
Dialogue

Philosophical Reason: Historical, Systematic, and Humble

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The intellectual power, originality and prescience of Irving Babbitt becomes with each passing decade more obvious. Scholars familiar with Babbitt's work are used to noting the belated discovery by others of questions that he identified and treated in depth. Today's "postmodernists," for example, imagine themselves innovators. To the extent that their movement is philosophically serious and constructive and not a congeries of intellectual disarray, desperation, and neurosis, it can be seen as yet another groping discovery of issues that Babbitt explored with authority. The excesses of postmodernism are at the same time striking examples of strains within modern thought and imagination that Babbitt subjected to penetrating criticism.

The relevance of Babbitt to postmodernist discussion was succinctly and incisively demonstrated by Professor Michael Weinstein in his article "Irving Babbitt and Postmodernity" (*HUMANITAS*, Volume VI, No. 1). With *Rousseau and Romanticism* as his main specimen, Weinstein explains how Babbitt's work on the role of imagination and illusion anticipated today's debate. Babbitt addressed postmodernist concerns while avoiding the extremism and idiosyncrasy to which representatives of the movement are prone. Specifically, Babbitt showed that recognizing the inevitability of illusion in constituting the self does not have to lead to a "surrender to eccentricity," in Weinstein's phrase. This recognition is compatible, as Weinstein writes, with a "life-strategy of cultivating a concentric

imagination." The latter, for which Babbitt adopts Edmund Burke's term "the moral imagination," gives the self a center of sanity that connects it with other human beings.

It is humanity's predicament, Babbitt argues, to live within a mixture of reality and illusion and never to know exactly which is which. "Such reality as man can know positively is inextricably mixed up with illusion."¹ It is not possible, as rationalists of various types believe, to strip away illusion from reality by means of assiduous ratiocination. Man moves closer to what has permanence and enduring value through "the right use of illusion" (RR, lxxv), which involves the ethical centering of the imagination.

While applauding these Babbittian ideas, I have argued in various places that Babbitt unduly discounts reason's contribution to the search for reality. In his article Professor Weinstein defends him, speculating that, in assigning to reason not just the pragmatic-analytical function that Babbitt acknowledges, I may be hankering for "a special ends-conferring reason" and perhaps even "metaphysics." Weinstein expresses this reservation in a tentative and exploratory manner and in an article with whose general aim I am in hearty sympathy. I seize the opportunity nevertheless to air an epistemological issue that is important not only for Babbitt studies but for a much-needed philosophical renewal.

My understanding of two different forms of reason, pragmatic and philosophical, and their relationship to imagination and will, has been set forth at length in *Will, Imagination and Reason* (1986). Here I can deal with the subject only very selectively and with special reference to Professor Weinstein's concerns. It should be said first of all that my objection to Babbitt's treatment of reason does not, as Weinstein acknowledges, call into question Babbitt's emphasis on the non-intellectual sources of civilization and on the crucial role of the imagination in shaping our view of reality. Babbitt's elaboration of that role, especially the interaction of the imagination with the will, is, in my estimation, one of the truly important contributions to philosophy—to aesthetics, ethics and epistemology—in this century. Secondly, I do not criticize his truncated conception of reason—rationality confined to an essentially pragmatic function—in the name of an abstractionist, ahistorical rationality. What I affirm is a form of critical reflection, distinct from pragmatic rationality,

¹ Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1991), lxxiv. Hereinafter cited in the text as "RR."

that gives expression to what is in concrete experience. This philosophical rationality is indistinguishably self-knowledge and history. It takes systematic account of the universal traits of human life as actually lived. It is not normative in the sense of divining ideal truth or promulgating “principles” of conduct.

The pragmatic rationality that Babbitt explicitly recognizes does form an indispensable part of the intellectual life; it is wholly dominant in the natural sciences. The epistemology of Irving Babbitt is in an important but limited way compatible with that of John Dewey. But pragmatic rationality, I argue, is not the chief *organon* of philosophy, although here too it inevitably plays a role. All philosophical ideas—for example, Babbittian concepts like “the inner check,” “the moral imagination,” and “humanism”—can of course be refined, elaborated and extended. That there is always room for that kind of clarification might suggest that such concepts are just provisional and pragmatic. But, unlike pragmatic ideas, philosophical concepts are not mere hypotheses, rough and somewhat arbitrarily differentiated notions, formulated *ad hoc* with a view to guiding practical action and understood to need revision in new circumstances. Genuinely philosophical concepts are attempts to express, with the greatest possible clarity and faithfulness, enduring features of human experience that are distinct in the sense of not blurring into each other. Although the work of deepening and extending philosophical insight will always continue, philosophy proper is governed by the intent to express the experiential facts just as they are. The always-remaining ingredients of obscurity in philosophical ideas are not the result of deliberate pragmatic interference with the experiential facts to advance practical ends. Philosophical reason proper does not take liberties with concrete experience to achieve an artificial but useful precision or consistency. It tries to discern and give conceptual form to what is actually and concretely in experience, without concessions to pragmatic convenience. One of the tasks of philosophy is to reduce the element of pragmatic approximations and simplifications in its deliberations—a process of theoretical elucidation that is analogous to the moral imagination’s gaining ground on less penetrating qualities of the imagination. Philosophy never comes to an end in definitive, perfectly lucid concepts, but what it knows, it does know. Always imperfect and somewhat tentative, genuinely philosophical knowledge still is not just hypothetical. Philosophical concepts capture the *categorical* structure

