
Another Conception of Knowing

Claes G. Ryn

The Catholic University of America

Our disoriented and fragmenting Western society urgently needs cathartic vision—vision that dispels the debauched imagination of escape and imparts a realistic sense of new possibilities. It is to great artists primarily and to individuals of rare wisdom that we must look for curative, centering insight. Without the penetrating glance that recognizes and recoils from evil, no amount of formal intellectual brilliance can point us towards a more humane existence. Indeed, the present age illustrates in abundance the extent to which abstract intellectualism can express and abet the flight from reality and responsibility.

Just as we cannot do without great orienting visions of the whole, so lack of intellectual discipline can retard and disperse any restorative creative impulse, to say nothing of aggravating a deteriorating cultural and social situation. Although no philosopher or critic can supersede or take the place of the imaginative mastermind, conceptual elucidations of insight are indispensable in the economy of the human spirit. Thought assists in the absorption and transmission of creative vision, serving to hold on to, elaborate and apply it. Philosophical discernment is needed also to help unmask the false pretenses of warped imagination. Without intellectual stringency, including a disciplined use of terms, confusion threatens, not in the realm of ideas and imagination only, but—since the two shape our approach to life—in the world of practice.

In a recent article I maintained that the theory of knowledge needs close attention, even though today's sometimes frivolous discussions of epistemology might seem to justify disdain for the sub-

ject.¹ Anticipating a possible reaction to current epistemological airiness and extremism, I argued that a reaffirmation of positivism in the humanities and social sciences is no remedy. I set forth a historical-philosophical understanding of knowledge. To indicate the problems with positivism and to outline an alternative to its conception of evidence I found it useful to examine certain statements by Irving Babbitt that might seem to align him with modern positivism. I contended that, if by positivism is meant what is commonly meant by that term, Babbitt was a strong *critic* of positivism. He embraced the modern commitment to free and open inquiry and stressed the need to support moral and religious claims with experiential evidence, but his way of understanding “the positive and critical spirit” put him at odds with existing positivism. His use of the latter term to characterize his own position was partly rhetorical, but it also revealed a gap in his own epistemological self-understanding. My purpose in explaining and critically assessing Babbitt’s theory of knowledge was to extend and supplement it and generally to address the epistemological needs of the humane disciplines.

One reason why I went into Babbitt’s view of the positive and critical spirit was to challenge a double claim recently made by Professor A. Owen Aldridge. Aldridge had argued 1) that the proper response to the current theory craze in literary studies is returning to positivism, and 2) that Irving Babbitt was a positivist who can help restore a proper regard for facts.² My article was not written mainly to refute Professor Aldridge, but it suggested that, at minimum, his epistemological prescription needs philosophical rearticulation. I tried to show that some of Babbitt’s terminology had thrown Professor Aldridge off the track regarding Babbitt’s theory of knowledge. The latter bears only a superficial resemblance to positivism as ordinarily understood. Babbitt’s real meaning is fully accessible to an attentive reader willing to read particular formulations in context.

Professor Aldridge’s response to my article is at once encouraging and disconcerting—encouraging because it shows him to be an

¹ “How We Know What We Know: Babbitt, Positivism and Beyond,” *Humanitas*, Vol. VIII, No. 1 (1995).

² A. Owen Aldridge, “Jonathan Swift’s Message for Moderns,” *Modern Age*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (1995).

urbane and genial representative of his discipline and to be anything but a positivist dogmatist, disconcerting because his general thesis is loosely argued and based on a number of highly questionable statements and interpretations. Professor Aldridge concludes that there is an “essential agreement” between his epistemological position and my own. He even quotes passages from me that seem to him to give voice to his own views. This reaction would seem to belie any insurmountable differences between us. Some of his views on the task of literary scholarship point in the same direction. Yet Professor Aldridge uses terms broadly, and it is unclear to what extent his assent to my words indicates philosophical agreement. What he asserts about Babbitt and positivism suggests that our views diverge in important ways.

