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Democracy and Imperialism:
Irving Babbitt and the Moral and Cultural Sources of Foreign Policy Leadership

A DISSERTATION

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Democracy and Imperialism: Irving Babbitt and the Moral and Cultural Sources of Foreign Policy Leadership

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After costly U.S. engagement in two major wars in the Middle East, our foreign policy debates are dominated by questions about the appropriateness of American military interventions. A central issue is whether an interventionist foreign policy is compatible with the American constitutional tradition and the temperament that this tradition requires.

Irving Babbitt (1865-1933) explored this question in depth. By linking foreign policy to questions of the soul, he explored how a nation’s “body of moral habits and beliefs” would ultimately shape its foreign policy. Babbitt felt that the substitution of expansive, sentimental Romanticism for the religious and ethical traditions of the West would lead to imperialism.

Research for this dissertation involved a thorough review of Babbitt’s writings, including articles and lecture notes never published in books. (Babbitt’s papers are available at Harvard University.) Particular attention was given to his most famous and relevant books, *Democracy and Leadership* and *Rousseau and Romanticism* although a number of obscure essays and letters have been cited.

The dissertation points to the unique contribution made by Irving Babbitt to understanding the quality of foreign policy leadership in a democracy. Babbitt explored how a democratic nation’s foreign policy is a product of the moral and cultural tendencies of the nation’s leaders.

Democracies that lack political restraint and tend toward plebiscitary practices and outcomes are more likely to be warlike and imperialistic. The United States has been moving
away from the restraining order of sound constitutionalism and, with that departure, has shown an increasing tendency to try to impose its will on other nations. In the contemporary global environment, this interventionism will inevitably cause the United States to clash with the “civilizational” regions that have emerged in recent decades. As described by Harvard historian Samuel Huntington, the tendency of the post-Cold War world order has been a realignment based upon historical, religious and cultural traditions. In Babbitt’s time, the most pressing foreign policy challenge was nationalism in Europe; the current U.S. challenge is to avoid cultural and military imperialism at a time when civilizational regions are returning to their historical roots. How to address the problem of tension between civilizations is a subject to which Babbitt, showing characteristic foresight, devoted much attention.
This dissertation by William S. Smith fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Politics and is approved by Claes G. Ryn, Ph.D., as Director, and by David Walsh, Ph.D., and Dennis Coyle, Ph.D. as Readers.

Claes G. Ryn, Ph.D., Director

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Dennis Coyle, Ph.D., Reader
To Laura

Amor Vincit Omnia
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Introduction

“The fortune of princes changes with their character.”

– Sallust, The War with Cataline

Imperialism, as a national motivation, generally has pejorative connotations across the political spectrum. Imperialism implies the forced imposition of the will of one people upon another people who oppose the political, cultural or economic changes being imposed. Imperialism is widely viewed as an unjustified violation of national sovereignty.

While imperialism, as an abstract concept, meets with near universal opprobrium, in concrete historical circumstances actions that constitute genuine imperialism are sometimes in the eye of the beholder. Historians of ancient Rome, for example, have regularly debated whether the growth of Roman power derived from a culture with imperial ambitions or whether pervasive outside threats to the Roman Republic caused Rome to conquer other peoples.

Recent foreign policy actions of the United States have generated similar debates. During the Cold War, left-leaning foreign policy observers viewed American interventions in nations such as Vietnam as imperialistic adventurism while right-leaning observers viewed such interventions as strategic responses to emerging threats to U.S. security. In the post-Cold War environment, similar disagreements have emerged. President George W. Bush, for example, argued that the spread of freedom and democracy through military interventions was a humanitarian cause and also represented a defensive strategy by the United States to prevent future terrorists attacks, while critics argued that such democratic interventionism embodied military, political and cultural imperialism.
Arriving at precise agreement about the nature of imperialism seems to take on added complexity in democratic regimes. Imperialism is readily recognized in tyrannical regimes that brutally suppress internal dissent and invade their neighbors for obvious economic or political advantage. Democratic nations however, with their implicit popular legitimacy, seem to enjoy a certain inoculation against having their foreign wars characterized as imperialistic. Leaders of democracies, in order to secure popular support for their foreign policy initiatives, tend to assert altruistic or humanitarian motivations. For this reason, the citizens of democratic nations may have difficulty in recognizing imperialism on the part of their own country because of the assumption that the nation's actions have purer motives and popular sanction.

While democracies seem weaker at self-diagnosing imperialism, the historical record reflects some ambiguity about whether democracies are indeed less disposed to imperialism than other regime types. Numerous historical examples point to democratic or quasi-democratic regimes that did in fact develop unjust and tyrannical characteristics and tended toward imperialism. Ancient Greece and Rome, as well as Jacobin France, are but three important examples. The Framers of the American Constitution were acutely aware of the decline of democracy in the classical world and, when constructing the Constitution, attempted to install bulwarks against the tendency of democracies to degenerate into class conflict, to suffer a loss of liberty at home and to engage in foreign adventurism abroad. One could make the argument that the spirit of the original Constitution was anti-imperialistic.

Because of the ambiguity of imperialism in democracies, it would seem a worthy task of scholarship to refine and enlarge the nation's understanding of imperialism and examine how

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1 A more contemporary example may be found in the rise of the Nazi Party and Hitler's appointment as German Chancellor. While neither Hitler nor the Nazis achieved popular majorities in the presidential or Reichstag elections, their substantial success at the polls did put them in a position to abolish the constitution and assume dictatorial powers.
democratic leaders might avoid a drift into imperialism as a matter of national policy. Such a project would involve a form of national self-examination to consider whether there are certain qualities in a democracy that pull it toward peace and other traits that pull it toward conquest.

Developing a deeper understanding of the nature of imperialism seems a necessary task for contemporary Americans. The United States has, in recent decades, launched lengthy wars in far-flung corners of the world. Supporters of these wars claimed that they were essential for both humanitarian and security reasons, and there is indeed evidence of terroristic threats and humanitarian crises in the regions where the United States has intervened. But given the weakness democracies tend to exhibit in diagnosing their own imperialism, it also seems incumbent on scholars to ask if America’s wars may be symptomatic of the kind of moral and cultural developments that coincided with the decline and wars of ancient Athens, the Roman Republic and revolutionary France.

Irving Babbitt, who lived through the Great War and spent much of his life studying the intellectual origins of the French Revolution, wrote extensively about what he believed to be the virtues or vices within democracy that may hold the balance between war and peace. Because Babbitt's analysis of imperialism was philosophically penetrating, Babbitt, I will argue, developed a useful guide to diagnosing genuine imperialism, a guide that transcends the typical back and forth arguments regarding whether certain historical and concrete cases entail imperialism.

In approaching the problem of imperialism in a democracy, Babbitt adopted an important part of the framework of classical political philosophy by asserting that the most important question is: who will rule? Babbitt believed that democracies were little different from other forms of government in that the quality most required for a successful political order
entails a high quality of moral character in their leaders. Modern democracies, Babbitt argued, had a tendency to evade this problem of ethical leadership by hiding behind appeals to popular will and democratic legitimacy. A numerical majority, he pointed out, may or may not embrace just policies but they are far more likely to go morally astray if they are poorly led.

Babbitt's theory of imperialism makes a unique contribution to political theory because he systematically applied the classical question of who should rule to international problems of war and peace. Irrespective of the form of government, Babbitt asserted that leaders of poor moral character who would easily cast aside conscience will be far more likely to embody a spirit of imperialism and exhibit a stronger inclination to impose their wills upon others. Unjust military adventurism, Babbitt believed, was inevitably rooted in intemperate leaders, and therefore democracies with a decadent leadership enjoyed no special immunity against engaging in imperialism. Leaders on the other hand who had, in an ethical sense, mastered themselves, would be far less likely to aspire to dominion over others.

As Babbitt may have predicted, throughout the last century Western elites have tended to evade the central issue of ethical leadership and have expressed confidence that principles of peace and international order could be found, either through robust military power or through the proper support for international institutions.

Leaders such as Barack Obama have expressed the confident belief that peace would triumph if the world would only finally accept the fact of global diversity and the requirements of international law and international institutions. As the historian Samuel Huntington wrote, the globalists believed that peace would be the inevitable result of “an open society with open borders, encouraging subnational ethnic, racial, and cultural identities, dual citizenship, diasporas, and led by elites who increasingly identified with global institutions, norms, and
rules rather than national ones.”

This type of idealism and globalism might, if Babbitt is right, be charged with combining “the pretence to a vast illumination with the utmost degree of spiritual and intellectual emptiness and vagueness.”

Other American foreign policy elites have criticized this type of soft globalism and argued for a different vision, the global triumph of democracy through American assertiveness. Unlike the vision of the mentioned globalists, this democratic aspiration would be advanced through great American military strength. Worldwide peace and order should be promoted by a new American assertiveness. As Huntington said: “At the start of the new millennium conservatives accepted and endorsed the idea of an American empire and the use of American power to reshape the world according to American values.”

President George W. Bush said: “The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.”

Claes G. Ryn framed the nature of Bush’s ambitions this way: “The president of the United States has committed his country to goals that will require world hegemony, not to say supremacy.”

The idealistic and globalist aspirations of U.S. elites for the last 100 years, whether of the liberal humanitarian or more militaristic variety, appear to have clashed with historical reality: the 20th and 21st centuries have witnessed brutality and suffering on an unexampled scale and never-ending wars. Rather than speak of an era of global peace and democracy, the cynic might agree with remarks attributed to the French philosopher Émile Boutroux, who in

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4 Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity*, 363-64.
1912 just before the outbreak of the Great War, told a reporter “that from the amount of peace talk abroad, he inferred that the future was likely to be ‘supremely warlike and bloody.’”

Irving Babbitt diagnosed what he saw as profound intellectual and moral errors underlying the dominant notions of international peace and democracy. He had seen similar arguments made prior to, and after, the catastrophic Great War and he pleaded with Western intellectuals to reconsider their assumptions about what may promote peace among Western nations. Contemporary paradigms of world order were based, he argued, on a Romantic idealism that denied central facts of human existence. Restoring a sounder, more realistic view of human nature was essential: “It is pleasanter, after all, to be awakened by a douche of ice-water than by an explosion of dynamite under the bed; and that has been the frequent fate of the romantic idealist.”

Babbitt employed the perspective of classical moral and political philosophy and built his arguments about war and peace from the ground up, starting with a careful examination of human nature and its moral and spiritual characteristics. Babbitt argued that any realistic understanding of human nature placed the source of political disorders – local, national and international – in the individual human soul. Human beings were subject to a “human law” that required human beings to exhibit "ethical concentration" to control their own merely impulsive, selfish desires that are the source of disorder among human beings. Without some form of ethical control, conflict is inevitable. As Babbitt insisted, “temperament is what separates.”

Babbitt based his theories of societal and international order on a simple Confucian premise that has Western counterparts in classical Greek philosophy: “There may be something after all

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7 Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1979) 156.
in the Confucian idea that if a man only sets himself right, the rightness will extend to his family first of all, and finally in widening circles to the whole community.”

Babbitt was well informed about contemporary events and did not ignore the complexity of foreign affairs, the requirements of military preparedness, and the fragility of any international order. But he wished to break down these problems to their most basic elements. He insisted that societies without leaders who shared a culture of character would be prone to war. Intemperate leaders beget an intemperate culture, which begets a decaying constitutional order, which begets a grasping, even warlike regime. The imperialistic personality writ large is the imperialistic state.

Sentimental globalism and assertive democracy promotion share a denial of the challenge of what Babbitt called the human law, which is an ethical standard standing athwart man’s lower nature. Sentimental globalism argues that a heartfelt and sincere desire for peace can breathe life, authority and efficacy into international institutions and create order. To paraphrase Babbitt, the globalists believe that peace is not the fruit of a common discipline among the world’s leaders and nations, but due to a common emotion.

Likewise, those who advocate promotion of democracy around the world, advancing a so-called “Freedom Agenda,” do not regard popular sovereignty as subject to the human law as understood by Babbitt. The Freedom Agenda is based upon something like Rousseau’s democratic theory, which postulated that when popular sentiment is unleashed, and the “people” become free of dictators and tyrants, the “will” of the people then rises to the fore, ensuring peace and freedom. Democracy is peace, and peace is democracy. In this type of

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10 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 226.
Rousseauistic democracy, the popular will becomes antinomian, a mysterious moral force that, in the collective, is exempted from any law above itself. In revolutionary France, large numbers of people were guillotined based upon the "people's will." As Irving Babbitt noted in a 1923 Sorbonne lecture: “radical democracy can lead to imperialism and tyranny since the sovereign people wants no obstacle to its will.”\(^\text{12}\)

Irving Babbitt argued that idealistic imperialism was always a danger lurking in American popular culture: “An unchecked expansiveness on the national scale is always imperialistic. Among the ingredients of a possible American imperialism M. Siegfried enumerates the American’s ‘great self-satisfaction, his rather brutal sense of his own interests, and the consciousness, still more dangerous, of his ‘duties’ towards humanity.’ M. Siegfried admits however that our imperialism is likely to be of a new and subtle essence, not primarily concerned with territorial aggrandizement.”\(^\text{13}\)

The very first sentence in Babbitt’s 1923 Sorbonne lecture, titled “Democracy and Imperialism,” told the audience “the connection between the two phenomena is not always acknowledged.”\(^\text{14}\) History would warn that democracies provide no insulation against imperialism and, under the wrong leadership, can be quite warlike. “Democracy in the sense of direct and unlimited democracy is, as was pointed out by Aristotle, the death of liberty; in virtue of its tyrannical temper, it is likewise, in the broad sense in which I have been using the term, closely akin to imperialism.”\(^\text{15}\)


\(^\text{15}\) Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 141.
After years of costly wars by the United States, a consideration of Irving Babbitt’s ideas may be indispensable to the crafting of an American foreign policy that is not based upon sentimental hopes or utopian ideologies but upon a genuine moral realism.

At this point, a note regarding the chief emphasis of this study is required. The forthcoming examination of Babbitt and international relations and foreign policy is not one of international relations theory as ordinarily understood but primarily one of political philosophy, though especially as related to international relations and foreign policy. It is freely granted that scholars of international relations and foreign policy in the more narrow sense make important contributions to understanding the nature of the international order and trends in military and diplomatic affairs that will impact that order. Policymakers do well to pay heed to those who think and write about the practice of foreign policy, but so do students of foreign policy need to learn from the practitioners of foreign policy, which is a form of prudential statecraft. As Edmund Burke remarked, in any prudential endeavor be it politics or farming and medicine, “I shall always advise to call in the aid of the farmer and the physician rather than the professor of metaphysics.”16

While recognizing the value and importance of other approaches to international relations and foreign policy, this study will by stressing certain philosophical considerations offer building blocks essential to any sound theory of international affairs. None of what will be discussed or argued here is intended to deny or discount the great complexity of this field of scholarly research. As it explores central philosophical questions, this dissertation may suggest new ways of thinking about or approaching international relations, but it will not provide

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specific answers for the large and bewildering number of tactical U.S. foreign policy questions that need answers.

On the other hand, any work of politics that fancies the creation of a utopian or millenarian paradise on earth or postulates the possibility of a fundamental transformation of human nature through political action can, ipso facto, be considered a work of intellectual malpractice. This dissertation will convey that according to Irving Babbitt certain ideas about international affairs are in fact rooted in fantasy, in a Romantic idealism that exhibits a false understanding of reality and has no realistic chance of fostering world order. To the extent that this study finds Babbitt’s views plausible it will challenge widely held views of international relations and foreign policy.

From the time of the ancient Greeks, political philosophy has analyzed politics from the perspective of what can be expected from human nature. Political philosophers have examined political regimes or theories about a potential regime by tracing political forms back to characteristics found in the individual human soul or to misunderstandings about the nature of the individual human soul. Eric Voegelin has described classical political philosophy in particular as applying “the anthropological principle that society is man written in larger letters.”

The unique contribution of Irving Babbitt to thinking about international relations, it can be argued, is how he understood the sources of human conduct and that his theory of imperialism and of restraint in foreign policy systematically and in distinctive ways applied the anthropological principle to a level above regime types and demonstrates that the international order is the sum total of “man written in larger letters.” In his lectures at the Sorbonne, Babbitt

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described his project this way: “At the end, I will leave behind the political aspects of the relationship between democracy and imperialism and try to study the root of this problem in the psychology of the individual.”

The international order is undoubtedly affected by balances of military power, economic interdependencies and rivalries, ethnic tensions and a host of complex factors studied by international relations theorists, just as relations among individuals may be shaped by dependencies and conflicts, as well characteristics of the individual person such as will-power, health, physical strength and other factors that influence success or failure. Yet Babbitt insisted that theories of international affairs that ignore or distort the immutable tendencies within the human soul are superficial at best and pernicious at worst. The anthropological principle applies to the analysis of world affairs in the same way that it applies to the analysis of regime types.

The challenges of international relations in the 21st century differ significantly from those faced at the turn of the 20th century. In Babbitt’s time, two centuries of Romanticism of a certain type had bred an aggressive form of nationalism in Europe. Babbitt applied his ideas to the contemporary interactions among European nation states and especially to the misunderstandings of human nature that he felt had helped to usher in the Great War.

In our time, the likelihood of nationalistic wars between Western European nation states seems remote, but Babbitt’s insights can be applied to a different set of events and circumstances within the international order. In this regard, there is a great deal of value in Samuel Huntington's thesis that the great challenges of current world affairs are found less in clashes between individual nation states than in “clashes of civilizations.” The clash between

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Islamic and Western societies is one obvious example. However, other significant international challenges fit the Huntington paradigm. The current tension between the United States and Russia, for example, may seem a clash of individual nation states, but this tension is probably more deeply rooted in the United States’ conviction that she represents a universal civilizational order of “democracy and freedom,” while Russia feels she is the primary defender of a far-reaching Orthodox civilization and a culture also found in numerous neighboring nations.

Babbitt’s insights are as applicable to the clash of civilizations as they are to the clash of nation states. In his time, Babbitt pleaded with Western leaders to seek what is at once common and highest in human nature; only a cosmopolitanism rooted in a common ethical center would unite centrifugal forces among leaders and nations. In our time, the challenge is even more daunting and complex: to develop the same kind of cosmopolitanism across culturally diverse civilizations—a project for which Babbitt’s moral-religious and humanistic philosophy and his extensive discussion of East and West laid a philosophical foundation.

Babbitt’s study of the great humanistic and religious sages of Asiatic civilization and their commonalities with Western Christianity points to the possibility that, with proper leadership, a bridge between civilizations could be built. If, as Babbitt insisted, human experience is despite its infinite variety at its core always and everywhere the same and “that the best books of the world seem to have been written, as Emerson puts it, by one all-wise, all-seeing gentleman,” then our task is to find the higher values that can unite the world's leaders across the world’s civilizations and to recognize that these higher things are a unifying, peace-inducing force. Nations and civilizations may have trade and military alliances but the only source of true peace is found in the souls of leaders who share higher nobility.
War will persist in human history because human nature always has the potential for moral indolence or evil. Despite his realism about the strenuous challenge of uniting human beings through ethical work, Babbitt believed that this common ground among diverse peoples and cultures was real and possible for properly educated people to discern. Leaders across civilizations who share the proper temperament and character may “go beyond the convention of a particular time and country, and lay hold in varying degrees on ‘the unwritten laws of heaven.’”

Babbitt’s quest was to locate and elucidate the part of the human soul that is either divine or most deeply human, because it is the wisdom of the ages that what is divine or most deeply human is what unites human beings, whereas what is merely temperamental or impulsive, untouched by a higher discipline, is what divides them.

This dissertation will examine the central ideas of Irving Babbitt with special reference to their relevance for foreign policy and international relations and with emphasis on what he has to say explicitly about those subjects. The structure of the dissertation will be as follows. The first chapter discusses Babbitt’s view of human nature, a view that, with respect to the higher potential of man’s “worldly” or “temporal” existence he labels as “humanism.” That view, he argued, is shared by numerous philosophical thinkers across civilizations who have expressed the same idea in a diversity of ways. Humanism, Babbitt said, is compatible with, but not identical to, the great religious traditions of East and West. The second chapter explains Babbitt’s view that a modern movement, “naturalism,” has gained wide currency in the West and that this movement provides a distorted and erroneous understanding of human nature, repudiating the West's cultural and religious heritage. The errors concerning human nature found in naturalism, Babbitt argued, spawn two superficially very different but closely

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aligned and often cooperating currents: a reliance on natural science as the way to progress and a sentimental humanitarianism that wholly rejects the old Western view of human nature and society. Sentimental humanitarianism becomes the source of a theory of radical democracy as developed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. That theory is discussed in the third chapter. In practice, radical democracy engenders two prominent characteristics, revolutionary disorder in domestic politics, to be discussed in Chapter 4, and imperialistic aggression in foreign policy, to be discussed in depth in Chapter 5. The only effective antidote to the imperialistic aggression of radical democracy, Babbitt argues, is a return to a sounder understanding of human nature and recognition that political disorder is rooted in disorders of the soul. As discussed in the sixth chapter, Babbitt argues that human beings can become genuinely “cosmopolitan” and move toward peace with other nations and civilizations only when their leaders share an ethical center, which is possible only when they have achieved a certain moral character. Temperamental, morally undisciplined leaders, who cannot control their passions, will never find peace with one another. The last chapter compares Babbitt’s theory of peace and good relations among nations and civilizations with three representative contemporary theories of world order. The dissertation concludes by applying Babbitt’s ideas to current world affairs and discussing their significance for supplementing and enriching theories of foreign policy and international relations.

Biographical and Bibliographical Information

Because of the death of his mother at an early age, Irving Babbitt grew up under a diversity of circumstances, from being a paperboy in New York City to a farmhand in Ohio to a cowhand in Wyoming. Babbitt's love of languages and the corresponding cultures eventually brought him to Harvard where he worried that his professors were concentrating on superficial
issues of philology rather than a more important philosophical subject matter. He graduated from Harvard with high honors in Classics and eventually found his way to the Sorbonne where he studied Eastern languages such as Sanskrit and Pāli and where he developed a profound respect for Eastern religions especially Buddhism. After earning a Master's degree at Harvard, he was offered a faculty position as an instructor of French. Babbitt was well qualified to teach Classics but the Classics requirement had been eased for Harvard students, probably leading to Babbitt's intellectual sparring with Harvard President Charles W. Eliot, a prominent education reformer and proponent of the modern system of "electives" for undergraduates. Babbitt, particularly in his first book *Literature and the American College*, was adamantly opposed to democratization of the curriculum under the elective system. Babbitt enjoyed a long career at Harvard, where he was a popular professor and influenced a number of figures such as T.S. Eliot who would become famous in their own right. Babbitt remained on the Harvard faculty until his death on July 15, 1933.20 21

Babbitt achieved national fame in his own lifetime for his advocacy of a "New Humanism" rooted in ethical discipline that stood in opposition to the cult of science and Romanticism. For example, an event at Carnegie Hall to discuss the New Humanism, with Babbitt as the featured speaker, reportedly drew 3,000 people. The debate and controversy surrounding Babbitt involved some of the most prominent intellectual and literary figures of his age, including: Edmund Wilson, Ernest Hemingway, T.S. Eliot, Arthur Lovejoy, Sinclair

20 One might surmise that he may have held on for an extra day to avoid passing on July 14th, Bastille Day.
Lewis, H.L. Mencken and Allen Tate. In his last decades, he wrote extensively about politics and war and peace.

The first body of scholarly literature around Babbitt's thought came in his lifetime with the intellectual ferment caused by his advocacy of a New Humanism. In 1930, two important books appeared that discussed Babbitt ideas. A defense of the New Humanism was made in *Humanism in America* edited by Norman Foerester, while a critique of New Humanism appeared in *The Critique of Humanism* edited by C. Hartley Grattan.

Babbitt's contemporary intellectual critics ranged from H.L. Mencken, who was largely out of his depth in critiquing Babbitt's interpretation of Rousseau, to intellectually more formidable interlocutors who were sympathetic but not in full agreement Babbitt. In this latter category, was his student T.S. Eliot who was more sympathetic to orthodox religion than Babbitt and Arthur Lovejoy who engaged with Babbitt in a relatively public dispute concerning Babbitt's interpretation of Romanticism and Rousseau. With Babbitt's death, debate over the New Humanism subsided, although in 1941 Oscar Cargill published *Intellectual America: Ideas on the March* that contained a rather polemical attack on Babbitt's ideas on humanism and education.

Prominent intellectuals during and just after World War II who were deeply influenced by Babbitt included the historian and Pulitzer Prize winning poet Peter Viereck and the historian and classicist Nathan Pusey, who became president of Harvard in 1953 and in 1960 inaugurated the Irving Babbitt Chair of Comparative Literature. Russell Kirk's treatment of Babbitt in *The Conservative Mind* (1953) helped attract interest in Babbitt. Scholarship on his work expanded markedly in the 1970s with the contributions of such scholars as Thomas Nevin, George Panichas and Claes G. Ryn. Russell Kirk assisted this new era of Babbitt
scholarship by founding of the conservative intellectual journal *Modern Age* in 1957; *Modern Age* became in time a vehicle for a considerable body of Babbitt scholarship. Ryn and Panichas in particular have done a great deal to correct older and misleading interpretations of Babbitt's ideas. In 1983 a two-day conference on Babbitt at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. commemorated the 50th anniversary of Babbitt’s death. In 1984 the National Humanities Institute was founded in part to carry forward the intellectual legacy of Irving Babbitt. For a quarter of century writings on Babbitt or related to his work have appeared in NHI’s interdisciplinary and international journal *HUMANITAS*. A growing number of scholars have applied, extended, revised or developed Babbitt’s central ideas, integrating them into work of their own.

Overall, the considerable amount of scholarship about Babbitt falls into several distinct categories. As discussed, there is a great deal of scholarship around the New Humanism. There is also considerable scholarship on Babbitt's religious thought and his comparisons between religions of the East and West as found in his *Dhammapada* and *Democracy and Leadership*. Babbitt's ideas, for example, have scholarly followers in China. Related to Babbitt's religious thought, there also is some formidable philosophical scholarship surrounding Babbitt's contributions to epistemology and to his general ideas, such as Ryn's *Will, Imagination and Reason* or Folke Leander's *Humanism and Naturalism: A Comparative Study of Ernest Seillière, Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More*. Over the years, scholars have also examined Babbitt's theories on education and his disagreements with Harvard President Charles Eliot. One recent such article is Kipton D. Smilie's "Humanitarian and Humanistic ideals: Charles W. Eliot, Irving Babbitt, and the American Curriculum at the Turn of the 20th Century" in the *Journal of Thought*. Babbitt was a considerable force in comparative literature, and
there is a body of work around his critique of Romanticism, mostly famously in Arthur
views on democracy also generated considerable controversy and over the years because of his
critique of Rousseauistic democracy he was accused of anti-democratic sentiments by a number
of scholars. A representative example is David Spitz's "The Undesirability of Democracy" in
*Patterns of Anti-Democratic Thought* in 1965. Finally, there are two excellent and more
sweeping considerations of Babbitt's ideas in *Irving Babbitt in Our Time*, edited by Claes Ryn
and George Panichas, as well as Thomas Nevin's *Irving Babbitt: An Intellectual Study*, both
generally reliable surveys of Babbitt's ideas. A voluminous body of literature surrounds
Babbitt's ideas, and those mentioned above are merely a representative sample drawn from a
few key areas of scholarly interest.

For the purposes of the present study, what is lacking in the scholarly treatment of
Babbitt is a thorough discussion of his ideas on war and peace, and on democracy and
imperialism. Given the presence of these themes throughout Babbitt's works and his
considerable interest in the origins of both the French Revolution and the Great War, this
represents a considerable intellectual gap in the treatment of Babbitt's thought that requires
attention.

There is only a single scholarly article that gives exclusive attention to Babbitt's ideas
on war and peace, Richard Gamble's "The 'Fatal Flaw' of Internationalism: Babbitt on
Humanitarianism" in *Humanitas* (1996). Gamble's article is a very reliable and sound
interpretation of Babbitt's ideas, but its focus is largely limited to a two-part essay written by
Babbitt in *Nation* (1915). Babbitt's ideas on imperialism are spread through much of Babbitt's
writings, and Gamble's essay is therefore not a systematic consideration of the sweep of
Babbitt's thought on the issue. Likewise, Nevin's book contains an important chapter on "Humanism in a Political Context" that mentions the connection Babbitt made between humanitarianism and "ideological imperialism" and how "Rousseau had produced Robespierre and Napoleon." But Nevin's treatment of Babbitt's political thought is confined largely to a discussion of Babbitt's ideas on democratic theory generally, not a discussion of the implications of democratic theory for foreign policy. In Russell Kirk's famous treatment of Babbitt in *The Conservative Mind*, he does mention the term "imperialism" once but in the context of human psychology not foreign affairs. Likewise, in Henry Kariel's essay "Democracy Limited: Irving Babbitt's Classicism" in the *Review of Politics* (1951) there is substantial discussion of Babbitt's political ideas but only one small mention of the danger of nations "meddling" in the operations of other nations.

Claes Ryn is one scholar who has written prolifically about foreign policy and clearly has been heavily influenced by Babbitt. In *America the Virtuous*, for example, Ryn draws on and enlarges many of Babbitt's ideas about war and peace and, like Babbitt, examines how the ideas of Rousseau seem to serve as an important intellectual basis for democratic imperialism in foreign policy and the fraying of the constitutional order in domestic affairs. However, Ryn's scholarship in this area is not a systematic treatment of Babbitt's ideas specifically. Drawing on Babbitt, he instead builds his own theory of imperialism, offers a more systematic philosophical treatment of epistemology and engages in a more contemporary discussion of current foreign policy events. For example, in *America the Virtuous*, which deals prominently with foreign affairs, Ryn mentions Babbitt's name on only seven pages.

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Given the paucity of scholarship about Babbitt's theory of imperialism and the recent wars prosecuted by the American democracy, the time seems ripe for a systematic treatment of Babbitt's thoughts on the tendencies that may make democracies warlike and for creating a scholarly basis for applying those ideas to the contemporary challenges of world order.
Chapter 1: Babbitt and Human Nature

“There are two laws discrete,
Not reconciled, --
Law for man, and law for thing;
The last builds the town and fleet,
But it runs wild,
And doth the man unking.” ¹ Emerson

Much of international relations theory rests upon analysis of “macro” trends in world affairs: studies of economic interdependence among nations, catalogs of military spending and weaponry, discussions of influential political ideologies and revolutions, detailed analyses of common interests among nations, or studies focused on international institutions. These analyses of the international system may yield significant insights about global trends and therefore may enlighten statesmen about looming dangers to world order. Yet each of these analyses also operates under certain “micro” assumptions about the nature of human beings and the potentialities therein. The superstructures of these theories have a deeper, philosophical basis. To understand Babbitt’s theory of democratic imperialism, one needs to examine carefully Babbitt’s theory of human nature as his larger theory of democracy is based upon the constituent parts of his insights into the human psyche.

Babbitt developed his theory in a manner similar to that of the classical Greek philosophers, on the anthropological principle that the political order is a larger reflection of individual souls, particularly the souls of its leaders. Babbitt noticed that both classical Greek and Asiatic philosophers, such as Aristotle and Confucius, shared a common understanding that peace in the polity was intimately related to a certain ethical harmony in the souls of

individuals. Babbitt concluded that true peace, as opposed to a temporary balance of forces or an agreement on common interests, is rooted in spiritual agreement. Just as intemperate individuals are prone to conflict and insensitive to the interests of others, nations with intemperate leaders are likewise quick to assert a certain moral superiority and are prone to seek dominion over others. Babbitt, an admirer and scholar of Confucian ethics, saw that Confucius traced a very clear line from the virtuous individual to the peaceful nation:

Wanting to govern well their states, they first harmonized their own clans.
Wanting to harmonize their own clan, they first cultivated themselves.
Wanting to cultivate themselves, they first corrected their minds.
Wanting to correct their minds, they first made their wills sincere.
Wanting to make their wills sincere, they first extended their knowledge.
When things are investigated, knowledge is extended.
When the will is sincere, the mind is correct.
When the mind is correct, the self is cultivated.
When the self is cultivated, the clan is harmonized.
When the clan is harmonized, the country is well governed.
When the country is well governed, there will be peace throughout the land.¹

These philosophers believed that the ability of people and nations to get along in peace would ultimately be found in the ability of human beings to fulfill the requirements found in the moral and spiritual components of their nature. When one is searching for peace in the world, it is proper therefore to begin by searching for how human beings find peace within themselves.

That is where we begin, with Irving Babbitt’s understanding of the human soul. How is the soul called to virtue? What is a proper understanding of virtue and what steps that must be taken to form a superior moral character?

¹ A. Charles Muller, trans., The Great Learning, (sayings attributed to or deemed expressive of the thinking of Confucius), accessed on January 6, 2016, http://courseweb.stthomas.edu/sjlaumakis/GreatLearning2.PDFAs; These sayings are also quoted in Claes G. Ryn, America the Virtuous (New Brunswick, U.S.A.: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 208.
The epigraph of this chapter, lines from Emerson, represents one of Babbitt’s most frequently quoted passages of poetry. Emerson’s poem provides a concise exposition of Babbitt’s understanding of human nature and his concept of humanism: human beings are unique in the universe because they are not simply subject to the laws of nature and science, they are also subject to a uniquely human law that is a guide for their behavior. In Christian terminology, the requirements of Babbitt's human law might be described as "the callings of conscience." Like conscience, the human law is distinct from, and above, the laws of nature that apply to the animal kingdom and the material world. The human law is a fact of everyday experience as human beings have liberty and may choose to live to excess or to avoid excess, they may give into impulse or control impulse, act with malice or act with kindness.

Because of the existence of the human law, counterpoised to the laws of their physical nature, human beings sense a "dualism" within themselves. As Babbitt describes the experience: “Anyone who sets out to live temperately and proportionately will find that he will need to impose upon himself a difficult discipline. His attitude toward life will necessarily be dualistic. It will be dualistic in the sense that he recognizes in man a ‘self’ that is capable of exercising control and another ‘self’ that needs controlling.” The central feature of Babbitt's humanism is his affirmation of this dualism.

Babbitt pointed to classical Greece and Rome for the West’s original understanding of this dualism. “Aristotle recognizes that man is the creature of two laws: he has an ordinary or natural self of impulse and desire and a human self that is known practically as a power of

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3 Babbitt, On Being Creative, xiv-xv.
control over impulse and desire. If man is to become human he must not let impulse and desire run wild, but most oppose to everything excessive in his ordinary self, whether in thought or deed or emotion, the law of measure.”

Society, for Aristotle, did not exist as a vehicle for humanitarian “service.” Instead, Babbitt's interpretation of Aristotle was that society existed to assist the individual in mediating the law of measure within one's own soul. “Aristotle, who would attach the individual by a thousand bonds to society, who even makes ethics only a branch of politics, does not, therefore, fall into the humanitarian error of making social service the goal of the individual. Society is chiefly important in the eyes of Aristotle for the aid it may give the individual in realizing his higher self.”

Babbitt also looked to Cicero as “one of the most influential occidental humanists” who also asserted the dualism of human nature. For Babbitt, the essence of Cicero was found in the belief that: “One becomes humanistic in proportion as he grows aware of the law of order and measure and decorum that, according to Cicero, distinguishes man from other living creatures, and in proportion as he imposes the discipline of this law upon his ordinary or animal self.”

Despite the clear influence of classical Greek and Roman philosophers, Babbitt’s humanism was also heavily influenced by his study of Confucius and early Buddhism. We see this Asiatic influence in Babbitt's assertion that the uniquely human law is accessed through the

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6 Babbitt, On Being Creative, xv.
power of a "higher will," an assertion of self-control and self-mastery. The requirements of conscience are fulfilled not by contemplating virtue but through acts of will. For much of Eastern philosophy, the power of reason – so prominent in classical Greek philosophy – gives way to the primacy of will. Reflecting a sympathy with Eastern philosophy, Babbitt believed that the individual does not “think” his way to good behavior; he restrains his will and therefore avoids bad behavior.

While it is intellectually perilous to oversimplify the distinction between East and West on the importance of will versus intellect, it seems reasonable to assert that the Greek tradition of philosophy, and even the Christian scholastic tradition, have a tendency to associate the divine quality in human beings with intellect. Babbitt countered that the true divine quality in human nature was will. “As against the expansionists of every kind, I do not hesitate to affirm that what is specifically human in man and ultimately divine is a certain quality of will, a will that is felt in its relation to his ordinary self as a will to refrain.”

While Babbitt argued that although Plato and Aristotle tended to give primacy to reason, rather than will, there is nonetheless a clear understanding of the power of will in Aristotle and in Christianity. “Though Aristotle, after the Greek fashion, gives primacy not to will but to mind, the power of which I am speaking is surely related to his ‘energy of the soul,’ the form of activity distinct from mere outer working, deemed by him appropriate for the life of leisure that he proposes as the goal of a liberal education.”

Because of this intellectual ambiguity in the epistemology of the ancients Greeks, Babbitt tended to see more clarity in Confucius and Buddha who more unambiguously ranked

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8 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 28.
will as superior to reason and who pointed to a higher will as the central locus of the divine in human beings: “reason that has the support of a higher will, that is, in the Confucian phrase, submissive to ‘the will of heaven’ would seem better able to exercise control over natural man than a reason that is purely self-reliant.”\textsuperscript{10} Babbitt shared the Confucian belief that reason and knowledge would represent a superior moral compass only if rooted in the well-trained will. Without this higher will, reason alone would have little power to lead a human being toward a higher plane of existence: “One may well come to agree with certain Asiatics, in contrast at this point with the European intellectual, that the good life is not primarily something to be known but something to be willed. There is warrant for the belief that if a man acts on the light he already has the light will grow.”\textsuperscript{11}

Despite this emphasis, Babbitt was not anti-rational. The intellect, he believed, was not blindly directed by the higher will but could support the higher will in helping to formulate correct moral choices. Nonetheless, the obligation to act when facing moral choices required the intellect to be subordinated to the higher will. Here, he explains the role of intellect in supporting the higher will: “If anyone sets himself the humanistic task of achieving the intermediary term between extremes, he will find that it is not enough to exercise an inner check on temperament, he will need to exercise this check intelligently; and to exercise it intelligently he will need to look up to some norm.”\textsuperscript{12}

Therefore, Babbitt's position was that the intellect played a supporting role in the search for proper moral choices but the true human law was accessed through acts of volition. When human beings took concrete steps to improve their character, they were fulfilling their truest

\textsuperscript{10} Babbitt, \emph{On Being Creative}, xvi-xvii.
\textsuperscript{11} Babbitt, \emph{On Being Creative}, xxxv-xxxvi.
\textsuperscript{12} Babbitt, \emph{On Being Creative}, xxii.
nature. More specifically, we should notice Babbitt argued that a proper exercise of the higher will possessed a negative quality in the sense that the higher will served to override or check impulse and desire. To capture this quality of negation, Babbitt used the term “inner check,” a concept found in ancient Hindu texts. The inner check is the instrumental component of the will that prevents human beings from yielding to the ordinary desires of their selfish nature.