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of experience, those fundamental, primordial dimensions of consciousness that cannot be defined out of existence but affect all human life. Other philosophical concepts from Babbitt are "a oneness that is always changing," "multiplicity," "immediate experience," and, for that matter, "analytic reason." In spite of impressions left from time to time, Babbitt does not really regard these as merely temporary, provisional, pragmatic "truths." They refer to ultimates of human life that always and everywhere constitute experience. If the concepts were not of that kind, Babbitt's philosophy would disintegrate into a blur. The primordial dimensions of human consciousness that are expressed in philosophical concepts are of necessity presupposed in all merely pragmatic formulations.

Babbitt is well aware of the limitations of pragmatic rationality. He points out that the intellect, as he understands it, inevitably distorts the concrete facts of immediate experience. Some of his comments about reason run parallel to ones by Henri Bergson. Analytic reason cuts up into convenient parts, into separate "things," phenomena that are actually living and interrelated. Because of that attribute of reason, Babbitt believes that humanity must rely on intuition, on immediate experience, for more dependable information about real life.

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Is Babbitt true to his own program? That his books draw upon riches of human intuition, including a wide range of poetry and other creative literature, is obvious. But his books contain extended reflection on human existence. If his various penetrating observations are not, or not mainly, products of reason—reason being incapable of faithfully expressing what is truly in experience and important—what exactly are they? Intuitive flashes? Are they poetry of sorts? Babbitt's observations do indeed pertain to immediate experience, but on the basis of this intuitive material he offers elaborate *argument* about life and literature. His books are full of ideas, definitions, distinctions, and concepts which together constitute a coherent and wide-ranging philosophy of life. What is it, then, that gives theoretical-conceptual form to the facts of immediate experience, making critical discussion of them possible? If, as Babbitt contends, the analytic intellect must by its very nature distort the actual, concrete facts of human consciousness, his ability to express those facts must be due to another form of rationality.

Without being fully aware of it, Babbitt, like all thinkers, has at his disposal a type of rationality that does not distort immediate ex-

perience but simply brings it to reflective self-consciousness. Contrary to a very old philosophical convention, universality and particularity are not like oil and water. They are synthesized in philosophical rationality. That Babbitt uses that kind of reason is apparent, for example, in his critique of the limits of reason, the faculty that he variously calls “the power that discriminates,” “analytical reason,” “the finite intellect,” or just “the intellect.” Note that the Babbittian critique is a *reasoned* demonstration of the flaws of pragmatic, analytical reason, not just an intuitive burst. Babbitt *thoughtfully* and *critically* compares what is actually in experience to the distortions introduced by pragmatic formulations. How, except through a kind of reason, does Babbitt *know* that what he compares to the analytical simplifications is actually in experience? Again, a form of reason is active whose existence is not brought to full awareness. I say not brought to *full* awareness, because Babbitt’s references to the role of reason are not entirely consistent and sometimes actually come close to identifying and endorsing the kind of philosophical-historical rationality that I have been describing. For example, stressing the need for intellectual discrimination, Babbitt explains that “I mean this power, *working not abstractly, but on the actual material of experience.*”² This formulation does not quite fit pragmatic intellect, for the latter always imposes an element of abstraction on the immediate data of consciousness, but it does fit philosophical rationality as here explained. The same is true of another statement by Babbitt regarding the proper approach to reality: “a concentration, at once imaginative and discriminating, on the facts.” (DL, 36) Babbitt is here not intending a definition of reason, but his words may serve in our context as a summary of philosophical rationality: intuitive power and conceptual discernment working together, particularity and universality unified.

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Philosophical reason is not “normative” as that term is usually meant. It does not decree specific rules or goals of conduct. It is historical, not in the empirical-positivistic sense, but in the sense that it is closely attentive to the experiential facts of the enduring but evolving human consciousness. If philosophical reason has some understanding about the goal of human existence, it is not because it enjoys privileged access to “ideal” truth or norms of perfection, but because it has knowledge about the permanent *categorical struc-*

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² Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1979), 36 (emphasis added). Hereinafter cited in the text as “DL.”

ture of human life, of the formal conditions of goodness, truth and beauty as historically manifested in practical action, art and thinking. As knowledge of the universal traits of our historical existence, philosophy carries implications for the future, but it does not know how, concretely, the values of goodness, truth and beauty will be realized in circumstances to come. Some of those concrete manifestations may take the most learned and perspicacious of the philosophers by surprise. Until the substantive specifics are in experience, they cannot be critically studied.