*Aldridge a
flexible
positivist.*

For one who considers himself a “scientific positivist” Professor Aldridge has a broad-minded and flexible conception of literary scholarship. He clearly has benefited from his interest in Irving Babbitt. Aldridge’s aversion to theoretical faddishness and blatant group partisanship and politicization in today’s academia is deep and appropriate. Still, his effort to formulate a sound alternative to present trends is impeded by his fondness for Enlightenment rationalism and his positivist habits of mind. Having found much in Babbitt to his liking, he wants to regard him as a kindred spirit, a free-thinking liberal scholar not bound by traditional authority. This view of Babbitt is not entirely without foundation, but treating his theory of knowledge as if its roots were in the Enlightenment and scientific positivism does violence to his central ideas.

Professor Aldridge’s desire to account for Babbittian ideas of which he approves within his own accustomed intellectual framework is a source of philosophical confusion. I should add immediately that I consider this confusion to be in one respect a sign of health. It results from Aldridge’s trying to expand and revise positivism. The kind of blurring of distinctions that marks his reasoning is certainly preferable to his seeking philosophical consistency in a purified, more rigid scientific positivism. Although his own brand is in some ways relatively benign, positivism in general has warped and constricted the humanities and social sciences. His broadening of the term and his affinity for Babbitt are signs that he is not untroubled by these problems.

Professor Aldridge is in fact torn between different epistemological leanings. He maintains a kind of overlap between them through

terminological vagueness. But the two orientations are ultimately incompatible. Partly because of deep-seated intellectual prejudices, Aldridge is reluctant to confront the tension systematically and in depth. My own inclination, especially in view of the present confused academic situation, is to press the philosophical issue and pursue needed distinctions. In what follows I shall consequently dwell on those parts of Professor Aldridge's response that seem to me to require correction and revision.

Deciding how to respond to Professor Aldridge's specific arguments, I find myself in a quandary. He never really engages or tries to refute my criticisms of positivism or my interpretation of Babbitt. He simply expands upon his own notion that Babbitt was a positivist and that positivism is a good thing—as if my arguments and supporting references to Babbitt's text had never called his views into question, or as if he did not believe that they had. Professor Aldridge's main claims appear to me to have been refuted by my original article. Much else that I have published also contradicts his assertions.³ I do not want merely to repeat what is already in print. Professor Aldridge's response also contains more questionable interpretations and opinions than I can respond to within a limited space. I shall confine myself to making some observations of general epistemological interest and to offering a few specific refutations and criticisms that should demonstrate the overall problem with Professor Aldridge's epistemological position and view of Babbitt.

Babbitt and Scientific Positivism

Much of Professor Aldridge's reasoning depends on glossing over differences in the meanings of words. He manages to make Babbitt and "scientific positivism" resemble each other only by loosely using general terms that cry out for distinctions and definitions. In my own article I had tried to show that words such as "fact," "data," "objective," "description," "account," "evidence," and "knowledge" are understood very differently within positivism and within the kind of historical-philosophical epistemology that

³ Let me here only mention *Will, Imagination and Reason: Irving Babbitt and the Problem of Reality* (Chicago and Washington, D.C.: Regnery Books, 1986) and my long introductions to new editions of two of Babbitt's books, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New Brunswick, N.J., and London: Transaction Publishers, 1991), hereinafter cited in the text as "RR," and *Character and Culture: Essays on East and West* (New Brunswick, N.J., and London: Transaction Publishers, 1995).

Babbitt assumed. That contrast is no less real because the two approaches can coexist uneasily in the scholarly practice of particular positivists who let their actual researches and conclusions be influenced by historical-philosophical insight, in violation of their official methodology.

Babbitt sought to explain that the exploration of moral and religious truths and of these in relation to art and society does not have to be left to the “mere traditionalist” who takes such truths on authority. To a large extent, religious and moral claims have an experiential basis open to examination. “The positive and critical spirit”—as Babbitt understood it—not only respects but can elucidate evidence of moral-spiritual reality. The positivism that had come to dominate academia, by contrast, excluded such evidence as unscientific; it was, in Babbitt’s term, “incomplete.” He called for a more “complete” positivism of a “spiritual” or “moral” type. Because of his awkward terminology—adopted partly to show that his own theory of knowledge was not a throwback to an earlier era—careless readers got the impression that he wanted to import naturalistic-scientific methods into the study of humane subjects. Nothing was further from his intent.