“Instead of conceiving of the divine in terms of expansion the Oriental sage defines it experimentally as the ‘inner check.’ No more fundamental distinction perhaps can be made than that between those who associate the good with the yes-principle and those who associate it rather with the no-principle.”\(^{13}\) (Babbitt also described the negative quality of the higher will as a “veto power.”\(^{14}\))

Properly understood, the inner check is not spontaneous, nor does it come naturally. Babbitt said that it must be cultivated, i.e., it develops a stronger pull in the soul when it is regularly exercised. “‘That wherein the superior man cannot be equaled,’ says Confucius, ‘is simply this – his work which other men cannot see.’ It is this inner work and habits that result from it that above all humanize a man and make him exemplary to the multitude.”\(^{15}\)

For those human beings who fail to exercise the inner check, the result will be a lack meaning, direction and purpose. A lack of inner work and surrender to impulse dehumanizes human beings because it represents a failure to exercise the quality in their nature that is most uniquely human. “The man who drifts supinely with the current desire is guilty according to Buddha of the gravest of all vices – spiritual or moral indolence (pamāda). He on the contrary who curbs or reins in his expansive desires is displaying the chief of all virtues, spiritual

\(^{13}\) Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 255.
\(^{14}\) Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 27.
vigilance or strenuousness (appamāda). The man who is spiritually strenuous has entered upon the ‘path.’”\textsuperscript{16}

Babbitt considered this Eastern ethical view, with its emphasis upon will, to be among the most spiritually strenuous doctrines ever propagated. Of Buddha, he says: “No one ever put so squarely upon the individual what the individual is ever seeking to evade – the burden of moral responsibility.” Babbitt quotes the \textit{Dhammapada}: “‘Self is the lord of self. Who else can be the lord?...You yourself must make the effort. The Buddhas are only teachers.’”\textsuperscript{17} In the ancient Hindu, Babbitt said, the divine is an "inner check."\textsuperscript{18} In Buddha’s terminology, “the permanent or ethical element in himself towards which he should strive to move is known to him practically as a power of inhibition or inner check upon expansive desire. Vital impulse (élan vital) may be subjected to vital control (frein vital).”\textsuperscript{19}

Babbitt also seemed to imply that the intellectual tendency in Western thinkers to overstate the role of reason actually might be found less in the original classical and Christian thinkers themselves than in subsequent interpretations. When read carefully, he argued, the great thinkers of East and West shared some agreement that the highest divine part of man might also be characterized as a certain quality of the will found in the veto power. “In the past, the spirit that says no has been associated rather with the divine. Socrates tells us that the counsels of his ‘voice’ were always negative, never positive.”\textsuperscript{20}

Babbitt did not view the higher will as an abstract mechanism of thought, such as Kant’s categorical imperative. He said that the higher will is not an “ideal” but an immediate

\textsuperscript{16} Babbitt, \textit{Rousseau & Romanticism}, 150.
\textsuperscript{17} Babbitt, \textit{Rousseau & Romanticism}, 151.
\textsuperscript{18} Babbitt, \textit{Rousseau & Romanticism}, 148.
\textsuperscript{19} Babbitt, \textit{Rousseau & Romanticism}, 150.
fact of experience. “Positively, one may define it as the higher immediacy that is known in its relation to the lower immediacy – the merely temperamental man with his impressions and emotions and expansive desires—as a power of vital control (*frein vital*). Failure to exercise this control is the spiritual indolence that is for both the Christian and the Buddhist a chief source, if not the chief source, of evil.”

A third important concept in Babbitt's thought is the imagination that, like reason, is shaped by the quality of a person's will. The imagination, for Babbitt, serves as a kind of cognitive filter sorting reality based upon the nature of the soul that deploys it. Therefore, if a person is materialistic, for example, his imagination will tend to focus attention on material possessions and the acquisition of money. If a person has cultivated and exercised the higher will, in contrast, his imagination will draw attention to nobler things. Babbitt did not display a systematic epistemology but he did regularly describe a complex theory about the interplay between will, imagination and reason. In these descriptions, he consistently viewed the mechanics of the soul as a process in which individuals listen to the voice of their inner check that will, in turn, influence a person’s imagination that, in turn, will influence the individual’s ideas.

The person who has exercised and cultivated their higher will would develop, in Babbitt’s view, an outlook he calls the “ethical imagination.” When the higher will is exercised, our will, imagination and reason cooperate in leading the individual toward a higher reality. “The imagination that Joubert calls the ‘eye of the soul’ is fully conscious and also creative, though in a different sense: it creates values. It does so by coöperating with reason in service of the higher will. The unconscious activities must be controlled with reference to the

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values thus created with the help of the ethical imagination, as one may term it, if they are to have direction and purpose, in other words, human significance.” Babbitt contrasted this ethical or moral imagination with the “idyllic” imagination of modernity, an imagination that is not disciplined or pulled back to an ethical center by the higher will and an imagination that, because of its lack of control, may lose touch with reality.

It should be mentioned that Babbitt saw a corrective to the Western tendency to intellectualize virtue in Edmund Burke who gave the imagination a new and important role. Babbitt wrote that Burke added a new insight to the Western tradition by emphasizing a quality in the soul that moves people to virtue that is neither rational nor sub-rational, but supra rational and imaginative. For example, of Burke he said:

And then he was familiar, as we are all familiar with persons who give no reasons at all, or the wrong reasons, for doing the right thing, and with other persons who give the most logical and ingenious reasons for doing the wrong thing. The basis for right conduct is not reasoning but experience, and experience much wider than that of the individual, the secure possession of which can result only from the early acquisition of right habits.24

Claes G. Ryn has explored in depth the interplay between will, imagination and reason, showing that as it shapes the outlook of the individual the will is preeminent.

Babbitt attributes decisive importance to the imagination in the shaping of man’s understanding of life. Certain types of imagination draw us into misleading views of the world and, indeed, may make us lose touch with reality. Other types tend to improve our hold on life. It is helpful, in trying to understand Babbitt’s doctrine, to keep in mind the notion of will (ethical or unethical) as the energy which carries all human activity, whether practical, philosophical, or aesthetic.25

Ryn emphasized that the ethical imagination does not arise spontaneously, but is a result of the will's ethical work: “Babbitt finds the ultimate criterion of reality in the universal

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24 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 130.
ordering power of the higher will. To know the essence of life, man must act to change his character. Without the sense of reality that comes with the exercise of the higher will no adequate perception of life is possible.”

The degree to which human beings are guided by their higher, rather than their lower selves, shapes or even determines their outlook on every human endeavor, including their aesthetical, moral, cultural and political outlooks. In fact, much of Babbitt's early writings did not apply his views on human nature to politics but to aesthetics. For example, Babbitt wrote extensively about the Romantic critique of classical form. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Romantics argued that a hollow formalism had crept into classical art and that these standards should be jettisoned. The Romantics believed that classical art and literature could be replaced by a new form, that of impulsive spontaneity and novelty.

Babbitt, in fact, agreed with some of this critique of classical formalism, but he argued that in the attempt to replace classicism, new and sound standards of taste would only be found in the souls of individuals who were operating on a higher ethical level. Spontaneity and novelty were not a substitute for sound standards. He commented: “Taste is attained only when this sensibility is rectified with reference to standard inwardly apprehended, and in this sense may be defined as a man’s literary conscience; it is, in short, only one aspect of the struggle between our lower and higher selves.” Art and literature would only be of the highest order when it emerged from the orderly soul. “The humanist maintains that man attains the truth of his nature only by imposing decorum upon his ordinary self.”

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Babbitt noted the importance of the higher will over imagination and reason not just in humanistic philosophers such as Confucius and Socrates, but he also found it a central commonality of the world’s great religions, including Christianity. Babbitt asserted that the great world religions, including Christianity, have their roots in Asia: “The mention of Christ and Buddha (of Confucius as a typical Asiatic I shall have more to say presently) is hardly necessary to remind us that it is the distinction of Asia as compared to Europe and other parts of the world to have been the mother of religions.”\textsuperscript{29} And, he argued that the core of Asiatic religions is an emphasis upon will. Christianity, for example, encourages human beings to submit their own selfish will to the divine will. “Dante has caught the inmost spirit of Christianity in his reply to this question: ‘In his will is our peace.’ This idea that man needs to submit his ordinary self to a higher or divine will is essential not merely to Christianity, but to all genuine religion. Muhammad is at one here with Buddha and Christ. The word Islam means submission.”\textsuperscript{30}

Babbitt’s most oft-quoted Christian saint is Paul, and Saint Paul emphasized “spiritual concentration.” “Now Christ, for St. Paul, is evidently the living intuition of a law that is set above the ordinary self; by taking on the yoke of the law men are drawn together as to common centre.”\textsuperscript{31} In Babbitt’s review of Ernest Renan, for example, he argued that Renan had missed the core teaching of St. Paul: “He calls him the second founder of Christianity, but he has little sympathy for the distinctive feature of the Pauline religion, its haunting sense of sin and the

\textsuperscript{29} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 184.
\textsuperscript{30} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 186.
\textsuperscript{31} Babbitt, \textit{The Masters of Modern French Criticism}, 26.
stress it lays on the struggle between a lower and a higher self, between a law of the flesh and a law of the spirit.”

In Christian terms, the ultimate goal of human beings is to discover the divine will and conform one’s own will to it. Babbitt therefore found true Christianity to be a religion of severe moral obligations and rejected the romanticizing of Christ as a Romantic aesthete. In his chapter on Renan in Masters of Modern French Criticism, he criticized Renan’s portrayal of Jesus as a Romantic sentimentalist. “Perhaps nothing so offends the serious reader of the ‘Vie de Jésus’ as Renan’s assumption that the highest praise he can give Jesus is to say that he satisfies the aesthetic sense. He multiplies in speaking of him such adjectives as doux, beau, exquis, charmant, ravissant, and délicieux.” Renan “reduces the mission of Jesus, so far as possible, to sentimental and humanitarian effusions. The masculine religion of the will is almost entirely sacrificed in his narrative to the feminine religion of the heart.”

On the contrary, Babbitt viewed true Christianity, as a religion that places great demands on the conscience of individuals. “For the man who imitates Christ in any traditional sense this world is not an Arcadian dream but a place of trial and probation. ‘Take up your cross and follow me.’…Genuine religion must always have in some form the sense of a deep inner cleft between man’s ordinary self and the divine.”

Babbitt argued that the Christian emphasis upon will was sometimes obscured by classical influences. At its core, Christianity is an Asiatic religion, but it is an Asiatic religion

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32 Babbitt, The Masters of Modern French Criticism, 274.
33 See: Babbitt, On Being Creative, 120-121 et al.
36 Babbitt, Rousseau & Romanticism, 115.
that, he argued, had incorporated aspects of “Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoical, Neoplatonic; also a strong Roman element.”

At this point, we should be careful to avoid blurring the important distinction found in Babbitt's thought between religion and humanism. Babbitt developed his concept of humanism, in part, by distilling some of the common moral premises found in different religious traditions. However, he was careful to argue that humanism operates on a separate plane of existence and does not incorporate the otherworldly saintliness found in the great religious traditions. Humanism, he said, is a system of ethics for the worldly, not the otherworldly.

The point on which Christ and Buddha are in accord is the need of renunciation. It should be abundantly plain from all I have said that the higher will is felt in its relation to the expansive desires as a will to refrain. The humanist does not carry the exercise of this will beyond a subduing of his desires to the law of measure; but it may be carried much further until it amounts to a turning away from the desires of the natural man altogether – the ‘dying to the world’ of the Christian.

Babbitt's humanism did not serve as an alternative religion; it was instead an acknowledgement that, on an ethical and experiential level, human beings may come together on a moral and ethical level even if they do not share doctrinal or dogmatic beliefs. This was an essential point to be made in the context of a discussion of war and peace as Babbitt pointed to the possibility that people across religious traditions can find common ground. As Claes Ryn explains Babbitt's goal: "In formulating the idea of higher will Babbitt is not trying to talk Christians out of their beliefs. He is addressing all those in the modern world who are not willing to accept ethical or religious truth on the authority of inherited dogmas. To these

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skeptics he argues, not that traditional Western beliefs are wrong, but that ethics and religion do not stand or fall with Church authority. The have an experiential foundation.”

In his time, Babbitt failed to persuade a number of religiously inclined intellectuals that his version of humanism did not represent a critique or a substitute for Christianity. Tension developed between Babbitt and some of his followers such as T.S. Eliot as well as his closest friend, Paul Elmer More.

Babbitt’s complaint about Christianity was not that its doctrines, properly understood, were erroneous and did not have a basis in human experience. Nor did he believe that humanism could serve as a substitute theology to provide understanding about eternal mysteries traditionally addressed by religion. Babbitt in fact insisted that Christian doctrine was fully in keeping with human experience and human nature, and went further than humanism in addressing otherworldly questions. His complaint was that, in historical practice, Christian dogma had sometimes pointed adherents to an overemphasis upon the outwardly concept of divinely-given “grace” which distracted human beings from their obligation to rein in their own selfish desires. In these cases, an overemphasis upon “grace” or “providence” took away from the “works” brought about by individual effort and conduct. Babbitt pointed to historical examples of where the contemplation of the genuine mystery of grace had resulted in metaphysical concepts and theological dogmas that tended to drift away from actual human experience. In one example, Babbitt pointed to the Church doctrine of “infant damnation” as the abdication of the “critical spirit” to “outer authority—that of revelation and the church.”

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41 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 204.
Babbitt’s concern was that rigid dogmatism might take the concept of grace too far, weakening the sense of obligation that individuals require in order to be sensitive to the callings of the higher will. “It may be said of the ultramontane Catholic, as of the extreme partisan of grace, though in a very different sense, that he has simply repudiated self-reliance.”\textsuperscript{42} Babbitt recoiled from any religious doctrine that may lead an individual away from the obligation of self-mastery. He felt that theological doctrines should not distract from the experiential reality and obligation of ethical work. Even the greatest saints, he believed, had taken their first steps toward otherworldliness on the path of everyday ethical work.

For Babbitt, when an overemphasis upon grace leads to a neglect of ethical concentration, religion could become a bewildering mystery. “We can infer what Buddha would have thought of the Augustinian Christians who would have man turn away from works and brood everlastingly on the mystery of grace. He would have agreed with Holmes that the only decent thing for a consistent Calvinist to do is to go mad.”\textsuperscript{43}

We should note that Babbitt emphasized that his critique involved erroneous historical tendencies found in some theological dogma; he was not criticizing Christianity's core doctrines. During one of his discussions on grace, he remarked in a footnote: “I do not mean to say that St. Augustine did not put great emphasis on works, but merely that side of Christianity which shows most clearly his influence has put an even greater emphasis upon grace.”\textsuperscript{44} Of Christian civilization, Babbitt remarked on the century of Dante, Aquinas, and Giotto: “The achievements of the thirteenth century which mark perhaps the culmination of

\textsuperscript{42} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 213.
\textsuperscript{43} Babbitt, \textit{The Masters of Modern French Criticism}, 370.
\textsuperscript{44} Babbitt, \textit{The Masters of Modern French Criticism}, 370, footnote.
Christian civilization were very splendid not only from a religious point of view but also from a humanistic point of view.”

Many of Babbitt’s critics either did not understand or accept his humanistic project. As Thomas Nevin pointed out: “Babbitt’s humanism was more than an ethic but less than a religion, and so it was fit to satisfy neither the secular nor the spiritual temperaments.” With his promotion of New Humanism, Babbitt won neither a broad religious nor secular following. Despite public criticism of his views on religion, Babbitt did not revise them. Toward the end of his life, in 1932, Babbitt wrote to More, and his comments reflected his consistent view that when religious dogmas diverted from actual human experience, religion could go astray: “There is a side of Christianity for which I do feel a real antipathy—namely the fanaticism and intolerance that it has so often displayed as a historical religion, so much so that you yourself would have been persecuted for certain statements in your last volume during the genuine ages of faith.”

Babbitt believed that very few individuals could genuinely ascend to the level of supernaturalism embodied in the life of an ascetic Christian saint, and the monastic life was losing favor because Christianity had been losing moral authority since the Enlightenment. The problems he saw in the West would not therefore be solved by an appeal for everyone to

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become Christian saints. "Perhaps" he said, "the world would have been a better place if more people had made sure that they were human before setting out to be superhuman."  

The intellectual controversy between those with an orthodox religious leaning such as More and Eliot and Babbitt’s non-orthodox humanism is not the subject of this paper. Babbitt was generally an ally of traditional religion as he saw religious faith as encouraging ethical concentration on the part of the individual. Babbitt’s intellectual sparring with some advocates of orthodox Christianity did however serve to highlight Babbitt’s foremost doctrine: ethical concentration of the individual is the key to ordering reality and to social peace.

Human nature’s most prominent feature for Babbitt was the challenge of conforming one’s behavior to the requirements of the human law, a law that is felt in the soul of every human being as an inner check upon impulse, emotion and passion. The modern world, he felt, has gone wrong by adopting philosophies of “naturalism” which deny this essential aspect of human nature.

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49 Babbitt, “Pascal,” 468.
50 Babbitt's human law is what earlier Christians may have characterized as "natural law."
Chapter 2: Modernity As Naturalism

A remarkable feature of the modern man indeed is that he does not propose to renounce anything and at the same time hopes to achieve the peace and brotherhood that are, according to Buddha and Christ, to be achieved only by renunciation. If these great religious teachers are right, it follows that what one finds when one penetrates beneath the surface of our contemporary life is a monstrous huddle of incompatible desires.¹

During his time studying at the Sorbonne, when Babbitt entered the library’s great Reading Room, he was confronted by two large mural paintings. As Babbitt described it: “on either side of the entrance…are mural paintings of two female figures: one of strenuous aspect, and with a contracted brow, is entitled Science; the other in floating draperies, and with vague far-away eye, is entitled Rêve.”² To Babbitt, these murals represented the West’s intellectual drift away from a true humanism, rooted in ethical self-control, and towards two forms of what he called “naturalism.” For Babbitt, the two greatest influences in modernity were a worship of science, rooted in the ideas of Frances Bacon and given wide currency during the Enlightenment, and a sentimental Romanticism, a philosophy with a pedigree in the West going back to Aristophanes but that found its most powerful modern expression in Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Babbitt stated quite simply, “I define two main forms of naturalism – on the one hand, utilitarian and scientific and, on the other, emotional naturalism.”³

While these two forms of naturalism had roots going back many centuries, Babbitt contended that they found their fullest expression in the 18th and 19th centuries when they

served to undergird the two dominant social movements in the West: scientific and sentimental humanitarianism. “The positive and utilitarian movements, we should add, have been inspired mainly by scientific humanitarianism, and sentimental naturalism again has been an important element, if not the most important element, in the so-called Romantic movement.”

For many intellectual historians, scientific naturalism and sentimental naturalism of Romanticism seem to be opposing philosophies. Was not Romanticism a reaction against science? What does the scientist in the laboratory have in common with the pastoral poet? For Babbitt, however, they were close intellectual cousins because, in their purest ideological forms, they both denied the importance of the human law and the moral struggle found in the inner life of human beings. These two strains of naturalism, he insisted, had corrupted ethics by placing the locus of ethics in the struggle for social justice, so-called humanitarianism, rather than rooting justice in the moral choices of individuals.

Babbitt believed that because these two forms of naturalism had corrupted modern ethics, they had also succeeded in creating a distorted picture of human nature and politics. His concept of democratic imperialism grew out of his belief that these two forms of naturalism had jettisoned the classical and Christian obligation of individuals to engage in introspection and self-reform, an error that would foster leaders who lacked self-control. Babbitt quoted Walter Lippmann as differentiating the “naturalists” of modernity with the “supernaturalists” of humanism and genuine religion: “According to Mr. Walter Lippmann, the conviction the modern man has lost is that ‘there is an immortal essence presiding like a king over his appetites.’”

1 Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 89.
At the same time, while denying an individual's obligation to conform their own behavior to a higher law, these two philosophies then existed side-by-side in modernity to unite a worship of scientific power with a worship of emotion and unchecked impulse. The modern marriage of technology and impulse was, Babbitt believed, a sure invitation to war.

Toward the end of his life, Babbitt penned a seminal essay in which he attempted to define humanism and contrast it with the two these types of humanitarianism. Humanism is not primarily concerned with expanding scientific knowledge or in expressing sympathy or pity for the downtrodden; it is concerned with individual moral choices that will build character. “Humanism appears primarily, not in the enlargement of comprehension and sympathy, desirable as this enlargement may be, but in the act of selection, in the final imposition on mere multiplicity of a scale of values.” Humanists can be found in any age or civilization as they reflect a temperament, not a religious dogma. “Humanists…are those who, in any age, aim at proportionateness through a cultivation of the law of measure.” Proportion, spiritual effort, self-control, and decorum are the marks of the humanist. “’Nothing too much’ is indeed the central maxim of all genuine humanists, ancient and modern.” As Babbitt explained, the focus of the humanitarian is not self-mastery, but progress for society: “a person who has sympathy for mankind in the lump, faith in future progress, and desire to serve the great cause of this progress, should be called not a humanist, but a humanitarian.”

Humanism contrasts with modern humanitarianism where ethical strenuousness plays little role. As Babbitt scholar Thomas Nevin summarized Babbitt’s view of humanitarianism:

“He ascribed to Bacon the modern impetus for *libido sciendi*, the passion for knowledge as

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gathered data, pursued on the premise that scientific investigation determines the progress of humanity. Complementary to this scientific naturalism was a sentimental naturalism, or *libido sentiendi*, a passion for feeling at the expense of self-discipline and restraint, for moral impressionism in lieu of conscience. The archetypal intellect of this aberration was Jean-Jacques Rousseau...the Renaissance and Enlightenment had furthered these two naturalistic or humanitarian tendencies while eroding the authority of institutional Christianity.”

Rather than standing for the law of measure, Babbitt said that Rousseau’s emotional humanitarianism “was above all for free temperamental expansion. He was himself emotionally expansive to a degree that was incompatible not only with artificial but with real decorum. He encouraged the humanitarian hope that brotherhood among men may be based on emotional overflow.”

Likewise, Babbitt pointed out that scientific humanitarianism shared Rousseau's repudiation of the human law as scientific inquiry came to replace the law of measure and the obligation to reign in of one's own expansive desires. Babbitt argued that the scientific humanitarian displays a boundless desire simply to acquire knowledge and is quite agnostic about, or even hostile to, the great moral questions raised by religious and humanistic thinkers.

“The humanitarian has favoured not only temperamental expansion; he has also, as a rule, favoured the utmost expansion of scientific knowledge with a view to realising the Baconian ideal. Perhaps indeed the chief driving power behind the humanitarian movement has been the confidence inspired in man by the progressive control physical science has enabled him to acquire over forces of nature.”

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In its purest ideological form, scientific humanitarianism argues that scientific inquiry represents the only true knowledge and that the accumulation of information developed using the scientific method represents the key to humanity’s progress. With a focus on the endless accumulation of data points, Babbitt said that the struggle within the soul of human beings disappears as the primary moral force shaping society.

The humanitarians, as I have pointed out, from Bacon down, are extraordinarily superficial in their definition of work. Even when they do not fall into the cruder quantitative fallacies, they conceive of work in terms of the natural law and of the outer world and not in terms of the inner life. They do not take into account of that form of work that consists in the superimposition of the ethical will upon the natural self and its expansive desires.\(^{10}\)

While Babbitt was critical of scientific humanitarianism as a guide for human conduct, he was not a Luddite. He thought science to be perfectly healthy when it remained in its proper moral place. Scientific humanitarianism became problematic when it developed into an all-encompassing ideology and when it denied Emerson's law for man and the law for thing. On this point, Babbitt seemed to be influenced by M. Edmond Scherer, when he wrote:

Industrial and scientific progress he grants is possible, since each new invention or discovery becomes the point of departure for further conquests. The error begins when we transfer what is true of the practical and positive order to the world of moral values; when we suppose that society increases in uprightness, equity, moderation, modesty, delicacy of feeling by a necessary evolution and an automatic development.\(^{11}\)

Babbitt maintained that there is a vain conceit in human nature that draws people to scientific humanitarianism. True ethical work, he said, involves exertion, self-scrutiny, and personal renunciation; scientific humanitarianism only requires “wonder and curiosity.”

Critiques of scientific humanitarianism, Babbitt therefore pointed out, tend to be unwelcome:

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\(^{10}\) Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1979) 222.

“Tell the average person that someone is planning to get into wireless communication with Mars, or to shoot a rocket to the moon, and he is all respectful interest and attention at once. Tell him, on the contrary, that he needs, in the interest of his own happiness to walk in the path of humility and self-control, and he will be indifferent, or even actively resentful.”

Babbitt insisted that he was not hostile to the acquisition of scientific knowledge, or even to a fanciful, Romantic work of art, but he argued that these scientific and Romantic pursuits would become pernicious if they pretended to serve as a substitute for the obligations found in the moral life of individual human beings. “It goes without saying that the humanist is not hostile to science as such but only to a science that has overstepped its due bounds, and in general to every form of naturalism, whether rationalistic or emotional, that sets up as a substitute for humanism or religion. In the case of such encroachments there is not only a quarrel between the naturalist and the humanist, but a quarrel of first principles.”

These two forms of humanitarianism, Babbitt argued, found their penultimate expressions in two philosophers who, again, have been traditionally viewed as being in opposition: Rousseau and Bacon.

Very diverse elements enter into the writings of Bacon as into those of Rousseau, but, like those of Rousseau, they have a central drive: they always have encouraged and, one may safely say, always will encourage the substitution of a kingdom of man for the traditional Kingdom of God – the exultation of material over spiritual ‘comfort,’ the glorification of man’s increasing control over the forces of nature under the name of progress.

The modern version of scientific humanitarianism came first and, Babbitt argued, was nearly fully formed in the ideas of Bacon, while elements of Romanticism did not coalesce into

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12 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 162.
13 Babbitt, Humanism and America, 32.
the modern form of sentimental humanitarianism until Rousseau: “We already have in the sixteenth century a perfect example of scientific naturalist and humanitarian, in Bacon. For sentimental naturalism, on the other hand, we have to wait until the eighteenth century, when it is embodied with extraordinary completeness in the personality and writings of Rousseau.”

Babbitt viewed Frances Bacon as the intellectual father of scientific naturalism and the author of the moral breakdown that it fostered. “He was led to neglect the human law through a too subservient pursuit of the natural law; in seeking to gain dominion over things he lost dominion over himself; he is a notable example of how a man may be ‘unkinged’ as Emerson phrases it, when overmastered by the naturalistic temper and unduly fascinated by power and success.”

Babbitt considered Bacon’s and Rousseau’s modern understanding of the human person as contrasting strongly with a dualistic view of human nature offered by St. Paul or Buddha. By refusing to recognize the ethical and spiritual struggle within the soul, unique to human nature, the naturalists had rejected “the duality of human experience.” As has been discussed, for those of a religious or humanistic outlook, life is characterized by the dualistic challenge of self-mastery; one must overcome the pulls of the natural passions found in the lower parts of the human soul and exert a higher discipline. Babbitt believed the denial of the duality of human nature that is embodied in naturalism was an overt repudiation of religious and humanistic ethics.

The naturalist no longer looks on man as subject to a law of his own distinct from that of the material world—a law, the acceptance of which leads, on the religious level, to the miracles of otherworldliness that one finds in Christians and Buddhists at their best, and the acceptance of which, in this world, leads to the subduing of the ordinary self and its

15 Babbitt, Literature and the American College, 90.
16 Babbitt, Literature and the American College, 92.
17 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 25.
spontaneous impulses to the law of measure that one finds in Confucianists and Aristotelians.”

With naturalism's denial of a special law for man, Babbitt argued that the West had abandoned its core ethical principle: “what the naturalists have neglected is not something on the fringe or outer rim of human experience, but something, on the contrary, that is very central… I have already said that the element in man that has been overlooked by the naturalistic psychology is felt in relation to his ordinary self negatively. If instead of taking the point of view of one’s ordinary self, one heeds the admonitions of the inner monitor, the result is two of the most positive of all things: character and happiness.”

With naturalism, the West had thrown off both medieval religion and classical humanism as humanitarian ethics denied the centrality of the human law. Babbitt contrasted Sophocles’ and Dante’s view of human nature with that of a later Romantic poet, Keats: “Yet Sophocles and Dante are not only superior to Keats, but in virtue of the presence of the ethical imagination in their work, superior not merely in degree but in kind.” Keats’ “Prometheus Unbound” is “flimsy” as a solution to the problem of evil because it wholly lacked an “imaginative concentration on the human law.”

In *Rousseau and Romanticism*, Babbitt presented a systematic intellectual (and roughly chronological) argument demonstrating Western civilization's devolution from its humanistic and medieval religious roots into the naturalistic philosophies of the 17th and 18th centuries. He pointed to two general trends in this devolution. First, Babbitt argued that medieval Christianity had checked mankind’s expansive desires through its emphasis upon humility and through the

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outer authority of the Church. Overall, Babbitt emphasized that the dualistic view of human nature embraced by the Church had helped with the “rescue of civilization from the wreck of pagan antiquity and the welter of the barbarian invasions.” But by its frequent emphasis upon outer authority, orthodox Christianity also tended to make man “entirely distrustful of himself and entirely dependent upon God” which meant that “in practice” men became “entirely dependent upon the Church.” In the daily life of human beings, this dependence upon the Church put the “administration of human nature in receivership.”

Babbitt pointed to Pascal’s writings on Catholicism that, he said, tended to assert fear rather than self-control. The control imposed by the Church sometimes tended toward relying on an outer control of behavior, rather than an inner control by the self-exertion of the individual. “For Pascal, religion was not only the ‘mother of form and fear,’ but he and the whole side of Christianity for which he stands pushed the form to a point where it became a straight-jacket for the human spirit.” Babbitt pointed to the period immediately prior to the Renaissance and argued that the institutional Church's sale of dispensations sent a signal to the faithful that outer authority mattered more than self-mastery.

As the West became more secure in the late medieval period, Babbitt argued that “the critical spirit began to awaken” and “human nature showed itself tired of being treated as bankrupt, of being governed from without and from above.” The resultant self-confidence helped usher in the Renaissance during which the West “aspired to become autonomous” with a “strong trend in may quarters toward individualism.”

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The Renaissance, Babbitt said, contained a variety of intellectual threads in which “naturalistic, humanistic, and religious elements are mingled in almost every conceivable proportion in” a “vast and complex movement.” One strong element that emerged in the Renaissance, however, was a naturalism that tended to obscure the dual nature of the human soul and the potentiality for evil. Babbitt saw this tendency in a 16th century writer, Rabelais, who “in his extreme opposition to the monkish ideal, already proclaims, like Rousseau, the intrinsic excellence of man.” From Rabelais, there was clear line to “Rousseau's educational naturalism – his exaltation of the spontaneity and genius of the child.”

An overemphasis upon the “intrinsic excellence of man” by some Renaissance thinkers would later progress to an affirmation of the “natural goodness” of mankind, as asserted by Rousseau, and a loss of the sense of duality in human nature.

In reaction to this element of naturalism in the Renaissance, religious leaders of the 16th and 17th century did sense a danger that naturalism might serve to repudiate the centrality of original sin and threaten a genuinely religious view of life. They attempted, therefore, to reassert outer authority over the souls of men. In the Catholic Church, the Jesuits, for example, developed a Christian educational program that “tends to stress submission to outer authority at the expense of inwardness and individuality.” While “each important Protestant group worked out its creed or convention and knew how to make it very uncomfortable for any one of its members who rebelled against authority.”

Babbitt argued that by the time Christian leaders moved to rebut naturalistic ideas, these ideas had already permeated the West during the Renaissance and were powerful enough to inspire a backlash against both Catholic and Protestant attempts to restore the outer authority of

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Babbitt said that the growth in the prestige and moral authority of science was a decisive obstacle that prevented the re-imposition of Christian authority in the West. “All these attempts, Protestant as well as Catholic, to revive the principle of authority, to put the general sense once more on a traditional and dogmatic basis” were defeated by the “spirit of free scientific enquiry in the Renaissance” that had inspired “great naturalists like Kepler and Galileo” and had brought forth a spirit of “scientific enquiry” that “had been adding conquest to conquest.”

The outer authority of religion was defeated, Babbitt argued, because “science has won its triumphs not by accepting dogma and tradition but by repudiating them, by dealing with the natural law, not on a traditional basis but on a positive and critical basis.” The result of the triumph of science was to obscure “the very notion that man is subject to two laws.” Human nature would now be seen through the prism of the laws of science and to “treat man as entirely the creature of the natural law.”

The rise of scientific authority led at first to theological Deism. While maintaining the traditional theological belief in an “Unmoved Mover,” Deism proclaimed that God had set the scientific and material laws in motion but that God does not participate in the inner life of individual humans “and that inwardly man may be guided aright by his unaided thoughts and feelings (according to the predominance of thought or feeling the deist is rationalistic or sentimental).” The denial of the inner life embodied in Deism led to what Babbitt called “the

29 Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 120.
application of scientific method to the soul.” And, “under this accumulation of outer influences the free agency of the individual tends entirely to disappear.”

Babbitt argued however that a purely scientific outlook could not satisfy the spiritual longings found in the human soul. When the problem of the soul was simply banished by Bacon and his followers, the result was a cold rationalistic view of human life that appeared a spiritual dead end. Babbitt pointed to the coldness and spiritual emptiness of scientific naturalism in the 19th century writings of Hippolyte Taine: “Taine compares the position of the human family in the midst of the blind indifferent powers of nature to that of a lot of field-mice exposed to the tramplings of a herd of elephants; and concludes that the ‘best fruit of our science is cold resignation which, pacifying and preparing the spirit, reduces suffering to bodily pain.’”

Such an extreme weakening of the traditional understanding of the soul and the elimination of the struggle “between a higher and lower self” was problematic because, Babbitt insisted, this internal struggle is a fact of human existence and many writers and intellectuals such as Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve came to conclude that “‘Doubtless, you shall never be able to proceed for man in exactly as for plants or animals…He has what is called Liberty.’”

The scientific naturalist had denied the uniquely divine quality in human beings and reduced them to sub-rational animals. In his analysis of Taine, for example, Babbitt said that Taine’s unwillingness to recognize that there is an “inner check that may restrain the èlan vital

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and direct it to some human end\textsuperscript{35} had led Taine to some preposterous conclusions about how to analyze human beings:

He has endless comparisons to suggest how inevitably human faculties unfold and how little they are a matter of individual choice or volition. At one time, he compares men to the lower animals; his only aim as an historian, he says, is to be a student of moral zoölogy. ‘You may,’ he says again, ‘consider man as an animal of superior species who produces philosophies and poems about as silkworms produce their cocoons and bees their cells.’ He is going to study the transformation of France by the French Revolution as he would the ‘metamorphosis of an insect.’\textsuperscript{36}

Babbitt saw particular danger because scientific humanitarianism was weakening the obligation that individuals felt to improve their character while simultaneously increasing the material power available to society.

What is monstrous in this present age is not that it possesses mechanical efficiency, in itself an excellent thing, but this mechanical efficiency has no sufficient counterpoise in spiritual efficiency. It would seem, therefore, that the first step in clearing up the present imbroglio is to call the humanitarians to a stern reckoning for the flabbiness they have encouraged on the human and spiritual levels of man’s being; for having sought to discredit all traditional restraints and failed at the same time to establish any new centre and principle of control; for having belittled in a thousand ways intellect, insight, self-control, everything, in fact, in comparison with sympathy.\textsuperscript{37}

With the carnage that resulted from the advancements in firepower that were brought to bear during the Great War, Babbitt’s concerns about science seem to have taken on a greater urgency in his later, post-WW I writings. “Now in the absence of ethical discipline the lust for knowledge and the lust for feeling count for very little, at least practically, compare with the third main lust of human nature – the lust for power. Hence the emergence of that most sinister

of types, the efficient megalomaniac. The final use of science that has thus become a tool of the lust for power is in Burke’s phrase to ‘improve the mystery of murder.’”

Babbitt pointed out that scientific humanitarianism obscured the looming danger of the Great War because leaders in the West wrongly assumed that progress and enlightenment followed scientific discovery. “An age that thought it was progressing toward some ‘far-off divine event,’ and turned out instead to be progressing toward Armageddon, suffered, one cannot help surmising, from some fundamental confusion in its notion of progress.” Regarding science without ethical self-control, Babbitt insisted, “A terrible danger thus lurks in the whole modern programme: it is a programme that makes for a formidable mechanical efficiency and so tends to bring into an ever closer material contact men who remain ethically centrifugal.”

Science has made significant progress since Bacon but with the growth in humanity’s knowledge of the natural world, there has not been a corresponding growth in wisdom or virtue. Babbitt believed that mechanical power without self-control is pernicious.

The problems that have been engaging more and more the attention of the Occident since the rise of the great Baconian movement have been the problems of power and speed and utility. The enormous mass of machinery that has accumulated in the pursuit of these ends requires the closest attention and concentration if it is to be worked efficiently. At the same time, the man of the West is not willing to admit that he is growing in power alone, he likes to think he is also growing in wisdom.

The rise of scientific and sentimental humanitarianism elevated “altruism” as the great virtue of Western elites. Science had made awesome power available to human beings, and sentimental humanitarianism had then told them that such power should be brought to bear on humanitarian causes. The need for restraint and self-mastery faded from memory. “One is

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tempted to define the civilization (or what we are pleased to term such) that has been emerging with the decline of the traditional controls as a mixture of altruism and high explosives."\(^{42}\) The cult of science had given birth to a world in which power and pleasure were the highest goals. Babbitt writes that Diderot, one of the chief propagandists of the cult of science, came to view life in this way: “Life as he sees it is a universal scramble for power and pleasure. The prizes go to the strong and cunning, and the fools and weaklings pay for all the rest. Rationalism has undermined the traditional foundations of society, and is impotent to put anything in their place.”\(^{43}\)

Babbitt’s warnings on the dangers of an unchecked science were remarkably prescient, including his very early warnings about the potential dangers of the atom bomb as well dangers to liberty and privacy. Of the atom bomb, he wrote: “Occidental man is…reaching out almost automatically for more and more power. If he succeeds in releasing the stores of energy that are locked up in the atom – and this seems to be the most recent ambition of our physicists – his final exploit may be to blow himself off the planet.”\(^{44}\) Of the emerging communications technologies, Babbitt cautioned: “With the development of inventions like the radio and the wireless telephone, the whole world is becoming, in a very literal sense, a whispering-gallery. It is hardly necessary to dilate on what is likely to follow if the words that are whispered are words of hatred and suspicion.”\(^{45}\)

While Babbitt wrote extensively about scientific humanitarianism, his background in French literature and Romanticism led him to even more extensive critiques of sentimental naturalism of the Rousseauistic type. But he insisted that the two forms of naturalism to be

\(^{42}\) Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 158.
\(^{43}\) Babbitt, “The Bicentenary of Diderot,” 332.
\(^{44}\) Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 167.
\(^{45}\) Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 159.
intellectually compatible: “Up to a certain point the rationalistic and sentimental deists worked together; they were both arrayed against supernatural religion, against revelation and miracles. Rousseau himself appears as one of the keenest rationalists in his attitude toward miracles. Voltaire, as we know from his annotated copy of the Profession, took satisfaction in all this portion of Rousseau’s argument.”46 In fact, Babbitt argued that Rousseau would not have been possible without Bacon.