What of particular norms of conduct, the kind of standards that are typically called "principles" or "values"? These prescriptions are not philosophical but are pragmatic and provisional derivations from what is philosophically and otherwise known about human life.

Imagination not demoted. Professor Weinstein notes that in mapping "the mind" a "special ends-conferring reason is not required and might introduce an undesired element of dogmatism into reflection." It is proper to have this concern about elements of an older Western philosophical tradition and to have it even more about various contemporary promulgations of "rights" and "values." Philosophical reason, as I understand it, works differently. Professor Weinstein may worry that recognizing a wider role for reason than the one explicitly endorsed by Babbitt would mean a general demotion of the imagination, but no such demotion is entailed. The epistemological reorientation for which I am arguing affirms the aesthetical-intuitive basis of the theoretical life. Good philosophy in the last two centuries has established the primacy of the imagination in constituting our grasp of the world. Today only thinkers who are ignorant of this advance or wearing ideological blinders contemplate a return to the kind of classical-medieval intellectualism that attributes to the imagination a passive and preliminary role in the search for reality. Some recent forms of abstractionism are even more careless of the intuitive and concrete wholes that underlie philosophical rationality.

Philosophical rationality as judgment of reality. The crux of the matter under discussion is that what has entered consciousness by acquiring imaginative-intuitive form needs to be assessed as to its reality. Is the particular whole sheer fancy, or does it express life as actually lived? What power in man answers this question? Not imagination itself, for, as imagination, it is self-absorbed, oblivious of whether it is intuiting reality or unreality. Not pragmatic rationality, for that kind of reason is forever constructing

inherently arbitrary classifications, asking only after their usefulness. The judgment as to the reality of imaginative wholes is passed by a power that is able to distinguish what belongs to the world in which we act from what does not. That power perceives the difference between unrealized desire, which thus remains in the imagination, and enacted desire. In that distinction resides the criterion of reality. The ability to separate what is purely imaginary from what is historically actual is the distinguishing mark of—philosophical reason. The latter raises the action of the will, which is mute, to self-consciousness. Without the reality check that it performs we would drift into unrestrained illusion, even madness. Philosophical rationality is integral to all human life, including its most ordinary forms. In virtually every moment it separates dream and reality, although in daily life pressing practical needs do not often permit it to become methodical and attentive to the human condition in general: its judgments are rendered on-the-spot in quick succession and yield repeatedly to other influences. In philosophy, more strictly speaking, the work of distinguishing what is imaginary from what is actual becomes systematic and deliberate.

Although these remarks concern the distinction between imagination and reason and the relationship between them, it is not possible to omit entirely references to the crucial role of will. For Babbitt reality is discovered, first and foremost, in the exercise of a certain quality of will, the one for which he uses the terms “the higher will” and “the inner check.” In his view, the most penetrating form of the imagination has depth and proportion because it is anchored in experience of this quality of will. It needs to be added to Babbitt that the concrete material upon which philosophical reason works is received from the imagination and that therefore the will, as the ultimate source of the orientation of the imagination, helps direct the attention of reason. To what was just said about the philosophical criterion of reality, it must be appended that most fundamentally the philosophical judgment of reality is the account of experience in relation not just to action in general, but to the action of the *ethical* will. The term “reality” refers to actual historical experience, but that experience can be more or less expressive of man’s highest potential, more or less *real* in a second special sense. It should be added that, although philosophical reason always seeks truth, that effort is ultimately for the sake of good willing.

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In art criticism, as distinguished from art itself, philosophical

reason combines with poetical-aesthetical sensibility to distinguish between qualities of the imagination. In his own literary criticism Babbitt distinguishes, for example, between "idyllic imagination" and "moral imagination." The former is a flight from the real conditions of human existence and especially their more disappointing aspects; the latter is structured by an intuition of man's true moral predicament. A work of art never presents the world in the sense of actual personages and events: it is not a statement of historical fact. Still, visions of art can be more or less attuned to "what life is really like" and add to or detract from our sense of reality. The judgment as to where a work of art stands in this respect does of course presuppose aesthetical absorption of the vision, but a part of the sensitive critic's reaction to the work concerns the extent to which it expresses life in its most important dimension, that is, in its relationship to the higher will. In art criticism philosophical rationality brings the critic's reaction to reflective self-awareness and spells out its grounds. Unlike abstractionist, reifying thinking, philosophical reason is at home with immediate experience and capable of identifying works of art that, although they are not historically true, have the texture of real life. It can distinguish them from works that are merely fanciful. The ability of philosophical reason to make such distinctions is actually enhanced in proportion as its intuitive element has been strengthened and enriched by great art—a large and important subject that cannot be taken up here.