*A spiritual
and moral
“positivism.”*

Professor Aldridge’s portrayal of Babbitt and Auguste Comte as fellow positivists runs up against strong evidence to the contrary. Not only did Babbitt emphatically reject the “humanitarian enthusiasm” of Comte’s Religion of Humanity; he strongly objected to Comte’s desire to apply the principles of physical science to all spheres of inquiry. Aldridge concedes that, “[a]t first glance, Comte’s scientific method seems to be essentially the same” as the “Baconianism” that Babbitt criticized. Aldridge still goes on to argue that Comte and Babbitt were alike in believing that our only knowledge is of phenomena and their laws and that “their essential nature, and their ultimate cause, are,” as Aldridge quotes J. S. Mill, “unknown and inscrutable to us.” This view, Aldridge asserts, can be called “scientific positivism.” He adds that he is aware of “no evidence in Babbitt’s works to indicate that he would have objected to the method when applied experimentally to observable phenomena.” Babbitt “opposed only the failure to extend the positive method beyond observable phenomena.”

Terminological vagueness here mixes with misunderstanding. I refer the reader in general to my original article. Let me reiterate in passing that everything depends on the meaning of a word like “ex-

perimental." When Babbitt used that term to describe a properly experiential approach to humane subjects, his meaning was wholly different from Baconian usage. A term like "observable phenomena" can also be understood in sharply different ways. To the positivist it typically means whatever is accessible by natural science or related empirical methods. But the term can also refer to the facts of human self-experience, understood in a philosophical-historical manner.

The central difficulty with Professor Aldridge's interpretation is brought into relief by his claim that Babbitt had no objection to scientific positivists except their "failure to extend the positive method beyond observable phenomena." Are we to believe that Babbitt—the self-described "modern" and champion of experiential evidence—thought it possible to study non-observable phenomena? No, his real argument was that the moral and religious phenomena central to humane study *are* observable—only these facts of man's inner life were ignored by positivists because inaccessible by their methods. According to Babbitt, one should "plant oneself firmly on the facts of experience that Diderot and other incomplete positivists have refused to recognize" (RR, lxxii). What Babbitt opposed was not some failure to extend "scientific positivism" "beyond observable phenomena." The object of his criticism was the naturalistic prejudice that drew attention away from the most important facts of the inner life and artificially restricted the range of evidence by letting the principles of natural science intrude where they did not belong. Hence Babbitt's strong opposition to the scientism of Comte and other positivists.

*Babbitt rejects
Comptean
scientism.*

According to Babbitt, Comte's desire to turn the men of natural science into a "modern priesthood" reveals a dangerous misunderstanding not only of the chief needs of leadership in the modern world but of the needs of humane inquiry. With specific reference to Comptean scientism, Babbitt wrote: "Physical science, excellent in its proper place, is, when exalted out of this place, the ugliest and most maleficent idol before which man has as yet consented to prostrate himself."⁴ Professor Aldridge actually quotes this sentence, but as part of a larger passage, and he construes that passage as critical only of Comte's Religion of Humanity, not his scientific positivism.

⁴ Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1979 [1924]), 284; hereinafter cited in the text as "DL."

Aldridge presents his own favorable assessment of Comte to the reader as if surely it must confirm Comte's favorable standing with Babbitt: "Comte by no means limited the positive method to the laboratory, but envisioned bringing all or nearly all knowledge to the positive stage through a process of gradual enlightenment." To Aldridge, an admirer of Enlightenment rationality, the Comtean desire to expand the scope of science is endearing. Babbitt's reaction was different. One of the reasons why he warned against Comte was that the latter did *not* want to confine the methodology of natural science "to the laboratory."

Babbitt was highly respectful of modern natural science at its best. Aldridge's mistake, probably induced in part by wishful thinking, is assuming that Babbitt saw his own critical stance—"positivism" of a "complete," "spiritual," or "moral" type—as somehow modeled upon natural science and its conception of observable fact. What Babbitt calls "the positive and critical spirit" does refuse "to take things on authority," but the principles of good natural science are but one manifestation of that spirit, suited to studying the "external," "physical" world. Humane studies require a very different approach, one attentive to the living whole of man's "inner" experience. Babbitt rejected "naturalistic excess" in its various forms, including scientism (RR, lxx-lxxi).

