world, something might be gained by giving a new meaning to an existing term.

What is sound about modernity.

Babbitt took up the subject of positivism in a discussion of the meaning of "modernity" in *Rousseau and Romanticism*. He pointed out that "the word modern is often and no doubt inevitably used to describe the more recent or the most recent thing." But this was not its sole use and not the one that he preferred. He associated himself rather with figures like Goethe, Sainte-Beuve, Renan, and Arnold, who meant by the modern spirit "the positive and critical spirit, the

spirit that refuses to take things on authority." Babbitt welcomed the willingness to deal critically with traditional subjects in the humanities, and he also had praise for the modern approach to natural science. One source of possible confusion regarding his meaning is the following sentence, which discusses the two types of research together:

> I hold that one should not only welcome the efforts of the man of science at his best to put the natural law on a positive and critical basis, but that one should strive to emulate him in one's dealings with the human law; and so become a complete positivist.[3]

By the "natural law" Babbitt meant the order of nature that is explored by the physical sciences. By the "human law" he meant the source of moral order within specifically human life, as studied by philosophers, literary scholars and others.

Lifted out of context, the quoted sentence might give the impression that Babbitt wanted to extend the methodology of natural science to the humanities. But that would be precisely the kind of "naturalistic excess" that he was combatting, a proclivity that to him was not modern in the good sense but modernistic. The context of the sentence as well as his work as a whole makes clear that he was here approving not scientism but the modern "positive and critical spirit . . . that refuses to take things on authority." In Babbitt's view, the better natural scientists represent that spirit in one way; soundly modern humanistic scholars do so in another. The sentences that follow immediately upon his comment about becoming "a complete positivist" condemn reductionistic approaches to the study of human nature. As applied to what is distinctively human, the critical spirit demands attention to a kind of evidence that is beyond the grasp of natural science.

It might be noted in passing that Babbitt had a broader and more historical understanding of modernity than so-called "postmodernists" today who define it eclectically and rather arbitrarily. Modernity is more diverse and complex than they assume, partly in that many of its strains simultaneously develop and react against older Western currents.

Babbitt insisted that the most important material for study in the humane disciplines is not the external data sought by the physical

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[3] Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1991), lxxi.

sciences, but the "inner life" of humanity, including its moral and religious life. There are facts of human self-experience that are more directly relevant to understanding characteristically human existence than facts ascertained by empirical-positivist methods.

Inner life as source of knowledge.

As a part of his program to deepen humane studies in the modern world, Babbitt was concerned to put the study of moral and religious questions on a positive and critical basis. Without rejecting the need for authority or the special claims of Christianity, he thought it misguided, especially in existing intellectual circumstances, merely to invoke traditional authority and assert the truths of the inner life in a doctrinal-dogmatic fashion. He noted that many modernists had broken with tradition, partly because tradition is "not sufficiently immediate, partly because it is not sufficiently experimental."[4] But certain general truths of morality and religion can be verified ecumenically, independently of particular traditions. They have their own experiential ground, Babbitt insisted, and that ground can be critically examined. Modernists who refuse to do so are "incomplete positivists" with truncated notions of immediacy and experiment. The right way to answer their neglect of important evidence, Babbitt suggested, "is not to appeal to some dogma or outer authority but rather to turn against them their own principles."[5] Those who are concerned to protect moral and religious wisdom need not resist the demand that claims be validated through experience and experiment—provided those terms are not understood reductionistically. Babbitt vigorously objected to "scientific naturalists" who restrict such terms "to observation of the phenomenal order and of man only in so far as he comes under this order."[6]

The inner life of humanity is concrete and immediate and offers evidence of the nature of human existence that must be taken seriously by honest representatives of the critical attitude. According to Babbitt, the central fact of man's moral-spiritual life—the special power of self-restraint that he termed the "inner check" or the "higher will"—is also a matter of direct experience. Because it is a form of willing, there is an important sense in which it becomes known only in action. The person who experiments morally by "ex-

[4] Irving Babbitt, "Humanism: An Essay at Definition," in Norman Foerster, ed. *Humanism and America* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1967; reprint of 1930 original), 44.