Babbitt calls the proper scrutiny and ranking of works of art "criticism." It is concerned both with the depth and the aesthetical coherence of the work. But Babbitt never goes very far in explaining the epistemological basis of "criticism." What exactly performs the critique? What formulates the concepts used? In Babbitt's case, they include "high seriousness," "romanticism," "classicism," "sentimental humanitarianism," "sham spirituality." Are these terms and definitions the products of pragmatic, analytic reason? In that case they would not faithfully articulate what is in experience, but Babbitt clearly believes that they do. The conceptual structure for a penetrating and balanced critique of a work of art is provided chiefly by philosophical rationality. To be sure, a good critic must first of all have a capacity for aesthetically recreating visions of art and for appreciating their intuitive integrity, but unless the work of the critic is informed by a deep and intimate sense of real life—made reflec-

tively self-conscious through philosophical reason—it lacks the criterion of reality.

Having raised some questions about my view of reason, Professor Weinstein comments that perhaps our positions are not so different in the end. Perhaps they can be reconciled, he speculates, by simply letting the highest kind of imagination, whose importance and primacy he defends, be called reason: “The use of the concentric imagination to produce general descriptions and strategies for life, that is, to define identities and to clarify the conditions of identity might just as well be called an operation of reason.”

There is warrant for Weinstein’s suggestion in one way. Philosophical reason is not abstract but historically concrete; it gives conceptual voice and lucidity to what has already been constituted into a whole by imagination (intuition); it is at once universal and particular. In this special sense, reason and imagination are the same; in their joint capacity they can be said to produce “strategies for life,” in the limited sense explained earlier. The trouble with Weinstein’s sentence is that, as becomes most clear in art, the imagination as such is *not* reason, however much artistic portrayals of human life may include depiction of the uses of reason. In great art, philosophical words spoken by the characters are not philosophical interludes but parts of an intuitive whole created by the artist. The medium of artistic expression is not concepts, definitions, distinctions, or the like; if they show up in art, they are intuitively transfigured to advance a non-historical, poetical objective. If the imagination is able to see deeply into human existence, which is most evident in great art, it is not because reason has taken charge of its operation. The imagination has a power of insight that is *sui generis*.

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To the quoted sentence Weinstein adds: “Yet it still remains a question as to why reason should be split off from imagination if not to endow it with the privileged role of seeing into the goal of being.” My response is that reason, by its own mode of working, is “split off” from imagination: although dependent always on the imagination for its concrete material, philosophical reason has its own distinctive manner and purpose. Recognizing this division of labor in the search for reality is *not* tantamount to setting up reason as the Supreme Normative Authority, for reasons already given. But neither is it necessary, in order to uphold the centrality of the imagination, to restrict reason to a merely pragmatic-analytical function.

Like Weinstein, I deplore the intellectual arrogance and superfi-

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ciality that do not recognize the decisive importance of the higher form of imagination in pointing us to reality and meaning. The same abstractionism fails to grasp the extent to which a very different kind of imagination fosters destructive illusion and pulls rationality with it in a flight from reality. Philosophical reason, as I understand it, rests upon the type of intuitive base that Babbitt calls the moral imagination. It can add to the visions of the great artists a conceptual, critical clarification of the facts of life. *Properly understood, philosophy is not the enemy of artistic-imaginative insight but its close and deferential ally.*

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The failure explicitly to recognize and take systematic account of philosophical-historical reason—a rationality that not only exists but is used to a greater or smaller extent by everyone—is holding back philosophy. The nature of philosophical reason has been elucidated with great perspicacity by Benedetto Croce, who substantially revises Hegel and clears away most of that philosopher’s obscurities and extravagances. One of the reasons why American thought has had difficulty absorbing such thinking is its spotty and selective familiarity with the classical period of German philosophy, the kind of biased and narrow attention that makes Hegel out to be mainly a precursor of Marx or of the cult of the state. Croce is in important respects an offshoot of classical German philosophical culture, but he creatively reworks and supplements its best elements. In America today, one school of thought in particular will not seriously consider ideas of this type. That school propounds the retrograde notions that whatever smacks of “historicism” poses a threat to universality and that philosophical ideas are best formulated in the abstract. Another group of scholars with a religious and more historical bent harbors a deep suspicion that a philosophical reason that is presented as both historical and systematic must constitute a closed, dogmatic system and claim divine omniscience. But the greatest danger of dogmatism and arrogance does not come from a reason that respects what actually falls within human experience. It comes from abstract and conceited quasi-rationality and from escapist and conceited imagination, both of which negate and try to overpower actual human life and set up their own constructs as true reality.