Professor Aldridge seizes upon isolated phrases used by Babbitt to show that he was a positivist. He cites a comment by Babbitt on the earliest Buddhist documents. Their "good sense," wrote Babbitt, rests on "indubitable facts" (RR, 176). To Aldridge this last phrase has the right positivist ring; it "strongly suggests the foundation of literary positivism's '*rappports de fait*' or approach through facts." Does it then not make any difference that the facts to which Babbitt was here referring are religious phenomena and that he was assuming the veracity of a kind of experiential claim that ordinary positivism would exclude as unscientific or unscholarly? Sometimes all that seems necessary to qualify as a positivist in Aldridge's eyes is to be willing to consider evidence in any form. Yet for Babbitt it was crucially important that evidence can be of entirely different types.

Professor Aldridge writes of the need for a "new" positivism, but he both is and is not trying to revise the conventional meaning of positivism. With one part of himself he is attracted to Babbitt's critical ethos, especially his going beyond traditional authority and requiring concrete evidence, but with another part of himself he is

strongly attracted to Comtean positivism. At least in regard to epistemological matters, Aldridge seems to be looking for that in Babbitt which might be reconciled with Comte and Enlightenment rationalism rather than the other way around. Professor Aldridge's attempt to blend oil and water is attended by some philosophical messiness.

Professor Aldridge repeatedly finds Babbitt caught in "paradoxes," "dilemmas," "ambiguities," and "confusion." I have myself criticized Babbitt for various philosophical weaknesses, including flaws in his epistemological self-understanding, but the problems alleged by Professor Aldridge are almost entirely due to Aldridge's applying categories of interpretation that do not fit. I admit to frustration in following his struggle with enigmas of his own making. If I excuse myself from completely disentangling the webs in which Professor Aldridge has ensnared himself, it is because I believe that various of my writings already have shown the "problems" identified by Aldridge to be non-existent. They appear to Aldridge as problems—"ambiguities," "dilemmas," etc.—because his own preconceptions prevent him from making sense of Babbitt's ideas.

Some of Professor Aldridge's most strained reasoning concerns Babbitt's remarks about the modern spirit in the Introduction to *Rousseau and Romanticism*. Aldridge quotes the following statement from Babbitt: "My main objection to the movement I am studying is that it has failed to produce complete positivists" (RR, lxxi). Aldridge then tries to determine Babbitt's meaning by deciding on the referent for "the movement I am studying." As is his habit, Aldridge somehow misses the evidence that Babbitt did not favor the kind of scientific positivism to which Aldridge is attracted. Thus, after some rather forced textual analysis, he indicates that the movement against which Babbitt had an objection seems to have been romanticism, but that he "*may . . . be associating naturalism with romanticism*" (emphasis added). Aldridge's curiously tentative mention of naturalism actually points in the right direction, but the reader is not alerted to the significance of this speculation for determining to what Babbitt objected. There really is no mystery concerning Babbitt's meaning. It is clear from the context of the quoted sentence that "the movement" to which he objected was indeed "naturalism." He saw naturalism as ignoring the existence of an ethically disciplining higher power. Moreover, he had explained only a page earlier that he regarded the naturalistic movement as having two main forms, the "scientific" and the "emotional," romanticism being

of the latter type. What Aldridge overlooks is that Babbitt's charge of "incompleteness" was directed not only against romanticism but against the "scientific" part of naturalism. In Babbitt's text it should come as no surprise that, having stated his "main objection" to the movement he was studying, he should take a swipe, just a few lines later in the same paragraph, at the scientific naturalist Diderot. From that criticism Aldridge quotes that Diderot is "a chief source of naturalistic tendency," but he does *not* quote the words that immediately precede them in Babbitt's text: that Diderot is "a notable example of the incomplete positivist" (RR, lxxi).

Professor Aldridge's interpretation of Babbitt as a positivist is derived largely from this kind of selective reading and emphasis. If Babbitt can be called a positivist at all, it is only in a special sense of his own that is markedly different from what Aldridge praises as "scientific positivism."