[5] Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, lxxi.

[6] Babbitt, "Humanism," 45.

ercising" this will eventually discovers more fully its own self-justifying quality and direction. This power is not confined to or exhausted by its particular manifestations. Rather, it is transcendent, pulling man toward moral universality. Yet, as a specific, discernible influence on the conduct of individuals, it is at the same time immanent; it is known in experience, and its effects on individual and society form a rich historical record. Why then not meet the modernists on their own ground, Babbitt asked, and "oppose to them something that is both immediate and experimental—namely the presence in man of a higher will or power of control?"[7]

Positivistic dogmatism.

The facts of the inner life are more clearly a matter of immediate experience than are the "external" facts of the natural sciences. The latter phenomena are not known from within human experience itself; they are reifications according to prescribed methodologies. Many advocates of positivist, "scientific" methods are actually dogmatists uninterested in the full range of evidence. Babbitt pointed here to "the behaviourists and other naturalistic psychologists who are to be regarded at present as among the chief enemies of human nature."[8] But more moderate empiricists in the humanities and social sciences were also reluctant to consider man's inner life in its own terms. To the extent that they studied man "from within," they were prone to forcing evidence thus obtained into pre-conceived, reifying categories that distorted or reduced actual experience. This tendency was debilitating, not least in scholars of literature and art, since their task was to absorb and assess works that seek to render life with experiential fullness.

It should be evident that what Babbitt meant when calling for a more complete positivism was not that positivist principles, as understood in his own day or our own, should be more widely or thoroughly applied. What he affirmed and welcomed was the modern critical spirit. That commitment to evidence and verification must not, he argued, be arbitrarily restricted to what could be handled by positivist methods as heretofore conceived. Humanistic investigations should not only encompass but be centered in the facts of immediate self-experience.

Existing positivism rejected.

The context of Babbitt's apparent endorsement of positivism was thus a sharp critique of existing positivism. He tried to put that orientation on the defensive by arguing that it did not fully employ its

[7] *Ibid.*, 44.

[8] *Ibid.*, 39.

own principles. His referring to the desirable widening and deepening of humanistic research as a kind of positivism turns out, on closer inspection, to be mostly a rhetorical posture. Babbitt's claim to be meeting "the modernists" on their own ground would be accurate only to the extent that they would be willing to reconstitute their understanding of what is admissible, reliable evidence. He recognized in his own way the important difference between his own method and that of existing positivism, but, because of a flaw in his own epistemological self-understanding, he also tended to blur that difference. Given the established and continuing meaning of the term positivism, his call for "a more complete positivism" was bound to mislead readers, especially superficial ones, regarding his own critical program. Babbitt was a positivist, if at all, only in a new and special sense of the word.

Positivism in Theory and Practice

Professor Aldridge is sympathetic to conventional positivism in literary scholarship. He associates Babbitt with that type of orientation, asserting that Babbitt subscribed to "the essence of positivism." That essence, Aldridge intimates, contrasts sharply with today's obsession with theory. It "consists in creating a factual base without which there could be no theory at all." [9] Significantly, Aldridge does not indicate that the term "factual base" might have more than one meaning. His readers can only assume that he has in mind the standard positivist conception of fact and that "the essence of positivism" is to be understood accordingly.

The objectivity of naturalism and empiricism.

Positivism rests on generally naturalistic assumptions and is willing to attach scholarly-scientific weight, officially at least, only to empirically ascertainable phenomena. For it, knowledge expands cumulatively and quantitatively rather than qualitatively. Researchers are seen as adding to the "body of knowledge." They do so by gathering more and more individual "data," which are analyzed and catalogued. It is the task of scholars to give an accurate, "objective" account of the evidence. Good theory either assists in the collection of material or spells out the patterns in what has been collected.