Babbitt's argument was that the success of the natural sciences helped to discredit the authority of the Church and therefore to discredit the obligation that Church-following individuals might feel to engage in ethical concentration. Once Bacon, the Encyclopedists and other advocates of salvation through data accumulation had shifted the foundations of ethics away from the human soul, Rousseau’s emotional naturalism was the next logical step as an overflowing emotionalism could fill the empty void left in the soul by the cold sterility of science.

While Bacon had cleared the path for Romanticism by its repudiation of the human law, Babbitt did see some truth in the analysis of Romanticism as a clear reaction against the cold, scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment. “Now it has been a constant experience of man in all ages that mere rationalism leaves him unsatisfied. Man craves in some sense or other of the word an enthusiasm that will lift him out of his merely rational self.”47 Scientific naturalism had set aside, or denied, all the great questions of existence, of virtue and character, of happiness and anxiety. With science, there was no telos of human existence for individual souls. There was only cold reason with the individual human beings left utterly exposed to the cold machinations of the scientific world.

46 Babbitt "Review of La Religion de J.J. Rousseau," 442.
47 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 90.
Yet the reaction of Romanticism against science sometimes obscured their intellectual linkages. Because Rousseau had attacked science, most prominently in his *First Discourse*, that attack, Babbitt said, had obscured the natural progression from scientism to Romanticism. The accumulation of scientific knowledge had created a conceit about human nature, Babbitt pointed out, which led Western culture to embrace the ethics of Romanticism. “If men had not been so heartened by scientific progress they would have been less ready, we may be sure, to listen to Rousseau when he affirmed that they were naturally good.”

Babbitt maintained that scientific naturalism therefore served as the midwife for emotional naturalism because it had succeeded in loosening men from traditional obligations and from the need to focus on the restraints upon their passions. The logical next step was that virtue was what came “naturally” to human beings.

All the nobler aspirations of man, all his notions of conduct, had clustered around the old-time conception of the soul, and the struggle between the higher and lower self. The weakening of the traditional belief has been followed by such an unsettling of all fixed standards, by such intellectual and moral chaos, that we are inclined to ask whether the modern man has not lost in force of will and character more than an equivalent of what he has gained in scientific knowledge of life.

Romanticism had, Babbitt argued, accepted one all-important premise of Baconian rationalism: the lack of dualism of human nature. Emotional or sentimental naturalism shared with scientific rationalism the belief that there was no need for individuals to perform ethical work and access the human law. This shared premise represented the bridge between Rousseau and Bacon.

For Babbitt, however, scientific naturalism and sentimental naturalism also had important distinguishing characteristics. For example, the most important doctrine of emotional

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naturalism was the denial of the obligation for vital ethical control on the part of individuals and the affirmation of “natural” spontaneity as the redefinition of virtue. For the sentimental Romantic, “Religion itself thus becomes in Blake the mere sport of a powerful and uncontrolled imagination, and this we are told is mysticism.”\textsuperscript{50} The hollowness and sterility of scientific naturalism created an attraction to Romanticism based in the assertion that the unfiltered impulses of human beings should not to be controlled through ethical effort, they must be affirmed as spontaneous virtues and they could provide religious feeling.

Babbitt viewed Rousseau as the most influential Romantic or sentimental humanitarian. Rousseau’s view of human nature was an inversion of the classical Greek understanding of the civilized person as the one who has effectively mastered his passions. To Rousseau, virtue was rooted in instinct, not self-mastery. Babbitt pointed out that Rousseau’s elevation of instinct was the culmination of an intellectual trend that was at least 200 years old. “One should note that as far back as the sixteenth century an incipient glorification of instinct that was later to culminate, in one of its most characteristic expressions, in the cult of the noble savage.”\textsuperscript{51}

Simply put, Rousseau redefined virtue. “Virtue is no longer to be the veto power of the personality, a bit and bridle to be applied to one’s impulses, and so imposing a difficult struggle. These impulses, Rousseau asserts, are good, and so a man had only to let himself go.”\textsuperscript{52} Once instinct and emotion were raised upon the ethical pedestal as forming the core of “virtue,” any checks upon impulse would be seen as vices, not virtues. “According to Rousseau, the state of nature is not a state of reason. On the contrary, the man who thinks is already highly

\textsuperscript{50} Babbitt, \textit{Rousseau & Romanticism}, 255.
\textsuperscript{51} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 95.
\textsuperscript{52} Babbitt, \textit{Literature and the American College}, 97.
sophisticated, or, in Rousseau’s phrase, "a depraved animal." Rousseau’s ethics were the laws of the animal kingdom: one should operate on pure instinct. The human proclivity for thought, deliberation, and conscience are all unnatural, artificial hindrances to true virtue.

Babbitt quoted Sir John Hawkins’ critique of the novelist Henry Fielding as criticism that could be also leveled against Rousseau: “His [Fielding’s] morality, in respect that it resolves virtue into good affections, in contradiction to moral obligation and sense of duty, is that of Lord Shaftsbury vulgarized. He was the inventor of that cant-phrase, ‘goodness of heart,’ which is everyday used as a substitute for probity, and means little more than the virtue of a dog or a horse.”

Rousseau’s particular genius, however, was in disguising his revolution in ethics by using classical and Christian language. Babbitt argued that Rousseau's terminology masked the fact that he had turned Western ethical understandings on their head: “No writer is more lavish in his praise of virtue and conscience. But he gives these words entirely new meanings…Conscience, instead of being, as it always had been traditionally, an inner check upon impulse, becomes itself an expansive emotion.”

Babbitt pointed out that Shaftsbury who also deserves great credit for the humanitarian concept of “social service” heavily influenced Rousseau.

The sentimental movement was already well underway when he began writing. As an originative force in this movement the third earl of Shaftsbury is perhaps more important than Rousseau. For Shaftsbury’s conscience is felt, not as an inner check, but as a passion for doing good to others, for what we should call nowadays social service. No one who wishes to trace the rise of humanitarianism can afford to neglect Shaftsbury.

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53 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 96.
54 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 95.
Rousseau’s glorification of instinct logically led, Babbitt believed, to a revolt against the institutions of civilization that are designed to restrain disorderly impulses. Babbitt summarizes Rousseauistic ethics this way: “The old dualism put the conflict between good and evil in the breast of the individual, with evil so predominant since the Fall that is behooves man to be humble; with Rousseau this conflict is transferred form the individual to society...The guiding principle of his writings, he says, is to show that vice and error, strangers to man’s constitution, are introduced from without, that they are due in short to his institutions.”

Rousseau’s view of human nature would create a new form of Western religion without a focus on fallen human nature and with no requirement for cultivating conscience. Religious feeling would become an aesthetical sentimentalism. “Instead of adjusting his temperament to religion, he adjusts religion to his temperament. One may set up as religious without having to renounce one’s ordinary self.”

Rousseau’s repudiation of ethical self-mastery, Babbitt said, required him to look outside of the soul for the source of evil in human society. The institutions of society, especially those surrounding religion and private property became, for Rousseau and his followers, the corrupting influence on human nature, leading men away from the natural and virtuous instincts that were exhibited in the state of nature, prior to the formation of societies.

Rousseau served therefore as an inspiration to modern revolutionaries, including the French Jacobins, and there is a clear line from Rousseau to Marx to Kropotkin and to other revolutionary critics of traditional institutions. Rousseau was highly influential in propagating the notion that destroying the hierarchy of society’s institutions, such as the Church, the monarchy, and private property, would lead to a return to nature, freedom and equality.

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French revolutionaries’ attack on the monarchy, the clergy and the wealthy was a near perfect transformation of Rousseau’s ideas into a program of political action.

Babbitt believed the political manifestation of Rousseau’s sentimental humanitarianism had broader and deeper appeal than a worship of science, and Rousseau’s sentimental humanitarianism achieved such popularity and has lasted through so many centuries, not because it was true, but because it was flattering. Babbitt described its popularity this way: “It is not only very flattering itself; it seems to offer a convenient escape from the theological nightmare. Above all, it flattered those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Christianity at its best had sought to make the rich man humble, whereas the inevitable effect of Rousseauistic evangel is to make the poor man proud, and at the same time to make him feel he is the victim of a conspiracy.”

Rousseau invented an ingenious new form of ethics that “was perhaps the most alluring form of sham spirituality the world has ever seen—a method not merely of masking but of glorifying one’s spiritual indolence.” Freed from the necessity of controlling one’s own appetites, the Romantic soul “may indulge in the extreme of psychic unrestraint and at the same time pose as a perfect idealist or even, if one is a Chateaubriand, as a champion of religion.”

So while the scientific humanitarian avoided the issue of ethical concentration, the sentimental humanitarian took the issue head on and called a lack of ethical concentration true virtue. What Rousseau had jettisoned, Babbitt said, was “the presence in man of a restraining, informing and centralizing power that is anterior to both intellect and emotion.” Rousseau was the foremost modern example of a philosopher who constructed an ethical system wholly

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59 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 100.
60 Babbitt, Rousseau & Romanticism, 154.
61 Babbitt, Rousseau & Romanticism, 155.
designed around the attempt to justify moral laxity. Babbitt argued that the entire system of Rousseau is an evasion of the central problem of ethics: “It has been said that a system of philosophy is often only a gigantic scaffolding that a man erects to hide from himself his own favorite sin. Rousseau’s own system sometimes strikes one as intended to justify his own horror of every form of discipline and constraint.”

Political order cannot be built, Babbitt insisted, on Rousseauistic ethics because it replaces the traditional virtues with a worship of an impulsive emotionalism. Without inner restraints, men would not unite in peaceful communion because their temperamental selves would drive them to conflict. “Now to be spiritually inert, as I have said elsewhere, is to be temperamental, to indulge unduly the lust for knowledge or sensation or power without imposing on these lusts some centre or principle of control set above the ordinary self. The man who wishes to fly off on the tangent of his own temperament and at the same time enjoy communion on any except a purely material level is harboring compatible desires.”

Babbitt viewed the loosening of temperament and the lack of inner self-control as leading not to peace among human beings but to conflict. “The ugly things that have a way of happening when impulse is thus left uncontrolled do not, as we have seen, disturb the beautiful soul in his complacency. He can always point an accusing finger at something or somebody else. The faith in one’s natural goodness is a constant encouragement to evade moral responsibility.”

Rousseauistic ethics had turned upside down the traditional hierarchy of human values. For example, this inverted scale of values actually led Rousseau, for example, to exhibit a greater affection for animals than for his own children. Babbitt pointed out that this is a genuine

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spiritual disease in Rousseau: “Medical men have given a learned name to the malady those who neglect the members of their own family and gush over animals (zoöphilpsychosis). But Rousseau already exhibits this ‘psychosis.’ He abandoned his five children one after the other, but had we are told unspeakable affection for his dog.” In another example, French Romantic novelist Victor Hugo, Babbitt said, “declares in the ‘Legend of the Ages’ that an ass that takes a step aside to avoid crushing a toad is ‘holier than Socrates and greater than Plato.’” The elevation of animals found in Romantic ethics was not random; it was, Babbitt pointed out, “at once a protest against an unduly squeamish decorum, and a way of proclaiming the new principle of unbounded expansive sympathy.”

This inverted scale of values involved more than animals. In fact, when it came to human beings, sentimental naturalism of the Rousseauistic type created an inverted ethics that elevated reprobates who, after all were operating on the level of natural instinct. “The Rousseauist is ever ready to discover beauty of soul in anyone who is under the reprobation of society.” In *Rousseau and Romanticism*, Babbitt cited many examples from Romantic literature in which “rascals,” “vagabonds” and “convicts” are considered truly virtuous simply because “the virtues that imply self-control, count as naught compared with the fraternal spirit and the readiness to sacrifice one’s self for others.”

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67 Laurence Sterne, a novelist and contemporary of Rousseau, had developed a lavish affection for a donkey. This caused Babbitt to remark: “the ass does not really come into its own until a later stage in the movement. Nietzsche has depicted the leaders of the nineteenth century as engaged in a veritable onolatry or ass-worship.” (See: Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 144.)
70 Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 140.
No Romantic novelist, Babbitt said, carried the spirit of Rousseau into literature more than Victor Hugo.

In ‘Les Miserables’ Hugo contrasts Javert who stands for the old order based upon obedience to the law with the convict Jean Valjean who stands for the new regeneration of man through love and self-sacrifice. When Javert awakens to the full ignominy of this role he does the only decent thing – he commits suicide. Hugo indeed has perhaps carried the new evangel of sympathy as a substitute for all the other virtues further than any one else and with fewer weak concessions to common sense.  

Elsewhere, in Hugo’s poem “Sultan Murad,” the principal character of the poem “after committing every imaginable crime of unrestraint, is pardoned at last by the Almighty because on one occasion he brushed away the flies from the wounds of a dying pig.”  

In Romantic ethics, an emotional sympathy emerges as the replacement for every other virtue.

To Babbitt, who was steeped in Aristotle and Buddha, the lack of moral strenuousness in Rousseau’s ethics made this philosophy a kind of parody of ethics. As Babbitt scholar Peter Stanlis explains: “A sentimental conception of the moral nature of man, which makes emotion a feeling identical with conscience, and bases its whole value system in things spiritual upon subjective feelings, is not Christian but Rousseauistic and humanitarian.”

Babbitt's analysis of scientific and sentimental humanitarianism was developed in his first book, *Literature and the American College* published in 1908, and he continued with similar themes in one of his last books, *Democracy and Leadership* published in 1924. His analysis of the two types of humanitarianism are important to understanding his view of democratic imperialism from the French Revolution to modern times.

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Both scientific and sentimental humanitarianism placed the emphasis not on the reform of oneself, but reform of society at large. But, as social movements, they pointed in different directions of reform. Scientific humanitarianism became the inspiration for sociology and modern government bureaucracies who seek to manipulate their citizens into orderliness using incentives (or worse) offered up by various sociological studies. Scientific humanitarianism is not inherently hostile to traditional institutions as long as they do not prove as obstacles to research and they appear to have some social utility.

In contrast, sentimental humanitarianism as a social movement is revolutionary and corrosive to traditional institutions. The reform of society can only be accomplished by deconstructing traditional institutions that represent the chief obstacle to the flowering of the natural goodness of human beings. In its benign form, sentimental humanitarianism can be found in the residents of the peaceful commune who eschew all the traditional institutions of private property, marriage, religion and law in order to live “naturally.” In its less benign form, sentimental humanitarianism can be found in the modern revolutionary butchery inflicted upon the religious, the wealthy or anyone representing traditional institutions. From the Jacobins to Pol Pot, the merciless destruction of traditional society as part of a plan of political action is rooted in the sentimental humanitarian’s belief that the destruction of those institutions will unleash the natural goodness of human beings that has been choked off by civilization.75

Because sentimental humanitarianism was destructive of both traditional institutions and traditional ethics, the lion’s share of Babbitt’s opprobrium was directed towards it. For if the scientist were to be dropped into a culture of moderation, restraint, and good sense, Babbitt believed that his inventions would likely be directed toward worthy goals. But if society had

75 The revolutionary nature of sentimental humanitarianism will be discussed in a later chapter.
become unmoored from traditional standards, decadent and unrestrained, then the inventions of
science would become not only a nuisance but also a mortal threat as the power that they
created would be directed toward pernicious ends. For Babbitt, therefore, the particular danger
at the turn of the 20th century was that science was unleashing exceptional power and, at the
same time, Romantic sentimentalism was discrediting every form of ethical control and
restraint.

For Babbitt, Rousseau therefore was a towering, ingenious and brilliant figure whose
ideas instigated a transformation in the self-understanding of the West. Babbitt argued that
Rousseau's "influence so far transcends that of the mere man of letters as to put him almost on a
level with the founders of religions."76 One cannot understand modern politics, ethics, and
culture without an understanding of Rousseau. "Among the men of the eighteenth century who
prepared the way for the world in which we are now living, I have, here as elsewhere in my
writings, given a preeminent place to Rousseau."77 A more specific discussion of Babbitt's
critique of Rousseau himself helps shed light on his ideas as the influential source of
contemporary sentimental humanitarianism.

For Rousseau, the traditional Christian notion of conscience or the Hindu concept of an
"inner check" needed to be discarded as artificial as these internal voices would interfere with a
man's natural virtuosity. Babbitt saw the influence of Diderot on his friend Rousseau: "Diderot
puts the underlying thesis of the new morality almost more clearly than Rousseau: 'Do you
wish to know in brief the tale of almost all our woe? There once existed a natural man; there
has been introduced within this man an artificial man and there has arisen in the cave a civil war

76 Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 90.
which lasts through out life. Babbitt described this as Rousseau's attempt to rid human beings of the civil war in the cave, “Everything, then, that restrains ‘nature’ is to be dismissed as empty convention…Diderot would therefore turn away from the ‘war in the cave,’ that is the struggle between good and evil in the breast of the individual, and fix his attention on the progress of mankind as a whole in knowledge and sympathy.”

Rousseau’s ethics had transformed religiosity from an ethical discipline to a sentimental assertion of emotion. “Virtue, for example, according to Rousseau, is not merely an impulse, but a passion, and even an intoxication…Now Joubert says that whereas virtue before Rousseau had been looked upon as a bridle, Rousseau turned it into a spur.” In Babbitt’s analysis, Rousseau had re-told the Biblical account of the fall of man. In the Old Testament, man fell away from God because of evil in his heart. In Rousseau’s myth, evil was introduced into man's nature by society as a foreign element. “Rousseau’s expedient for getting rid of man’s sense of his own sinfulness on which fear and humility ultimately rest is well known. Evil, says Rousseau, foreign to man’s constitution, is introduced to it from without.”

With Rousseau’s Romanticism, Babbitt argued, Western institutions were transformed from sacred representations that reflected the divine order, as they had been viewed in medieval Europe, into artificial and pernicious restraints that suppressed the natural goodness of men who would flower if they could operate solely on natural impulse.

The whole movement from Rousseau to Bergson is, on the other hand, filled with the glorification of instinct. To become spiritual the beautiful soul needs only to expand along the lines of temperament with this process the cult of pity or sympathy does not interfere. The romantic moralist tends to favor expansion on the ground that it is vital,

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80 Babbitt, "Review of La Religion de J.J. Rousseau," 446.
creative, infinite, and to dismiss whatever seems to set bounds on expansion as something inert, mechanical, finite.\(^8\)

Rousseau transformed bohemian indecency into the highest virtue and, Babbitt said, “also declares war…in the name of what he conceives to be his true self – that his emotional self – against decorum and decency.”\(^8\)

A social order built upon Rousseauistic ethics does raise a central problem of political philosophy: if human beings are acting upon selfish impulse, how is it possible to have an orderly society? Babbitt said that Rousseau, ever the creative genius, does not shirk from the problem. His clever answer is that the most “natural” virtue, the one implanted into human beings from the beginning, is that of pity or sympathy. If one returns to Rousseau’s state of nature, we see that man has an instinct for self-preservation and self-love. However, “Natural man has another instinct, an instinctive dislike of seeing his fellow creatures suffer, which is alone a sufficient counterpoise to the love of self.”\(^8\) The soul, who exhibits great pity, or sentimental humanitarianism, need not worry about developing other virtues.

Babbitt’s argument was that Rousseau’s redefinition of virtue was formed by his reaction against two intellectual and religious trends, previously discussed, against which Rousseau recoiled. First, to the Christian religious strains that had emphasized man’s total depravity, Rousseau had offered the opposite extreme: man’s thoroughgoing goodness. “But other Catholics, notably Jansenists, as well as Protestants, like the Calvinists, were for insisting to the full man’s corruption and for seeking to maintain on this basis what one is tempted to call a theological reign of terror. One whole side of Rousseau’s religion can be understood only as a

\(^{8\text{2}}}\) Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 147.
\(^{8\text{3}}}\) Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 128.
\(^{8\text{4}}}\) Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 96.
protest against the type of Christianity that is found in a Pascal or a Jonathan Edwards.”

The theological position that man’s fate was wholly determined by an arbitrary concept of Christian grace brought an inevitable counter-reaction in Rousseau.

The second trend that recoiled Rousseau, Babbitt argued, was found in the artificial decorum of the court of Louis XIV. That court, with its unending formalism, claimed to represent the pinnacle of Christian morals, manners and decorum. “The members of the French aristocracy, and that as far back as Richelieu and Louis XIV, has largely ceased to perform the work of an aristocracy. They had become drawing room butterflies and hangers-on at court.”

The historical reality was that the court was a place where the courtiers “set up as personages in the grand manner and at the same time behind the façade of conventional dignity to let their appetites run riot.” For Rousseau, this artificial decorum of the French aristocracy discredited the very idea of decorum itself. Would not men be more virtuous outside of such a corrupt court?

Babbitt pointed out that the decadence of the French aristocracy represented the perfect opportunity for Rousseau to promulgate a theory of morals that abandoned decorum and restraint. “It would have been perfectly legitimate at the end of the eighteenth century to attack in the name of true decorum a decorum that had become the ‘varnish of vice’ and the ‘mask of hypocrisy.’ What Rousseau actually opposed to pseudo-decorum was perhaps the most alluring form of sham spirituality that the world has ever seen – a method not merely of masking but of glorifying one’s spiritual indolence.”

For Rousseau, the ersatz decorum of the royal court was living proof of his position that impulse was the truest virtue. Impulse, temperament and instinct were to be glorified as the true nature of noble men.

He puts the blame of the conflict and division of which he is conscious in himself upon the social conventions that set bounds to his temperament and impulses; once get rid of these pure artificial restrictions and he feels that he will again be at one with himself and ‘nature.’ With such a vision of nature as this it is not surprising that every constraint is unendurable to Rousseau, that he likes, as Berlioz was to say of himself later, to ‘make all barriers crack.’ He is ready to shatter all forms of civilized life in favor of something that never existed, of a state of nature that is only the projection of his own temperament and its dominant desires upon the void. His programme amounts in practice to the indulgence of infinite indeterminate desire, to an endless and aimless vagabondage of the emotions with the imagination as their free accomplice.89

As a social movement, Rousseau’s sentimental humanitarianism was a primary philosophical inspiration for the French Revolution. Among the revolutionaries, there was no religious or humanistic outlook; virtue was found in reforming society, particularly in overthrowing the priests and aristocrats that had constructed the artificial institutions of civilization that suppress the goodness of natural man.

The anticlericalism and murder of the clergy were not simply part of a power struggle between different factions in revolutionary France. The denial of the spiritual substance of human beings required the destruction of the clergy, as they were a living symbol of a false ethics.

In Robespierre and other revolutionary leaders one may study the implications of the new morality – the attempt to transform virtue into a natural passion – not merely for the individual but for society…Both Rousseau and his disciple Robespierre were reformers in the modern sense, --- that is they are concerned not with reforming themselves, but other men. Inasmuch as there is no conflict between good and evil in the breast of the beautiful soul he is free to devote all his efforts to the improvement of mankind, and he proposes to achieve this great end by diffusing the spirit of brotherhood.90

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89 Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 79.
The institutions of civilization and their representatives must be destroyed for they are conspiring against the natural goodness of men and thwarting the universal brotherhood of mankind. When the monstrous artificial complex of civilization is overthrown, the preeminent human virtue – pity – will rise to the surface, inspiring a brotherhood not seen since the state of nature.

All the traditional forms that stand in the way of this free emotional expansion he denounces as mere ‘prejudices’ and inclines to look on those who administer these forms as a gang of conspirators who are imposing an arbitrary and artificial restraint on the natural goodness of man and keeping it from manifesting itself. With the final disappearance of the prejudices of the past and those who base their usurped authority upon them, the Golden Age will be ushered in at last; everybody will be boundlessly self-assertive and at the same time temper this self-assertion by an equally boundless sympathy for others, whose sympathy and self-assertion likewise know no bounds.  

Babbitt insisted forcefully that Rousseau’s advocacy for the destruction of the institutions of civilization in order to unleash the “natural” soul would promote “the reality of strife that it is supposed to prevent.” The Revolution, it could have been predicted, ended in an orgy of violence.

Anyone who rejects the humanitarian theory of brotherhood runs the risk of being accused of a lack of fraternal feeling. The obvious reply of the person of critical and experimental temper is that, if he rejects the theory, it is precisely because he desires brotherhood. After an experience of the theory that has already extended over several generations, the world would seem to have become a vast seething mass of hatred and suspicion. What Carlyle wrote of the Revolution has not ceased to be applicable: ‘Beneath the rose-colored veil of universal benevolence is a dark, contentious, hell-on-earth.’

The French Revolution had, in Rousseauistic fashion, repudiated Christian civilization with its emphasis upon original sin and personal humility. The “citizens” of France did not feel that they were flawed sinners who needed to reform their souls; they were instead proud reformers of society armed with the “rights of man.” Babbitt pointed out, however, that this

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91 Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 137.
Rousseauistic influence did not create peace and brotherhood: “The only brotherhood the Jacobinical leaders had succeeded in founding was, as Taine put it, a brotherhood of Cains.”

Rousseau's assertion of man's natural goodness represented a revolutionary change in the traditional Western understanding of human nature and would lead to a new theory of democracy predicated on the natural goodness of the popular will. In contrast, *The Federalist* had an entirely different view of human nature and democratic theory. Their view of human nature, with its potential for good and evil, caused them to attempt a system that would bring to power leaders of strong moral character and to construct a constitutional republic that would limit the influence of popular passions and force the “will of people” to run a gauntlet of constitutional constraints before popular desires could become law. These two conflicting views of democracy, Babbitt believed, represent two of the greatest opposing forces found in American history.

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93 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 152.
A main purpose to my present argument is to show that genuine leaders, good or bad, there will always be, and that democracy becomes a menace to civilization when it seeks to evade this truth. The notion in particular that a substitute for leadership can be found in numerical majorities that are supposed to reflect the “general will” is only a pernicious conceit.¹

If we are to understand the root of Babbitt’s theory of imperialism, we must first understand which qualities in a democracy Babbitt felt would make it conducive to peace and which qualities would make it warlike. Over the course of his many writings, Babbitt consistently argued that there are two types of democracy. The first type, reflected in the American Constitution, was based on an implicit understanding of the dualism of human nature and of the need to find political results that represented the sober and considered judgment of the people, not their emotional, selfish, or impulsive desires. This type of constitutionalism assumes the importance of leaders who have developed a level of moral character sufficient to make them restrained and temperate. The second type of democracy, Rousseauistic democracy, denied the dualism of human nature and asserts that the general will of the people needs no bit or bridle to help direct or restrain its judgment. The will of the people was not to be checked or impeded even by the nation's leaders whose role was not to deliberate and to cool popular passions but to serve as their handmaiden.

Claes Ryn characterizes Rousseauistic democracy as plebiscitary: “Plebiscitary democracy aspires to rule according to the popular majority of the moment. To ensure the speediest implementation of their wishes, it seeks the removal of representative, decentralized,

¹ Irving Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1979), 38.
and decentralizing practices and structures that limit the power of the numerical majority.”¹

For Babbitt, the pure democracy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a menace to be feared by both its citizens and its neighbors because the popular will is not subject to any higher moral authority.

Babbitt believed that Rousseau's fundamental errors in diagnosing human nature had led to his flawed concept of democracy. One of Babbitt’s fiercest critics, H.L. Mencken, called Babbitt’s views on Rousseau as “absurd” and, in particular, criticized Babbitt’s attempt to integrate Rousseau’s various ideas into a relatively coherent political philosophy. Mencken wrote: “I doubt, indeed, that Jean-Jacques was the inventor of most of our current curses, or even that he gathered them together and made a system of them. His actual system, as a matter of fact, was full of contradictions, and large portions of it were old when he adopted them.”² It is not clear that Mencken had read Babbitt’s entire body of work on Rousseau because, in fact, Babbitt seems to have pulled the many divergent strands of Rousseau’s ideas into a very coherent political philosophy. A more systematic review of Babbitt's writings seems to demonstrate that he was able to explain a logically ordered progression in Rousseau’s ideas, first from his views on human nature and education leading upward to his ideas on democracy, revolution and imperialism.

As with most intellectuals, Rousseau did have contradictions in his thought, but he himself noticed internal contradictions and worked openly to resolve them. One of the leading contradictions in Rousseau’s thought was found in his differing theories of education first in Emile where in he discussed how to educate a child, and later in his Considerations on the

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Government of Poland where he discussed how to educate a citizen. Resolving this seeming contradiction on educational theory is important because it helps to explain the bridge from Rousseau’s ideas on education to his views on democracy.

Babbitt’s writings on education were prolific and opinionated, and he jousted with prominent university leaders including presidents of Harvard (which may indeed have set back his academic career). Babbitt's thought shared similarities with Aristotle in his understanding that a regime’s theory of education provided a window into its understanding of human nature and therefore forms the foundation of the regime type and the nature of the political order. He also agreed with Aristotle that education is an indispensable tool in the formation of political leaders, as it will tend to influence whether future leaders will be just or unjust, enlightened or tyrannical.

As Aristotle said about education:

That education should be regulated by law and should be an affair of state is not to be denied, but what should be the character of this public education, and how young persons are to be educated, are questions which remain to be considered. As things are, there is disagreement about the subjects. For mankind are by no means agreed about the things to be taught, whether we look to virtue or to the best life. Neither is it clear whether education is concerned with intellectual or with moral virtue.3

Babbitt was concerned that the leaders of his time, including Mencken, could not see the connection between an unsound education system and an unsound democracy. In 1917, for example, Babbitt reviewed a recently published collection of Rousseau’s political writings in the Nation.4

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While praising the editor’s “important contribution to the desideratum” of Rousseau’s writings, Babbitt criticized the editor nonetheless for omitting passages of Rousseau that were not explicitly political but which formed the foundation of his political thought: “there is a danger in studying the political writings of Rousseau apart from his other writings, and especially in separating passages which are supposed to be political from those which are not.”

Babbitt went on to say that Rousseau’s book on education, Emile, might be the most important guide to understanding Rousseau’s political thought yet the editor had not excerpted key passages from that work. “For example, the book which had the most influence in preparing the Revolution was not, as Professor Vaughan seems to think, the ‘Discourse on Inequality,’ but ‘Emile.'” Babbitt in fact insisted that Rousseau is the “father of modern education.” In this regard, given the political results that modern education was producing in the early 20th century, Babbitt said it is imperative that we understand Rousseau’s educational theory.

Babbitt captured the education theory of Emile in one concise idea. Rousseau, he said, had “sought to discredit habit...’The only habit the child should be allowed to form’, says Rousseau, ‘is that of forming no habit.’” For Babbitt, it seemed obvious that Rousseau’s

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5 Babbitt was actually more critical of Professor Vaughan in Democracy and Leadership, writing: “Professor Vaughan, again, the editor of a recent edition of Rousseau’s political writings, remarked in his introduction, apparently without awakening any special contradiction or surprise, that in the essentials of political wisdom Burke is ‘immeasurably inferior to the man of whom he never speaks but with scorn and loathing; to the despised theorist, the metaphysical madman of Geneva.’” See: Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 140.


9 Quoted in Rousseau & Romanticism, 387, From Emile, Book 1, “La seule habitude qu’on doit laisser pendre à l’enfant est de n’en contracter aucune.”
theory of education was precisely the opposite of Aristotle's. “One of the ultimate contrasts that presents itself in a subject of this kind is that between habit as conceived by Aristotle and nature as conceived by Rousseau.”\textsuperscript{10} Aristotle’s understanding was, of course, that the formation of good habits in children is the indispensable center of education; a child’s good habit will become his virtue.

For the ancient Greeks, this virtue was not found in spontaneity or impulsiveness but in ethical work. For the Aristotelian, the goal of education was to help children discover the law of measure, not to act upon impulse. As Babbitt described it, “This gradual conversion the Aristotelian hopes to achieve by work according to the human law.”\textsuperscript{11} Babbitt described education as the formation of right habits in children in order to carry virtue, and therefore civilization, from one generation to the next. “For civilization (another word that is sadly in need of Socratic definition) may be found to consist above all in an orderly transmission of right habits; and the chief agency for the transmission must always be education, by which I mean far more of course than mere formal schooling.”\textsuperscript{12}

Babbitt called Rousseau’s worship of the spontaneity in children “chimerical” because the real challenge in education is deciding which habits should be passed down and instilled into children, which traditions and conventions in civilization are worthy of transmission and which are not.

The trait of the child to which the sensible educator will give chief attention is not his spontaneity, but his proneness to imitate. In the absence of good models the child will imitate bad ones, and so, long before the age of intelligent choice and self-determination, become a prisoner of bad habits. Men, therefore, who aim to be civilized

\textsuperscript{10} Babbitt, \textit{Rousseau \& Romanticism}, 386.
\textsuperscript{11} Babbitt, \textit{Rousseau \& Romanticism}, 385-6.
\textsuperscript{12} Babbitt, \textit{Rousseau \& Romanticism}, 387.
must come together, work out a convention in short, regarding the habits they wish transmitted to the young. A great civilization is in a sense only a great convention.¹³

Rousseau, in contrast, denied this central mission of education and advocated freeing children from convention. He asserted that an education system based upon the principles of *Emile* would allow citizens to get in touch with their “natural” instincts and eschew their own self-interest. In contrast, Babbitt insisted that when education fails to pass along civilizing traditions the results for politics are pernicious as proper traditions are what might temper leaders from operating on the basis of the law of the jungle. A temperamental child, denied sound habits and civilizing traditions, might very well become a temperamental adult and, as such, would likely not be fit to lead a democracy.

Rousseau’s theory of education, Babbitt said, illuminated his larger political philosophy and provided a window into the intellectual endowment Rousseau provided to Machiavellian revolutionaries from Robespierre to Lenin. Denied the conventions of civilization, the law of force would come to the fore in a society based upon Rousseau’s naturalism. Babbitt said that those raised in the world of nature, i.e. the jungle, would not find themselves constrained by any warrants of civilization; they would not find their behavior circumscribed; and, they would soon learn to trust only in cunning and force. To describe the law of the jungle, Babbitt quoted from a Wordsworth poem about the roguish and somewhat lawless Scottish rebel Rob Roy MacGregor: "The good old rule, the simple plan: That they should take who have the power, And they should keep who can."¹⁴

For the political order, Babbitt insisted, Rousseau’s redefinition of education as spontaneity also invited anarchy in the relations between nations because it jettisoned the moral

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and ethical dimension of learning for future leaders. “But why should an Emile who has learned the lesson of force from nature herself not be ready to pass along this lesson to others, whether to his fellow-citizens or to the citizens of some other state? It remains to consider more fully this latter point – the implications of Rousseauism for international relations.” Babbitt, in fact, pointed out that on occasion, even Rousseau himself would emerge from his idyllic Romanticism and recognize that the world of nature was indeed a world without restraint upon force. Because “Rousseau has no notion of any such spiritual discipline…In spite of his talk of natural pity, he saw that what prevails on the naturalistic level is the law of force.”

In his first book, *Literature and the American College*, Babbitt had argued that Rousseau's influence was beginning to dominate American higher education. In his review of Rousseau, Babbitt continued this theme and lamented that a Baconian worship of science, already present for generations in American education, would be combined with Rousseauistic humanitarianism. “There has thus grown up gradually that singular mixture of altruism and high explosives that we are pleased to term our civilization.” Babbitt believed that modern American universities were jettisoning their mission to shape moral character and evolving into institutions designed merely for the acquisition of scientific knowledge and its deployment in humanitarian causes.

Thomas Nevin argues that the social changes wrought by the massive industrialization of the United States in the 50 years after the Civil War led Harvard President Charles W. Eliot’s to adapt higher education to two humanitarian goals: utilitarian organization and service to mankind. The economy needed to be organized, Eliot believed, with a view toward

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harnessing the great power of industry, while the plight of a growing and vocal class of industrial workers had to be mitigated. The primary goal of higher education was, according to Eliot, efficiency and sympathy. As Nevin summarizes Eliot’s view: “In collegiate education, too, there was a move toward collective order. President Eliot’s ethic of training for service and power was a formula for direct accommodation of the newly rising social and industrial conglomerates.”\textsuperscript{17} Nevin continues: “In Eliot, then, a Baconian ethic of utility fused with the Rousseauist assumption of individual spontaneity.”\textsuperscript{18}

Babbitt was highly critical of Eliot's outlook. \textit{Literature and the American College} in fact was a direct response to Eliot’s installation of an elective system and the elimination of certain required courses such as classical languages. Babbitt believed that both Bacon and Rousseau had heavily influenced Eliot\textsuperscript{19} in arguing that the curriculum of higher education needed to both serve the vocational needs of the economy as well as the spontaneous liberty of the student.

Eliot, in fact, hinted at his rejection of the moral dimension in education when he acknowledged Rousseau’s personal behavior as reprehensible, particularly in sending all his children to orphanages and to a likely death, but this behavior was not relevant to Rousseau's philosophy. These actions, Eliot said, could be excused by Rousseau’s devotion to “the great

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\textsuperscript{19} Babbitt did not view Eliot’s personal moral character however as inspired by either Bacon or Rousseau. Babbitt believed Eliot to be a Puritan. See: Babbitt, \textit{Literature and the American College}, 96.
doctrine of human liberty.” Regarding Rousseau’s children, Babbitt quoted Eliot as saying in a speech: “Verily, to have served liberty will cover a multitude of sins.”

For Babbitt, the elective system instituted by Eliot had a very personal aspect. In 1889, Babbitt had graduated from Harvard’s Department of Classics with high honors. When he returned to teach in that same department in 1894, Babbitt found a department that had been significantly diminished due to President Eliot’s elimination of the classical languages requirement for undergraduates. The classics, of course, were the first great ethical teachings of the West, and to put them on par with other less profound subject matter was an important error, he believed.

Babbitt predicted that with Eliot’s weakening of educational standards students would make course selections with “no general norm, no law for man” and that selections would be “entirely with reference to [the students] own temperament and its (supposedly) unique requirements. The wisdom of all the ages is to be as naught compared with the inclination of a sophomore.” The educational establishment had adopted the advice of *Emile* and denied their obligation to pass down certain conventions, traditions or habits of civilization and adopted the position that “a well-instructed youth of eighteen can select for himself a better course of instruction than any college faculty.”

Babbitt’s earlier views on education therefore seemed to have shaped his democratic theory because of his belief that severing the ethical dimension from education and democratizing the curriculum would lead to a decline in standards (conventions, if you will).

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20 Quoted in: Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 97, from President Eliot’s address to the National Education Association, *Proceedings of National Education Association*, 1900, 199.


and a weakening of the natural aristocracy that a democracy requires. For Babbitt, the two forms of humanitarianism that actively undermined the cultivation of civilization had corrupted education's primary goal of transmitting right habits. “Self-expression and vocational training combined in various proportions and tempered by the spirit of ‘service’ are nearly the whole of the new education. But I have already said that it is not possible to extract from any such compounding of utilitarian and romantic elements, with the results material efficiency and ethical inefficiency, a civilized view of life.”