The One and the Many

Professor Aldridge's epistemological leanings include long influential reifying habits of mind that can be traced back in Western history even beyond Aristotle's logical principle of non-contradiction. These patterns of thought incline Aldridge to think of the phenomena of human experience as quasi-solid objects rather than as dualistic-dialectical, living realities. Most generally, he has difficulty making sense of Babbitt's theme of the One and the Many, Platonic terms to which Babbitt gave his own meaning. Aldridge's interpretation vaguely assumes that the two terms refer to empirical categories, separate but connected. It is hard for him to understand what Babbitt always took for granted, that the One and the Many are dualistically implicated in each other, and that universality is, as Babbitt wrote, in italics for emphasis, "*a oneness that is always changing*" (RR, lxxiii).⁵ Revealing the reifying inclinations of his own literary positivism, Aldridge explains Babbitt's conception as a kind of classificatory scheme, the sort that scholars in comparative literature might use when grouping texts by genres, schools, and movements. To distinguish "the individual from the collective" in that way is, Aldridge asserts, "a manifestation of the Platonic doctrine of the

The effects of reification.

⁵ There is great need for a dualistic-dialectical reform not merely in epistemology but in ethics and aesthetics. I deal with this subject in depth, partly in relation to Babbitt's efforts of this kind, in *Will, Imagination and Reason*. For a critique of reifying logic, including Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction, see especially Ch. 7.

One and the Many that is vital to Babbitt's thinking." In reality, Babbitt meant by the One and the Many the simultaneous coexistence and tension between unity and diversity that is the human self-consciousness itself. The "oneness that is always changing" refers to the universal—not a classificatory "collective"—and to its being inseparable from particularity.

The same objectifying preconceptions complicate Aldridge's understanding of Babbitt's notion of the "the inner check," a topic that has puzzled many interpreters before Aldridge. Babbitt believed that the ultimately normative power at the center of human life is not just a restraining force, as indicated by the word "check," but an "informing and centralizing power" (RR, 157). In this particular area Aldridge perhaps has more cause than elsewhere to complain of lack of clarity in Babbitt, but philosophical analysis has shown Babbitt's ethical doctrine of the higher will to be fully intelligible.⁶

Babbitt's simultaneous emphasis on achieving standards and adjusting to "vital novelty"⁷ is also puzzling to Professor Aldridge because of his reifying conception of human phenomena. It seems to Aldridge that in the end Babbitt "falls short of establishing objective criteria"; he just envisions some kind of "compromise" between the One and the Many, unity and diversity. Aldridge wonders how the "spiritual positivist" can simultaneously look beyond traditional creeds and dogmas, because they are insufficiently grounded in individual experience, *and* affirm a source of standards superior to the individual. How could something normative be at the same time "in the breast of the individual," as Babbitt wrote, and outside of the individual (RR, 153)? But this apparent paradox dissolves once objectifying categories are set aside as alien to man's basic self-experience. For Babbitt the proper and ultimate source of standards is universal and in that sense above and beyond the individual, but its living normative reality is known only through individual experience of the inner check/higher will.

Professor Aldridge is wrong to associate Babbitt's "inner check" with Brunetière's "*principe réfrénant*." In Babbitt's view, Brunetière sought discipline and definite standards in a "reactionary" reliance

⁶ See Folke Leander, *The Inner Check* (London: Edward Wright, 1974). Unfortunately this monograph was published in a semi-private edition and is available only in a few academic libraries. See also Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason*, esp. Ch. 1.

⁷ Irving Babbitt, "Humanism: An Essay at Definition," in Norman Foerster, ed., *Humanism and America* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1967 [1930]), 42.

on external authority. He failed to “escape from the vicious dilemma of nineteenth-century thought which would either sacrifice the individual to society or society to the individual.”⁸ Brunetière did not recognize the curbing and ordering force “in the breast of the individual” with reference to which standards can be kept at once fresh and normative.

Babbitt argued that standards require “the most difficult of all mediations, that between the One and the Many.” Aldridge asserts that “Babbitt does not tell us how this can be done.” It may be true that Babbitt does not tell us in a single convenient quotable sentence or passage; the subject is too large and complex for such treatment. But how this “mediation” can be accomplished is a central theme of Babbitt’s work as a whole, indeed, *the* central theme. All of his books were attempts to explain the relationship between the One and the Many and how a sense of moral and other universality is fostered. This sense cannot be built up by merely imitating already existing models or repeating the past. In Babbitt’s words, “The wisdom of the past, invaluable though it is, cannot . . . be brought to bear too literally on the present.”⁹ For Babbitt, the creative imagination plays a crucial role in maintaining and deepening man’s sense of the One. It “mediates” between the eternal and the transitory, the universal and the particular. Babbitt wrote admiringly of Burke, who recognized the crucial importance of “the moral imagination”: Burke “saw how much of the wisdom of life consists in an imaginative assumption of the past in such fashion as to bring it to bear as a living force upon the present” (DL, 127-28).¹⁰