The "new positivism" for which Professor Aldridge calls in literary scholarship appears to be of this type. He defines it as "a

[9] Aldridge, "Swift's Message," 171.

method of objective description"—language that calls to mind the standard positivist approach.[10] Now it is of course possible, as the above discussion of Babbitt illustrates, to use the language of positivism in a manner quite different from common usage. By taking up an epistemological discussion and introducing important philosophical distinctions, one could define Aldridge's term "objective description" in such a way as to make it fit Babbitt's method. But Aldridge does not signal that the methodology of which he approves is different from positivism in the ordinary sense: collecting and "describing" facts that can be warrantably ascertained by approved empirical methods.

It is vaguely assumed by most positivists that the natural sciences set the most rigorous standards for inquiry. "Objective description" has to do with seeing, hearing, counting, recording, measuring, testing, etc. In practice, positivist scholars in the humanities and social sciences never come very close to following the methods of natural science, although so-called behaviorists believe themselves to be approximating the real thing. Consciously or unconsciously, positivist students of man as a social and creative being adopt more humanistic and philosophical outlooks, although ones marked by naturalistic and empiricist prejudices. What qualifies as fact is never made entirely clear. Most of what positivists in the humanities and social disciplines allow into consideration, including material from historical researches, has not really been screened and ascertained according to strict scientific investigative principles. But the material is viewed and treated in a quasi-quantitative, quasi-empirical manner. Hence the "value"-dimension of life is said to lie outside the purview of the researcher, except in so far as the "preferences" of individuals can be empirically studied as among the phenomena constituting behavior.

Positivists rely on extra-positivistic sense of the whole.

Positivist scholars in the humanities and social sciences are guided, in practice, by a sense of the larger whole of human life that is not derived mainly from positivist methods and investigations. Specifically, these scholars bring to their work a feel for the dynamic of human existence, for the interconnections of particulars, and for what is important and relevant. In addition to their own personal experience of what it is like to be a human being, what helps them interpret and give the right proportions to evidence is a philosophical-humanistic understanding of man and society of one kind or an-

[10] *Ibid.*

other. A long tradition of non-positivist scholarship and reflection seeps into the minds of the researchers. In trying to explain the French Revolution, for example, positivist scholars too regard the ideas of Rousseau and the Jacobins as being more important than, say, the dietary habits of the French people. They do so even as their official epistemology undermines the type of philosophical understanding of man that gave rise to their own implicit view of what influences human conduct.

Positivist specialization dehumanizing.

In proportion as it is true to its own official methods, positivism treats what is distinctively human in a reductionistic manner, fostering a naturalistic, "value-free" perspective. Precisely because Babbitt championed close attention to the central facts of human self-experience now and throughout history, he resisted the spread of this narrowing approach. He was sharply critical of what German scholars called the *strengwissenschaftliche Methode*, the kind of positivism that was being emulated in leading American universities before the turn of the century when Babbitt received his education and started his academic career. The advocates of that method insisted on the rigorous and thorough collection, analysis and cataloguing of empirical data. Babbitt was disdainful of the pedantry and over-specialization that this allegedly scientific method spawned in the humanities and of its inability to handle the central questions of human existence. He remembered with distaste a year-long course on Shakespeare that he had taken as an undergraduate at Harvard. In keeping with the fashionable positivist method, the professor, George Lyman Kittredge, presented large amounts of detailed philological and biographical material but offered no insight into Shakespeare as a commentator on the human condition.

Babbitt formed the opinion that this dehumanizing and pedantic data-gathering method was quintessentially German. Even today it is common for American academics with sympathies for a more humanistic approach to believe the same. But this prejudice betrays limited familiarity with German thought and its history. What is not understood is that, although German scholars in various disciplines did make pioneering and widely admired efforts of the mentioned kind, that type of research represented a marked change in German thought relative to the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the most creative and famous period in the history of German philosophy. The *strengwissenschaftliche Methode* signified the retreat of that earlier humanistic-philosophical-historical orientation and the tri-

umph of very different influences—of mainly French and English origin: the positivism of such figures as Auguste Comte, James and John Stuart Mill, and Herbert Spencer. This change in German thought was partly a reaction against the excesses and weaknesses of Hegelianism. The historical consciousness emerging from the older German humanistic-philosophical understanding of man had not been fully absorbed. It was now pushed aside or transformed into a positivist concern about the past as a huge new field for the collection of data. Babbitt always assumed the indispensability of history in humane studies. When he objected to the positivist narrowing of the meaning of history, he could have appealed to earlier and more home-grown German philosophy.