For Babbitt, the specific danger of the humanitarian education was that it substituted “sympathy” and the “scientific method” for “high and objective standards of excellence.” Humanitarianism would weaken what should be the primary outcome of a college education: the creation of a genuine aristocracy that would infuse the democratic body politic with high standards. Babbitt believed that refined and civilized elites were the essential feature in a sound democracy. “As formerly conceived, the college might have been defined as a careful selection of studies for the creation of a social elite. In its present tendency, it might be defined as something of everything for everybody.” The university was being infused with a “democratic spirit” that entails a “democracy of studies to meet the needs of the student democracy.”

In education, Babbitt viewed the pure democratic spirit in education as generating a mediocre equality: “With the progress of democracy one man’s opinion in literature has come to be as good as another’s.” Babbitt insisted that the curriculum necessary for a formative education would be found in works such as “the Greek and Latin classics” that have “survived

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for centuries after the languages in which they are written are dead, the presumption is that these books are not dead, but rather very much alive – that they are less related than most other books to what is ephemeral and more related to what is permanent in human nature.” The curriculum for an aristocratic education must be selected by accessing Burke’s “wisdom of the ages” so “as to register the verdict and embody the experience of large number of men extending over a considerable time.”

Babbitt insisted throughout his writings that a sound and orderly democracy required a class of elites whose education has been “formative.” This failure of educational institutions to cultivate a set of ethical, aristocratic leaders was a particular danger to the politics of a democracy because “in one sense, the purpose of the college is not to encourage the democratic spirit, but on the contrary to check the drift toward pure democracy. If our definition of humanism has any value, what is needed is not democracy alone, nor again an unmixed aristocracy, but a blending of the two – an aristocratic and selective democracy.”

For Babbitt, the particular danger for politics was that the new education would breed leaders that are of no particular use, and are even dangerous, to a democracy. Democracies require a “permanent element of judgment, whether in an individual man or in a body of men” that stands as a counterpoise to the “impulse of the moment.” In democracies, Babbitt argued, this aristocratic element is indispensable because of the constant pressure of public opinion regularly inflamed by an irresponsible media.

Therefore, Babbitt's theories about the implications of a Rousseauistic education were at the root of his insistence that Rousseau’s non-political writings were the most insightful

26 Babbitt, Literature and the American College, 115.
27 Babbitt, Literature and the American College, 114.
28 Babbitt, Literature and the American College, 113.
29 Babbitt, Literature and the American College, 115.
passages in understanding his political theory. In this regard, he pointed to one of the most important passages in Rousseau, cataloged in Book VIII of his *Confessions*. Rousseau's friend Diderot had been imprisoned in the city of Vincennes. Rousseau, short on money, decided to take the long walk from Paris to Vincennes to visit him. Along the way, he was reading the French journal, *Mercure de France*, in which he noticed the Dijon Academy’s essay contest for the next year’s prize: “Has the progress of the sciences and arts done more to corrupt morals or improve them?”

Upon reading this, Rousseau had a vision, Babbitt says, “comparable to that of Saint Paul’s vision on the road to Damascus.” As Rousseau himself wrote of that moment:

> The moment I read this I beheld another universe and became another man…when I reached Vincennes, I was in a state of agitation bordering on delirium…All my little passions were stifled by an enthusiasm for truth, liberty, and virtue; and the most astonishing thing is that this fermentation worked in my heart for more than four or five years as intensely perhaps as it has ever worked in the heart of any man on earth.

This vision on the road to Vincennes, of course, was the inspiration for his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, which won the Dijon Academy’s prize in 1750. Babbitt summarized the core of that vision: “Among the multitude of ‘truths’ that flashed upon Rousseau in the sort of trance into which he was raptured at the moment, the truth of overshadowing importance was, in his own words, that ‘man is naturally good and that it is by our institutions alone that men become wicked.’”

Under Rousseau's vision that inspired the *Discourse*, traditional education was viewed as corrupting morals and artificial to true human nature; civilization itself was destructive to

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human virtue. Rousseau’s vision was a revolution in the West’s understanding of human nature and education, a “new dualism…that between man naturally good and his institutions.”\(^{33}\) Babbitt said that this moment was decisive for Rousseau because this “first effect” of a new dualism “was to discredit the theological view of human nature, with its insistence that man has fallen” and that the “true opposition between good and evil is in the heart of the individual.”\(^ {34}\) Rousseau's vision at Vincennes and the resulting \textit{Discourse}, Babbitt believed, was one of the most powerful inspirations for purging morality from education. Rousseau then built upon the Vincennes vision when he composed the \textit{Discourse on the Origins of Inequality} in which he begins laying out the characteristics of natural man uncorrupted by civilization.

Babbitt pointed to a passage in the \textit{Confessions} in which Rousseau’s uncontrolled idealism about human nature serves as the basis of his political philosophy. “We can trace even more clearly perhaps the process by which the Arcadian dreamer comes to set up as a seer…He goes off on a sort of picnic with Thérèse into the forest of Saint Germain and gives himself up to imagining the state of primitive man.” There in the forest, Rousseau invented an imaginative world that served to explain human existence.

Babbitt quoted Rousseau:

‘I sought and found there the image of primitive times of which I proudly drew the history; I swooped down on the little falsehoods of men; I ventured to lay bare their nature, to follow the progress of time and circumstances which have disfigured it, and comparing artificial man (l’homme de l’homme) with natural man, to show in his alleged improvements the true source of his miseries. My soul, exalted by these sublime contemplations, rose into the presence of the Divinity.’\(^ {35}\)

This new imaginative creation, of course, was Rousseau's vision of the “noble savage” who was not corrupted by private property and other societal institutions and was only

\(^{33}\) Babbitt, \textit{Character and Culture}, 228.
\(^{34}\) Babbitt, \textit{Character and Culture}, 227-28.
\(^{35}\) Babbitt, \textit{Rousseau & Romanticism}, 78-79.
animated by the virtue of pity. In the world of the noble savage, uncorrupted by the institutions of society, human beings lived in peace and harmony because they lived in pre-civilizational environs.

Babbitt pointed out that Rousseau’s world of “natural men” was an imaginative invention. There was never a historical period in which mankind found itself in a “state of nature” with noble savages lounging under shade trees. Babbitt said that Rousseau's political theories were built upon flights of fancy: “Now the most salient trait of the sentimentalist is that he always has some lovely dream that he prefers to the truth…He took flight on the wings of his imagination into some ‘land of chimeras,’ as he said, or, as we should say into some tower of ivory. He built up a world of pure fiction alongside the real world and called this world of fiction the ideal. In the name of his ideal he refused to adjust himself to the real.”

The superstructure of Rousseau’s political theory, Babbitt said, was built upon a fanciful narrative that began with the worship of spontaneity in Emile and proceeded to the political conclusion that civilization itself was the source of corruption in human souls. Mankind had been brought low by their institutions. If the institutions of civilization, including the arts and sciences, represented the major obstacles to the flowering of man’s goodness then the political program must entail destroying these institutions and those who administer them. In actual practice, the human representatives of civilization become the targets of political action. “Practically, the warfare of the Rousseauistic crusader has been even less against institutions than against those who control and administer them – kings and priests in the earlier stages of the movement, capitalists in our own day.” As Babbitt pointed out, Rousseau’s anti-civilizational philosophy tended to flatter the radical: “as a result of the superior imaginative

appeal of the new dualism based upon the myth of man’s natural goodness, the rôle he has actually played has been that of arch-radical.”

The revolutionary implications of Rousseau’s political ideas will be discussed in later chapters but it should be recognized that Rousseau’s theory of education and human nature, embodied in the idea that spontaneity and impulse were naturally good, represented a revolution in political theory. These ideas repudiated the great Western religious and ethical traditions that were rooted in an understanding that human beings must conform their own selfish wills to higher divine or humanistic order. That older tradition assumed that religion, education, and other institutions of civilization were essential supports to assist human beings in overcoming the weaknesses in their natures.

In his political writings, Rousseau then began the process of explicitly linking his views on human nature to a democratic theory that would recommend specific societal reforms. Yet because of his views on human nature, he faced a formidable challenge and contradiction in constructing a political and social order. For how can one build the institutions of a democratic polity when one’s view of human nature is highly individualistic and asserts that all political and social institutions are unnatural and corrupting?

Rousseau’s reply to this contradiction was that only by completely abdicating individuality and immersing oneself in the collective general will could the individual achieve freedom and equality. Here was how Babbitt explained Rousseau's resolution of the contradiction: “From the unflinching individualism of the Second Discourse, where man is conceived as a sort of isolated and unrelated particle, he passes to the no less unflinching

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37 Babbitt, *Character and Culture*, 228.
collectivism of the *Social Contract.*” What was required to create a just social order, said Rousseau, was “divesting man as completely as possible of his natural virtue in order that he may acquire the virtue of a citizen.”

The only way to square the circle of Rousseau’s radical individualism with his radical collectivism, Babbitt argued, was to assert that complete freedom and equality would emerge only when citizens had given up every shred of their individuality to the collective. “The only free and legitimate government is founded upon a true social compact” in which individuals freely subsume their individuality under the “general will” of the community. Babbitt quoted the key passage from Rousseau: “under the social contract, these virtues no longer reside in the individual, but in the general will. All the clauses of the social contract ‘reduce’ themselves to one: the total alienation of every associate with all his rights’ (including his right to property) ‘to the whole community.’”

For Rousseau, this subjugation of the individual within the nation represented true democracy and equality, not a tyranny. In Rousseau's *Social Contract*, the individual disappears into the collective will and this submission, Rousseau surmised, would naturally protect liberty because no organism would harm its own component parts. As Babbitt explained: “The use that Rousseau makes of the parallel is to argue that the community cannot will the harm of any of the individuals that compose it any more than the single person can will the harm of one of his own members.”

Rousseau’s extreme collectivism was highlighted when he posed the question of whether the love of his fellow man or the love of country was greater. He answered this

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40 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 110.
41 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 111.
question in his Considerations on the Government of Poland. Babbitt explained: “On this point, no doubt is possible. The love of country he takes to be the more beautiful passion. The virtuous intoxication of the internationalist seems to him pale and ineffectual compared with the virtuous intoxication of the citizen.”

When he becomes a citizen, the natural man, subsumed by the state, becomes “free.”

Therefore, for Rousseau, the education of Emile was essential in order break down an individual's attachment to civilization and prepare them for the day when they could subsume their individual will into that of the collective, assuming the mantle of the true patriotic citizen. For Rousseau, when this collective is formed, law, tradition, or other constitutional barriers cannot limit popular sovereignty because citizens in the collective would now be unencumbered by competing loyalties to any institutions other than the nation. Babbitt pointed out that with Rousseau's democracy, “the individual is to have no rights against the numerical majority at any particular moment because this majority expresses the general will and the general will is ideally disinterested.”

For Babbitt, Rousseau’s collective regime entailed the end of liberty. The idea of individuals subsuming their personalities into the community implied a tyrannical destruction of human diversity. Basing popular sovereignty and political legitimacy on this type of general will, Babbitt believed, would lead to tyranny: “Democracy in the sense of direct and unlimited democracy is, as was pointed out long ago by Aristotle, the death of liberty.”

Babbitt argued that Rousseau's version of democracy, with its firm belief in the wisdom of the collective will, tended to ignore the necessity of sobriety, deliberation, and a

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42 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 144.
44 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 141.
disinclination to act impulsively. “The will of the popular majority at any particular instance should be supreme – this is the pseudo-democracy of Rousseau. We may safely trust the democratic spirit, if by democracy we mean selective democracy of the sober second thought, and not the democracy of the passing impression.”

Babbitt argued that the lack of a check upon popular will was, writ large, akin to freeing individuals from any check or restraint upon their passions: “his method, in spite of the usual cautions and reservations, is that which has been adopted by so many of his disciples—to seek to discredit the veto power in the state in favor of popular impulse.” Rousseau's definition of popular sovereignty has, of course, inspired a commonly held view that constitutional checks or procedural obstacles to popular passions are inherently anti-democratic. Babbitt contrasted Rousseau’s understanding of popular sovereignty with the English tradition of popular sovereignty in which a system of checks and balances is designed “to bestow a little sovereignty here and a little there and absolute sovereignty nowhere; and then set up a judiciary sufficiently strong to put a veto on any of these partial sovereignties that tend to overstep their prescribed limits.”

While Rousseau's influence upon imperialistic nationalism will be discussed in forthcoming chapters, in the present context it should be pointed out that Babbitt maintained a philosophical connection between Rousseau’s theory of popular sovereignty and radical nationalism where human beings believe that can only recover their true selves by a total submission into the state. For Rousseau, one did not discover one’s true self by the practice of Aristotelian virtue or by acting on the callings of conscience. Instead the very idea of

conscience was denied so that natural man could assume his role as a citizen. The pull of conscience within an individual, in fact, would only create divided loyalties for the citizen.

Babbitt believed therefore that Rousseau was the prime influence upon the German intellectual tradition of *Kultur*.

By his corruption of conscience Rousseau made it possible to identify character with temperament. It was easy for Fichte and others to take the next step and identify national character with national temperament. The Germans according to Fichte are all beautiful souls, the elect of nature. If they have no special word for character it is because to be a German and have character are synonymous. Character is something that gushes up from the primordial depths of the German’s being without any conscious effort on his part.\(^\text{48}\)

Babbitt argued that German nationalism derived inspiration from the Rousseauistic vision of loyal citizens possessing no divided loyalties and without fidelity to institutions other than the state. “The tendency to set country over all (Deutschland über alles), to make a religion of country, is not mediaeval, but Rousseauistic…The God to whom the Hohenzollerns make such frequent and fluent appeal is, far more than the God of the Middle Ages, a tribal God.”\(^\text{49}\)

German *Kultur*, in fact, combined a virulent strain of nationalism with an emphasis upon scientific progress that tended to worship not only the nation but also its military power. *Kultur* represented the combination of both modern forms of naturalism. “When one analyses in depth German *Kultur*, one finds that it encompasses two rather distinct elements: first, the utilitarian element, the cult of science and efficiency and second the nationalistic enthusiasm which uses scientific efficiency to achieve its ends. It is obvious that if there is Rousseauism in *Kultur*, it exists mostly in the second of the two elements that I have identified, i.e. in the

\(^{48}\) Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 347. (Babbitt also footnotes this paragraph with a reference to Fichte’s writings: “Reden an die deutsche Nation, XII.”)
national enthusiasm.”\(^{50}\) It was Rousseau’s advocacy for an undisciplined emotional outpouring, Babbitt argued, that formed the heart of modern nationalism: “One might suppose that Rousseau would seek to retain in some form or other this spiritual bond that is set above nationality. But the whole conception has the drawback of being disciplinary, and what Rousseau wants is not discipline, but emotional expansion, especially in the nationalistic form – the intoxication of patriotism.”\(^{51}\)

Rousseau’s thought therefore represented an important precursor to German idealism and in turn to German nationalism where, Babbitt said, “a whole national group may thus flatter one another and inbreed their national ‘genius’ in the romantic sense and feel all the while that they are ecstatic ‘idealists’; yet as a result of the failure to refer their genius back to some ethical centre, to work, in other words, according to the human law, they may, so far as the members of other national groups are concerned, remain in a state of moral solitude.”\(^{52}\)

While in several places Babbitt pointed to Rousseau's influence on Kultur and, in turn, Kultur's role in the lead up to the Great War, Babbitt wrote even more extensively about the influence of Rousseau’s democratic theory on the French Jacobins who adopted not only his view of human nature, but also his views on popular sovereignty. “In Robespierre and other revolutionary leaders one may study the implications of the new morality – the attempt to transform virtue into a natural passion – not merely for the individual but for society.”\(^{53}\)

The adoption of a Rousseauistic concept of democracy and popular sovereignty by the French Jacobins had two sets of implications, one for domestic and one for international


\(^{52}\) Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 347.

politics. Domestically, any institution that created divided loyalties or unequal citizens had to be destroyed. To restore natural rights and bring equality, the king and queen and many of the aristocracy, the wealthy, and the clergy would be sent to the guillotine.

For international affairs, Rousseau’s version of popular sovereignty was rightly seen as a threat to the perceived legitimacy of the monarchical and aristocratic nation-states surrounding France because the Jacobins had declared that the only legitimate forms of government were those that had adopted Rousseau’s restoration of democratic “natural rights.” As Simon Schama described the European war crisis of 1791 and 1792: “Against the higher moral law of self-determination embraced by the Revolution, even the language of treaties between princes had no standing. How could the Pope claim to be sovereign of Avignon, or some German princes of the Empire claim property rights in Alsace, when the citizens of those places had never consented to the alienation of their territory?”

As Schama pointed out, all other European governments, no matter the historical richness and legacy of their monarchies, were declared outlaws by the Rousseauistic Revolution, “The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and the assertion of natural rights on which the constitution was based were, by definition, universally applicable. How could men be born to freedom in equality in one patch of the world but not another?” (This point will be discussed in more detail in the forthcoming chapter on “Democratic Imperialism.”)

Babbitt, on the contrary, saw in the Jacobin-style assertion of abstract and universal “natural rights” a debauched form of democracy because it avoided the central requirement of

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liberty, “the need of a veto power either in the individual or in the state.” Babbitt, like Burke, maintained that liberty is earned, not declared, and its origin is rooted in ethical work by individuals over generations. Communities and nations achieve liberties when their citizens and leaders become self-ordered and therefore lessen the need for outer control and authority. It is quite simple to proclaim liberty, Babbitt said, but much harder to actually devise a system that protects it. “The liberty of Jefferson…makes against ethical union like every liberty that rests on the assertion of abstract rights.”

Babbitt believed that the Romanticism undergirding theories of natural rights was artificial because it “encourages a total or partial suppression of the true dualism of the spirit and of the special quality of working it involves.” A conception of liberty that merely allowed individuals to do as they please would be a false liberty, inviting anarchy. “True liberty,” Babbitt said, "is not liberty to do as one likes, but liberty to adjust oneself, in some sense of the word, to law…genuine liberty is the reward of ethical effort; it tends to disappear if one presents liberty as a free gift of ‘nature.’"

Burke, of course, heavily influenced Babbitt’s view of liberty; Babbitt’s very terminology echoed Burke. In Burke's worldview, duties take precedence over and give birth to rights and liberties. Liberties would not simply appear because they are declared abstractly in a political document; they are the result of work over generations. As Burke wrote: “In the famous law of the 3d of Charles I. called the Petition of Right, the parliament says to the king, ‘your subjects have inherited this freedom,’ claiming their franchises not on abstract principles

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56 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 272-273.
57 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 273.
58 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 320-21.
‘as the rights of men,’ but as the rights of Englishmen, and as a patrimony derived from their forefathers.”

Rights, Burke insisted, flow from the mastery of one’s passions.

Government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants. Men have a right that these wants should be provided for by this wisdom. Among these wants is to be reckoned the want, out of civil society, of a sufficient restraint upon their passions. Society requires not only that the passions of individuals should be subjected, but that even in the mass and body as well as in the individuals, the inclinations of men should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection.

Without coupling rights with duties, Babbitt argued that there is a “tendency of the doctrine of natural rights to weaken the sense of obligation, and so to undermine genuine liberty.”

Babbitt further pointed out how a theory of natural rights tends to justify a meddling and expansive domestic government. Babbitt’s argument was that a political spirit based solely on “rights” tended to display individuals who, in asserting their liberty, fail to live up to their responsibilities and create disorder in society. Faced with disorder, the leaders of this society will recognize the challenges created by this type of problematic individual but can only counterpoise an alternative theory of rights as the solution: the “rights of society.” When the rights of society are asserted against the individual, social utility for the greater number tends to override personal liberty, i.e. individual assertions of right tend to be trumped by the needs of society. Under these theories of abstract right, therefore, the nation's leaders tend “not only to ascribe unlimited sovereignty to society as against the individual, but also to look upon himself as endowed with a major portion of it, to develop a temper, in short, that is plainly

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61 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 322.
Babbitt concluded therefore that when the traditional ethical controls break down in individuals, the “humanitarian crusaders” offer detailed reforms for society that end up becoming genuine threats the liberty of individuals because there is “under cover of their altruism, a will to power.”

Babbitt viewed the growth of a legalistic culture as an outgrowth of this humanitarian outlook. “The result of the attempt to deal with evil socially rather than at its source in the individual, to substitute an outer for an inner control of appetite, has been a monstrous legalism, of which the Eighteenth Amendment is only the most notable example…The multiplication of laws, attended by a growing lawlessness – the present situation in this country – is, as every student of history knows, a very sinister symptom.”

Babbitt argued that Rousseau’s absolutist conception of popular sovereignty and his assertions of abstract natural rights were the hallmark of radical democracy and the opposite of the constitutionalism of *The Federalist*. In fact, these two divergent forms of democratic theory, he believed, have been competing in the politics of the United States since its inception. “In this country, the contest can be traced in the authors of *The Federalist*, for example, on the one hand, and the representatives of the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy on the other.”

Babbitt argued that the French Revolution and American constitutionalism did not share a common theory, but an opposition, representing two divergent views of human nature and two fundamentally different types of democracy. Although elements of Rousseau’s thought have been present throughout American history, the Framers of the Constitution adopted a distinctly anti-Rousseauistic view of human nature and popular sovereignty.

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62 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 323.
63 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 323.
64 Babbitt, *Character and Culture*, 245.
If we go back to the beginnings of our institutions, we find that America stood from the start for two different views of government that have their origin in different views of liberty and ultimately of human nature.” The tradition of natural rights and of direct democracy was best represented by Jefferson while “the view that inspired our Constitution, on the other hand, has much in common with that of Burke” and “has its most distinguished representative in Washington.”

In his clearest annunciation of the differences between the two versions of democratic theory, Babbitt said:

The contrast that I am establishing is, of course, that between constitutional and direct democracy. There is an opposition of first principles between those who maintain that the popular will should prevail, but only after it has been purified of what is merely impulsive and ephemeral, and those who maintain that this will should prevail immediately and unrestrictedly. The American democracy has, therefore, from the outset been ambiguous, and will remain so until the irrepressible conflict between a Washingtonian and a Jeffersonian liberty has been fought to a conclusion.

At its core American constitutionalism in the tradition of The Federalist required two essential features, both of which shared a common view of human nature. First and foremost, democracy cannot survive without leaders of strong moral character; this is the primary argument in Babbitt's Democracy and Leadership. Rousseau's concept of popular sovereignty had obscured the centrality of ethical leadership in a democracy, Babbitt insisted. "One's choice may not be between a democracy that is properly led and a democracy that hopes to find the equivalent of standards and leadership in the appeal to a numerical majority, that indulges

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66 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 272.
67 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 273.
in other words in a sort of quantitative impressionism, but between a democracy that is properly
led and decadent imperialism.”

The American constitutional tradition encouraged leaders with an aristocratic
temperament who would assist in preventing the triumph of a pure democracy and could steer
popular opinion toward choices that were in their truest long-term interest. Rousseau’s direct
democracy, in contrast, was inspired by a Romantic sentimentalism that no one person was
better than the next and that aristocrats, as a general matter, were illegitimate rulers as they had
achieved their superior position by cunning and deception. Rousseau sought leaders who were
not true leaders, but rather mere servants of the popular will.

Babbitt’s contrasting of Rousseau’s view of leadership and that of The Federalist was
maybe the single most essential component of his democratic theory. The success of the
American republic flowed from the aristocratic temperament of George Washington and the
insistence by The Federalist that an orderly democracy required not popular, but representative
government, one whose leaders might elevate and refine popular desires. Based upon their
reading of the history of ancient democracies, the American Framers did not believe democracy
could survive without representatives who possessed the requisite character and virtue and who
would serve as checks upon popular passions. As Babbitt explained: “A democracy that
produces in sufficient numbers sound individualists who look up imaginatively to standards set
above their ordinary selves, may well deserve enthusiasm. A democracy, on the other hand,
that is not rightly imaginative, but is impelled by vague emotional intoxications, may mean all

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68 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 271-72.
kinds of lovely things in dreamland, but in the real world it will prove an especially unpleasant
way of returning to barbarism.”

In Federalist No. 71, Alexander Hamilton pointed to the paramount importance of
leadership in cooling the popular passions of democracy:

When occasions present themselves, in which the interests of the people are at variance
with their inclinations, it is the duty of the persons they have appointed, to be the
 guardian of those interests; to withstand the temporary delusion, in order to give them
time and opportunity for more cool and sedate reflection. Instances might be cited, in
which a conduct of this kind has saved the people from very fatal consequences of their
own mistakes, and has procured lasting monuments of their gratitude to the men who
had the courage and magnanimity enough to serve them at the peril of their
displeasure.

The Federalist's emphasis on a representative republic provides an obvious contrast with
Rousseau's concept of popular sovereignty.

The second salient characteristic of American constitutionalism, Babbitt argued, were
institutions arranged in a manner that would check popular passions and force deliberation in
the body politic. These institutional checks, Babbitt said, are akin to the “higher will” that
individuals must impose upon their own impulses. “Just as man has a higher self that acts
restrictively on his ordinary self, so, they hold, the state should have a higher or permanent self,
appropriately embodied in institutions, that should set bounds to its ordinary self as expressed
by popular will at any particular moment.”

In the United States, the traditional reverence for the Constitution and its institutional
safeguards have created stability in the American regime, as there has been popular respect for
checks upon the popular will. Babbitt maintained that the success of this constitutional

69 Babbitt, Rousseau & Romanticism, 379.
70 Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and James Madison, The Federalist, ed. George W. Carey and
James McClellan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund), 371.
71 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 273.
tradition derives from its sound view of human nature, the ethical insight that “the state should have a permanent or higher self that is felt as a veto power upon its ordinary self” that “rests ultimately upon the assertion of a similar dualism in the individual.” Babbitt's essential argument was that the entire structure of the American Constitution, with its representative government and elaborate mechanisms to thwart the spontaneous popular will, assumes that the impulsive desires of the people may very well be arbitrary and selfish, precisely the opposite of Rousseau's views on human nature.

Claes Ryn is in the Babbittian tradition when he explains:

Constitutional democracy means popular rule under self-imposed restraints and representative, decentralized institutions. Its aim is not to enact the popular wishes of the moment but to articulate what in American constitutional parlance is called the ‘deliberate sense’ of the people…Constitutional democracy assumes a human nature divided between higher and lower potentialities and sees a need to guard against merely self-serving, imprudent, and even tyrannical impulses in the individual and the people as a whole.

As James Madison wrote, certain constitutional structures were put in place “as a defense to the people against their own temporary errors and delusions.” Because the people could be “stimulated by some irregular passion,” the system should be designed to allow the “cool and deliberative sense of the community” to prevail.

From his earliest to his last books, Babbitt expressed his belief that a healthy democracy would be home to leaders and institutions that can both resist the fleeting emotions of the moment and access a more timeless standard of judgment.

Why then, it may be asked, should not democracy select without restraint? The answer is, that democracy should not be restrained in its judgments, but only in its impressions. Three institutions in this country – the Senate, Constitution, and Supreme Court – were especially intended to embody the permanent judgments and experience of democracy.

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72 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 299.
73 Ryn, *America the Virtuous*, 50.
74 Madison, *The Federalist*, 327.
and at the same time serve as a bulwark against popular impulse. Attacks on these institutions are usually inspired by the rankest Rousseauism.  

Babbitt was consistent in his view that the Senate, the Constitution and the Supreme Court were the three most important institutional checks upon the tendency of American democracy to accede to popular passions. In *Democracy and Leadership*, published 16 years after *Literature and the American College*, Babbitt continued to maintain the connection between sound education and sound constitutionalism: “There is a real relation between the older educational standard that thus acted restrictively on the mere temperament of the individual and the older political standard embodied in institutions such as the Constitution, Senate, and Supreme Court, that serve as a check on the ordinary or impulsive will of the people.”

Babbitt had special praise for the role carved out by John Marshall for the Supreme Court:

John Marshall deserves special praise for the clearness with which he saw the final center of control in the type of government that was being founded, if control was to have a ethical basis and not be another name for force, must be vested in the judiciary, particularly in the Supreme Court. This court, especially in its most important function, that of interpreting the Constitution, must, he perceived, embody more than any other institution the higher or permanent self of the state.

In the opening paragraphs of his one book devoted to democratic theory, *Democracy and Leadership*, Babbitt proclaimed that: “This book in particular is devoted to the most unpopular of tasks – a defense of the veto power.” His use of the word “veto” has been very carefully chosen. In the context of the paragraph in which he uses the word, he was clearly referring to the inner veto within the soul of the individual, to “a certain quality of will, a will

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76 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 331.
77 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 333.
that is felt in relation to his ordinary self as the will to refrain.” Of course, use of the word “veto” also carries the overtone of the presidential “veto”, or the prerogative of the President to override popularly enacted legislation.

A recognition of the importance of the veto power, Babbitt maintained, was the key difference between Jeffersonian democracy and Washingtonian constitutionalism: “The Jeffersonian liberal has faith in the goodness of natural man, and so tends to overlook the need of a veto power either in the individual or the state. The liberals of whom I have taken Washington to be the type are less expansive in their attitude toward the natural man.” For Babbitt, understanding the difference between a Jeffersonian liberal and a Washingtonian liberal was, “the key that unlocks American history.”

In his recounting of the opprobrium heaped upon George Washington for eschewing an alliance with the French Jacobins, Babbitt emphasized the requirement in a democracy for “an enlightened minority” because “the notion that wisdom resides in a popular majority at any particular moment should be the most completely exploded of all fallacies.” In his most powerful broadside against popular majorities, and referenda in particular, Babbitt pointed out that “if the plain people of Jerusalem had registered their will with the aid of the most improved type of ballot box, there is no evidence that they would have preferred Christ to Barabbas. In view of the size of the jury that condemned Socrates, one may affirm confidently that he was the victim of a ‘great and solemn referendum.’”

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80 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 274.
81 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 289.
82 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 290.
Washington himself, in his personal character and decorum, was an example of what Babbitt thought required of leaders in a healthy democracy. In viewing life’s challenges, Washington took precisely the opposite view as that of Rousseau. Virtue was not natural; it was the omnipresent struggle within oneself. As one recent Washington scholar wrote of Washington’s character: “The theory of behavior that Washington and his peers knew and attempted to live by did not view any virtue as natural…While fortifying their own self-esteem is an activity that individuals gladly beaver away at, self-mastery, the seemly control and direction of the *amour-propre*, is a much harder slog – and needs all the props of morality and religion that society can muster.”

For Babbitt, there were two poles of democracy, one sound and disposed to personal liberty, one unsound and a threat to personal liberty. The first, rooted in a dualistic view of human nature, was embodied in the American Constitution with its many safeguards preventing the popular passion from imposing itself with any immediacy. The second form of democracy, inspired by Rousseau, denied the “civil war in the cave” and worshipped “natural” impulse, both impulse in individual and impulse in the popular will. This second form of democracy was fully on display in Jacobin France, first with anarchy, next with the Terror and finally with the imposition of a militaristic order from above. The first form of democracy was punctuated by an ordered liberty and was led by leaders of an aristocratic temperament who possessed strong character and high standards. The second was punctuated by revolutions and anarchy and led by demagogues who flattered the fluctuating popular will all the while amassing power around themselves.

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In distinguishing between the two forms, Babbitt argued that there was one symptom that could help diagnose the slide into the decadent form democracy: class warfare. “The egoistic impulses that are not controlled at their source tend to prevail over an ineffectual altruism in the relations of man with man and class with class.”

In a decaying democracy, the members of the propertied class, because they are not sufficiently aristocratic, tend to believe in conserving property for “its own sake…not like Burke” who believed in defending private property “because it is an almost indispensable support of personal liberty, a genuinely spiritual thing.” A decadent elite has no credible response to complaints about their wealth when class warfare arrives on their doorstep.

Class warfare, Babbitt argued, would always be the mark of a declining democracy and a sign that it has entered a radical and decadent phase. “Every student of history is aware of the significance of this particular symptom in a democracy.” Income inequality for Babbitt was not necessarily the cause of class warfare and therefore schemes to confiscate wealth were not a true solution. “Every form of social justice, indeed, tends toward confiscation and confiscation, when practiced on a large scale, undermines moral standards and, in so far, substitutes for real justice the law of cunning and the law of force.”

The envy and jealousy of wealth that drives class warfare, Babbitt said, could only be corrected by elites of an aristocratic temperament who are enlightened and self-disciplined rather than rapacious and grasping. “The only remedy for economic inequality, as Aristotle says, is ‘to train the nobler sort of natures not to desire more’; this remedy is not in mechanical

84 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 298.
85 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 298.
86 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 299.
87 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 232.
schemes for dividing up property; ‘for it is not the possessions but the desires of mankind that need to be equalized.’”

Babbitt pointed out that in the United States a sometime counterweight to the demagogues of class warfare could typically be found in the “great unionist tradition,” counterweights that embodied “the idea that state should have a permanent or higher self.”

Yet, Babbitt believed that this tradition was waning and, under the influence of humanitarianism, the emerging culture was engaging simultaneously in class warfare and worshipping the acquisition of material goods and wealth. “The type of individualism that was thus encouraged has led to monstrous inequalities and, with the decline of traditional standards, to the rise of a raw plutocracy.” The decline of the elite class away from an aristocratic temperament and into self-indulgence would, he said, lead to class warfare: “People will not consent in the long run to look up to those who are not themselves looking up to something higher than their ordinary selves. A leading class that has become Epicurean and self-indulgent is lost.”

Finally, Babbitt pointed out that when radical democracy had reached a point when significant intermediate institutions were being undermined by the popular passion to equalize all things, its pretension to popular sovereignty is ultimately illusory. A small, ruthless minority would inevitably dictate the political order of a radical democracy. “No movement indeed illustrates more clearly than the supposedly democratic movement the way in which the

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88 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 229.
89 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 299.
90 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 229.
will of highly organized and resolute minorities may prevail over the will of the inert and unorganized mass."91

Babbitt’s democratic theory was ultimately rooted in his assertion of a human law that creates ethical obligations for individuals. Successful democracy would only be found, he believed, where leaders and in turn citizens have acquired good habits, checked their impulses, and engaged in the ethical work that is the only route to a sound political order. Leaders in a democracy, in particular, must possess this quality of self-mastery or they would not display the kind of temperament that makes for an orderly democracy. The Romantic notion that unleashing popular passions would bring justice, Babbitt said, is a chimera. Unleashing popular passions and destroying traditional habits and institutions would have one inevitable political result: class warfare and anarchic revolution.

Chapter 4: Democracy as Revolution

“In the words of Madame de Stael, he invented nothing, but set everything on fire.”

“Every atrocity the time could imagine was meted out to the defenseless population. Women were routinely raped, children killed, both mutilated.”

“The murder of a king or queen, or a bishop, or a father, are only common homicide—and if the people are by any chance or in any way gainers by it, a sort of homicide much the most pardonable, and into which we ought to not make too severe a scrutiny.”

The two opposing democratic theories described by Babbitt have existed side-by-side in the American polity. The first was articulated in The Federalist and was embodied in the political restraint and personal reserve of George Washington and the second was the direct democracy of Jeffersonianism and embodied in a populist president such as Andrew Jackson. The Federalist tradition was not much influenced by Rousseau but instead bore the imprint of the British tradition of constitutionalism. Cognizant of the history of the ancient world, the authors of The Federalist warned that popular opinion was, like human beings themselves, sometimes inclined toward impulsive, destructive and disorderly behavior but possessing the potential for measured and reflective judgment.

The Framers knew that popular governments in ancient Greece and Rome were plagued by revolutions, civil wars, coup d’états, assassinations and other civil disorders and this historical knowledge motivated them to develop constitutional safeguards to mitigate the effects of popular passions. As Claes Ryn explains, the authors of The Federalist understood the historical dangers of decadent democracies: “To understand the Framers’ conception of

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1 Irving Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1979), 119.
good government it is necessary, however, to remember that they had a very low opinion of what they called ‘democracy’ or ‘pure democracy.’ They associated it with demagoguery, rabble-rousing, opportunism, ignorance and general irresponsibility.”¹

In contrast, there was far less skepticism about democracy in the Jeffersonian tradition, which was profoundly influenced by Rousseau. Jeffersonians, rather than being cautious about popular passions, saw wisdom in unfiltered popular sentiment. They were always concerned that constitutional checks upon popular opinion could create obstacles to “the people’s agenda.” This tradition of populism has gained greater currency in modern American politics. For instance, it seems unproblematic to many that our legislators regularly make decisions about complex questions of public policy on the basis of public opinion polls. Likewise, many erroneously consider the American constitutional tradition to be one of simple "majority rule." Jeffersonian populism has adherents on both the left and right side of the American political spectrum.

Irving Babbitt believed however that an unvarnished Rousseauistic populism should carry an important warning for democracies: it tends to breed violent revolution. Thomas Jefferson famously praised revolution in a letter to James Madison claiming revolutions had important cleansing effects:

Even this evil is productive of good. It prevents the degeneracy of government, and nourishes a general attention to the public affairs. I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical. Unsuccessful rebellions indeed generally establish the incroachments on the rights of the people which have produced them. An observation of this truth should render honest republican governors so mild in their punishment of rebellions, as not to

¹ Claes G. Ryn, America the Virtuous (New Brunswick, USA: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 51.
discourage them too much. It is a medicine necessary for the sound health of government.²

In the American context, a Rousseauistic admiration for rebellion has always been in competition with the constitutional tradition of The Federalist, although popular reverence for the Constitution has created a political order in U.S. that, while buffeted by waves of popular unrest, has never been overcome by them.

Babbitt argued that the influence of Rousseau’s philosophy had bred revolution and violence, not only in the 18th century France, but had even contributed to the radicalism of the early 20th century. In a review of a book on Pascal in 1910, Babbitt remarked that the contemporary intellectual interest in Rousseau was not a coincidence: “The return to Rousseau evidently bears a close relation to the great wave of radicalism that has been sweeping over the world.”³ Despite his “timid” personal nature, Babbitt said that Rousseau’s writings contained the seeds of violent revolution. As Babbitt observed, “In his theories Rousseau is a wild revolutionary dreamer, but timid and circumspect in the last degree in everything that relates to practice. His genius, however, appears only in the stormy orchestration of the sentiments of revolt.”⁴

On the surface, Rousseau's role in inspiring revolt seems counterintuitive because of his fondness for seemingly peaceful and solitary reveling in pastoral nature. When in the Plato’s Phaedrus, for example, Socrates was lured to the woods and he expressed admiration for the beauty of nature, Phaedrus asks him why he does not come more often, Socrates replied that the

“fields and trees do not teach me anything but men in the city do.”

Rousseau, on the other hand seemed happiest when he strolled through the forest and he found the most profound wisdom in the simplest peasant. However, Babbitt argued that Rousseau's flattery of the peasant had a darker side: a rebellious hatred of civilization.