*Mediation
between the
One and the
Many.*

Sometimes Professor Aldridge compounds philosophical misunderstanding with careless misreading. One example is his discussion of Babbitt’s view of the relationship between social conventions of decorum and sense, on the one hand, and universality, on the other. Aldridge quotes Babbitt as believing that “good sense and decorum themselves have in them no universal element, and are en-

⁸ Irving Babbitt, *The Masters of Modern French Criticism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Co., 1963 [1912]), 328-29; hereinafter cited in the text as “MFC.”

⁹ Babbitt, “Humanism,” 42.

¹⁰ The tension and co-existence of universality and particularity is discussed at length, with special reference to Babbitt (including his notion of the moral imagination) and Benedetto Croce, in Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason*. For an extended, more general discussion of the mutual dependence of universality and particularity, see Claes G. Ryn, “Universality and History: The Concrete as Normative,” *Humanitas*, Vol. VI, No. 1 (Fall 1992/Winter 1993).

tirely implicated in the shifting circumstances of time and place." But it is quite obvious from the context of this passage, to say nothing of Babbitt's work as a whole, that he was here not stating his own belief but summarizing a commonly held view that he *rejected*. He was referring to a mistaken conclusion that he said "*would seem*" (emphasis added) to follow from countries having different customs. Aldridge does not quote the "would seem." Having wrongly attributed complete cultural relativism to Babbitt, Aldridge points out that this view is hard to reconcile with Babbitt's belief in higher standards. But, says Aldridge, Babbitt "attempts to resolve the dilemma" by arguing that there exists behind the ethos of every country Antigone's "unwritten laws of heaven." Wrote Babbitt: "Something of this permanent order is sure to shine through even the most imperfect convention" (RR, 175). But Babbitt was here not trying to resolve any dilemma; there never was one to resolve. The dilemma exists in Aldridge's mind only, having arisen from his misconstruing Babbitt's views. Babbitt saw permanence and impermanence, unity and diversity, as existing together, so that for him there was nothing strange about an element of universality being manifested in diverse customs.

Miscellanea

Professor Aldridge sometimes is led astray by limited familiarity with Babbitt's writing. Trying to make his case that Babbitt was a positivist, Aldridge compares him to one "scientific positivist," Paul Van Tieghem, whom Aldridge describes as a "pioneer" of comparative literature. Van Tieghem argued that the word "comparative" in "comparative literature" "must be drained of all esthetic value and receive a scientific value."¹¹ Aldridge comments: "I do not personally agree with Van Tieghem that the positivist method must reject esthetic considerations, but it is possible that Babbitt would have raised no objection to that position."

Professor Aldridge's surmise is a flagrant and egregious lapse. It is reminiscent of reckless charges directed against Babbitt since his life-time by his most hostile critics. It was alleged that he cared nothing about, and had no sensitivity to, the aesthetic dimension of works of art, but was a narrow-minded moralist obsessed with

¹¹ As quoted by Aldridge.

moral content. These charges originated with individuals devoted to *l'art pour l'art* aestheticism who resented Babbitt's interest in the ethical dimension of art. Their attacks involved crude, even preposterous, distortions of his position. The person who now lends credence to this old canard is a figure of prominence in comparative literature who claims kinship with Babbitt and would be expected to know something about his aesthetics. Except for Professor Aldridge's speculation, it might seem superfluous among Babbitt scholars to point out that for Babbitt art must have its own aesthetical coherence and integrity, the special intensity accomplished by the creative imagination. Assessing this quality is integral to the work of the critic and scholar of art. Babbitt was a severe critic of didactic and moralistic tendencies in art. Stressing the freshness of genuine aesthetic creativity, he warned, for example, of a "rut of pseudoclassic formalism" (DL, 57). Babbitt did contend that in the end the beauty of great art cannot be divorced from its ethical depth, and he scorned the idiosyncrasy and superficiality of the mere aesthete. But he would have rejected as absurd the idea that literary scholarship dispense with "esthetic considerations."¹²