In spite of terminological appearances, then, Babbitt opposed positivism—as understood then and now. He did affirm the modern "positive and critical spirit," but, as should be clear from the above analysis, his view of what is sound about that spirit is markedly different from that of the intellectuals who, until fairly recently, have set the tone in academia in this century.

Babbitt and German Philosophy

Babbitt's own epistemology combined elements from ancient, Oriental, medieval, and modern sources. One substantial influence on him was Aristotle's "empiricism," although as revised in the light of much later thought. Another major influence on Babbitt, if partly unconscious and acknowledged mostly by implication, was German non-positivist philosophy. When Babbitt referred directly to German thought his tone was often critical, even hostile. Kant, for example, came across in his writing as an abstract rationalist with a weak sense of the importance of the concrete and imaginative in the search for reality. Still, Babbitt's own epistemological assumptions, which were never brought to full and systematic self-awareness, reveal that he was substantially affected by German philosophy, including Kant.

To point out this philosophical affiliation may not enhance Babbitt's standing in the eyes of his countrymen. Their unease about "German philosophy" is considerable and of long standing. Babbitt himself exhibited it. In general, Anglo-Saxony has not been predisposed to the kind of intellectual discipline and depth that is required to move beyond elementary and general philosophical dis-

course. Often Anglo-Saxony has excused itself from these rigors by disparaging and ridiculing German philosophy, calling it pretentious, obscurantist, turgid, arrogant, God-denying, or the like, and has recommended its own more "down-to-earth," pragmatic ways.[11] Although this criticism has not been without truth in all cases, too often it has been a cover for lack of philosophical understanding and subtlety.[12]

A higher form of romanticism.

Babbitt was a student of German thought, especially the philosophy of aesthetics, and often commented on it.[13] He was influenced by it not only through Germans he admired—he revered the older Goethe—but through Germans of whom he had major criticisms. Babbitt also had considerable, if highly qualified, admiration for two English-speaking writers who had drunk deeply from German sources, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Babbitt was sharply and properly critical of the strains of romantic sentimentalism in both men and drew only selectively from them, but he often referred to them. He aligned himself with such elements of their thought as Emerson's critique of scientism and Coleridge's notion of the creative imagination. Through them and others Babbitt absorbed much of the German idea of the universal, transcendental Self and of the German historical sense. He did so while emphatically rejecting the romantic primitivism and pantheism with which these philosophies were often mixed up.

Babbitt did not directly acknowledge these German influences on his thought. Always concerned to criticize what seemed to him questionable and pernicious about romanticism, he did not explicitly distinguish between higher and lower forms of that large and diverse movement. He would have had every reason to make and to dwell on such distinctions, because, in spite of appearances, he was himself a kind of romantic—his emphasis on the creative nature of the imagination and on the imagination as a possible source of reality being obvious examples. Contrary to the impression created by Babbitt, romanticism did not only inspire the kind of imaginative

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[11] One of the few major American contributions to philosophy, the pragmatism of John Dewey, is far from lacking intellectual discipline and depth. It also owes greatly to German thought.

[12] In some American intellectual circles a stated belief in God or "transcendence" appears to be a sufficient sign of philosophical depth.

[13] See, for example, the chapter on "Schiller as Aesthetic Theorist" in Irving Babbitt, *On Being Creative* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1968; reprint of the 1932 original).

extravagance and irresponsibility that he found objectionable and dangerous. Two individuals whom Babbitt admired can be cited as outstanding examples of a different, higher form of romanticism: the mature Goethe in Germany and Edmund Burke in England. Both exhibited romantic thought and imagination but chiefly not of the type that Babbitt criticized. If he did not recognize the full extent to which German ideas influenced his own thinking, it also should be said that he put his own mark on what he absorbed and that in so doing the German ingredients were blended with elements of different origin.