Rousseau’s dream of pure uncorrupted democracy that would return society to an aboriginal condition was based upon his observations of Swiss peasants going about their business in an orderly and sensible way. He noticed that they cordially lived their lives with efficiency and good cheer and seemed to have little need of leadership. Rousseau persuaded himself that these peasants were so orderly and placid because, in their simplicity, they had been uncorrupted by civilization and its institutions. Babbitt quoted Rousseau: “‘When you see,’ says Rousseau, ‘in the happiest people in the world bands of peasants regulate the affairs of state under an oak-tree and always behave sensibly, can you keep from despising the refinements of other nations which make themselves illustrious and miserable with so much art and mystery?’”

Babbitt pointed out however these peasants were being viewed by Rousseau through an idyllic imagination, “through the Arcadian glamour.” In fact, Rousseau saw these peasants “in much the same way Emerson saw proof of the consonance of democracy with human nature in the working of the New England town-meeting. But both Rousseau’s Swiss and Emerson’s New Englanders had been moulded by generations of austere religious discipline and so throw little light on the relation of democracy to human nature itself.”

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Rousseau’s admiration for the political order of the Genevan peasants, Babbitt pointed out, did not prevent him from writing down the most inflammatory and seditious thoughts about the council of 25 patrician families who actually ruled Geneva through the Petit Conseil. Rousseau could, when approaching Geneva, simultaneously embrace lofty idyllic images of the pacific peasants side-by-side with a seething passion for revolution against their leaders.

Even in regard to Geneva, Rousseau is capable of passing, after the fashion of the radical, from the fairest visions to the darkest suspicions. The Petit Conseil which is presented in the introductory letter to the Second Discourse as ideally subservient to the general will appears in the ‘Lettres la Montagne’ (of which Professor Vaughan prints the last four)\(^8\) as a gang of conspirators who are seeking to thwart this general will. Rousseau is here seen fomenting an actual revolution; his method, in spite of the usual cautions and reservations, is that which has been adopted by so many of his disciples – to seek to discredit the veto power in the state in favor of popular impulse.\(^9\)

Babbitt argued that Rousseau's misleading diagnosis of the peasants' happy and orderly lives provides a key insight into his larger political philosophy. Rousseau simply avoided or denied the fact that the peasants were peaceful largely due to a rigorous religious tradition, not because they had eschewed the trappings of civilization. One can see, Babbitt said, in Rousseau's idyllic imaginings on these peasants the inkling of the revolutionary personality who believes that political order would come with the destruction of the institutions of civilization, not through religious or humanistic discipline.

One also sees the darker side of the Rousseauistic imagination in his accusation that the very existence of institutions of civilization and their leaders was evidence of a conspiracy.

Babbitt explained:

> The guiding principle of his (Rousseau’s) writings, he says, is to show that vice and error, strangers to man’s constitution, are introduced from without, that they are due in

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short to his institutions. Now institutions mean in practice those who administer them. A small group at the top of the artificial hierarchy, kings and priests and capitalists, sit on the lid, as it were, and keep man’s native goodness (as in Shelley’s ‘Prometheus Unbound’) from gushing forth torrentially.\(^\text{10}\)

Rousseau had given birth, Babbitt believed, to the conspiratorial outlook of the modern revolutionary who is eager to destroy those conspirators through violence.

Under Rousseau's assumptions, with civilization and its institutions as the enemy of democracy, the heroes of the revolutionary mindset become the rascals, vagabonds, and reprobates who were willing to destroy the institutions of the established order with the means less important than the ends. Babbitt quoted extensively from a passage of Pierre Lasserre’s *Le Romantisme français*, to describe how the revolutionary breaks down society into two groups: “sublime” groups of criminals and assorted crooks who are willing to destroy civilization, and the “wicked” who seek to protect the retrograde institutions of civilization:

'Sublime convicts’ says M. Lasserre, ‘idlers of genius, angelic female poisoners, monsters inspired by God, sincere comedians, virtuous courtesans, metaphysical mountebanks, faithful adulterers, form only one half – the sympathetic half of humanity according to romanticism. The other half, the wicked half, is manufactured by the same intellectual process under the suggestion of the same revolutionary instinct. It comprises all those who hold or stand for a portion of any discipline whatsoever, political, religious, moral or intellectual – kings, ministers, priests, judges, soldiers, policemen, husbands and critics.’\(^\text{11}\)

For the revolutionary Romantic, political violence against civilization was the essence of personal virtue and explains the tendency for revolutions to lionize rogues and criminals who were devoted to the “cause.” In revolutions, as in some Romantic literature, the scoundrels became the heroes and the heroes became scoundrels.

\(^{10}\) Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 99-100.
\(^{11}\) Quoted in: Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 140,
As discussed, Rousseau's view of human nature and his belief in the natural goodness of man led him to attack civilization's institutions as well as the leaders of those institutions. Evil, for Rousseau, was found in the institutions of civilization and their representatives, not in the souls of individuals. As Babbitt concisely summarized this view: “Thus according to Rousseau, man is ‘naturally good.’ If evil appears, it is to be referred not to a failure on the part of the individual to control himself but to ‘institutions.’”\(^1\)

In turn, Rousseau’s ideas on the natural goodness of man, Babbitt believed, led to the view the people would only become sovereignty when historically rooted institutions, traditions and conventions were drained of authority. Rousseau’s concept of popular sovereignty, for example, had achieved such prominence in late 18\(^{th}\) century France that even Louis XVI, who represented a Bourbon dynasty extending back to the 16th century, was under its spell. Louis was paralyzed by the thought that the violent outbursts of the Parisian mob might actually represent the true spirit of the French people and therefore he took no action to put down the growing rebellion. Louis developed what Babbitt described as a “monomaniacal” inability to act. As Babbitt described Louis’ outlook: “This monomania is not unrelated to the growing belief not only that the will of the people is sovereign but is identical with its shifting caprice, for example, with the will of the Parisian mob. If the King and his counselors had not been thus touched by the new philosophy, the ‘whiff of grapeshot’ would not have come before 1790 at the latest and there would have been no reign of Terror.”\(^2\)

Indeed Babbitt viewed the French Revolution as a highly representative political expression of Rousseau's philosophical Romanticism: “If we wish to see the psychology of

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Rousseau writ large we should turn to the French Revolution. That period abounds in persons whose goodness is in theory so superlative that it overflows in a love for all men, but who in practice are filled like Rousseau in his later years with universal suspicion.” Revolutions based upon Rousseauistic principles, Babbitt argued, would entail attacks on whole classes of individuals and institutions that are viewed as impediments to the *vox populi*. The revolutionary attacks in France, intended to bring freedom and democracy, would instead target important intermediate institutions such as the Church and result, finally, in a tyrannical dictator who would be legitimized as the “true voice” of the popular will.

The leaders of the Revolution had expressed all of Rousseau’s loftiest idealism – *liberté, égalité, fraternité* – yet would produce the Terror. Babbitt thought the Terror should not be understood as an excess of a revolution that had spun out of control or had drifted from its earlier noble intentions; it was, he believed, a logical result of Rousseauism. Babbitt wrote that, “By setting up his chimerical contrast between some ‘natural’ or ‘ideal’ state in which men are peaceful, benevolent, and happy without any genuine moral effort, and an actual society in which they are oppressed and corrupted by their institutions and those who administer them, Rousseau opened the way for more convulsions and breaches of peace than all the cynics from Machiavelli to Hobbes down.” An idealism that had escaped reality gave the Revolution a simultaneous aura of lofty humanitarianism mixed with the most brutal realism, a reflection of the idealism and realism found in Rousseau’s ideas. Babbitt offered his analysis of this contradictory character of revolutions: “The soft temperamentalists are overflowing with beautiful professions of brotherly love, and at the same time the hard temperamentalists

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are reaching out for everything in sight; and inasmuch as the hard temperamentalists operate not in a dreamland, but in the real world, they are only too plainly setting the tone. Very often, of course, the same temperamentalist has his hard and his soft side."

Claes Ryn points out that, after centuries of bloody and violent revolutions that were inspired by lofty idealistic dreams, political idealism nonetheless continues to enjoy immunity against condemnation for its link with brutality.

Some of the biggest idealists, championing a vision of universal brotherhood -- Lenin, Trotsky, Mao -- were also among the greatest killers and murderers. They caused enormous suffering. Yet the Western world seems to have learnt very little about idealism from this horrifying experience. Idealists still expect, and often receive, admiration for their allegedly noble visions. The idealism cannot be blamed for the homicidal mania, the idealists tell others.

In this regard, Ryn's view implies some mild criticism of Babbitt for his characterization of Rousseau's imagination as "idyllic" as this term does not precisely capture the dark moral import of many forms of political idealism. "Imagining and advocating unattainable goals," Ryn says "is from the point of view of traditional morality not admirable, but perverse and dangerous."

Simon Schama’s monumental history of the French Revolution, *Citizens*, chronicled this perversity and took historians of the French Revolution to task for soft-peddling the brutality of the Terror and, in particular, for claiming that the violence and bloodshed represented an “aberration” from the otherwise noble goals of the Revolution. “Confronted with the evidence of an apocalypse, it does historians no credit to look aside in the name of..."

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scholarly objectivity.”¹⁹ The Romantic accounts of the French Revolution, Babbitt claimed, had airbrushed the history of the Terror: “In Heaven’s name, let us have the cold facts, unembroidered by these arabesques of a disordered fancy, and undistorted by the hallucinations of a revolutionary temperament!”²⁰

For Schama, as for Babbitt, the violence of the Revolution was not an excessive aberration but a predictable result of the Revolution’s principles. “The exterminations practiced there were, in fact, the logical outcome of an ideology that progressively dehumanized its adversaries and that had become incapable of seeing any middle ground between total triumph and utter eclipse.” Rather than lamenting the violence or complaining that some revolutionaries had taken things too far, “Robespierre had rejoiced that ‘a river of blood would now divide France from its enemies.’ That river was now swelling its banks; the current was flowing fast but it remained obscure, except to the intimates of the Incorruptible, where it was taking the Republic.”²¹

One of Babbitt’s favorite French authors and a critic of Romanticism, Joseph Joubert, had written: “Philosophers fall into unreality from ‘confounding what is spiritual from what is abstract.’”²² Yet after living through the Terror, Joubert had remarked that the sheer brutality of the Revolution made him wish he could flee reality, not face it squarely. “Joubert’s shrinking from l’affreuse réalité is also to be connected to the fact that he lived through the Reign of Terror. ‘The Revolution,’ he says, ‘drove my spirit from the real world by making it

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¹⁹ Schama, Citizens, 792.
²⁰ Irving Babbitt, Literature and the American College (Washington, DC: National Humanities Institute, 1986), 139.
²¹ Schama, Citizens, 792.
too horrible for me.’ ‘Revolutions are times when the poor man is not sure of his probity, the rich man of his fortune, and the innocent man of his life.’”

There was a direct intellectual line, Babbitt felt, from Rousseau's democratic theory to the Terror, a line that continued to flame radicalism long after 1789:

‘We are approaching,’ Rousseau declared, ‘the era of crises, and the age of revolutions.’ He not only made the prophecy but did more than any other one man to insure its fulfillment...In one of the best-balanced estimates that have appeared, the French critic Gustave Lanson, after doing justice to the various minor trends in Rousseau’s work, sums up accurately its major influence: ‘It exasperates and inspires revolt and fires enthusiasms and irritates hatreds; it is the mother of violence, the source of all that is uncompromising; it launches the simple souls who give themselves up to its strange virtue upon the desperate quest for the absolute, an absolute to be realized now by anarchy and now by social despotism.’

This revolutionary outlook swept France after Rousseau published The Social Contract in 1762. As Claes Ryn explains:

In France, Rousseau’s view of man and his vision of a new society spread quickly and soon became a powerful political force. It was espoused with increasing militancy by the Jacobin clubs, which saw themselves as incorruptible guardians of universal principles...They were ushering a new way of life, a society of equality and democracy, a glorious goal that permitted no mercy for those who stood in the way. Jacobinism inspired the French Revolution’s murderous hatred of traditional elites, its reign of terror, and its messianic ambitions.

Babbitt quoted Robespierre extensively because he was “probably a more thoroughgoing Rousseauist than any other of the Revolutionary leaders.” Like Rousseau, Robespierre explicitly redefined virtue by associating it with overflowing feeling rather than self-control.

25 Ryn, America the Virtuous, 19.
26 Babbitt, Rousseau & Romanticism, 135.
Babbitt quoted Robespierre on virtue:

'Doubtless virtue is a natural passion… Yet virtue exists as you can testify, feeling and pure souls; it exists, that tender irresistible, imperious passion, torment and delight of magnanimous hearts, that profound horror of tyranny, that compassionate zeal for the oppressed, that sacred love for one’s country, that still more sublime and sacred love for humanity, without which a great revolution is only a glittering crime that destroys another crime.27

Virtue was for Robespierre an overflowing patriotic emotion and once the patriot was captured by this emotion, he would turn his attention to political action that would usher in the utopian vision of the Revolution. The idealistic vision bred the violence; they were not separate phenomena. As Babbitt described the outlook of Robespierre: "If one wishes to enter into the psychology of the later stages of the Revolution, one should devote special attention to avowed disciples of Rousseau like Robespierre. He adopts a rather uncompromising form of Rousseau’s view of ‘virtue,’ and so is led to set up an ‘ideal’ France over against the real France, and this ‘ideal’ France is largely a projection of what I have termed the idyllic imagination."28 Robespierre possessed a monumental conceit about own natural virtue and that of the other Jacobins. Babbitt quoted Robespierre expressing the nature of this “noble” soul: “You feel it at this moment burning in your souls. I feel it in mine. But how could our vile calumniators have any notion of it?”29 Other, less worthy souls must be killed because the "fraternité" of society, Robespierre believed, depended upon such killings and murders.

Robespierre drew inspiration from Rousseau's wayward imagination and his willingness to impose, through violence if necessary, that Romantic dream upon society. As Babbitt pointed out regarding the French Revolution and Romanticism generally, when one acts in politics on the basis of unreality, on the basis of a dream, the result is a messianic revolution.

Babbitt cited Aristotle’s definition of Romanticism as things that are “wonderful rather than probable.”

For Rousseau, Babbitt said, preferred living in a fantasy world: “The creative imagination is thus for Rousseau a means of escape into a land of heart’s desire, a world of sheer unreality.”

Babbitt conceded that imaginative Romantic literature and occasional escapist daydreaming might have a perfectly healthy place in the busy life of human beings who often face a grinding reality. However, when revolutionaries declared it to be a political requirement to actually create and live in a world that is more “wonderful” than “probable,” one begins to see the strong influence of Rousseauistic imagination on the modern revolutionary mindset. As Babbitt explained: “Thus alongside the real world and in more or less sharp opposition to it, Rousseau builds up a fictitious world, that pays des chimères, which is alone, as he tells us, worthy of habitation.”

This type of imagination becomes madness when the Romantic cannot distinguish the Arcadian dream world from the real world and proceeds to act as if they are living in the dream and not in reality.

Babbitt pointed to one incident in Rousseau’s life in which his imagination tipped over into a kind of madness: “It was, for example, natural for a youth like Rousseau who was at once romantic and musical, to dream that he was a great composer; but actually to set up as a great composer and to give the concert at Laussane, shows an unwillingness to discriminate between his fictitious and his real world that is plainly pathological. If not already a megalomaniac, he

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was even then on his way to megalomania.” As Babbitt said of Rousseau’s imagination:
“The striking fact is that, far more than Wordsworth, he held fast to his vision. He refused to adjust it to an unpalatable reality.”
Babbitt said that Rousseau “is ready to shatter all forms of civilized life in favor of something that never existed, of a state of nature that is only the projection of his own temperament and its dominant desires upon the void.”

When Robespierre faced the reality of prerevolutionary France and concluded that it did not comport with his imaginary France, he was forced to adopt the position – one held by so many modern revolutionary movements – that there were certain elements in society who had corrupted the virtue of the nation and must be purged. Society would be divided into the virtuous and vicious, not on the basis of character but on the basis of class. Babbitt explained the outlook of Robespierre: “The opposition that he established between the virtuous and the vicious is even less an opposition between virtuous and vicious individuals than between whole classes of individuals. The judging of men by their social groupings rather than by their personal merits and demerits, that seemed to Burke so iniquitous, has, as a matter of fact, been implicit in the logic of this movement from the French to the Russian Revolution.”

For the revolutionaries, the natural goodness within mankind could only be restored when those “calumniators” who were standing in the way were destroyed. Babbitt explained the Revolution's justification for the Terror: “Inheriting from Rousseau (albeit in garbled form)

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34 At Lausanne in 1730 Rousseau tried to set himself up as a music instructor by offering to conduct an orchestra and perform a piece that he himself had written. With little musical training, the result was a terrible cacophony that brought howls of laughter from the audience. Rousseau refers to the incident in Book 4 of his *Confessions*, although his autobiographical account may downplay the truly ridiculous nature of the incident. See: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, trans. J.M. Cohen (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1977), 144-47.
37 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 150.
the doctrine that government was a form of educational trust, the guardians of the Revolution meant to use every means possible to restore to a nation corrupted by the modern world the redemptive innocence of a presocial child. On the ruins of the monarchy, aristocracy and Roman Catholicism would sprout a new natural religion: civic, domestic and patriotic."\(^{38}\) Babbitt quoted Danton who, in a pithier way, explained the logic of the Terror: "‘These priests, these nobles are not guilty, but they must die, because they are out of place, interfere with the movement of things, and will stand in the way of the future.’"\(^{39}\)

Rousseau’s democratic theory, with its elimination of any the intermediate institutions that may divide the loyalties of citizens, Babbitt insisted, inevitably led to the violent revolutions that targeted a “whole social strata that seemed to be made up of parasites and conspirators in order that they may adjust this actual France to the Sparta of their dreams.”\(^{40}\) Babbitt argued that these type of revolutions consistently displayed conspiratorial tendencies because of the failure of their unrealizable dream world to emerge. The entire progression of Rousseau’s Romanticism, Babbitt said, “lends color to the assertion that has been made that the last stage of sentimentalism is homicidal mania.”\(^{41}\)

The historical record, in fact, corroborates Babbitt's position that the revolutionary purging was not random violence or simply the targeting of political opponents. What was on display in revolutionary France was the systematic targeting of certain populations who, by the nature of their positions, were considered conspirators. For example, in the city of Lyon alone, after a rebellion had taken place against the revolutionary government, one thousand nine hundred and five people were executed. These deaths were not the arbitrary result of people

\(^{38}\) Schama, *Citizens*, 770.
\(^{39}\) Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 150.
\(^{40}\) Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 150.
\(^{41}\) Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 151.
“caught up” in the violence but were classes of people systematically targeted because of Jacobin ideology. As Schama explained, “They included, of course, many of the Lyonnais notability…Aristocratic army officers, members of the rebel department of Rhone-et-Loire, federal magistrates and priests were all high on the list, as was anyone who could be associated with the capacious category ‘the rich,’ with ‘merchants’ or with any tradesmen or manufacturers accused by sans-culottes of economic crimes.”

Rousseau had embraced the dream of a democracy with an undifferentiated mass of citizens, none better than others. He rejected any aristocracy, either based upon lineage or merit. As Babbitt stated it, “I have already mentioned that Rousseau is very hostile not only to any aristocracy in particular, but to the aristocratic principle in general. Humankind is made up of the people and what is not the people consists of so few that they do not count.”

This rejection of the very idea of leadership creates a particular problem during revolutions that, by their nature, must be led by someone. Therefore, in very Rousseauistic fashion, the leaders of the French Revolution declared that they were not influencing events but only acting as servants of the popular will. Robespierre, Babbitt said, “is not a real leader at all—only the people’s ‘hired man.’ But at critical moments, in the name of an ideal general will, of which he professes to be only the organ, he is ready to impose tyrannically his will on the actual people.”

Yet, Babbitt argued, this denial of the need for leadership actually generated resentment in the lower classes of society who suddenly viewed themselves as not deserving of their

42 Schama, *Citizens*, 783.
44 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 151.
inferior position. Babbitt contrasted Rousseau's views on leadership in a democracy with classical philosophy: “Leadership of some kind Plato and Aristotle felt there must be, so that everything in the art of government hinges on getting the right quality of leadership. The total tendency of what they urge is to restrain the passions and appetites of the most intelligent members of a community, the tendency of what Rousseau urges is to inflame the passions and appetites of its least intelligent members.”

While Rousseauistic revolution rejected the idea of aristocratic leadership, religion also served as a particularly troublesome obstacle to the goals of the Revolution as it was a reminder that citizens may well retain loyalties to something higher than the state. The Jacobins who sought the murder of priests and nobles as well as the de-Christianization of France in order to replace the old civilization with a new “civil religion” and “cult of reason” were simply good Rousseauists. For Rousseau, Christianity represented a threatening set of imaginative symbols that would divide the loyalties of human beings away from their duties as a citizen. Rousseau's new civil religion, his new “creed,” must replace any traditional religion, and that new civil religion, which would be imposed by the sovereign, was not tolerant of dissent. The spiritual substance of Christianity, which is the struggle between good and evil in the soul of the individual who is reaching for something eternal, had vanished in Rousseau. All that was left would be religion as a deterrent force to keep order in society and support the sovereign state. Babbitt pointed to the last chapter in Rousseau’s *Social Contract* that is “in the highest degree hostile to Catholicism, inasmuch as even the aesthetic Catholic is unwilling to subordinate himself entirely to the state.”

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Rousseau, Babbitt believed, had created a bastardized form of religion that served as a mere prop to the political order:

The remedy is to get rid of historical Christianity, and not only to make the state supreme, but also to set up a state religion—a religion that was not to be, properly speaking, religious, but merely an ‘aid to sociability’...Rousseau would banish fear from religion entirely, and everything that is form and discipline being, as he holds, not the essence of religion, he would turn over to the state. The essence of religion he sees in fluid emotionalism, and this a man may indulge in without having two fatherlands, without dividing his allegiance between the spiritual and the temporal order, as he must do if he remains a Christian in the traditional sense.  

The hostility to religion among the French revolutionaries helped to foster Burke’s strong distaste for the Revolution, as he believed that civilization itself was not possible without true religion. “Nothing is more certain, than that our manners, our civilization, and all the good things which are connected with manners, and with civilization, have, in this European world of ours depended for ages upon two principles; and were indeed the result of both combined; I mean the spirit of a gentleman, and the spirit of religion.”

Rousseau’s hostility to traditional Christianity was the philosophical antecedent to the anticlericalism and the systematic murder of the clergy during the French Revolution. On this point, Babbitt argued, Rousseau’s influence upon Robespierre was clear. “One immediately relates Rousseau’s hostility to Christianity as a form of discipline quite apart from the state to the anticlericalism that has prevailed in France from the Revolution to the present day; and the connection of Rousseau’s religious ideas with those of Robespierre, for example, is close and indubitable.” Robespierre was the Revolution’s enforcer of the civil religion. “Few facts are

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more certain, for example, than that the passage in the ‘Contrat Social’ on civil religion as interpreted by Robespierre sent many persons to the guillotine.\textsuperscript{50}

Besides purging aristocracy and Christianity, Rousseau also took particular aim at the wealthy. Babbitt linked Rousseau with modern egalitarian radicals and class warfare:

One need scarcely be surprised that this and similar passages of the Second Discourse should still be a direct source of inspiration to the bomb-throwing anarchist. What one hears throughout this treatise, as elsewhere in Rousseau, is the voice of the angry and envious plebeian, who in the name of love is actually fomenting hatred and class warfare…The crusader against social inequalities on Rousseauistic lines may easily become not merely an enthusiast but a fanatic.\textsuperscript{51}

Revolutionary violence based upon class-warfare was an essential and oft-overlooked element of Rousseau. Rousseau’s objection to property did not parallel Marx, although there certainly are intellectual linkages. Rousseau did not have a full-blown theory of dialectical materialism but he did view the institutions of civilization as creations of a wealthy class who used them as mechanisms to suppress the natural goodness of peasantry. A return to simple nature would be impossible when there existed a class of people who enjoy such largesse; a return to nature necessitated an attack on the wealthy. Babbitt explained the class warfare imperative at the heart of Rousseau:

Now it is in the man of the plain people that the lively native impulse is least sicklied o’er by the pale cast of thought. ‘Love had he found in the huts where the poor men lie.’ As one ascends in the social scale, love diminishes, and as one approaches the top, it gives way to the opposite. As for the rich, Rousseau compares them to ‘ravening wolves, who having once tasted human flesh, refuse every other form of food, and henceforth desire to devour only men.\textsuperscript{52}

Babbitt pointed out that Rousseau is quite clear in his writings that private property was one of the key institutions that destroyed the blissful state of nature:

\textsuperscript{51} Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 100-101.
\textsuperscript{52} Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 98.
Just as in the old theology everything hinged on man’s fall from God, so in Rousseau everything hinges on man’s fall from nature. The first and decisive step in this fall and the source of social evils was, according to Rousseau’s familiar account, the invention of private property in the form of property in land. With the invention of property, ‘equality disappeared’…slavery and wretchedness were soon to spring up and grow with the crops.’ Misery, in short, is the result of industry.53

This class warfare was not only the logical result of Rousseau’s political philosophy but, as Babbitt pointed out, it happened to be politically effective given that the rich never outnumber the poor and Rousseau’s ideas flattered and emboldened the poor. “The man at the bottom of the existing social order is flattered by being told that he is more virtuous, more fully possessed, in other words, of the spontaneous goodness of the state of nature than the man at the top…He (Rousseau) owes no small part of his amazing influence to his flattery of the popular head as well as of the popular heart.”54

Babbitt’s analysis was that the revolutionary mindset was connected to Rousseau's ethical philosophy because both encouraged men to shed any check upon their temperamental self and to direct their ire at the traditions and conventions of civilization:

Usually, the brake upon temperament is supplied by the ethos, the convention of one’s age and country. I have tried to show that the whole programme of the eccentric individualist is to get rid of this convention, whatever it may be, without developing some new principle of control. The eccentric individualist argues that to accept control, to defer to some centre, as the classicist demands, is the cease to be himself. But are restrictions on temperament so fatal to a man’s being himself?55

Babbitt pointed to Edmund Burke as the most prescient analyst of this revolutionary psychology. Burke was often portrayed as a reactionary defender of tradition, almost a mountebank, who defended the old order for nefarious but unsaid reasons. But for Babbitt, “Burke was no mere partisan of the status quo. He was not opposed on principle to

53 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 99.
54 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 106.
55 Babbitt, Rousseau & Romanticism, 329.
revolutions.”\textsuperscript{56} Babbitt understood that Burke was instead fundamentally opposed to the core philosophical principles of Rousseauistic Jacobinism.

Babbitt saw Burke’s assault upon the French Revolution as a profound philosophical critique of the Jacobin’s view of human nature and of the dangerous mindset of the revolutionary personality, not simply as a political polemic. If Burke “refused, therefore, to compromise with the French Revolution, the reason is to be sought less in the field of politics than in general philosophy, and even of religion. He saw that the Revolution did not, like other revolutions, seek to redress specific grievances, but had universal pretensions. France was to become the ‘Christ of nations’ and conduct a crusade for the regeneration of mankind.”

Babbitt argued that Burke saw that the revolutionary mindset was fundamentally “subversive of the existing social order of Europe.”\textsuperscript{57} The revolutionary would not stop when a handful of grievances were addressed, they would see all of the institutions that were the basis of European civilization as fundamentally illegitimate. As Babbitt put it: “They leave no limit to logic save despotism.”

Rousseau’s revolutionary was not motivated by a naked power grab or a desire to steal. His was an ideological outlook that was the logical result of Rousseau's philosophical premises: The new revolutionary evangel was the final outcome of speculations that had been going on for generations about a state of nature, natural rights, the social contract, and abstract and unlimited sovereignty. Burke is the chief opponent of this tendency toward what one may call metaphysical politics, especially as embodied in the doctrine of the rights of man. ‘They are so taken up with the rights of man,’ he says of the members of this school, ‘that they have totally forgotten his nature.’ Under cover of getting rid of prejudice they would strip man of all habits and concrete relationships and network of historical circumstance in which he is actually implicated and finally leaving him shivering ‘in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction.’\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{56} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 122.
\textsuperscript{57} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 122-23.
\textsuperscript{58} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 123.
The revolutionary would weaken the historical bonds that unite citizens in a common civilization and, with anarchy and violence, make true community impossible. Babbitt argued that Burke had put his finger on the revolutionary nature of the Rousseau’s concept of the general will. If the fleeting impulses of popular opinion were the guide to the polity, men would lose their common inheritance and their sense of community: “By an unprincipled facility in changing the state such as is encouraged by Rousseau’s impressionistic notion of the general will, the generations of men can no more link with one another than the flies of a summer.”

Burke emphasized that the institutions and traditions of civilization and religion were mechanisms to mitigate the human tendency toward disorderliness because they provided each citizen with conventions to revere that were above the ordinary self. “When antient opinions and rules of life are taken away, the loss cannot possibly be estimated. From that moment we have no compass to govern us; nor can we know distinctly to what port we steer.” As Babbitt concisely state it: “A man’s first need is to look up to a sound model and imitate it.”

Burke argued that the atomistic and abstract concepts embodied in social contract theory pushed the human imagination to invent worlds that did not exist and represented a revolt against the institutions that are more grounded reminders of reality of the human condition. This Romantic imagination is not “moral” but so romanticized that it led to ruthless rebellions against institutions based upon a false picture of reality. Human beings, Burke pointed out, never existed as unsociable and isolated noble savages who made abstract decisions about the legitimacy of society, contemplated the existence of natural rights and or

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61 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 125.
decided whether even to participate in society. Rather, he believed that human nature was, and would always be, sociable and men's thoughts, habits and world view could not, and should not, be abstractly ripped away from culture and tradition. As Babbitt described Burke’s views: “Burke is antiindividualistic in that he would not set the individual to trading on his own private stock of wit. He would have him respect the general sense, the accumulated experience of the past that has become embodied in the habits and usages that the superficial rationalist would dismiss as prejudice.”

Babbitt pointed out that Rousseau’s form of liberty encouraged social anarchy as it sought to free individuals from any form of control, outer control of law and inner control of conscience.

Rousseau, as he never tires of telling us, has a horror of every constraint upon his emotional impulse. He does not spurn merely certain barriers and limitations, but all barriers and limitations whatsoever. When he speaks of liberty, he does not mean, as a typical Englishman (let us say Burke) would mean, liberty defined and limited by law, but an undefined liberty that is tempered only by sympathy, which in turn is tempered by nothing at all. An undefined liberty and unselective sympathy are the two main aspects of the movement initiated by Rousseau – the poles between which it oscillates.

Burke stated the problem quite simply: “The effect of liberty to individuals is, that they may do as they please: We ought to see what it please them to do, before we risque congratulations, which may be soon turned into complaints.” Babbitt also added that this lack of limits was part and parcel of the imagination of the revolutionary. “A liberty that means only emancipation from outer control will result, I have tried to show, in the most dangerous form of anarchy – anarchy of the imagination.”

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Rousseau insisted, of course, that unbridled liberty would not lead to anarchy because the overriding human passion was pity and sympathy for others. However, Babbitt warned, sympathy was not enough to restrain the dangers inherent in human nature: “Unfortunately, a formidable mass of evidence has been accumulating (the Great War was for many a convincing demonstration) that, in natural man as he exists in the real world and not in some romantic dreamland, the will to power is more than a match for the will to service.” Therefore, the loosening of every restraint through a licentious form of liberty would unleash revolutions. Babbitt warned: “This conception of love and liberty may very well cease to be a virtue and become a disease.”

Babbitt described the revolutionary disease born of Rousseau as “eleutheromania” which as defined “as the instinct to throw off not simply outer and artificial limitation, but all limitations whatsoever.” A lack of limits in the political order would be, by definition, anarchy and revolution. “For over a century the world has been fed on a steady diet of revolt. Everybody is becoming tinged with eleutheromania, taken up with his rights rather than his duties, more and more unwilling to accept limitations.”

Rousseau felt that just as temperamental individuals would be softened by natural pity, temperamental democracies would be pacified by a disinterested general will. Babbitt argued that Rousseau’s desire to emancipate democracies from healthy constraints would not bring community, but it would unleash an unrestrained ego and a lust for power.

The preliminary to achieving either of these ideals is that the traditional checks on human nature should be removed. But in exact proportion as this programme of

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emancipation is carried out what emerges in the real world is not the mythical will to
brotherhood, but the ego and its fundamental will to power. Give a bootblack half the
universe, according to Carlyle, and he will soon be quarreling with the owner of the
other half. He will if he is a very temperamental bootblack.  

Babbitt argued that even “moderate” social contract theorists such as Locke had paved
the way for the revolutionary. Social contract theory was based upon the fanciful theory that
individuals provide their consent to participate in society. This idea, Babbitt said, was
corrosive to liberty. “The final superficiality of Locke is that he granted man abstract natural
rights anterior to his duties, and then hoped that it would be possible to apply this doctrine
moderately. But it has been justly said that doctrines of this kind are most effective in their
extreme logical form because it is now in this form that they capture the imagination.”

Burke’s concept of a moral imagination meant that, unlike the revolutionary or even the
moderate social contract theorist, human beings were not free to invent metaphysical worlds of
the imagination that were unmoored from the reality of human existence. Reality imposed
obligations. Burke said: “But I cannot stand forward, and give praise or blame to any thing
which relates to human actions, and human concerns, on a simply view of the object, as it
stands stripped of every relation, in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction.
Circumstances (which some gentlemen pass for nothing) give in reality to every political
principle its distinguishing colour, and discriminating effect.” And, human beings were,
Burke insisted, particularly proscribed from actually carrying out a political program designed
to bring these imaginary metaphysical worlds into existence through revolutionary action.

For Rousseau, in contrast, the invention of these metaphysical worlds, and political
action based upon them, was desirable and noble. As Babbitt explained: “Now the most salient

70 Babbitt, Rousseau & Romanticism, 193.
71 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 127.
72 Burke, Reflections of the Revolution in France, 89-90.
trait of the sentimentalist is that he always has some lovely dream that he prefers to the truth.

‘There is nothing beautiful,’ Rousseau was fond of saying, ‘save that which is not.’”73

Babbitt argued that Burke wanted imagination rooted in the reality of tradition as he
“saw how much of the wisdom of life consists in an imaginative assumption of the experience
of the past in such fashion as to bring it to bear as a living force in the present. The very model
that one looks up to and imitates is an imaginative creation. A man’s imagination may realize
in his ancestors a standard of virtue and wisdom beyond the vulgar practice of the hour; so that
he may be enabled to rise with the example to whose imitation he as aspired.”74

However, neither Burke nor Babbitt blindly supported of tradition and aristocracy.
Innovations in the social order were indispensable to its health, but those innovations should be
made slowly and with the utmost care as the institutions of society may have a latent wisdom
that is not readily apparent to each new generation. Revolutions simply tear down institutions
that may be indispensable supports to society’s health. Babbitt insisted that Burke “would
admit innovations in the social order only after a period of severe probation. He is no partisan
of an inert traditionalism.”75

Babbitt argued that traditions must be refreshed by each generation through vibrant and
virtuous leaders who would display a sound vision for society that would foster community and
prevent revolution. In his analysis of the French Revolution, he pointedly criticized the hollow
formalism of the French aristocracy who failed to keep imaginative traditions alive. He
believed, for example, that the court of Louis XIV was possessed by an artificial and
unimaginative pomp and was not a worthy aristocracy. “It cannot be said that the decorous

75 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 129.
reserve of the French aristocracy that had been more or less imitated by other European
aristocracies was in all respects commendable. According to this decorum a man should not
love his wife, or if he did, should be careful not to betray this fact in public. It was also good
‘form’ to live apart from one’s children and bad form to display one’s affection for them.”

In the neo-classical theatre enjoyed by the French aristocracy “only the aristocracy had
the right to appear in tragedy, whereas the middle class was relegated to comedy and the man
of the people to farce.” The hollow formality and detachment of the French aristocratic
culture, Babbitt argued, created a reaction in the form of emotional Romanticism, particularly
in drama. “At no time have there been so many persons who, with streaming eyes, called upon
heaven and earth to bear witness to their innate excellence…it had become almost a
requirement of good manners to weep and sob in public.” What was lacking in the new
Romantic drama was an ethical dimension. Great drama, said Babbitt does not engage in
“explicit moralizing” but provides a “scale of ethical values, or what amounts to the same
thing, a sense of what is normal and representative and decorous, and the quality of the
characters is revealed by their choices good or bad with reference to some ethical scale.”

There were neo-classical critiques of the Romantic revolt in art and literature, but the
reaction against Romanticism failed to produce an imaginative defense of tradition. Babbitt
argued that some of the French anti-Romantic writings defending the late Ancien Régime were,
for example, totally inaccessible to foreigners, a sure sign that they were not sufficiently
imaginative and did not portray anything with universal appeal. “What the foreigner objects to,
on the other hand, may be summed up in the word artificiality, a pervading suggestion of the

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76 Babbitt, Rousseau & Romanticism, 124.
77 Babbitt, Rousseau & Romanticism, 124-25.
78 Babbitt, Rousseau & Romanticism, 125-26.
79 Babbitt, Rousseau & Romanticism, 125.
somewhat hollow pomp and grandiosity of the court of Louis XIV—an element, in short, that is pseudo-classic rather than truly classical.” In short, Babbitt agreed with Burke that an unimaginative defense of tradition would not be effective. There was always an obligation on the part of the defenders of civilization to remake the traditions in each generation in a new imaginative light. Without this, traditions become opaque and societies would undermine their moral authority and risk revolution.

The role of the statesman was to utilize the moral imagination to constantly renew society by preserving what is valuable in the past, not by wholesale renovations. Babbitt pointed to two famous quotes from Burke’s Reflections on the role of the statesman: “By preserving the method of nature in the conduct of the state, in what we improve we are never wholly new; in what we retain, we are never wholly obsolete.” ‘The disposition to preserve, and ability to improve, taken together, would be my standard of a statesman.’

Babbitt contrasted Burke’s thought with Rousseau’s political philosophy, rooted in an affirmation of abstract equality and without reverence toward anything higher. “The world of the Social Contract, no less than that of the Second Discourse, is a world without degree or subordination; a world in which no one looks up to anyone else or expects anyone to look up to him; a world in which no one (and this seems to Rousseau very desirable) has either to command or to obey.”

Some observers have commented that both Rousseau and Burke have what might be described as an anti-intellectual strain. Burke saw a latent wisdom in tradition that could not be fully understood even by the sharpest intellect while Rousseau saw the deployment of the

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81 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 129.
82 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 132.
intellect as downright pernicious. Yet Babbitt argued that the “resemblance is, however, only superficial. The wisdom that Rousseau proclaimed was not above reflection but below it.”\textsuperscript{83} Rousseau’s anti-intellectualism derived from his Romanticism and his desire to find “emancipation of temperament” that welcomes the “vital, dynamic and creative.” So, “in direct proportion as he turns his attention to the infinite manifoldness of things he experiences wonder.”\textsuperscript{84} The Rousseauist, Babbitt said, was not seeking unity, not looking for a common center. The Rousseauist objected to anything that “interferes with the creative impulse of genius as it gushes up spontaneously from the depths of the unconscious. The whole movement is filled with the praise of ignorance and of those who still enjoy its inappreciable advantages – the savage, the peasant, and above all the child.”\textsuperscript{85}

For Babbitt, the difference between Rousseau and Burke was the “contrast between the superrational and the subrational.”\textsuperscript{86} Babbitt described the difference: “As a man grows religious, awe comes more and more to take the place in him of wonder.”\textsuperscript{87} What is distinctly human is the ability to experience awe and the superrational, not the Rousseau's return to the natural world and the suppression of those institutions and traditions that bring an experience of something larger than self.