Another example of spotty reading of Babbitt is Aldridge's discussion of Babbitt's reaction to Bergson. Aldridge writes that "in the seven-year period" between Babbitt's books *Masters of Modern French Criticism* (1912) and *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919) Babbitt "presumably became aware of Henri Bergson's concept of *élan vital* and devised *frein vital* to counteract it." But this comment is not even scholarly speculation. The simple fact is that Babbitt had discussed Bergson already in the earlier of the two books, in several places. He considered not only Bergson's notion of *élan vital* but the need for restraining impulse. Humanistic wisdom, wrote Babbitt in *Masters of Modern French Criticism*, mediates "between vital impulse (*élan vital*) and vital control (*frein vital*)" (MFC, 252).

¹² Babbitt's aesthetical views, including misunderstandings and distortions by others, are examined in depth in Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason*. For a shorter discussion of how aestheticians have mischaracterized Babbitt's view of art, see Folke Leander, "Irving Babbitt and the Aestheticians," *Modern Age*, Vol. VI, No. 4 (1960). See also Folke Leander, "Irving Babbitt and Benedetto Croce," and Ryn, "Babbitt and the Problem of Reality," in George A. Panichas and Claes G. Ryn, eds., *Irving Babbitt in Our Time* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986).

*The need for
philosophical
discipline.*

Reconstituting Epistemology

Professor Aldridge's lengthy response contains a number of points that I have not addressed here, some of which would have called for more affirmative and appreciative comment. I have concentrated on what seem to me weaknesses in Professor Aldridge's view of Babbitt, as related to Aldridge's problematic advocacy of positivism. It would of course have been possible to explore our common ground further, but this is probably not the right time or the right subject for minimizing real differences. The current academic situation, marked as it is by epistemological disorientation, has created an acute need for philosophical discipline and discrimination. In these circumstances, what is questionable in Professor Aldridge's response stands out more than otherwise it might. To summarize: First, I believe that Aldridge misinterprets Babbitt in central respects and thereby diverts the reader from Babbitt's main achievements, including his contribution to epistemology. By labeling Babbitt a positivist he discourages many intellectuals from considering his thought. It would be most unfortunate if serious younger scholars seeing some merit in postmodernist ideas were not to discover that Babbitt both anticipated postmodernist themes and worked them through in a way that counteracted the potential for idiosyncrasy and extremism much in evidence today.¹³ Second, although Aldridge's positivism is not of the most harmful variety and perhaps open to further revision, it will probably, even if unintentionally, boost naturalistic-scientistic prejudices that long have hampered and distorted humane studies. Third, epistemology greatly needs careful, systematic thinking. I conceded in my article that Professor Aldridge is free to use the term "positivism" as he sees fit, but it is incumbent on one who is revising old usage to provide painstaking definition. Aldridge's practice of loosely connecting thinkers or ideas that strike him as appealing and similar is charmingly undogmatic but not conducive to clearing away philosophical confusion.

Would it have been more constructive to emphasize points of agreement between Professor Aldridge and myself and dwell on the recommendation of a leading representative of comparative literature that scholars heed the example of Irving Babbitt? It seems obvi-

¹³ For a discussion of Babbitt in relation to postmodernist issues and concerns, see Michael Weinstein, "Irving Babbitt and Postmodernity," *Humanitas*, Vol. IV, No. 1 (1992/93).

ous that a positivism that is to some extent influenced by Babbitt is much preferable to one not so affected. Professor Aldridge's "new positivism" does have encouraging features. As I indicated in the original article, his fondness for Babbitt's brand of multiculturalism is a good sign. Aldridge's efforts may help humanize positivism. Yet the humanities and social sciences would be better served, all things considered, by breaking away from the main epistemological trend of this century. Trying to reform positivism is to be needlessly encumbered by scientific and narrowly empiricistic prejudices that should finally be jettisoned. Rather than renew a misconceived theory of knowledge, we need to reconstitute the epistemology of the humanities and social sciences along historical-philosophical lines, giving primacy to the living facts of consciousness and fostering heightened sensitivity and discipline in the study of human experience.

Professor Aldridge's counter to politicization and abstractionist theorizing in literary studies is a call for greater scholarly rigor, closer and broader attention to facts, and critical standards with more historical support. I like the sound of those objectives, but all depends on the meaning of the words.