The self universal and particular.

Babbitt was not drawing on Aristotelianism but rather echoing German idealism when he took up the theme of universality and particularity. He often argued in one way or another that there is that which makes a person "incomprehensibly different" from other human beings, but that there is also "that element in his own nature that makes him incomprehensibly like other men." "Even the man who is most filled with his own uniqueness, or 'genius,' a Rousseau, for example, assumes this universal self in every word he utters." Babbitt quoted approvingly from Emerson's essay on "The Over-Soul" to convey the same idea: "Jove nods to Jove behind us as we speak." [14] The German notion of the transcendental Self, an obvious strong influence on Emerson, had added an important dimension to what Babbitt had drawn from other, partly ancient sources. He found much to admire in Coleridge's explication of the modern idea of the creative imagination in *Biographia Literaria*. That idea, as is abundantly clear from the text itself, owes greatly to German thought, and Coleridge makes a philosophically ambitious effort to explain its meaning and derivation, including the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, to English readers. Setting forth his own position, Coleridge writes of "the conditional finite I"—which, as he points out, Kantians call the "empirical self"—and "the absolute I AM." He notes "the dependence or inherence of the former in the latter." [15] Although Babbitt sometimes used the ancient Greek language of the One and the Many when speaking of the same subject, he was aware that for him the One is not a disembodied Platonic transcendent, just as the Many is not a Platonic flux. What is "stable and permanent" in life was for Babbitt "a oneness that is always changing.

[14] Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 50, 47.

[15] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1975), 152n.

The oneness and the change are inseparable." [16] Had Babbitt been more fully conscious of his indebtedness to German philosophy, he might have referred to the inherence of life's enduring element in historical particulars as the subject of "the concrete universal." [17]

"Objects" vs. *living experience.*

The purpose of establishing these philosophical connections is not to prove that Babbitt was a German idealist, but to show how his philosophical leanings separated him from positivism. For him, the proper sphere of evidence about human life and letters is the simultaneously individual and trans-individual, trans-cultural, trans-historical consciousness in which permanence and change, unity and diversity are inextricably joined. The facts most relevant to the student of human action, thought and imagination are not the kind of atomic objects postulated by positivism. The relevant facts are the living phenomena of human self-experience. These facts, though always present to and marked by individual consciousness, are inextricably part of the universal whole and are meaningless outside of that whole. So-called empirical data are fragments from the whole that have been turned into "distincts" by abstraction, i.e., reification. As was suggested above, evidence of that reified kind makes sense to researchers in the humanities only because the researchers continue to live within the whole and because, in the act of interpretation, they partially reintegrate the "empirical" evidence into the whole.

If it can be said that Babbitt advocated "a method of objective description," to use Professor Aldridge's phrase, "objective" must not be understood in the ordinary positivist manner. Babbitt did want to give an accurate account of life and literature, but here the most important facts are not solids of some kind; they are not facts in the empirical-positivistic sense of discrete, inert "things." The subject matter of Babbitt's investigations, as of any similar scholarly endeavors, is the immediate, irreducible sense of human existence as actually lived or imagined. The facts being scrutinized are potentialities of life belonging to a structured if forever changing human consciousness. Before they become objects of interpretation and philosophizing, the central facts of life and literature are experiential facts. They must be studied from within the whole of which they are a part, whatever the limits of intuition and personal experience of

[16] Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, lxxiii (emphasis in original).

[17] On Babbitt's relation to German thought, see Claes G. Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason* (Chicago and Washington, D.C.: Regnery Books, 1986).

the particular student. Needless to say, works of art are intuitions of life that can only be understood and assessed in relation to the whole that they attempt to express.