This chapter described Babbitt’s theory that a philosophy based upon the worship of what is temperamental and impulsive in human nature would not serve as the basis of order and community but would bring revolt. Rousseau's Romantic idealism, his discounting of tradition, and his hostility to the intermediate institutions tended to foster resentments in the

\textsuperscript{83} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 131.  
\textsuperscript{84} Babbitt, \textit{Rousseau & Romanticism}, 49.  
\textsuperscript{85} Babbitt, \textit{Rousseau & Romanticism}, 51.  
\textsuperscript{86} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 131.  
\textsuperscript{87} Babbitt, \textit{Rousseau & Romanticism}, 49.
populace and revolutions, not orderly communities. Yet Babbitt also argued that even when democracies do not engage in full-blown revolutions, Rousseauistic characteristics might be apparent. Babbitt's list provides an interesting cultural commentary on the contemporary United States. The culture of this type of democratic society, Babbitt said, would exhibit contempt for tradition, especially traditions that encourage moderation and personal probity. In this type of democratic culture, personal virtue was a matter of indifference and even scoundrels would be feted as long as they expressed support for a sympathetic “cause,” their moral indolence notwithstanding. In the law of this culture, society would ignore traditional legal precedents and legal rulings and would pander to popular fads and opinions, with laws proliferating wildly as a substitute for personal self-control. In politics, the goal of this society’s politicians and their operatives would be to inflame popular opinion against adversaries, not to encourage thoughtful deliberation or moderation. In arts and letters, this society would produce art and literature dedicated to the expansive emotions and self-expression, not classical balance and decorum; the arts would be simultaneously wonderful and trivial.

Babbitt highlighted the presence of these features in American society as a warning about the influence of Rousseau and the struggle within the American polity between two views of human nature and democracy. These features, if they continued to gain broader saliency, would cause the internal decomposition of American society.

The next task to consider is how such Rousseauistic democracies treat their neighboring nations. When Rousseau proclaimed in the *Social Contract* that “man is born free and he is
everywhere in chains,” he followed this sweeping proclamation with the question of how any
government could be made “legitimate.” The less than subtle implication was that all
governments not based upon Rousseauistic principles were illegitimate. If heartily embraced,
Rousseau's ideas would, Babbitt argued, move democracies to imperialism.

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Chapter 5: Democracy as Imperialism

“The humanitarian would, of course, have us meddle in foreign affairs as part of his program of world service. Unfortunately, it is more difficult than he supposes to engage in such a program without getting involved in a program of world empire.”

Rousseau’s democratic theory, rooted in an emotional expansionism and a worship of the impulsive spirit, would inspire the French revolutionaries. In the domestic politics of France, their outlook fostered the belief that traditional institutions of civilization were an impediment to the flowering of the virtuous general will and would need to be destroyed. So, the French revolutionaries went about destroying them in brutal attacks upon royalty, aristocracy, clergy and wealthy.

The Rousseauistic outlook also had important implications for the foreign policy of the revolutionary nation. For the revolutionaries, the conspirators against the flowering of popular will were not limited those within France. Other peoples and nations, the revolutionaries believed, were by definition enslaved everywhere that a Rousseauistic revolution had not occurred. By late 1791, the Revolution in France had taken its logical turn – toward the conspirators against the rights of man not just within France, but abroad. As historian of the French Revolution Simon Schama, said: “With these kinds of moral criteria in mind, nothing was easier than to represent the Declaration of Pillnitz as a direct affront to the sovereignty of the people, the first state of a counterrevolutionary warfare. ‘A huge conspiracy against the

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2 The Declaration of Pillnitz was a joint statement of support for Louis XVI and opposition to the French revolutionaries by Austria and Prussia.
liberty not only of France but of the whole human race’ was being planned, said Hérault de Séchelles, ex-Parlementaire and eager Jacobin.‘¹

To the inflammatory speakers in the Jacobin Clubs, the foreign kings, priests and aristocrats were as much the enemy as similar domestic conspirators. Schama pointed out that “the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and the assertions of natural rights on which the constitution was based were, by definition, universally applicable”² and speakers in the Assembly began to create new concepts of international order based upon the ‘polarity between the free and the ‘enslaved’ nations.”³ With their discovery of the rights of man, Maximin Isnard, a prominent member of the Assembly, declared that: “The French had become the foremost people of the universe, so their conduct must now correspond to their new destiny. As slaves they were bold and great; are they to be timid and feeble now that they are free?”⁴ To the revolutionaries, the new democracy of France had made it the exceptional, indispensable nation.

France therefore would not limit its ambitions to domestic revolution. Any monarch who did not submit to popular rule was, by Jacobin definition, a tyrant and despot and these nations were declared to be enemies of the Revolution. On Christmas Day 1791, Elie Guadet dramatically proclaimed to his colleagues in the Assembly that: “If the Revolution has already marked 1789 as the first year of French liberty, the date of the 1st of January 1792 will mark this year as the first year of universal liberty.”⁵ Only a handful of Jacobins, such as those immediately surrounding Robespierre, were skeptical of these internationalist ambitions.

² Schama, Citizens, 592.
³ Schama, Citizens, 593.
⁴ Quoted in: Schama, Citizens, 592.
⁵ Quoted in: Schama, Citizens, 594.
Schama captured Robespierre’s prescient remarks about the dangers of international democratic crusading, thoughts that are quite relevant today: “‘No one,’ he stated prophetically, ‘loves armed missionaries.’”⁶ As war fever swept France, Robespierre’s reservations would subside.

Faced with an increasingly tenuous grip on power and the rising call for an international crusade against tyrants, Louis XVI tried to save his throne by riding the wave of patriotic and imperialistic fervor and declaring war on Prussia and Austria. In early 1792, addressing the Assembly “in a flat, faltering voice Louis XVI then read the formal declaration of war as though it were a death sentence upon himself. Which indeed it was.”⁷

And so began more than a decade of wars growing out of the Revolution, conflagrations that at first were limited to central Europe but that would spread far beyond the Continent and would bring the rise of an ambitious young military officer, Napoleon Bonaparte. The reign of Napoleon, it must be noted, should not be interpreted as a hijacking of an otherwise idealistic revolution. In fact, it was its culmination. While no doubt an opportunist throughout his life, Napoleon himself was nonetheless a loyal Jacobin who eagerly participated in the Jacobin Clubs. He was firmly anti-clerical, anti-Christian and anti-monarchy. Indeed, he was the man who saved the Revolution from being crushed in Paris in 1793 when he mowed down hundreds of royalist counterrevolutionaries with artillery fire, the famous “whiff of grapeshot.” One recent biographer of Napoleon points out that he “idolized Rousseau,” and the young Bonaparte had written “a paean to On the Social Contract” and had adopted “Rousseau’s beliefs that the state should have the power over life and death over its citizens, the right to prohibit frivolous luxuries and the duty to censor the opera and theatre.”⁸ Napoleon, in the fashion of a

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⁷ Schama, *Citizens*, 597.
Rousseauistic leader, promised not to govern as a dictator, only as the instrument of the popular general will. In his coronation oath, Napoleon committed “to govern only in view of the interest, the wellbeing and the glory of the French people.”

The culmination of the Revolution, as might have been expected of one inspired by Rousseau, was a patriotic militarism. Schama pointed out that: “militarized nationalism was not, in some accidental way, the unintended consequence of the French Revolution: it was its heart and soul...it was totally logical that the multimillionaire inheritors of revolutionary power—the true ‘new class’ of this period in French history—were not some bourgeoisie conquérante but real conquerors.” Therefore, when he took power in 1799 in a coup d’état, Napoleon was said to have remarked: “the Revolution is completed.”

Crusading imperialism wrapped in patriotism was the predictable outcome of an ideology that claimed to represent the only genuine embodiment of universal abstract rights. The revolutionaries believed that no nation or people should be denied these rights. The revolutionaries did not see their liberties as rooted in the historical institutions or cultural inheritances of France; these universal rights were the birthright of all nations and peoples and it was their moral responsibility to spread them through war.

The wars of the late 18th and early 19th centuries were sometimes initiated by the messianic Jacobins and sometimes by Napoleon, and at other times they were waged preemptively by foreign monarchs who were well aware of the threat to their legitimacy represented by revolutionary ideology. In each case, however, the source of these conflagrations was the same: the ideology and will to power of Rousseauistic ideas. While there are certainly advocates of abstract rights who are not warlike, militant advocates of

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9 Quoted in: Roberts, Napoleon, 355.
10 Schama, Citizens, 858.
abstract rights tend toward international meddling, imperialistic ambitions and perpetual warfare because they believe those rights are being suppressed by illegitimate tyrants and they feel it is their moral obligation to intervene.

Moreover, imperialistic ambitions tend in turn to transform the domestic political landscape of the crusading nation. While the French revolutionaries had conducted domestic massacres, purges and crackdowns in the period of 1789 to 1793, the murderous Reign of Terror can only be fully understood in the context of the French Revolutionary Wars. The Terror was largely a wartime crackdown on dissent, so common in history, to strengthen the home front after a series of setbacks on the battlefield. The Committee on Public Safety, in fact, was created on April 6, 1793, as a result of a series of military defeats of French arms. After spectacular military defeats at Neerwinden, Louvain and in the Rhineland, the most radical members of the Assembly, those members led by Robespierre who sat in the in the so-called Mountain, believed that “there could be only one explanation for this sorry trail of disasters: conspiracy.”

Deputies from the Mountain argued that the defeats were related to treasonous conspiracies launched both at home and within the French Army itself. A consensus was reached that the domestic machinery of surveillance and punishment needed to accelerate in order to prevent these conspiracies. “On March 11, a special Revolutionary Tribunal was established in Paris to try suspects accused of counter-revolutionary activities… if guilty, they were to be shot within twenty four hours.”\footnote{Schama, \textit{Citizens}, 706.} Within a month, the Committee of Public Safety would be created and the machinery for the Terror, beginning in the fall of that year, was put into place.
As a scholar of the French Revolution, Babbitt was intensely aware of how events developed in France and how a populist revolution had transformed itself into a military dictatorship. Recalling Burke’s prescient predictions about the course of the Revolution, Babbitt concluded that democracies of the Rousseauistic type are likely to become meddling menaces abroad and domestic tyrannies at home. Their metaphysical politics and their inflated sense of their own virtues lead to messianic crusades internationally and to a police state at home. Ideological revolution, a suppression of civil liberties, and international imperialism are fruits of the same tree.

This chapter will explore the development of Babbitt's concept of imperialism from his earliest writings to his latest in a rough chronological format, diverging from the format of previous chapters in order to highlight how contemporary events and intellectual influences shaped Babbitt's thought on this key subject. Although he was intellectually very consistent throughout his life, Babbitt did not write explicitly about imperialism early in his career. He began publishing articles in 1897 and his first book appeared in 1908 yet it was not until 1915 that he systematically laid out his theory of imperialism. Previously, he had written largely about French literature and the importance of a classical and humanities education, only gradually forming opinions about the political implications of Romanticism through the intersection of his literary scholarship and what he noticed in Rousseau's influence upon the French Revolution. Once the Great War arrived on his doorstep, he finally felt compelled to write specifically about imperialism in a two-part essay in Nation (1915). Finally, Babbitt provided his most systematic explication of imperialism in one of his last books, Democracy and Leadership; a book he decided to write because he believed that the deeper philosophical issues related to imperialism could not be adequately addressed in a shorter essay.
In his earliest book, *Literature and the American College*, Babbitt addressed the issue of war and peace indirectly by pointing out that if education has no ethical center and is largely grounded in utilitarianism or expansive emotion, the long-term result will be a warlike temperament in a nation’s leaders. “A man may be a prodigy of energy and yet spiritually indolent. Napoleon showed his energy by conquering Europe; he would have shown his will if at the critical moment he had been capable of curbing his own lust for power (*libido dominandi*).”\(^{12}\) As the Buddha said, the man who can “conquer his own self, he is the greatest of conquerors.”\(^{13}\)

In *Literature and the American College*, Babbitt also argued that self-expression, the highest value of the Romantic education, was intellectually linked with Rousseauistic nationalism and the worship of national self-expression and self-assertion. “According to Herder, every nation is to cultivate to the utmost its own national genius, and then, as an offset to this self-assertion, have a comprehensive sympathy for other national originalities. Nationalism is to be tempered by internationalism.”\(^{14}\)

In this early book, Babbitt laid out several of his ideas about human nature that ultimately undergirded his theory of imperialism and that contrasted with the premises of Romanticism. For Babbitt, the temperamental self-expression of the Romantic tended to divide people, not unite them. Moreover, emotional pity and sympathy for one’s fellow human beings would not be a sufficiently powerful sentiment to unite people in peace. Years before the League of Nations and United Nations, Babbitt predicted that an internationalism founded upon sentimental Rousseauistic principles would fail to keep the peace.

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\(^{13}\) Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 101.

\(^{14}\) Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 171.
Our modern cosmopolitanism is simply one form of Rousseau’s attempt to substitute sympathy for restraint as the foundation of ethics. Any one who believes that the instincts of brotherhood are strong enough to prevail unaided over the egoistic instincts in the relations between man and man may readily believe in a similar altruistic triumph in international relations. But in the eyes of the old-fashioned moralist there is something chimerical in the underlying assumption of the Rousseauist.\textsuperscript{15}

While he never formulated an explicit theory of democratic imperialism in this first book, Babbitt began to make the connection between the influence of Romantic ethics and military adventurism. In the closing paragraphs of \textit{Literature and the American College}, Babbitt pointed to two character types Plato described in \textit{The Statesman}. The first type is full of “motion and energy,” the second exhibits “rest and quietness.” While no city can prosper “where either of these two types is wanting,” there is great danger from the energetic statesman who has no ethical center. While Babbitt’s contemporary educational theorists were worshipping the man of action, Babbitt said that: “it would seem that they might recognize the claims of the contemplative life without encouraging a cloistered seclusion.” For the danger of the focused man of action was laid out by Plato: “strenuousness when it gains excessive mastery, ‘may at first bloom and strengthen, but at last burst forth into downright madness,’ and is especially likely, Plato adds elsewhere, to involve a state in wars with all its neighbors.”\textsuperscript{16}

Babbitt’s theory of imperialism was further developed in his next book, \textit{The New Laokoon}. Later in life, he described \textit{The New Laokoon} as an attempt to “exhibit the anarchy that has supervened in literature and the arts with the progressive decline of standards. Superficially, this anarchy seems above all an anarchy of the emotions. On closer scrutiny, however, emotional anarchy itself turns out to be a sign of something subtler and more

\textsuperscript{15} Babbitt, \textit{Literature and the American College}, 171.
\textsuperscript{16} Babbitt, \textit{Literature and the American College}, 210.
dangerous – anarchy of the imagination.”

The New Laokoon was Babbitt’s least political book and largely dedicated to detailed discussions of literary criticism and aesthetics as well as aspects of Romantic literature and neo-classicism. Taking the position that both tradition and creativity must be combined, he pointed to Mozart as finding the golden mean: he “obeys musical law spontaneously, being in this respect at the opposite pole from some of our modern artists who, under the pretext of being original and expressive, merely succeed in violating law laboriously.”

Babbitt’s views on aesthetics in The New Laokoon provided hints about his rising concerns about politics influenced by Romanticism. For example, Babbitt pointed to Romanticism’s “subliminal uprush or overflow of emotion” as assuming “forms” such as the “German Storm and Stress” and “the French Revolution.”

Babbitt’s ethical critique of Romanticism as fostering a revolutionary outlook was a subtle theme throughout The New Laokoon.

Toward the end of the book, however, Babbitt addressed these political overtones more explicitly when he offered his view that the kind of decadent democracy produced by Romantic ethics would ultimately produce revolution and imperial ambition. The naturalistic ethics of Romanticism had bred the type of man that will “engage in miscellaneous expansion and back it up if need be with noisy revolt against all the forms of the past.”

The danger for politics was that this “apostle of everlasting expansion…is rendering inevitable a concentration that will not be humane, but of the military and imperialistic type peculiar to epochs of decadence.

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17 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 31-32.
19 Babbitt’s commentary on music was somewhat controversial as he was not a musical expert.
20 Babbitt, The New Laokoon, 64.
When the traditional checks and inhibitions finally disappear and the *élan vital* gets under way on a grand scale, with no countervailing *frein vital*, the only law that can decide which nation or which individual is to expand vitally or unrestrained is the law of cunning or the law of force.”

In a footnote that captures his emerging theory of imperialism, Babbitt presciently tied his concerns about Rousseauistic ethics to contemporary events: “The humanitarian will of course reply that all this expansion will be sufficiently tempered by an increase in altruism. Unfortunately, evidence is as yet rather scanty that the human nature of the future is going to differ so radically from the human nature of the past. To illustrate concretely, the growth of international good will does not seem to reassure the English entirely regarding the vital expansion of Germany.”

By 1910 when this was written, with alliances forming in Europe in the lead up to World War I, the emerging crisis undoubtedly caused Babbitt to begin thinking more carefully about questions of war and peace and the intellectual and moral origins of imperialism.


In his later summary of *The Masters*, Babbitt said he wanted to “carry a stage farther my defense of critical humanism.” He argued that when traditional standards are weakened, human beings do not have general rules of conduct to follow and they face the task of finding

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24 In *Democracy in Leadership*, Babbitt summarized the themes of his previous books in what appears to be chronological order (see *Democracy and Leadership*, 30-32), beginning with *Literature and the American College*. Curiously, he discusses *The Masters* out of order, prior to *The New Laokoon*. This is likely because many of the discreet chapters on French writers in *The Masters*, or large parts of it, may have been written well prior to *The New Laokoon*. Babbitt published essays, for example, on Brunetière in 1897, on Taine in 1898, on Renan in 1902, and on Saint-Beuve in 1909—all prior to the publication of *The New Laokoon*.
right behavior on their own without guidance from society. The breakdown of traditional conventions left human beings without reliable guideposts. In this situation, the everyday ethical tasks for individuals become more challenging and people find that they “must rely on the critical spirit in direct ratio to the completeness of the break with the traditional unifications of life.”

In ethics, the weakening of outer standards of conduct obliges greater introspection.

In an important passage that contains one of Babbitt’s foundational thoughts about imperialism, he said that the “special theme of The Masters is the problem of the one and the many and the failure of Saint-Beuve and other eminent French individualists to deal with it adequately and so to achieve standards in a modern fashion.” Babbitt was pointing to what he believed was a metaphysical error in Romanticism with the practical result that the French Romanticists desired to shake off the rules of society without replace them with standards that might point human beings back to a common ethical center.

In The Masters, Babbitt offered one possible antidote to this Romantic societal anarchy: the Eastern religions that offered human beings the opportunity to find common ground through ethical work performed within themselves and not given from the outside as a set of dogmas. Babbitt’s scholarship on Eastern religions was important in shaping his theory of imperialism because of their simple doctrine that human beings only come together and form a peaceful community when they have controlled their will. Men who were not exercising their higher will, according to the Buddha, are “asleep” and are in need of being “Awakened.”

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26 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 31.
27 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 31.
“Men tend to come together in proportion to their intuitions of the One; in other words, the true unifying principle of mankind is found in the insight of its sages. We ascend to meet.”

The Masters, like The New Laokoon, was generally little concerned with politics. In his third and last chapter on Saint-Beuve, however, Babbitt repeated the theme that naturalism in ethics will begin in idealism and end in imperialism.

The culmination of the political Romanticism in the Revolution of 1848 was followed by sudden and violent disenchantment. The fairest millennial visions had collapsed at the first contact with reality. The ‘idealists’ had had an abrupt descent from the clouds, and lay bruised and bleeding upon the earth. What really goes with the naturalistic view of life is imperialism. Those who would set up as idealists and at the same time live on the naturalistic level simply hasten the triumph of the opposite cause to that they are preaching.

The popular uprising in 1848 in France had ended in the ascension and dictatorship of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte and the abolishment of the French Parliament, another popular government ended by an idealistic revolution.

Babbitt connected this rise in idealistic revolutionary fervor – followed by an imperialistic strongman in 1851 – with similar events in 1789. “Saint-Beuve says that the example of Napoleon had done much to corrupt the nineteenth century and encourage the cult of mere force even in literature. But Napoleon himself is only the ironical reply of the Nature of Things to the Utopias of the French Revolution.”

At the end of The Masters, Babbitt again linked naturalistic ethics with imperialism. “A naturalistic age, whatever it may set out to be, will end up by being imperialistic.” With the collapse of the Church and other institutions that upheld outer standards of behavior, Babbitt

30 Babbitt, The Masters of Modern French Criticism, 129.
31 Babbitt, The Masters of Modern French Criticism, 129.
32 Babbitt, The Masters of Modern French Criticism, 386.
argued, the best opportunity for the West to recover morality was to develop a sound
individualism in which moral unity is found within the individual. Inner standards must
replace the outer standards that had been lost. The situation facing the West, he argued was
akin to the situation faced by Socrates when the sophists had destroyed the outer standards of
Greek culture and, “the great effort of Socrates, we are told, was to recover that firm foundation
for human life which a misuse of the new intellectual spirit was rendering impossible.”33 A
culture that has lost its standards will, he argues, inevitably progress to decadent imperialism.

Babbitt regularly cited anecdotes about imperialism from ancient times, but he viewed
modern imperialism as more dangerous because of the cult of emotionalism propagated by
Rousseau. “To the excessive mental suppleness of the sophists there is often added to-day an
undue emotional pliancy. If some remedy is not found the modern world will, like the ancient
Greek world, become the prey of the sophists. It will progress, not as our humanitarians would
have us believe towards ‘some far-off divine event,’ but towards a decadent imperialism. What
principle can set the bounds to all this intellectual and emotional expansiveness?”34

After the publication of The Masters, Babbitt then penned several shorter works: a book
review on Rousseau’s writings, an essay on the “Bicentenary of Diderot,” and a review of an
essay on Romanticism by his friend P.E. More.35 These writings captured previous themes on
scientific and humanitarian naturalism, on the threat to civilization by abstract assertions of

33 Babbitt, The Masters of Modern French Criticism, 387.
34 Babbitt, The Masters of Modern French Criticism 387-88
27, 1913, 313, col. 2; Anonymous Review of Vol. VIII of Annales de la Société Jean-Jacques
Rousseau, Nation, Vol. 97, August 28, 1913, 191-92; “Bicentary of Diderot,” Nation, Vol. 97,
1914, 386-89.
equality, on Rousseau’s concept of that state of nature, and on the revolutionary nature of
Rousseau’s writings. He did not, however, reference his concept of democratic imperialism.

He picked up on the theme of imperialism again as he was researching his most famous
book, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, and as the war drums were beating loudly in Europe.
Contemporary events seem to have influenced Babbitt to use the insights from his research on
the book to draft an essay explicitly linking Romanticism and imperialism. The result was a
very important two-part essay article in which he systematically argued that the breakdown of
the contemporary international order was intimately related to the success of Romanticism in
the West. As historian Richard Gamble characterizes the essay, it "spoke directly to the West's
moral crisis that had culminated with such force in the Great War."36

In early 1915, he shared the drafts of that essay with his friend Paul Elmer More, who
was a prolific essayist and philosopher. More did not approve of the early draft. He wrote to
Babbitt that he was “pretty sure that you will not get it printed in its present form” because,
More told him, he had “sown the full sack, and thought more of what was in your own mind
than what your reader could take and put together.”37 Babbitt, it seemed, had contemplated
sending the essay to the *Atlantic Monthly* where the editor, Ellery Sedgwick, was a friend of
More’s. More told Babbitt that “possibly Sedgwick will not agree with me, but I suspect he
will. I feel pretty sure that he would demand an abridgement by a fourth or third.”38

More advised him to trim the piece back significantly and to focus on a handful of the
most important ideas such as nationalism, humanitarianism and expansionism. More told

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37 More to Babbitt, February 15, 1915, “More to Babbitt Correspondence, 1896-1915” Box 8,
Papers of Irving Babbitt, Harvard University Archives, Pusey Library, Harvard University,
Cambridge
Babbitt: “you will gather from these criticisms that I judge the essay as a whole very harshly. Well, in one way I do, in another I do not.” More told him that the subject matter was very important given current events. “The season is ripe for such a paper as you can make out of this, and I hope you can work it over. The idea of Nationalism, to my mind, is the special thing much considered today and gives you an admirable handle for your propaganda.”

Babbitt replied to More a month later and confessed that “your criticism of my own paper was so drastic that it has quite put me out of conceit with it.” Babbitt then told More that, despite his criticism, he had not attempted to make any changes in the essay and was not certain how he would proceed. The problem, Babbitt told More, was that the essay was grappling with the issue of “putting conduct on a positive and critical basis,” which Babbitt called “my plea for humanism” and cutting out “illustrative material” would not be difficult but the important discussion of humanism “is less easy to correct.” Babbitt seemed to then offer the thought that an adequate discussion of humanism “needs to be developed in a book rather than an article; it would require a pretty thorough review of the present situation in philosophy.”

This self-suggestion was probably the basis for his later book, Democracy and Leadership.

Babbitt however did not give up on the essay. He submitted it to the Yale Review whose editors asked that he trim the article significantly, to about a thousand words. In a letter to More on April 27, 1915, Babbitt told More that he was not willing to trim the paper but that he had the idea to break the essay into two parts and submit it to the Nation. More had, in fact, previously been an editor of the Nation, from 1909 to 1914. More seemed not to have

offered his assistance with placing the essay at the Nation, as Babbitt wrote More two months later to inform him that, “I finally decided to withdraw my war paper from the Yale Review and give it to the Nation. Your criticism of it was so severe that for a time I had about determined to suppress it entirely and I am somewhat nervous about seeing it in print, as it is.” Babbitt told More that the editor at the Nation seemed to have been “very nervous about accepting it, not apparently because of doubts about the intrinsic quality of the article itself, but of fear as to how it might be taken by Villard.”\(^{42}\) Villard was the owner and publisher of the Nation and the founder of the American Anti-Imperialist League, an organization founded with the goal of rolling back the U.S. annexation of territories such as the Philippines. The subject matter of Babbitt’s piece must have been of great interest to Villard, a prominent anti-war activist.

Babbitt’s essay was finally published in the Nation, in two-part form, on June 17 and June 24, 1915.\(^{43}\) A comparison of the published essay and Babbitt's original draft manuscript located in the Harvard Archives indicates that, despite More’s concerns, the published essay had undergone only limited editing.\(^{44}\) Besides removing a couple of sentences and a paragraph with detailed statistics on U.S. homicides, the Nation editors removed only one major section of the manuscript before final publication.

The excised section entailed Babbitt prognostications on the future of Russia. Babbitt speculated that the next Alexander the Great would likely come out of Russia and “Russia

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would seem, more than any other country, to be qualified for world empire." In this excised section, Babbitt also coined the term “over-civilization.” The nations of Western Europe, he asserted are displaying symptoms of over-civilization such as declining birth rates. He defined over-civilized nations as “those in whom the growth of character and self-control has not kept pace with the emancipation of the intellect and emotions.” The Nation editors likely deleted this section because Babbitt closed his discussion of Russia by claiming no special expertise of Russia. “However, speculations of this kind are highly uncertain at best, and on the part of one like myself who can lay claim to no special knowledge of Russia, perhaps wholly unprofitable.”

Events in Europe and Babbitt’s extensive knowledge of Romantic literature converged in this Nation essay. The essay itself was filled with so many passages that eventually found their way, verbatim, into Rousseau and Romanticism, that there are too many commonalities to footnote. The many phrases common to the Nation article and Rousseau and Romanticism are a clear sign that Babbitt’s research on Romanticism was what generated his theories on

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48 Consider just one page of the Nation article (page 678) and parallel passages found in Rousseau & Romanticism. See parallel passages about Napoleon from the Nation on page 678 and Rousseau & Romanticism page 346; on Stendhal in the Nation on page 678 and in Rousseau & Romanticism page 192; on Diderot in the Nation on page 678 and in Rousseau & Romanticism on page 130; on Burke on page 678 in the Nation and in Rousseau & Romanticism on page 143; on Fichte on page 678 in the Nation, and in Rousseau & Romanticism on page 347; and two quotes from on Goethe, page 678 in the Nation and in Rousseau & Romanticism on page 362 and page 147.
international relations. The article contained all the themes about Romanticism that are found in his earlier works but without being presented as a systematic theory.49

The title of this essay, “The Breakdown in Internationalism,” must be read in two ways. While there had been a breakdown in the relations between nations, the more profound problem was that a Romantic view of life had caused a breakdown in the relations between individuals. “Every one, beginning with the Germans themselves, seems to be losing sight of the fact that, before being Germans, the Germans are human beings.”

Babbitt also made clear in his subtitle, “The Relation of the War to the Movement Initiated by the French Revolution,” that there was a clear intellectual line from the French Revolution to the ongoing Great War.

The cry of the revolutionary army, ‘Vive la nation,’ heard by Goethe in a pause of the cannonading at Valmy, was rightly taken by him to mark the dawn of a new era. The beginning of this type of warfare we are now witnessing in Europe, that is, the coming together of whole nations for mutual massacre (la levée en masse), go back to this period. This type of warfare is therefore the final outcome of a propaganda for the establishment of universal brotherhood. The new national enthusiasm supplied France with soldiers so numerous and so spirited that she not only repelled her invaders, but began to invade other countries in turn, theoretically on a mission of emancipation.50

49 Babbitt’s essay in the Nation in 1915 has a curious feature. While citing several thinkers from French Romanticism and the Enlightenment, the essay never mentions Rousseau by name. This is even more curious because when Rousseau and Romanticism appears, many of the quotations from the Nation are lifted from that essay and included in the book in the very context of Rousseau’s thought. For example, in the Nation essay, Babbitt uses a quote from Diderot that he also uses, verbatim, in Rousseau and Romanticism. In Rousseau and Romanticism, he introduces the Diderot quote this way: “Diderot put the underlying thesis of the new morality almost more clearly than Rousseau.”49 In the Nation piece, Babbitt does not introduce the quote by mentioning that it is a concise distillation of Rousseau’s thought; Rousseau is simply not mentioned. Finally, Rousseau was not edited from the essay as there is no mention of Rousseau in Babbitt’s original manuscript nor is there any discussion of the omission in the correspondence between Babbitt and More leading up to the publication of the essay.

Babbitt began the article by reminding the readers about the nature of Jacobin ideology. Unlike the English Revolution of 1688, he said, the French Revolution had international ambitions. The declaration of the heretofore undiscovered universal rights of man, Babbitt said, would, in one stroke, “practically put in question the legitimacy of all existing European governments, inspired in the revolutionary leaders a policy that was felt by these governments themselves as intolerable meddling.”

The Romantic assumptions about human nature, rather than bringing peace and brotherhood, turned out to be “violently centrifugal” producing first the Terror and then Napoleon. As Babbitt ironically pointed out:

The passion for humanity that marked the dawn of the French Revolution culminated not merely internationally, but nationally as well, in imperialism. The triumph of brotherhood over traditional control was symbolized by the Federation on the Champ de Mars, when a vast multitude embraced, not merely figuratively, but literally. But here again we are faced with a strange irony. Many of the very men who had embraced were guillotining each other not many months afterwards.

Babbitt linked the rabid nationalism on display during the Great War with the French Revolution. “‘The sentiment of nationalities,’ says Renan, ‘is not a hundred years old.’ And he adds that this sentiment was created in the world by the French Revolution.” Babbitt then pointed to German culture or Kultur as the penultimate expression of this Romantic nationalism. Under the influence of French Romanticism, German culture had decomposed

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53 With his reference to Champs de Mars, Babbitt is likely referring to a rally that took place in Paris on July 14, 1790 attended by thousands of Parisians. Even Parisians who could not attend the rally, raised their hands in the direction of the Champ de Mars, and all took an oath of loyalty to the nation, the King and the new Constitution. The rally was viewed by many revolutionaries as a visible expression of Rousseau’s general will and a sign of the emerging Utopia in France.
from the age of Kant to the age of “nationalism” under Bismarck to the present “age of imperialistic aggression.” In tracing the French-German intellectual connection, Babbitt pointed to Nietzsche who he says “was under special obligation for his gospel of force to Stendhal and his cult of Napoleon, that more or less openly avowed model of all supermen.”

Babbitt specifically referenced a recent book on the influence of French Romanticism on German thought as he discussed the new “Teutonic temperament.” The denial of the “civil war in the cave” propagated by French Romanticism had later manifested itself in German culture in the belief that the German soul is naturally virtuous. “Fichte says that there is not special word for character in German, because to be German and to have character are synonymous; character is something that gushes up without any conscious effort on his part from the primordial depths of a German’s being.” The “monstrous flattery of the Teutonic temperament” was a haunting reminder of the monstrous self-flattery of Romantic writers who gushed about their inspired and visionary natures.

This expansive flattery of the German soul, Babbitt said, demonstrated a self-flattery and a lack of ethical concentration that would inspire enmity because, as Goethe said, “everything that emancipates the intellect without a corresponding growth in self-control is pernicious” and it is akin to “unstrapping the devil.” In the modern world, this unstrapping of the devil was an acute problem since in a nation such as Germany, there are “sixty-seven millions of highly vitalized people” who are “confined in a territory of moderate fertility about half the size of Texas.”

Babbitt argued that the rest of Western Europe had been under the spell of Romanticism, and he pointed to the futility of humanitarian peacemaking schemes that were floated at the time. He added that all these proposals for world peace were either premised on the idea that nations will come together on the basis of sympathy or for utilitarian reasons. Appeals for peace on these grounds were bound to fail. For an example of such a scheme, he pointed to a statistician named Roger W. Babson, subsequent founder of Babson College, who created a mathematical model to demonstrate the financial advantages of peace over war.

The philosophical flaw in these humanitarian plans, Babbitt said, was that it is not possible to find genuine unity on the basis of sympathy or material advantage. “The problem of adjusting the relations between highly expansive individuals and nationalities is indeed the modern problem par excellence…According as the humanitarian is emotional or rationalistic he assumes that clashes which occur between different individuals and or different states can be sufficiently mitigated by an appeal either to the principle of sympathy or that of enlightened self-interest.”

For Babbitt, appeals to sympathy and self-interest were not strong enough tonics to prevent war and “on supreme occasions they fail.” The humanitarian understanding of human nature was naïve and shallow, failing to understand the primordial emotions that rise to the surface when leaders of nations consider questions of war and peace. Leaders of nations must possess a strong countervailing ethic to avoid being overcome by warlike emotion. “On such occasion men are not governed by cool reflection as to what pays, but by their passions and imagination; and the appeal that the emotional pacifist can make to their passions and imagination in the name of humanity at large, turns out to be pale and unsubstantial compared

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with the appeal of nationality. That, no doubt, is why the record of the advocates of peace on humanitarian lines has been a long series of failures.”

To buttress his point about sympathy not representing a strong enough countervailing force to war, Babbitt pointed to historical examples of pacifistic schemes that were followed by the most brutal wars. The French philosophe, Abbé de St. Pierre, for example, offered one of the first internationalist schemes in his *Project for an Everlasting Peace in Europe*, which called for European disarmament and a council to arbitrate disputes. As Babbitt pointed out, this proposal was soon followed by the wars of Frederick the Great. Likewise, the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars almost immediately followed Kant’s essay on “Perpetual Peace.” In Babbitt's era, pacifists also saw their advocacy fail and had to watch the unfolding of the Great War. Elsewhere, Babbitt would also later write that he did not see the philosophy of Gandhi as an antidote to the “mass production and mechanical efficiency” that was helping to bring so much death to the battlefields of the West. “There is much in the teaching of Gandhi, however, that is more suggestive of Tolstoy than of the genuine Oriental seer.”

This essay represents the first detailed connection that Babbitt made between the idyllic imagination of Romanticism and the conspiratorial mindset that is the hallmark of idealistic political movements. When the idealistic dream world of the Romantic humanitarian meets reality, Babbitt said, the failure of the theory is blamed not on its unreality, but on an opposing conspiracy. During the French Revolution, the failure of the Jacobins to achieve universal fraternity was blamed on priests and nobles. In contemporary Europe, the humanitarians had found a new conspirator who has prevented the flowering of peace: “Thus the arch-

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62 This is a theme even more fully developed in *Democracy and Leadership*.
conspirators for the early humanitarians were the kings and priests who sat on the lid, as it were, and so kept the natural goodness and peacefulness of man from manifesting itself. For many contemporary humanitarians, Germany has become the traitor nation that France became, after her invasion of Switzerland, for the humanitarians of the eighteenth century.”

Humanitarians, he said, also pointed to another conspirator responsible for the Great War: “Another and extraordinarily naïve type of contemporary humanitarian thinks that there would be an end of war if we could only get rid of the ‘Armament Trust.’” The armaments industry, Babbitt believed, had developed from the worship of efficiency and material power, but the industry itself was not the cause of war, but merely an outgrowth of the general ethical confusion of the West. That moral confusion was a humanitarian worship of science and impulse with no countervailing ethic. In one of Babbitt’s most famous turns of a phrase, he said that the combination of naïve idealism and utilitarian efficiency “seems too much like picnicking on a battlefield.” And, “the present alliance between emotional romanticists and utilitarians is a veritable menace to civilization itself.” Babbitt insisted that the decisive philosophical event that had given birth to this picnicking on a battlefield was Rousseau's idyllic quest to return human beings to a blissful state of nature where man's natural goodness would return. These utopian fantasies ignored the human propensity to assert a will to power and “men were interrupted in their wanderings over fair Arcadian meads by a sudden explosion

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64 It should be noted that it took courage for Babbitt to argue that Germany was, at the time, being partially scapegoated for its role in the Great War. Babbitt’s Nation essay was published a short time after Germany had used poison gas in Belgium, inflicting 58,000 allied casualties.
66 Babbitt, Rousseau & Romanticism, 349.
67 Babbitt, Rousseau & Romanticism, 350.
of hell-fire. In like manner the ‘evangelical’ Republic of 1848 gave way with disconcerting suddenness to a brutal imperialism.”

These humanitarian errors were rooted not in flawed theories of international affairs but at a deeper level in wholesale misunderstandings of human nature and the qualities that bring order to society. Humanitarian naturalism, which encourages personal expansionism—a kind of “Promethean individualism,” does not succeed in bringing people together in community. A culture of Promethean individualism, in fact, is more likely to promote imperialistic leaders and create discord among nations. Babbitt explained this error using the classical anthropological principle: “The expansive view of life is plainly not the peaceful view. It does not establish peace and unity among different nationalities, it does not establish peace and unity among members of the same nationality, it does not establish peace and unity—and this is the root of the whole matter—in the breast of the individual.” If people were seeking a peaceful world, Babbitt said, the culture must “repudiate the spirit of Napoleon and recover the spirit of Christ.”

Toward the end of his Nation essay, Babbitt returned to the French Revolution and other historical examples of nations and cultures that had lost their moral bearings and become imperialistic. Ancient Greek civilization, despite its humanistic civilizational traditions, had become decadent when “the expansive instincts of the different states and of individuals in each state tended to run wild.” The Peloponnesian War Babbitt called “an unpardonable crime against this civilization.” The exhaustion of Greek civilization in an orgy of war had, for Babbitt, its strong parallel in Europe’s own cultural suicide as embodied in the Great War.

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“There is a certain likeness between the present war and the Peloponnesian War—both wars of commercial and imperialistic expansion.”

Babbitt argued that the decline of Greek culture had begun with a similar Romanticism in the arts and letters embodied in thinkers such as Aristophanes. “’Whirl is king,’ exclaimed Aristophanes, ‘having driven out Zeus.’ The worship of the god Whirl was indeed erected by some of the sophists into a philosophy.” Aristophanes, who worshiped “change and novelty and motion,” was the predecessor to modern Romanticism. Romantic thinkers such as Henri Bergson later paralleled Aristophanes by advocating a dive “into the everlasting flux.” Babbitt believed that decadence, ancient and modern, shared a similar “spiritual joy-riding” and “all these writers and thinkers were alike in their expansiveness, in their exaltation of vital impulse over vital control. The final drift of the modern world, if it follows such leaders, will be like that of the ancient Greek world, toward a decadent, or, if the reader prefers, an irrational imperialism.”

What marks epochs of decadence is not universal brotherhood, but a “noisy revolt against all forms of the past” as well the appearance of leaders “of the military and imperialistic type” who, without ethical concentration, operate “unrestrained” utilizing the “law of cunning or the law of force.” In the case of ancient Greece and Rome, the attempts at rehabilitation were not successful and both democracies, Babbitt pointed out, were “swept…towards the abyss of decadent imperialism.”

Babbitt then moved to consider what might arrest this decadent imperialism. For him, it seemed certain the only solution would be a “recovery of the disciplinary virtues, the virtues of

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concentration.” The larger question was “on what basis these disciplinary virtues should rest if they are to be successfully rehabilitated.” Should an appeal be made to older traditions in the nation? Would a religious revival or a resuscitation of Puritanism suffice to restore them? Babbitt replied that nostalgia would not suffice: “Do not dream of an impossible return to the past, Socrates said in substance.”

An imaginative recovery of these disciplinary virtues might, he argued, create a true “internationalism” in which people are united based upon what they have in common “from a truly human point of view.” The disciplinary virtues could only be recovered through a new humanism that would assert a “special law for human nature as opposed to the natural law.” It seemed unlikely that modern man would rely upon the authority of religion or tradition so a recovery of these virtues must be put on a “positive and critical basis.” What is required is a dramatic break from the current “convention,” a break with the “organized common-sense of the community in which one lives” and the adoption of a “commoner sense.”

At the conclusion of the Nation article, Babbitt made the explicit link between Romantic ethics and imperialism. Failure to control the will had generated in modernity an undisciplined imagination and, in the process, reality and common sense was slipping away from contemporary politics. The Romantic “bohemian” had asserted that he would not submit the “free play of his imagination” to tradition or to anything “so philistine as common sense.” But, Babbitt retorted, the “great poets and sages” have exhibited “inspired and imaginative good sense...The opposition between imagination and common-sense is one of the most vicious assumptions of the modern movement.” Babbitt believed that a revival was possible, but only through sound leaders who were willing to impose the disciplinary virtues and who then could,

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through an act of imagination, set a standard that people would look up to. Leaders possessing a sound imagination would be essential to restoring more sensible politics.

A central premise of the Nation essay was that restoring a sound understanding of human nature is an essential first step in reviving the West. The rehabilitation of the disciplinary virtues was not simply a process of persuading people to change their behavior by presenting facts that are unknown. “Right knowing does not always insure right doing, as Socrates seems to say, but it is surely an indispensable preliminary.”

As he had intimated to More that he would, Babbitt developed his ideas in ethics, aesthetics and politics, and on the problem of an overreliance upon reason, in much greater detail in Democracy and Leadership. But Babbitt had reached the clear conclusion by 1915 that for the sake of the Western world, the proper roles of will and imagination needed to be restored. The humanitarian idealist, Babbitt said, would not confine his imagination to the world that actually exists, but reached out and created a world that he wished would exist. And, simultaneous with the creation of fantasy worlds, the idealist would feel no obligation to control their appetites. The humanitarian idealists, he explained, “under cover of working a great good, the elevating of society, are in danger of working a still greater evil—the undermining, namely, of the individual’s sense of responsibility and spiritual self-reliance.” This type of idealism had a direct relationship with Rousseau’s ersatz definition of virtue as an expansive emotion. In the Confessions, for example, Rousseau “declares war...in the name of what he conceives to be his true self - that is his emotional self - against decorum and decency.”

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76 Babbitt, Rousseau & Romanticism, 128.
Babbitt said that the humanitarian activists were conveniently exempting themselves from the laws of decency and decorum. In Christian terms, this Romantic idealism had an antinomian quality that would lead to national and international meddling. “A suffragette who pours acid into a letter-box or mutilates a masterpiece with a meat-cleaver is convinced, whatever else she may be in doubt about, that she is an idealist.” However, this type of idealism, “if scrutinized Socratically, would turn out to mean not much more than a meddler or busybody or downright anarchist.”

A sound humanist, in contrast, recognized that “man attains to the truth of his nature only by imposing decorum upon his ordinary self.” The secular antinomian quality of the humanitarians was a genuine threat to civilization as “all the terms expressive of the higher values of human nature are in danger of being discredited.” The idealist who throws off restraint, even for the sake of social causes, inevitably moves to a desire to dominate others, to imperialism.

Babbitt’s concluded the *Nation* essay by arguing that a democracy that has thrown off the disciplinary virtues would always be in danger of developing into an international menace. Babbitt saw as a grave error in the view that democratic societies were inherently peaceful. In fact, democracies would become most menacing and imperialistic when their leaders viewed political legitimacy as based upon the free expression of unchecked popular opinion; imperialism rooted in popular passions was no different from the imperialism of the tyrant. Just as the individual who acted temperamentally and impulsively would inevitably crash into

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those around him, the plebiscitary democracy would inevitably crash into neighboring nations.

This summary passage of Babbitt's conclusion to the essay should be quoted at some length:

Take the word democracy itself. At the very sound of the word we are supposed to cease discriminating and fall into a state of vague emotional exaltation. Yet what is valuable in democracy can be saved only by the utmost keenness of discrimination. We are being told that a remedy for war will be found in more democracy. If by more democracy is meant more radical democracy, the obvious reply is that radical democracy has in the past proved to be anything but a peaceful form of government. It has been at least as prone to quarrel with its neighbors as any other form, and its citizens have been peculiarly prone to quarrel with each other. As a result of these civil convulsions, most experiments in democracy, ancient, mediaeval, and modern, have tended by stages very familiar to the student of history to pass over into imperialism.\(^80\)

In this passage, Babbitt crystallized his argument about democratic imperialism. A democracy was not necessarily any more warlike than other forms of government, he said, but democracies, more than other forms of government, must exhibit leaders whose character serves as a restraining influence on popular passions. “A democracy that would get rid of all veto powers and take popular sovereignty to mean the immediate putting into effect of the shifting will of a numerical majority simply reproduces on a larger scale the case of the individual who would get rid of the veto power in his own breast and follow impulse; except that a state can afford even less than an individual to live impulsively.”\(^81\)

American society, Babbitt argued, had more and more exhibited the ethics of the humanitarian idealist rather than the humanist and this political culture portended a future of meddling, both in the lives of their fellow citizens and in the affairs of other nations. Muckraking journalism, for example, encouraged Americans to turn “away from themselves and encourages them to point an accusing finger at nearly everybody else.” Rather than an

understanding that liberty was rooted in personal probity, popular American legislatures had sought to micro-manage every aspect of human behavior: “this multiplication of laws seem to have been attended by a decrease in the law-abiding spirit.”

Rather than religious or humanistic self-control, Babbitt pointed to “the humanitarian legalist who passes innumerable laws for the control of people who refuse to control themselves.” Babbitt pointed out that little of this humanitarian meddling had fostered domestic tranquility: crime in U.S. had exploded, American popular tastes were increasingly vulgar, and the American educational system had failed to establish “habits of sound reading and reflection” so that the entire “educational system sometimes strikes one as an immense whir of machinery in the void.”

In response to this increasing domestic chaos, Babbitt continued, American leaders had not responded with a call to return to the disciplinary virtues. Instead, there was the belief that the solution could be found in philanthropy or social crusades.

The divergence is radical between those who tell us that our prime concern should be to raise the general level of society by philanthropic endeavor and those who tell us to make sure first that our society has leaders who have imposed upon their impulses the yoke of the human law, and so have become moderate and sensible and decent. In the last analysis, what a man owes society is not his philanthropy, but his good example; and he can set this example only by practicing the virtues in due proportion, and not, like many of our rich men, trying to make ten percent of the virtues serve as a substitute for the other ninety.

The meddling domestic policy of the humanitarian was intimately related to the meddling that would occur in international relations by leaders who were focused on crusading rather than self-reform. Leaders of nations would not be capable of displaying a peaceful disposition toward their neighbors if they have not first exercised a level of personal self-mastery and ethical restraint. Any philosophy that wished to move the nation toward peace

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"must show its efficacy, first of all, by establishing peace in the breast of the individual. To suppose that men who are filled individually with every manner of restlessness, maddened by the lust of power and speed, votaries of the god of Whirl, will live at peace either with themselves or with others, is the vainest of chimeras.” The world stage require leaders who are capable of self-control. Only such leaders would have the hope “that they may get within hailing distance of one another, even hope that they may subordinate to some extent the private interests of their respective states to the larger interests of civilization.”

With the Nation essay, Babbitt had finally constructed the intellectual bridge connecting his analysis of the Romantic Movement with historical and contemporary political developments. The Great War inspired Babbitt to draw out of his research on Romanticism his first articulation of the concept of imperialism. This essay was, in fact, a distillation of the political ideas that would thread their way through Rousseau and Romanticism, and it represented Babbitt’s most succinct explication of his theory of democratic imperialism prior to Democracy and Leadership.

In 1917, while still researching Rousseau and Romanticism, Babbitt penned another essay for the Nation that explicitly drew the connection between democratic imperialism and Rousseau’s aesthetical and philosophical theories. The 1915 Nation essay had never referenced Rousseau directly, although it clearly made implicit references to his thought. The 1917 essay, “The Political Influence of Rousseau,” laid many of the modern problems directly at Rousseau’s feet: “Rousseau has perhaps had more influence than any single person since

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Jesus…But Jesus is not, like Rousseau, an Arcadian dreamer. He faces the facts of life and he faces them with imaginative good sense.”

The 1917 essay is an excellent summary of Babbitt’s views on Rousseau’s political philosophy that, until this article was published, had to be gleaned from Babbitt’s writings on other subjects. The essay emphasized that Rousseau’s concept of a state of nature was a “mere fiction.” The general will, as conceived by Rousseau, would not foster liberty because “the individual is to have no rights against the numerical majority at any particular moment.” Rousseau’s ideas, Babbitt said, would foment revolution because they affirmed popular impulse without reference to some higher standard of justice. Many of these themes have been discussed in other parts of this paper.

One important aspect of this 1917 essay, however, was Babbitt’s hint, in a footnote, that he had been influenced in his development of this theory of democratic imperialism by Ernest Seillière, who published a book in 1908, “Le Mal romantique; essai sur l’impérialisme irrational.” Babbitt pointed out that Seillière’s writings explored the “relationship between Rousseauistic living and what he terms irrational imperialism.” This footnote did not provide an extensive discussion of Babbitt’s views on Seillière’s theory. However, by the time Rousseau and Romanticism was published in 1919, Babbitt seems to have concluded that Seillière’s theory was only partially adequate in capturing the true dangers of democratic imperialism. In a footnote in Rousseau and Romanticism, he qualified his earlier references to Seillière by stating that: “His point of view is on the constructive side very different from

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mine”⁹¹ and “like other leaders of the crusade against romanticism in France, S. seems to me unsound on the constructive side.”⁹²

Later, in *Democracy and Leadership*, Babbitt further clarified that Seillière had had a clear influence his own theory of imperialism but only “on the negative side.”⁹³ What Babbitt implied by this remark was that he agreed with Seillière’s thesis concerning the connection between Rousseau’s Romanticism and imperialism. However, Babbitt stipulated, “on the positive and constructive side, M. Seillière and I diverge sharply.” Babbitt’s concern was that what Seillière “opposes to an irrational imperialism is a rational imperialism; by which he means ‘the social army on the march towards the conquest of power by the coordination of individual efforts.’”

Babbitt’s believed that imperialism was unproblematic for Seillière as long as it was rooted in the right social cause. This means, Babbitt said, “in his general position, as revealed in such utterances, he seems to me to strike back through the utilitarians to Hobbes and ultimately, in some respects, to Machiavelli.” Babbitt, in contrast, was most interested in the ethical dimension of imperialism that first manifests itself in the human heart. Babbitt’s essential concern about imperialism, one that eluded Seillière, was explained this way: “the essential contrast for me is not, as for Mr. Seillière, that between a rational and irrational imperialism, but between imperialism and that quality of will in man which is, in every possible sense of the word, anti-imperialistic.”⁹⁴

Nonetheless, Seillière’s influence on the formation of Babbitt’s theory seemed to persist. In his last book, Babbitt referenced the fact that Seillière “has been developing in

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⁹³ See: Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 43
⁹⁴ Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 43.
numerous volumes the thesis that Rousseau’s doctrine of man’s natural goodness, in theory 
fraternal, results practically in an ‘irrational imperialism.’”

The conclusion that must be reached about Seillière’s influence upon Babbitt was the 
establishment in Babbitt’s mind of the strong connection between Romanticism and 
imperialism as well as Babbitt's likely expropriated of the term "imperialism" from Seillière. 
To illustrate, Literature and the American College, Babbitt’s earliest book published in 1908, 
was the only one of Babbitt’s major books that does not use the term “imperialism.” In that 
book, when Babbitt described the tendency of Rousseauistic democracies to threaten their 
neighbors, he described it as “egoistic instincts…in international relations.” Or, he 
characterized the influence of Rousseauism upon nationalities as “a mixture of sympathy and 
self-assertion.” In these earlier passages from Literature and the American College, Babbitt 
was clearly describing the tendency of Rousseauism to breed imperialism in world affairs, but 
he fails to use the specific term.

Babbitt then adopted Seillière’s general concept of Romantic imperialism after 1908, 
and he began using the term in all his major political writings after that time. However, Babbitt 
certainly redefined the term to embrace the moral errors that he believed were at the root of 
imperialism. No theory of international relations could be adequate for Babbitt if it did not 
embrace an understanding of the dualism of human nature of the potentialities within the 
human soul that might ultimately manifest themselves in combat on the world stage.

After years of research, Babbitt finally published Rousseau and Romanticism in 1919. 
The political ideas articulated in the book are a direct reflection of the two essays he published

95 Babbitt, On Being Creative, 187.
96 Babbitt, Literature and the American College, 171.
97 Babbitt, Literature and the American College, 172.
in the Nation in 1915 and 1917. The Nation essays, in fact, represent a handy distillation of the political ideas found in Rousseau and Romanticism, a book that is not dedicated to politics but to the Romantic imagination.

In Democracy and Leadership, Babbitt described Rousseau and Romanticism as “a book that is closely connected in argument with The New Laokoon, because it is a book where the problem of the imagination receives special treatment.”98 Babbitt did accurately characterize the theme of Rousseau and Romanticism as being primarily concerned with the imagination; the book is probably one of the most important literary analyses of the psychology of the Romantic imagination. The implications of the Romantic imagination for politics was, as written in the Nation essays, that civilization requires a certain quality of imagination in its leaders. The freewheeling imagination of the Romantic is an invitation to anarchy and imperialism; only an imagination shaped by ethical self-mastery can bring peace and order.

While Babbitt had been writing sporadically for two decades about the connection between Romanticism, decadent democracies and imperialism, with Democracy and Leadership, he finally devoted an entire book to the subject. Immediately after Rousseau and Romanticism was published, Babbitt began his research on Democracy and Leadership. Babbitt wrote to Paul Elmer More on July 10, 1919 telling him that the rest of the Babbitt family would be soon traveling to New Hampshire for vacation “but I am likely to be in Cambridge for some time yet collecting material for Democracy and Imperialism.”99

From the time Babbitt began researching the book, he intended that the title would be “Democracy and Imperialism.” It was only during his final negotiations with his publisher that his editor at Houghton Mifflin, Ferris Greenslet, advised against this title. At that time, Babbitt

98 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 32.
wrote to More: “The present plan is to have the book appear early next April. Greenslet does not seem to warm up especially to the title ‘Democracy and Imperialism’. Two other titles occur to me as possible: ‘Democracy and Civilization’ and ‘Democracy and Leadership.’ I should very much appreciate your opinion on the matter.”100

It is not known if More influenced Babbitt’s decision to choose the title “Democracy and Leadership” as More’s reply to Babbitt’s letter makes no mention of the possible title. What does seem clear is that Babbitt preferred to use the term “Imperialism” in the title, a term he had been using throughout his writing since 1908.

Babbitt in fact struggled to complete the book. In early 1923, he accepted a position as a visiting professor at the Sorbonne. When he returned from Paris in September 1923, he complained to More that he was working hard to complete the book, but “my stay in Paris was so strenuous socially that I found it left no time for writing or for anything else except recuperating from numerous dinner parties and late hours. I had planned to get the book out of the way before going abroad. Under the circumstances, I feel that I have made a mistake in accepting the foreign job at all at this time.”101

During his time in Paris, he gave a series of lectures on “Democracy and Imperialism” that encapsulated the arguments he had made in the Nation article of 1915 and in Rousseau and Romanticism.102 The Sorbonne lectures do not contain significant original themes that go beyond the ideas that Babbitt had laid out earlier in the Nation articles and in Rousseau and

Romanticism and, surprisingly, they generally do not offer more than bits and pieces of the more sustained and systematic argument that is later made in Democracy and Leadership despite his contemporaneous research for that book. Instead, in his lectures, he stressed the historical link between radical democracy and imperialism, the roots of German Kultur in Rousseau, the importance of Rousseau’s redefinition of virtue, the role of scientific and sentimental humanitarianism, the Rousseauism of the French Jacobins and the decadence of the French aristocracy. These were all themes that had been discussed in his earlier writings.

Democracy and Leadership goes beyond these themes and Babbitt was insistent that the book was ultimately a work of philosophy and, more specifically, Babbitt implied that it made a contribution to epistemology. And, unlike Rousseau and Romanticism, which was an exploration of the human imagination, Democracy and Leadership was primarily concerned with the problem of “will” and how it shaped other human faculties. In Democracy and Leadership, Babbitt merged his previous writings on aesthetics in such works as The New Laokoon and Rousseau and Romanticism with his political writings ideas, which, while scattered through all his writings, are only systematically laid out in the two articles in the Nation.  

In the early spring of 1923, Babbitt sent his friend More a partial manuscript of the book. More wrote to Babbitt that he felt the first chapter on “Types of Political Thinking” was the “weakest part of the book”, and that he did not “see that your critical thesis of ethos and

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government was worked out clearly, and the construction, or partition of subjects, did not strike me as orderly or effective.”

Babbitt did not reply to More’s criticism until September 17, 1923, when he lamented, “I did not find the general tenor of your observations especially exhilarating.” And, Babbitt sought, in particular, to clarify what he felt was More’s misreading of the first chapter. “My first chapter by the way does not primarily deal with the relation between ethos and government (I attempt to elucidate that point in my last chapter) but with the passage from the mediaeval emphasis on the divine will to the modern emphasis on the popular will. The whole book in fact is devoted to the problem of the will.” Babbitt was insistent that the book was primarily a work of philosophy, not government.

After a careful reading of the first chapter, “The Types of Political Thinking,” the reader is not left with a detailed account of the problem of will, although the chapter certainly discusses ethics, virtue, the human law and other themes related to will. One might even be inclined to agree with More that this is the weakest chapter in the book because it does not add “much to your [Babbitt’s] argument.”

In this September letter to More, Babbitt indicated that he had not yet finished the introduction to the book and that he would send that introduction and conclusion when they were complete. This exchange of letters probably prompted Babbitt to craft the introduction so that it would clarify the central theme of the book as the problem of will. His argument about the purpose of the book became quite explicit in the final Introduction:

This book in particular is devoted to the most unpopular of tasks—a defense of the veto power. Not the least singular feature of the singular epoch in which we are living is that the very persons who are least willing to hear about the veto power are likewise the persons who are most certain that they stand for the virtues that depend upon its exercise—for example, peace and brotherhood. As against the expansionists of very kind, I do not hesitate to affirm that what is specifically human in man and ultimately divine is a certain quality of will, a will that is felt in relation to his ordinary self as a will to refrain.¹⁰⁷

This statement, probably prompted by his exchange with More, is the most succinct encapsulation of Babbitt’s argument in the book.

The modern problem, for Babbitt, was that the ethical standards and conventions of the West, traditionally supplied by Christianity, had broken down. In such an environment, individuals were forced to fall back upon their own inner resources, to find high standards in their own inner life.

Though the basis of the inner life is the opposition between a lower and a higher will, the higher will cannot, after all, act at random. It must have standards. Formerly the standards were supplied by tradition. The man who accepted Christian tradition, for example, was in no doubt as to the kind and degree of discipline he needed to impose upon his lower nature. He thus achieved some measure of moral unity with himself and also with other men who accepted the same discipline. If the individualist, on the other hand, is to have standards, he must rely upon the critical spirit in direct ratio to the completeness of the break with the traditional unifications of life.¹⁰⁸

The Introduction to *Democracy and Leadership* not only explicitly raised the problem of will; it neatly summarized Babbitt’s view of human nature and how human beings are to make sense of reality. For if the individual, in trying to sort out right behavior, is left to his or her own devices then that individual is “confronted at the outset with the most difficult of philosophical problems—that of the one and the many.”¹⁰⁹ Behavior is choice and in their daily lives every individual is constantly faced with a number of complex choices that, even in

the Christian era, could not be neatly solved with reference to a series of rules. In a secular society, with fewer traditional standards for behavior, the choices are even more numerous and bewildering. “The failure of criticism to attain to any center of judgment set above the shifting impressions of the individual and the flux of phenomenal nature is a defeat for civilization itself, if it be true, as I have tried to show, that civilization must depend on the maintenance of standards.”

Babbitt repeated his theme from the 1915 Nation essay by emphasizing that the problem of morality was therefore wrapped up in a proper understanding of the different faculties of the soul. In a time of civilizational flux, when conventions and standards are eroding, human beings must depend upon their own imagination to solve the problem of the one and the many. The imagination is that quality that can find the universal standard embedded in the ever-changing circumstances of life. “The imagination, in other words, holds the balance of power between the higher and lower nature of man.” Since the era of the ancient Greeks and through the modern age of Romanticism, when society had failed to solve this problem of the one and the many, it has fallen back on relativism. In the case of Rousseauistic Romanticism, one found an outright worship of the relative, the anarchic and the impressionistic, and an explicit rejection of any universal standard.

As in Rousseau & Romanticism, the central problem for Babbitt was that a well controlled will must take mastery over the imagination: “Superficially, this anarchy seems above all an anarchy of the emotions. On closer scrutiny, however, emotional anarchy itself turns out to be only a sign of something subtler and more dangerous—anarchy of the

110 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 31.
111 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 32.
imagination.”\textsuperscript{112} As Babbitt explained the challenge of understanding a standard above our ordinary selves amidst a wealth of diversity: “If we mean by imagination not merely what we perceive, but what we conceive, it follows inevitably that the problem of the imagination is closely bound up with that of the One and the Many and therefore with the problem of standards; for it is impossible, let me repeat, to achieve standards, at least along critical lines, unless one can discover in life somewhere an abiding unity with which to measure its mere variety and change.”\textsuperscript{113}

In life as it is actually experienced, Babbitt repeated throughout his writings, it is impossible “to eliminate the element of illusion.” Solving the problem of illusion would not be found in “right reason” because a proper view of life is not found in simply analyzing random facts, but in sorting out the correct set of facts to analyze. Nor could one sort out the changing circumstances of life by merely allowing the imagination to run wild and to dream up a world that does not exist. “The final contrast is not between reason or judgment and mere illusion, but between the imagination that is disciplined to what abides in the midst of the changeful and the illusory, and the imagination that is more or less free to wander wild in some ‘empire of chimeras.’”\textsuperscript{114} Life, as it is actually experienced is not all unity, nor all change, it is, in Babbitt’s famous phrase, “a oneness that is always changing.”\textsuperscript{115}

As Babbitt pointed out, one can be highly imaginative but exhibit an uncontrolled and undisciplined imagination, a central problem of Romanticism. “The critical observer is forced to agree with Napoleon that, not reason, but ‘imagination governs mankind.’” But it does not follow that mankind need be governed, as it has been very largely during the past century, by

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\item \textsuperscript{112} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 32.
\item \textsuperscript{113} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 35.
\item \textsuperscript{114} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 171.
\item \textsuperscript{115} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 170.
\end{itemize}
the Napoleonic quality of imagination.”\textsuperscript{116} For Babbitt, an uncontrolled imagination was “an invitation to Nemesis”\textsuperscript{117} since one can construct a dream world, an imaginative idealistic society, that bears no relation to the facts of existence. “We have all grown familiar with the type of person who is in his own conceit a lofty ‘idealist,’ but when put to the test has turned out to be only a disastrous dreamer.”\textsuperscript{118}

Babbitt emphasized more explicitly in \textit{Democracy and Leadership} that human character was ultimately shaped by a higher will that is naturally antecedent to a superior quality of imagination. These two faculties, which work in combination and strengthen one another, would allow individuals to choose correct behavior. If one wished civilization to reestablish high standards of behavior and good order, its leaders must first possess this higher quality of will.

The implications for politics were that leaders who had restrained their will and developed a moral imagination would tend to be peaceful souls and the leaders that had been unrestrained in their will and imagination tend to be the imperialistic souls. Rousseau’s imagination, Babbitt said, provided a glimpse of the imperialistic soul: “The Nature to which he invites us to return is only a conceit. This conceit encourages one to substitute for the vital control, which is the true voice of man’s higher self, expansive emotion. Ideally, this substitution is to be marked by a triumph of the fraternal spirit. Actually, as I have sought to prove, the outcome of yielding to a mere expansive conceit is not fraternity, but a decadent imperialism.”\textsuperscript{119}

\textsuperscript{116} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 32.
\textsuperscript{117} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 37.
\textsuperscript{118} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 37-38.
Babbitt then sought to make a distinction between types, and even phases, of imperialism. Rome’s conquest of most of the known world was, without doubt, a form of imperialism. Yet, in the early stages, it was not yet a decadent imperialism. “The critical moment for Rome was the moment of triumph when the leaders of the state not longer felt the restraining influence of dangerous rivals like Carthage.” With the defeat of Carthage, Rome began to “throw off the traditional controls” and declined into decadence. Babbitt quoted the Roman poet Juvenal who satirized the corruption of the 2nd century AD: “‘Luxury,’ says Juvenal, ‘more cruel then the foeman’s arms, fell upon us, and is avenging the conquered world.’” When Rome's leaders jettisoned all restraint in private matters, Rome’s politics began to exhibit the consequences in the public realm. “A graver symptom, however, was the appearance of leaders who were ever more and more ruthless in the pursuit either of their personal advantage or that of some class or faction.”

While Babbitt’s tone was far from sanguine about the future of the contemporary West, he reserved judgment about whether the United States had moved into a period of decadent imperialism akin to that found in the late Roman Republic. The United States, he said, was at “the acme of our power” and was “at the same time discarding the standards of the past.” He also saw a parallel to Roman politics in American politics through its “highly unethical leaders—leaders who seek to advance the material interests of some special group at the expense of the whole community.” The parallels, he admitted, “may perhaps be exaggerated.” But the only way to “get to the root of the matter” was not to analyze the parallels in the politics of the two periods, but to “turn from the merely peripheral manifestations of the push for power to the inner life of the individual.”

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120 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 40.
Babbitt, of course, made the classical Greek argument that the most important unit of analysis necessary to measure the level of decadence or health in society, and hence the nature of a society’s imperialism, was the individual. “The more one ponders either the modern American or the ancient Roman situation, the more surely will one be led from imperialism in the political, to imperialism in the psychological sense.”\(^1\)\(^{121}\)

While Babbitt was not certain that the United States had reached a level of decadent imperialism, he was certain that the current set of political leaders was not even aware of the problem. The progressives of his era, Babbitt said, avoided the entire ethical problem and focused on the reform of institutions rather than on the ethical concentration of individuals despite the fact that “immediate experience” demonstrated an “opposition” within the individual soul “between a law of the spirit and a law of the members.”\(^1\)\(^{122}\) Society, he feared, had become more concerned with “service to others” rather than personal virtue. “The humanitarian is not, I pointed out, concerned like the humanist, with the individual and his inner life, but with the welfare and progress of mankind in the lump. His favorite word is ‘service.’\(^1\)\(^{123}\) So, the question that must be asked in politics is “not whether one should be a moderate humanitarian, but whether one should be a humanitarian at all.”\(^1\)\(^{124}\)

Babbitt’s conclusion was that the humanitarian leadership of the West must be replaced with humanists or some form of genuinely religious leaders as these two options represented the only possible methods of controlling a decadent imperialism. The West must find leaders who were willing to master their own selves: “On the appearance of leaders who have

\(^{121}\) Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 41.
\(^{122}\) Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 29.
\(^{123}\) Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 30.
\(^{124}\) Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 47.
recovered in some form the truths of the inner life and repudiated errors of naturalism may
depend the very survival of Western civilization.”{125}

Babbitt argued that throughout history society might assume the mantle of one of three
possible political forms: “naturalistic, or humanistic, or religious.”{126} For the religious
outlook, Babbitt pointed to medieval Christianity, Hindu religion in India as embodied in the
Laws of Manu, and Buddhism. For the humanistic and non-theocratic alternatives, he pointed
to the similarities between Confucius and ancient Greek philosophy, especially Aristotle. The
distinction he made between the religious and the humanistic outlook was that “Confucius is
less concerned with the other world than with living to the best advantage in this. To live to the
best advantage in this world is, he holds, to live proportionately and moderately; so that the
Confucian tradition of the Far East has much in common with the Aristotelian tradition of the
Occident.”{127}

Babbitt pointed out that the religious and humanistic traditions of both East and West
are united in their affirmation of a human law, “a law, the acceptance of which leads, on the
religious level, to the miracles and other-worldliness that one finds in Christians and Buddhists
at their best, and the acceptance of which, in this world, leads to the subduing of the ordinary
self and its spontaneous impulses to the law of measure that one finds in Confucianists and
Aristotelians.”{128} By denying a uniquely human law, Romanticism and naturalism would
provide no restraint upon an ambitious will to power. “Other animals have appetite, but within
certain definite bounds, whereas man is, either in a good or bad sense, the infinite animal.”{129}

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{125} Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 47-48.
{126} Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 49-50.
{127} Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 56.
{128} Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 59.
{129} Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 161.
Human beings have the potential for great saintliness or unimaginable evil; naturalistic philosophies that fail to concede this point would be naive about the potential for war and conflict.

Therefore, Babbitt saw only two potential checks upon the human desire for dominion: one religious and one humanistic. In the West, “Christianity has actually done more to curb the expansive lusts of the human heart, and among its other lusts, the lust for power.”\(^{130}\) This naturalistic turn of the West was decisive in the rise of total war among nation states because the political result was the destruction of the authority of the Church and the cosmopolitanism it inspired. “One important outcome of this naturalistic trend has been the growth of the national spirit. The Protestant religion itself, if one takes a sufficiently long-range view, appears largely as an incident in the rise of nationalism.”\(^{131}\)

Rousseau had inspired nationalism by morally sanctioning an expansive national spirit unchecked by any higher authority. Rousseau correctly perceived that the Church's claim of authority over spiritual matters and its admonition that Christian rulers must embody a certain humility toward the Church had weakened state power and authority as “to be humble was to be submissive.” Yet, for Rousseau, “one should...discard humility in favor a patriotic pride, of the kind that flourished in the great days of Rome and Sparta.”\(^{132}\)

In *Democracy and Leadership*, Babbitt pointed out that Rousseau’s political theory has such a humanitarian overlay, stressing pity and sympathy, which you must read Rousseau closely to understand that his nationalism is one of cunning and force. Rousseau's nationalism embodied a Machiavellianism in which, “the rules of ordinary morality may hold in the

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\(^{130}\) Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 166.
\(^{131}\) Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 59.
\(^{132}\) Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 117.
relations between man and man, but only have a secondary place in the relations between state and state.”¹³³ Machiavelli's virtù shared a similarity with Rousseau's virtue of the citizen in which “the ruler above all should have no conscience apart from the state and its material aggrandizement.”¹³⁴

Babbitt saw Machiavelli, Rousseau, Hobbes and other political theorists since the Renaissance sharing a naturalism that denied a specifically human law. While conceding that Machiavelli was an “extraordinarily shrewd observer,”¹³⁵ Babbitt argued that Machiavelli’s naturalism nonetheless combined “a clear perception of the facts of the material order with spiritual blindness” that would lead to “imperialistic dreaming” about the “glories of ancient Rome.”¹³⁶ Hobbes, likewise, denied a uniquely human law that would apply to all mankind’s affairs. Hobbes’ political order was predicated on the sovereign assuming complete control, unchecked by any other institution or principle. “Hobbes’s assertion of absolute and unlimited sovereignty recalls the medieval notion of sovereignty with a most important difference: it rests upon force and is in this sense imperialistic; it does not, like the sovereignty of the Middle Ages, have a supernatural sanction.”¹³⁷

At this point, Babbitt began to frame his argument that any philosophy of naturalism, whether Machiavelli or Hobbes, cannot and would not unite human beings in peace. Only a humanistic or religious outlook can unite human beings and bring “cohesion among men.” In Christianity, men were not united by fear of the sovereign, or submission to a popular will, but by submission to God’s will, a common endeavor that forms the spiritual glue of the Christian

¹³³ Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 61.
¹³⁴ Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 62.
¹³⁵ Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 60.
¹³⁶ Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 63.
¹³⁷ Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 65.
community. “According to the true Christian, the final counterpoise to egoism, in virtue of which alone men may be drawn to a common center, is submission to the will of God, a submission that is conceived in terms of the inner life.”^138

With the decline of Christianity and the rise of the nation state, the chief problem that had arisen was: what could unite men across national boundaries? Babbitt’s clear answer was that, once a Rousseauistic understanding of popular sovereignty firmly took hold, there was nothing that could provide unity. If nations were in a state of nature with one another, then the only law that applied was that of force. At least under the divine right theory of kings, which recognized a law higher than popular or royal will, the king was obligated to rule under a divine sanction. With the new doctrine of popular sovereignty, Babbitt said, no authority could limit the will of the people. “Within the bounds of each separate nationality, the essential aspect of this secular process is the passage from divine right to popular right, from the sovereignty of God to the sovereignty of the people.”^139 While the king had ruled in the place of God and had to be cognizant of His divine judgment, the Rousseauistic general will asserts popular rule without divine blessing or sanction.

A general will for each individual nation, unmoored from any higher authority or constraint, was an invitation to war between nations who would share no basis for unity. This new nationalism was undoubtedly responsible for the Great War. “The question of war becomes acute if Europe, and possibly the world, is to be made up of a series of states, each animated by what one is tempted to term a frenzied nationalism, without and countervailing principle of unity. That the new nationalism is more potent than the new internationalism was

^138 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 68.
^139 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 75.
revealed in August 1914 when millions of socialists, in response to the call of country, marched away to the slaughter of their fellow socialists in other lands.”

Modern theorists of popular sovereignty, natural rights, and social contract theory had not, and in contemporary times have not, recognized this strain of nihilism in modern democratic theory. Rousseau asserted on a number of occasions that the love of country is the most “beautiful passion” and “the fact that the l’invresse patriotique may make the citizens of one country ruthless in their dealings with citizens of other countries seems to him a matter of small moment.”

Babbitt argued that recognition of this problem was also lacking in Locke, the father of modern popular sovereignty. “However moderately he (Locke) himself may interpret the sovereignty of the people, it is not easy to discover in his theory anything that will prevent this sovereignty from developing into a new absolutism.” Babbitt characterized this nihilistic popular sovereignty as “the evils of an unlimited democracy.”

Here Babbitt began to move from his critique of Romanticism to a positive solution regarding the problem of conflict. If one is to refute Machiavelli and Hobbes, one must show that there is some universal principle that tends to unite men across even national frontiers.” That unifying principle was little different in the international community than it was in small communities such as families or towns. To describe what was essential to peace, writ large or small, Babbitt returns to his core principles of ethics. What was required was some

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140 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 144.  
141 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 144.  
142 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 83.  
143 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 68.
“recognition…that moves in an opposite direction from the outer impressions and expansive desires that together make up his ordinary or temperamental self.”

The most acute modern political problem for the rising Western democracies was finding checks upon the relativism of popular sovereignty, i.e., finding countervailing forces that could prevent a democracy from submitting to “the irresponsible tyranny of the mob.” Yet modern theories of popular sovereignty made finding such checks difficult because their premise was that there was no higher principle than popular desire.

For Babbitt, the primary answer was found in the revised title of his book: leadership. Democratic societies would only be orderly and peaceful where there was an “aristocratic principle” operating within their leadership. Babbitt’s immediate concern was that leadership in the Western democracies has not been aristocratic but egalitarian. Politicians had promised the people all manner of material schemes that would “promote what is socially useful, the greatest good for the greatest number.” The people, he argued, would not respect politicians who operate merely on the material level. “The people, especially the people of the great urban centers, no longer look up with respect to representatives who are themselves so imbued with the utilitarian temper encouraged by Locke that that have perhaps ceased to be worthy of respect. If the aristocratic principle continues to give way to the egalitarian denial of the need for leadership, parliamentary democracy may ultimately become impossible.”

In an anonymous book review published in 1920 in The Weekly Review, Babbitt began to formulate the central theme of Democracy and Leadership: the main bulwark against capricious popular opinion in a democracy is sound and elevated leadership. In the book

144 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 74-75.
145 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 363.
146 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 366.
147 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 84.
review, Babbitt was commenting on a recent history of the French Revolution in which the author took the position that the French people were victims of a sophisticated conspiracy that duped them into committing heinous acts.

Babbitt was unequivocal that the people were not the important actors in either the Revolution or in democracies generally: “The truth is that neither the good nor the evil of a movement like the French Revolution emanates spontaneously from the people. It is all a question of leadership; and the one serious doubt about democracy is whether it can show sufficient critical discrimination in the choice of its leaders.”

Rousseau had sought to discredit aristocratic leadership and replace it with popular will. “‘The people,’ he (Rousseau) says, ‘constitute the human race’: all that is not the people is parasitic and ‘scarcely deserves to be counted were it not for the harm it does.’”