Scholarly Illumination of the Whole

Humanistic scholarship frequently studies the life and work of particular persons. Often it studies particular movements or epochs. Yet, through the particular, it is trying to better understand all of humanity. It was for Babbitt self-evident that the history of mankind, displaying both the depravity and glory of human life, provides indispensable illumination of the present. The study of the past is a powerful antidote to idiosyncrasy and superficiality regarding human nature. With deep approval, Babbitt quoted Goethe's statement that one should juxtapose to the aberrations of the hour the masses of world history.

Universal significance of the particular.

Scholars in the humanities and social sciences must of course marshal the kind of evidence that is most pertinent to their particular disciplines. Depending on their orientations, the evidence may be predominantly literary and artistic, historical and philosophical, or historiographic and documentary. In each instance, what gives meaning and the right proportions to the particular material is how it fits within the whole. The most systematic and concentrated study of human experience is philosophy. Good philosophy explores the enduring forms of human life—will, imagination and reason—consulting the forever expanding historical record of what human beings have wrought. The complexity and range of human life calls for a wide variety of research. Specialization is a necessary aspect of all serious scholarship. And yet specialization that loses itself in its specialty by deliberately or inadvertently disconnecting its "facts" from the enduring human consciousness loses its human significance. This is the case, for example, when history, potentially one of the most humane of academic disciplines, becomes instead, in that apt if brusque phrase, just "one damn thing after another."

In practice, positivism has often done better than its epistemological theory by following humanistic intuitions of the whole. Still, its understanding of knowledge as based on quasi-solid, discrete pieces of evidence bears much of the blame for the current fragmentation in academia. Positivism has greatly damaged the sense of universality without which the academic enterprise and civilization in general will begin to fall apart. The belief of many positivists that

Positivism source of academic fragmentation.

their methods, by themselves, could supply the needed academic unity has proved ill-founded. To the extent that an older Western sense of the whole has ceased to inform positivist researches, partly because of positivist attacks upon that sense, fragmentation has worsened, and the inability of those methods to carry the burden placed upon them has become more glaring. Some positivist researchers may still exhibit greater discipline than do exponents of the approaches that now have the cry in academia, but discipline for what enduring central purpose? If positivism is offered today as the best that the humanities and social sciences can offer, the value of those disciplines to people concerned about life's central questions is placed in doubt.

Need for centering knowledge.

By contrast, research that is guided by and conducive to reflection upon the whole can justify itself to humanity. It is the connection between more or less specialized investigations and the continuing effort better to understand life in general that gives the investigations meaning and humane relevance. Experts in particular fields need the seminal centering insights of the intellectual giants, those rare thinkers and scholars who are capable of the highest form of specialization: that of specializing in being a generalist. Those individuals too achieve insight with reference to some particular material, whether of action, thought or art: they understand the universal and the particular through each other. Their distinction is that they center thought while heightening the awareness of the complexity, richness, and diversity of human life. Babbitt was such a thinker.

The Aesthetical and Moral Conditions of Knowledge

This article has examined Babbitt's conception of knowledge in relation to positivism. I have concentrated on different meanings of the "positive and critical spirit" and have tried, by means of a comparison with positivism, to explain a view of knowledge that Babbitt implied but was not able fully to articulate. To contain the discussion I have not delved into the aesthetical and moral issues to which Babbitt devoted most of his attention, although they have a strong bearing on epistemology. To balance my deliberately selective approach to his work and to expand and deepen the notion of knowledge here presented, a few clarifications and additions are needed. It is particularly desirable to summarize an idea of which the main contending epistemological camps have at best only the

most fumbling grasp: that humane knowledge is to a large extent dependent for its depth and breadth upon will and imagination of a certain quality.

The critical intellect is in an important sense the chief organon of humanistic inquiry. The scholarly mind, especially when it becomes more systematically philosophical, proceeds by means of analyses, definitions, distinctions, concepts, etc. The critical intellect aspires to clarity of thought. What has been argued here is that sound humanistic scholarship is the intellectual articulation of experience and that the experiential material must be understood in a non-positivist, non-empirical manner. The scholarly-philosophical intellect appropriate to humane studies works primarily, not on abstract, reified entities, but on the living, concrete phenomena of human consciousness.

Intellect seeks conceptual clarity.

There is no hidden inference in this view of the critical intellect that conceptual excogitation is mankind's sole or even primary source of understanding. Babbitt would certainly have resisted such an inference. One of his chief and recurring criticisms of the Western tradition was that it has too often, as in the case of Plato, placed too much emphasis on the importance of intellect in pointing man toward reality.

There is also a non-intellectual form of understanding. Human beings did not have to wait for philosophers to know something substantial about their own existence. They always had an immediate intuition of the nature of the whole, an awareness to which story-tellers, poets and other artists contributed. That kind of intuition, or imagination (a synonymous term), is presupposed in all operations of the critical intellect. Without a pre-conceptual, alogical sense of what human life is actually like, philosophical reflection on man would lack concrete material and direction. One of Babbitt's most persuasive themes is that the artistic imagination at its best is a central source of knowledge, although of non-conceptual, non-historical knowledge.

Intuitive wisdom and illusion.

Babbitt contrasted what he called the "ethical" imagination—which is not only aesthetically compelling but realistic and penetrating—with the "idyllic" imagination—whose visions are perhaps appealing but illusory and distortive. He pursued this distinction not just because it is important to aesthetics and literary scholarship but because it is central to understanding human life in general, including the evolution of civilization. Briefly put, how mankind sees its

own situation and how it decides to live has everything to do with how it imagines the world. Sometimes artists pull civilization into dangerous illusion. Scholars and thinkers are by no means immune to such imagination. It can make them see life in a warped fashion, which means that distorted intuitive material is presented to the intellect. In one sense, then, the primary need—the sine qua non—of good critical scholarship is a soundly working imagination.

Imaginitive insight rests on moral character.

This is not the place to take up the epistemological importance of Babbitt's understanding of the imagination, including its morally opposed potentialities. But it is important to recognize that the scholarly-philosophical mind, as such, owes much of its sense of the whole to poets and other artists. Humanity in general and scholars in particular are deeply affected, directly or indirectly, by the imaginative masterminds. The latter articulate, express in aesthetically intensified form, what others intuit in merely groping fashion. The imaginative masterminds thus put their mark on society's general outlook on life. At bottom, what holds the contemplated world together and forms the basis for critical reflection upon human existence is the imagination. But only a certain quality of imagination imparts a sense of reality. It can become such, Babbitt argued, only if rooted in and informed by exercise of the special quality of will that he called the "higher will" or "inner check." A truly penetrating and proportionate imagination is centered by experience of that will and of the forces with which it must contend in self and the world. Without that kind of imagination, scholars and thinkers have an insufficient sense of the concrete texture of reality. If it is true, as it certainly is, that, in their professional capacities, scholars and thinkers base their conclusions not on artistic visions but on historical facts, it is also true that their imaginations help direct their attention and profoundly affect their interpretations of those facts. And individuals tend to develop such imaginations as are pleasing to their wills. However much it may offend the dominant epistemological prejudices of this century to say it, moral character is a necessary precondition for a realistic view of life.[18]

Babbitt added significantly to mankind's self-understanding by

[18] For an in-depth discussion of the epistemological importance of the imagination and of the relation of the imagination to reason and different types of will, see Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason*. The book draws selectively from Babbitt and Benedetto Croce, as well as other thinkers, to reconstitute the epistemology of the humanities and social sciences.

identifying and exploring contrasting forms of the imagination and relating those forms to the qualities of will that inspire and are inspired by them. He examined in depth a central part of the human condition and understood perhaps better than any other thinker the moral-imaginative dynamic that characterizes modern Western man. He achieved his knowledge and wisdom, not through the positivist method, but through an extraordinarily perceptive grasp of the living human whole. Irving Babbitt was not a positivist but a learned scholar who specialized in being a generalist.