In *Democracy and Leadership*, Babbitt provided two significant chapters contrasting Rousseau and Burke particularly on the issue of aristocratic leadership. Rousseau was the spiritual father of egalitarian democracy that denies the need for an enlightened leadership that may guide popular will. Burke “took up the defense of the traditional order” and argued that popular passions were subject to a higher law because all human beings must submit to a “standard of virtue and wisdom that is beyond the vulgar practice of the hour.”

Babbitt’s discussion of Rousseau and Burke in *Democracy and Leadership* revolved around the problem of imagination that was discussed earlier in this paper. Babbitt argued that Burke had made a unique contribution to Western philosophy and epistemology because he

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149 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 147.
emphasized the importance of tradition in shaping a higher quality of imagination that would be essential to leadership in a democracy. Babbitt’s conclusion, however, was that Rousseau's ideas, not Burke's, carried the day in the West. Burke’s battle for the necessity of “prejudice and prescription” had been lost and the “history of modern Europe, during and since the Great Revolution” had been shaped by Rousseau leading to “the two chief political problems of the present time, the problem of democracy and the problem of imperialism, both in themselves and in relation to one another.”152

Along with his 1915 essay in the Nation, the fourth chapter of Democracy and Leadership was Babbitt’s most important concise discussion of the problem of democratic imperialism. Titled “Democracy and Imperialism,” this chapter drew together the many strands of Babbitt’s writings on ethics and politics into his lengthiest discussion on imperialism.

Babbitt asserted that Rousseau’s brand of democracy and popular sovereignty came to dominate Western opinion. Babbitt asked whether the results of Rousseauistic democracy in the West – based upon a “new ethics” whereby “virtue is not restrictive but expansive, a sentiment and even an intoxication”153 – had been “a paradise of liberty, equality, and fraternity?”154 The answer was firmly in the negative. This form of popular sovereignty had a tendency to tear apart human beings and centuries of wars were the result.

The centrifugal nature of the French Revolution, for example, did not cause its leaders to turn inward, to appoint leaders of character and self-discipline or to institute sensible reforms that may have corrected the administrative problems that had built up over the course of the

152 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 140.
153 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 143.
154 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 141.
Instead, the Revolutionary leaders, impressed by their own beautiful souls, turned outward.

The Revolution and Napoleon were a direct result of the Rousseauistic democratic outlook that the revolutionaries had adopted.

I have been trying to make clear the relation between Rousseauistic democracy and imperialism in France itself. The same relationship appears if we study the Rousseauistic movement internationally. Perhaps no movement since the beginning of the world has led to such an inbreeding of national sentiment of the type that in the larger states runs over very readily into imperialistic ambition...I have said that the Revolution almost from the start took on the character of a universal crusade. The first principles it assumed made practically all existing governments seem illegitimate.\textsuperscript{155}

Of course, as Simon Schama pointed out, monarchies and other nations with more traditional forms of government rightly understood the universalistic ambitions of the Revolutionaries as a threat to their stability. As Babbitt put it: “What followed is almost too familiar to need repetition. Some of the governments whose legitimacy was thus called into question took alarm and, having entered into an alliance, invaded France.”\textsuperscript{156}

The historical result was a decade of warfare of a type that had not been seen on Western battlefields, the wholesale mobilization of entire nations and a mindset of “total war” among their leaders. Babbitt then repeated some important lines that he had written in his 1915 Nation essay connecting the French Revolution and the Great War: “The cry of the revolutionary army—\textit{Vive la nation}—heard by also in a pause of the cannonading of Valmy — was rightly taken by him to mark the dawn of a new era. The beginnings of the very type of warfare we have recently been witnessing in Europe, that is, the coming together of who

\textsuperscript{155} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 153.
\textsuperscript{156} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 153-154.
nations for mutual massacre (*la levée en masse*), go back to this period."\(^{157}\) A humanitarian movement that weakened the traditional religious, cultural and humanistic mechanisms tempering selfish impulses, “actually promotes the reality of strife that it is supposed to prevent.”\(^{158}\)

In his 1915 *Nation* essay, Babbitt had been remarked that a number of historical expressions of pacifism had ironically been followed by large wars. But, in *Democracy and Leadership*, he went further and argued that pacifists should be lumped into the category of humanitarian movements that would actually break down traditional controls. “It is possible to show that the pacifist is not only a materialist, but a very objectionable type of materialist. In the name of the fairest of virtues, he is actually engaged in breaking down ethical standards. It is a matter of common sense and everyday experience that there can be no peace with the unrighteous and the unrighteous always have been and are extremely numerous.”\(^{159}\)

The final result of the democracy of the Rousseauistic type, with its repudiation of ethical restraint and worship of unvarnished and unchecked popular sovereignty, would be militarism and imperialistic war.

From a strictly psychological point of view, the movement we are studying had not only produced all its characteristic fruits over a hundred years ago, but also its two outstanding and truly significant personalities—Rousseau and Napoleon. If there had been no Rousseau, Napoleon is reported to have said, there would have been no Revolution, and without the Revolution, *I* should have been impossible. Now Rousseau may be regarded as being more than any other one person the humanitarian Messiah. Napoleon, for his part, may be defined in Hardy’s phrase, the Christ of War. So that the humanitarian Messiah set in

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\(^{158}\) Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 155.

\(^{159}\) Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 221.
motion forces that led to a process that I have attempted to sketch in rough
general outline to the rise of the Christ of War.\textsuperscript{160}

The will to power that marked the revolutionaries, in fact, attracted them to the
“imperialistic superman” embodied in Bonaparte. “What became apparent, on the contrary,
was the affinity that has always existed between an unlimited democracy and the cult of
ruthless power. No one crawled more abjectly at the feel of Napoleon than some of the
quondam Terrorists.”\textsuperscript{161}

Chateaubriand, a Romantic but a royalist and defender of the Church, was nonetheless
perceptive enough to see the evolution from democratic revolution to an imperialistic
despotism under Bonaparte.\textsuperscript{162} He would write in his memoires: “From day to day there was
taking place the transformation of republicans into imperialists and of the tyranny of all into the
despotism of a single man.”\textsuperscript{163} In the French Revolution, Babbitt said, “the doctrine of popular
sovereignty as developed from the \textit{Social Contract} had been found to encourage a sort of
chronic anarchy. Inasmuch as society cannot go on without discipline of some kind, men were
constrained, in the absence of any other form of discipline, to turn to the discipline of the
military type.”\textsuperscript{164}

Ancient Rome had undergone a similar process: the weakening of religious traditions
caused a weakening of the constitutional republic and the rise of an egalitarian democracy.
What followed was a period of class warfare and then democratic imperialism. He quoted
Mirabeau’s warning to the French revolutionaries about war and democracies: ““free peoples

\textsuperscript{160} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 156.
\textsuperscript{161} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 152.
\textsuperscript{162} Chateaubriand’s \textit{The Genius of Christianity} had earned him an appointment by Napoleon as
the French ambassador to the Holy See but his later criticisms of Napoleon as a dangerous
dictator resulted in his banishment from Paris.
\textsuperscript{163} Quoted in: Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 152-153
\textsuperscript{164} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 152.
are more eager for war, and the democracies more slaves of their passions than the most 
absolute autocracies.”

Babbitt even pointed to ancient China where an “unbridled individualism” caused the 
end of the Chinese feudal system, resulting in the “era of the Fighting States.” Ancient China 
exhibited “a mingling of utilitarian and sentimental elements which is closer, perhaps to our 
contemporary humanitarianism than anything to be found in Greece or Rome.” Even the 
ancient Chinese did not recognize the deeper causes of war and therefore adopted many of the 
contemporary schemes to establish peace. “Toward the end, when everything had been tried, 
including the balance of power, universal brotherhood, and a ‘league of nations,’ and after the 
perpetuation of horrors unspeakable, no one apparently had more illusions: the only question 
was which imperialistic leader should first succeed in imposing his will upon all the others.”

Babbitt also dismissed the modern notion that commerce and trade drives peace and 
amity among nations. The “expansion of the commercialist,” he said, is “imperialistic.”

Military power, he said, “follows the flag” and, at this point in history, “it is hardly necessary at 
this day to refute the notion held by so many liberals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries 
that trade is in itself a pacific agency. Commercial interests lead to clashes and dangerous 
rivalries between European nations, not merely in Europe itself, but in other parts of the 
world.” To demonstrate Babbitt’s relevancy to modern times, he had remarked that one of the 
chief causes of imperialism in modern times is the “scramble for oil.” He also presciently 
predicted World War II when he pointed out that trade between East and West are more likely 
to cause war than peace: “the chief problem raised by all this imperialistic expansion is that of

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165 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 176.
166 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 175.
168 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 177.
the relations between Asia and the Occident. There are possibilities in the present situation that may lead to the real world war, that between East and West, a war to which the recent European struggle is like to seem in retrospect but a faint prelude.**169

More presciently and more specifically, he said the real danger was a U.S.-Japanese conflict.

There is also the problem of the United States in its relations with the Far East, with the possibility in the offing of a gigantic struggle for the empire of the Pacific. One encounters here the portent of Japan, an Asiatic power that is learning to play the imperialistic game along the most approved Occidental lines, that is even learning to adapt to its own uses the humanitarian-imperialistic cant of the ‘white man’s burden,’ and is beginning to speak of China as ‘Japan’s burden.’**170

Amazingly, Babbitt continued with his predictions (and the reader should be reminded that this is 1924, with much of the book written years before its publication date). He turned to German and Russian ambitions and again presciently predicted the Axis alliance. “Russia is likely to remain for some time to come a fertile field of imperialistic intrigue, not only on the part of the Russians, but also of Germans and Japanese, and perhaps of Turks, with the whole Moslem world in the background…so Germany in her desire to get even might be tempted to join with these extra-European forces, even though such action on her part would amount to a betrayal of the vital interests of the cultural group to which she herself belongs.”**171 Babbitt’s skill in predicting future developments in European politics leading to WWII indicates a genuine realism and sagacity on his part regarding international politics.

In making these predictions in *Democracy and Leadership*, Babbitt pointed out that the scientific progress of the West had provided crusading humanitarianism with unmatched military power. Babbitt quoted a contemporary Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore, who

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169 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 177-78
regularly wrote about relations between the East and West. “The man of the West, he says, has
specialized in power and mechanical efficiency and so has enabled itself the bully of the planet;
but it has been established in the nature of things that bullies come to grief.” Tagore’s solution
to this problem of East and West is for the West to adopt “the principle of love,” a solution that
Babbitt said, allies Tagore with other “Rousseauistic dreamers.”

What was missing in the contemporary leaders of the West, Babbitt believed, was a
moral realism. The West had surrendered to the flaccid humanitarianism of Rousseau when
what was required was the Buddha’s realistic assessment of human nature with its
understanding that life is a personal moral challenge.

Philosophies that ignored the human moral dilemma, even so-called “realist” schools of
international relations, were ignoring a fundamental aspect of human nature that is at the
deepest roots of war. Babbitt, for example, scoffed at the arguments of some supporters of
science that powerful weaponry will have a deterrent effect and prevent war. "We are told that
our means of destruction are growing so terrible that no one will venture to use them—the same
argument that was heard before the War. But at the same time that we are heaping up these
means of destruction, the breakdown of the traditional controls combined with the failure thus
far to supply any adequate substitute, is creating fools and madmen who will not hesitate to use
them.”

Conflict between human beings, Babbitt asserted, is an inevitable result of the
potentialities in the human soul; democratic leaders and the popular will are not exempted from
this moral problem. Rather than face this fundamental ethical problem, the West had explicitly
denied the “civil war in the cave” and had proffered humanitarianism as the solution to human

172 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 187, 188.
173 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 167-68.
conflict. Not only had this failed to produce the desired results, it has offered no principled opposition to the imperialistic personality. When conflict developed, leaders misdiagnosed the causes and implement solutions that may even exacerbate them. Only the development of some kind of religious or humanistic understanding that would cause political leaders to engage in personal introspection and ethical work can stem the chaos, disorder and war that humanitarianism had caused. Human beings who perform this spiritual and ethical work would come together in communion, and that communion would be peaceful. Leaders who had done this ethical work might finally be in a position to display a genuine cosmopolitanism in their relations with other nations.
Chapter 6: True and False Cosmopolitanism

_The moral man, by living a life of simple truth and earnestness, alone can bring peace and order in the world._\(^1\) – Confucius

_The special danger of the present time would seem to be an increasing material contact between national and racial groups that remain spiritually alien._\(^2\)

For Irving Babbitt, peace was found in a disposition of character. This disposition, not easily acquired, was not a feeling or emotion, and would not be acquired because of an institutional arrangement. The leader who assumed the mantle of this disposition would display certain recognizable characteristics. One would notice urbanity and a courteous and respectful attitude toward competitors and opponents. One would recognize a detachment displaying itself as an unwillingness to allow personal or policy decisions to be driven by raw emotion. This leader would possess a firm belief in the truth of the most elevated principles of his or her own culture but would also be respectful of the symbols of other cultures; the leader would have an inchoate awareness that the symbols of others may represent principles that parallel his or her own. In this regard, the leader of a peaceful disposition, while a defender of his or her own culture, would not be aggressively dogmatic and would look for what is common and most elevated across cultures. This leader would not celebrate the eccentricities of diversity but recognize that diversity may indeed represent different paths to something that unites human beings, not what divides them. The different and highest roads of various cultures may indeed lead to the same place.

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\(^1\) Quoted in: Irving Babbitt, _Democracy and Leadership_ (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1979), 336, footnote.

Irving Babbitt called this disposition “cosmopolitanism.” Cosmopolitanism, in his view, was not simply a breezy and sentimental affinity for other cultures, as advocates of “multiculturalism” sometimes portray it. Genuine cosmopolitanism was, for Babbitt, a recognition that human beings can only truly unite on a higher plane of religious or humanistic understanding, even though different cultures will be have different representations of that higher plane. The prerequisite for national leaders to achieve this cosmopolitanism was, first and foremost, a spiritual or ethical concentration, a mastery of their own passions and impulses. While leaders need not achieve saintliness, they must have done enough ethical work to form a conscience in which they are pulled toward virtue. The cosmopolitan leader contrasted with the temperamental leader who would be driven by his ego and would seek to dominate others.

For Babbitt, self-mastery on an ethical level was an admonition found in the great philosophies of East and West.

If man as a natural phenomenon grows by expanding, man as man grows by concentrating. He proves that he is set above nature, not so much by his power to act, as by his power to refrain from acting. According to Emerson, God himself is defined by the Orientals as the ‘inner check.’ I do not happen to know of any oriental book in which this precise phrase occurs, but the idea is found in every truly religious book that was ever written in either the East or the West.¹

Even for the best leaders, finding common ground could be difficult, not only because of cultural diversity and dogmatic competition, but because it represented something more profound than an emotional sympathy for humanity or a recognition of self-interest. As Babbitt framed the challenge: “true spirituality insists that men cannot come together in a common sympathy, but only in a common discipline. For example, St. Paul (doctor gentium), perhaps the most successful of all cosmopolitans, proclaims that men cannot meet directly and on the

level of their ordinary selves. They can come together only by allegiance to a law set above
their ordinary selves or to a personality taken as a symbol of this law.”

Romantic literature, Babbitt said, shared Rousseau's assumption that "the prime mark of
genius is refusal to imitate." Because it was centered on personal feelings, originality and a
rejection of standards, Romanticism “appears far more cosmopolitan than it really was.”

Romantic artists had tired of the narrow smugness and conformity of neo-classical imitation
and sought, particularly in the early Renaissance, to create art that was “in a high degree
favorable to originality” and an originality that was closely bound up with what is rather
vaguely known as individualism.” Babbitt believed that the social results of Romantic
sensibility and the elevation of originality above all other standards would be more distance,
not more unity, between individuals and nations. “In the name of originality art is becoming
more and more centrifugal and eccentric.”

Babbitt pointed out that in his contemporary world, the quest for originality had gone so
far that: “Now, many a man passes for original who is in reality only freakish.” Babbitt
pointed to Aristotle: “the final test of art is not its originality, but its truth to the universal.”

Aristotle “goes on to say that the superiority of poetry over history lies in the fact that it has

2607, 679-680.
3 Irving Babbitt, Rousseau & Romanticism (Transaction Publishers: New Brunswick U.S.A.,
1991), 34.
Company, 1912), 81.
5 Irving Babbitt, Literature and the American College (Washington, DC: National Humanities
Institute, 1986), 187.
6 Babbitt, Literature and the American College, 188.
7 Babbitt, Literature and the American College, 186.
more of this universality, that it is more concerned with the essentials and less with the accidents of human nature.”

However, Babbitt did not view the proper rejoinder to Romanticism to be a search for universal standards that are not anchored in reality. Human beings are trapped in a present reality from which there is no escape. Therefore, they must deploy their imagination not to fly off into unreality, but to find a center amidst the wealth of diversity. Those with a sound imagination will "not evade the actual...but select from it and seek to impose upon it something of the proportion and symmetry of the model to which it is looking up to and which it is imitating." Babbitt insisted that the "classicist" who possesses this superior quality of imagination must always keep in mind that "he perceives reality only through a veil of illusion. The creator of this type achieves work in which illusion and reality are inseparably blended, work which gives the 'illusion of a higher reality.'”

_Literature and the American College_ was where Babbitt first explored in some detail the philosophical problem that Romantic aesthetics created for the political order. _Literature and the American College_ was devoted to a theory of education and one of Babbitt’s central arguments was that the true purpose of education is to make human beings cosmopolitan. With an overemphasis upon originality, education was not elevating future leaders to the qualities that would unite people, education was breeding a worship of differences. “As a result of our loss of standards, the classicist would complain, we are personal and national peculiarities and getting farther and farther away from what is universally human.” Babbitt's complaint was

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8 Babbitt, _Literature and the American College_, 189.
9 Babbitt, _Rousseau & Romanticism_, 102.
10 Babbitt, _Literature and the American College_, 188.
not with originality, per se, but with an originality that refused to recognize commonalities in the human spirit.

Babbitt described the Romantic personality this way: “Since Rousseau the world has become increasingly familiar with the man who poses and attitudinizes before it and is not satisfied until he can draw its attention to the traits that establish his own uniqueness. The eccentric individualist not only rejoiced in his own singularity, but was usually eager to thrust it on other people. His aim was to startle, or, as the French would say, to épater le bourgeois, to make the plain citizen ‘stare and gasp.’”¹¹ In its extreme form, the Romantic becomes, like Rousseau, the “arch-egoist.”¹²

Babbitt admitted that what gave life to the Romantic Movement was the artificiality of neo-classical art and literature that had “an excessive respect for the past.”¹³ The solution was not, however, to swing the pendulum wildly in the opposite direction and to focus solely on the quality of originality. In fact, finding the universal expressed in a new way was at the very heart of all great art and literature. “Genuine originality is so immensely difficult because it imposes the task of achieving work that is of general human truth and at the same time intensely individual.”¹⁴

In The New Laokoon, Babbitt also hinted at the implications of Romantic aesthetics for politics. He again emphasized that there was much that was “artificial and superficial in the French tradition, – its conventions, and etiquette, and gallantries.”¹⁵ The danger, however, with throwing out all tradition was “the risk of losing a real virtue, viz., the exquisite urbanity that

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¹² Babbitt, Literature and the American College, 193.
¹³ Babbitt, Literature and the American College, 194.
¹⁴ Babbitt, Literature and the American College, 195.
¹⁵ Babbitt, The New Laokoon, 42.
the French had at their best really succeeded in attaining.”

Because some conventions were artificial, one cannot, Babbitt asserted, dismiss convention as some form of decorum is necessary to prevent the triumph of temperamental individuality.

In *The Masters of Modern French Criticism*, Babbitt took this argument one step further by linking Romantic originality with national self-assertion, and the roots of conflict in this self-assertion. “When individual or national differences are pushed beyond a certain point what comes into play is not sympathy but antipathy.” The worship of national differences would prevent cosmopolitanism. In his portrait of Madame de Staël, for example, Babbitt connected her perceptive observations about the uniqueness of national cultures to Rousseau’s theory of nationalism and argued that her views represented a false and modern conception of cosmopolitanism.

Her conception of the relation of nationalities to one another simply reproduces on a larger scale the Rousseauistic conception of the proper relation of the individuals. Each nationality is to be spontaneous and original and self-assertive, and at the same time infinitely open and hospitable to other national originalities. Nationalism in short is to be tempered by cosmopolitanism, and both are to be but diverse aspects of Rousseauistic enthusiasm. The first law for nationalities as for individuals is not to imitate but to be themselves.

Madame de Staël was important intellectually because she had taken the idea of Rousseau’s spontaneous individual and applied it on a national level, claiming that nations driven by temperamental self-assertion would be exhibit peaceful natures. This is a parallel with Rousseau's belief that temperamental individuals would unite in the general will. Babbitt believed that it was utopian to believe that the impulsive and temperamental nation states would live in harmony with one another.

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Madame de Staël's false cosmopolitanism, Babbitt said, offered a moral justification for national expansion based upon a belief that one’s nation possessed unique and inherently virtuous national traits. “The modern cosmopolitan is to be blamed not for developing on a magnificent scale the virtues of expansion but for setting up these virtues as a substitute for the virtues of concentration. He would have us believe that everyman can fly off on his own tangent, and then in some mysterious manner, known only to romantic psychology, become every man’s brother; and that the same process can be repeated on a national scale.”

False cosmopolitanism was, Babbitt remarked, “something of romantic sophistry”\(^1^9\) because it suppressed genuine spiritual experience and obscured the ethical challenges that must be overcome if people were to get along with one another. The Romantic sentimentalist sought to be unique, eccentric, and solitary, yet also wished to find communion through sentimentality. But the false cosmopolitan’s attempt at unity through emotion, Babbitt said, was an attempt to find communion through the lowest common denominator of human existence and was more a sign of decadence than peaceful order:

> Few moments are more perilous for a country than when it escapes from its narrow traditional disciplines and becomes cosmopolitan. Unless some new discipline intervenes to temper the expansion, cosmopolitanism may be only another name for moral disintegration. Nations, no less than individuals, as history tells us all too plainly, may descend to meet. Their contact with one another may result not in that ideal exchange of virtues of which Madame de Staël dreamed, but in an exchange of vices.\(^2^0\)

For Babbitt, this false cosmopolitanism represented a historically unique threat to peace because it assumed that the worship of national ego would naturally lead to common ground with other nations similarly oriented. Babbitt argued that recent history more likely points to the conclusion that well-armed nations, all with the firm conviction that their national souls

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were each unique and inherently beautiful, would more likely be warlike than peaceful. Babbitt employed a reference from Romantic literature to explain the problem:

The clashes between states and coalitions of states have, under existing conditions, become clashes between Frankenstein monsters. One should recollect that the Frankenstein monster was not, as is commonly supposed, a soulless monster. On the contrary, as depicted by Mrs. Shelley, he is, in the Rousseauistic sense, a beautiful soul—possibly as a result of having learned to read from works like the *Sorrows of Werther*. He becomes ruthless only when the beauty of his soul and his yearnings for sympathy are underappreciated by others and he is forced back into psychic solitude.21

Romanticism tended to create a literature of nationalism, which could only be understood through a subrational spirit accessible only by those native to that particular country. Babbitt cited critics of this type of national literature such as the nineteenth century French literary critic, Désiré Nisard, who objected to the “‘chimera of a purely national literature.’” Nisard asserted, “what is precious in literature must not be purely national, but universal and human.” One cannot become cosmopolitan, Nisard complained, and look for common ground across cultures by asserting that literature is only comprehended through a unique national outlook. Nisard “looked on the new cosmopolitanism of comprehension and sympathy as a menace to some of the finest qualities in French literature.”22

Long before Babbitt began writing extensively about politics, he had developed his concept of cosmopolitanism. In a very early essay, written in 1898 when he was in his early 30s, Babbitt was critical of an unsound cosmopolitanism that naively assumed that nations would come together based upon their differences. “In that ideal cosmopolitanism of which Goethe dreamed, each country was to broaden itself by a wise assimilation of the excellencies of other nationalities. The actual cosmopolitanism which has arisen during the present century

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has perhaps resulted in an interchange of vices rather than of virtues." In his 1915 *Nation* essay, Babbitt described the same ideas as "true" and "false" internationalism.

Throughout his writings, Babbitt preferred to bring his concept of genuine cosmopolitanism into clearer focus by contrasting the genuine cosmopolitanism of Christianity with the false cosmopolitanism of an expansionistic nationalism. Because of its religiosity, the culture of the Middle Ages was, in contrast to modernity, highly cosmopolitan. “This literature that expressed the mind of the Middle Ages was in the highest degree cosmopolitan, but cosmopolitan in the older and what may turn out to be the only genuine sense, - that is, it rested primarily on a common discipline and not on a common sympathy.” On this ethical level people “cease to be, first of all, Jew or Greek, bond or free, male or female, for they have become ‘one in Christ.’”

He pointed out that Rousseau had rejected “both institutional Christianity and true Christianity, on the ground that they are antinational” and that the Enlightenment-Romantic rejection of a religious and humanistic view of human nature meant that individuals and nations would not find common ground. “Even etymology tells us that if men wish to move toward a common centre they must not expand and fly off, each on a tangent of his own temperament and impulses, but concentrate. For those who admit that men must move towards some such

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centre set above their ordinary selves, if civilized society is to endure at all, it follows that the
‘civil war in the cave,’ instead of being artificial, is a tremendous fact.”

Babbitt’s political writings therefore did not offer simply a negative critique of modern
naturalism; he offered a positive path forward in his concept of cosmopolitanism. All great
cultures, East and West, have deep humanistic or religious traditions that could unite people on
the basis of “moderation and good sense and decency.” Babbitt’s version of true
cosmopolitanism emphasized not national differences but a genuinely religious or humanistic
outlook that might unite individuals and even national leaders by emphasizing common
spiritual experiences. What could draw people together, or what created a genuine
cosmopolitan outlook was religious or ethical discipline. “If we are to unite on the higher
levels with other men we must look in another direction than the expansive outward striving of
temperament: we must in either the humanistic or religious sense undergo conversion.”

Babbitt also believed that a genuinely cosmopolitan person could not be aggressively
dogmatic about religion doctrine. Even some genuinely religious personalities in history had
mistakenly neglected to find commonalities among different religious traditions because they
have focused on contrasting dogmas rather than common religious experiences. Traditions and
dogmas might, as Burke argued, provided the decent drapery of life and would buttress one
who was struggling to perform their duties, but truth was found not in the dogma, but in the
activity of the soul itself. As Babbitt stated the problem of dogma: “The final reply to all the
doubts that torment the human heart is not some theory of conduct, however perfect, but the

28 Babbitt, Rousseau & Romanticism, 388.
29 Babbitt, Rousseau & Romanticism, 329.
man of character.” Babbitt liked to point to the common spiritual experiences found in Christianity and in Buddhism. “Persons of positive and critical temper who yet perceive the importance of meditation may incline here as elsewhere to put less emphasis upon the doctrinal divergence of Christianity and Buddhism than on their psychological agreement.” Leaders from different nations and cultures would not, of course, share the same doctrines and conventions, but if they were engaged in true ethical work, they would find common ground with other leaders of similar orientation.

What struck Babbitt about human history was not, as the Romantic would point out, the sheer variety of human beings but the central unity that threads through all of the diversity. “A student of the past cannot help being struck by the fact that men are found scattered through different times and countries and living under very different conventions who are nevertheless in virtue of their insight plainly moving towards a common centre.” The problem of the One and the Many, Babbitt thought, could be solved in actual experience: “Men tend to come together in proportion to their intuitions of the One; in other words the true unifying principle of mankind is found in the insight of its sages. We ascend to meet.”

Claes G. Ryn has devoted an entire book to the idea that international order must ultimately be rooted in a sound cosmopolitanism in which diverse cultures recognize their common humanity. Diverse religious and humanistic traditions may exhibit unique and particular conventions and traditions, yet when examined with some care, this diversity at the highest level is found to be “a manifestation of universality itself.” That is, universal human

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30 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 197.
32 Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism*, 175-76.
values manifest themselves in a perpetual stream of diversity that displays “richness, strength and adaptability.” For Ryn, a leader with a cosmopolitan temperament will recognize that each culture can attain a higher plane of existence by cultivating and developing the richness of its unique historical experience. This particularity is not an obstacle to be overcome, but a potentiality for enhancement to be celebrated.

Ryn is enlarging an idea that is implicit to Babbitt's thought but is not always precisely articulated. Ryn emphasizes that even on this higher plane of existence, what is universal will—by the very nature of reality—manifest itself in diverse ways. It is important to point out that true cosmopolitanism as extended in this fashion would welcome diversity and see it as a strength as long as the diversity is grounded in a sound ethical outlook. In short, Romanticism's celebration of diversity and differences might deserve a partial acceptance that is not often given by Babbitt. Babbitt's emphasis, however, was not on doing justice to possibly valid elements in Romanticism but on the requirement that human beings need to engage in ethical work in order to avoid a false picture of reality and on the fact that Romanticism went off track when an unchecked imagination asserted utopian visions for the political order.

In *Democracy and Leadership*, seeking to demonstrate the possibility of a genuine cosmopolitanism, Babbitt devoted an entire chapter – “Europe and Asia” – to the commonalities of the philosophical traditions of East and West. To analyze what united mankind, Babbitt said, we should notice what East and West have in common, the things that affirm, as Cardinal Newman argued, “that the whole world is sound in its judgments (Securus judicat orbis terrarium).”

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In order to perform this task, the analysis cannot be impeded by “theological blinders” or “dogmatic preoccupations,” or even by trying to recover, as Burke recommended, “‘old prejudices and unreasoned habits.’” While the modern world would no longer accept these traditional symbols, Babbitt was sanguine that the cause was not lost because the unity of mankind could be recovered by pointing to “a purely psychological definition of the vital factor that has plainly tended to drop out in the passage from medieval to modern Europe.”

While Asiatic periods and regions, like Western history, could be characterized as highly civilized or less so, at its height Asiatic civilization possessed traits that were highly similar to Christianity. After citing all of the Pauline virtues, including “Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, mildness, self-control,” Babbitt remarked that: “About the middle of the third century before Christ, the Buddhist ruler of India, Asoka, had a very similar list of virtues carved in stone at various points throughout the vast empire: ‘Compassion, liberality, truth, purity, gentleness, peace, joyousness, saintliness, self-control.’” Thus Buddhism and Christianity, which often seemed hopelessly at variance when approached from the point of view of dogma, confirm one another when studied experimentally and in their fruits. The pathway to peace will be found in these spiritual and ethical commonalities.

At the center of these commonalities, Babbitt again emphasized, was a certain quality of will.

I have been trying to show that at the center of the great religious faiths of Asiatic origin is that idea of a higher will that is felt in its relation to man’s ordinary will or expansive desires as a power of vital control. The recognition of this higher will, however conceived—whether one say with Christ, ‘Thy will be done,’ or with Buddha, ‘Self is

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37 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 181.
38 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 184-85.
39 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 185.
the lord of self; who else can be the lord? - is the source of awe and humility. The submission to this higher will is in its consummation peace.\textsuperscript{40}

A focus on the foremost obligation to master oneself and to improve one’s own character also tended to mitigate the desire to meddle, or even bully, in the affairs of others, whether on a personal, political, or even international level. “With the present trend toward ‘social justice,’ the time is rapidly approaching when everybody will be minding everybody else’s business.”\textsuperscript{41} Babbitt affirmed agreement with the Platonic notion that the best definition of justice is minding one’s own business. “The Platonic definition of justice as doing one’s own work or minding one’s own business has perhaps never been surpassed.”\textsuperscript{42}

Unsound cosmopolitanism emphasized activity outside the soul rather than activity internal to it: “Genuine justice seems to demand that men should be judged, not by their intentions or endeavors, but by their actual performance.”\textsuperscript{43} What the individual owed society was “conscience that is felt as a still small voice that is the basis of real justice.” The concept of social justice, Babbitt believed, distracted attention from the ethical work that would be required to men together in a genuine way. Injustices that exist in society, he believed, were the accumulated injustices, writ large, of individual unjust acts committed by individual people.

Modern progressives and altruists would label such an outlook as selfish, but Babbitt’s retort was that a focus on one’s own character was the truest social policy: “There may be something after all in the Confucian idea that if a man only sets himself right, the rightness will extend to his family first of all, and finally in widening circles to the whole community.”\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{40}Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 188.
\textsuperscript{41}Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 225.
\textsuperscript{42}Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 223.
\textsuperscript{43}Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 228.
\textsuperscript{44}Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 226.
This passage, more than any other, summarized Babbitt’s concept of sound cosmopolitanism. Human beings would be peaceful together when they are united in a common ethical discipline.

Babbitt was a critic of the prevalent belief that virtue involves a commitment to a social cause as, many times, this activism simply masks a will to power. There were many financial titans, Babbitt pointed out, who through imperialistic personalities have accumulated mass wealth, only then to espouse the view that their imperialism can be mitigated, and cosmopolitanism can be spread, by philanthropy. But, as Babbitt said: “A man who amasses a billion dollars is scarcely exemplary, in the Aristotelian sense, even though he proceeds to lay out half a billion upon philanthropy. The remedy for such a failure of the man at the top to curb his desires does not lie, as the agitator would believe, in inflaming the desires of the man at the bottom.”

Babbitt’s distinction between humanitarianism that characterized virtue as support for social justice and humanism that defined virtue as personal moderation and self-restraint was important in the context of cosmopolitanism as this distinction is the key to understanding the difference between a sound cosmopolitanism and an unsound cosmopolitanism. Nations that were genuinely cosmopolitan would worry first and foremost about their own probity and the example they were setting before they began meddling in the affairs of others or telling them how to act or govern themselves.

For the humanitarian, Babbitt said, “men are to be brought together, one finds on analyzing this idea of service, by means that are rationalistic and mechanical or else emotional. In either case, the humanitarian assumes that men can meet expansively and on the level of their ordinary selves. But if this notion of union should prove illusory, if men can really only

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come together only in humble obeisance to something set above their ordinary selves, it follows that the great temple to humanity that has been in the process of erection for several generations is the modern equivalent of the Tower of Babel.”

Babbitt recognized the unique problem of achieving a genuine cosmopolitan attitude in the leaders of a democracy. A Rousseauistic view of democracy denied the need for leaders who look to anything higher than the general will of the people. Simply set up the mechanisms for popular rule and heed the voice of the people. But, as Babbitt pointed out, the will of the people can be quite imperialistic. When not properly led, the people of a democracy and be materialistic and superficial, embodying “a huge mass of standardized mediocrity.”

The only method of avoiding egalitarian decline in a democracy would be to elevate the type of aristocratic leader who would be “so loyal to sound standards that he inspires right conduct in others by the sheer rightness of his example.” The leader who followed public opinion rather than shaping it through example, will stand “for nothing higher than the law of cunning and the law of force, and so is, in the sense I have sought to define, imperialistic.”

The French revolutionaries argued that the essence of democracy was overturning a corrupt leadership and replacing it with an undifferentiated popular will. But, Babbitt said that the Revolution demonstrated, “a leader who sets out to be only the organ of a ‘general will’...will actually become imperialistic” and there are profound implications for international relations in leaders who see themselves merely as enforcers of the popular will. The popular will, as history has demonstrated many times from ancient Greece to the French Revolution, tended not to “promote ethical union among men even across national frontiers.”

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When a democratic population has been “emancipated from traditional standards,” popular opinion is often inflamed by “an irresponsible quest for thrills.” Democratic regimes of this type tended “in international affairs” to “involve transitions, often disconcertingly sudden, from pacifism to jingoism.” As Babbitt regularly pointed out, the yellow journalism of a William Randolph Hearst was an accelerant to inflame public opinion toward war, not a cooling force that counseled deliberation.

When he appears, the imperialistic leader would not, of course, represent himself to the people as a militarist, but as a humanitarian. One cannot but reflect on recent headlines in the United States about our wars in the Middle East when Babbitt remarked: “A democracy, the realistic observer is forced to conclude, is likely to be idealistic in its feelings about itself, but imperialistic in its practice. The idealism and the imperialism, indeed, are in pretty direct ratio to one another.” For example, Babbitt pointed to the failure of Wilsonian idealism, which was not based upon a sound moral realism, but a dreamy humanitarianism and had so plainly failed to meet “the test of fruits that they are taking refuge more and more, especially since the war, in their good intentions.”

Only those leaders who have “quelled the unruly impulses of their lower nature” would embody this humanistic understanding and bring peace both to their own nation and with other states. This type of cosmopolitan leader “will find that he is moving toward a common center with others who have been carrying through a similar task of self-conquest.” Only states with this type of leader would tend towards a peaceful disposition. “A state that is controlled by men who have become just as a result of minding their own business in the Platonic sense

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50 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 293.
51 Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 293-94.
will be a just state that will also mind its own business; it will be of service to other states, not by meddling in their affairs on either commercial or ‘idealistic’ grounds, but by setting them a good example. A state of this kind may hope to find a basis of understanding with any other state that is also ethically controlled."\textsuperscript{54} Writ large, the peaceful disposition of a nation's leaders would manifest itself in a peaceful nation.

Genuine cosmopolitanism could only be found in a quality of leadership that was genuinely humanistic or religious. International institutions or legal machinations cannot create cosmopolitanism and, Babbitt insisted, these institutional arrangements were of no use when facing imperialistic leaders. “The hope of cooperation with a state that has an unethical leadership is chimerical…the unit to which all things must finally be referred is not the state or humanity or any other abstraction, but the man of character. Compared with this ultimate human reality every other reality is only a shadow in the mist.”\textsuperscript{55}

Claes Ryn echoes Babbitt in asserting that peace in the contemporary world will be dependent upon leaders who can share a cosmopolitanism rooted in ethical character.

Peace among cultures may be possible in the twenty-first century only if their various elites cultivate the discipline and sensibility of cosmopolitan humanism and are able to impart to their respective peoples some awareness of the shared higher ground of mankind. Each society needs leadership that inspires its people to live up to its own highest moral and cultural standards and that draws attention to how those standards correspond to the aspirations of other peoples.\textsuperscript{56}

The implications of Babbitt’s outlook for international diplomacy are that world leaders with a truly cosmopolitan outlook will exhibit a healthy respect for the highest traditions of other cultures and not seek to impose the “ideals” of one culture upon another. These leaders, Ryn writes, will recognize that “goodness, truth and beauty are in a sense an ever-unfolding

\textsuperscript{54} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 335.
\textsuperscript{55} Babbitt, \textit{Democracy and Leadership}, 335-36.
\textsuperscript{56} Ryn, \textit{A Common Human Ground}, 36
discovery.” Ryn also provides an important cautionary note about the potential for modern thinkers to sentimentalize the establishment of a harmonious world community. Ryn’s critique of John Dewey, whose “notion of the human community is too affected by sentimental humanitarianism” could be applied to many contemporary notions of world community. In particular, sentimental humanitarianism, Ryn says, creates a “tendency to romanticize human nature, specifically, to discount man’s propensity for evil.” This sentimental outlook, which saturates modern Western culture, overestimates the ease with which nations may achieve peace based upon, as Ryn says, “fellow feeling.”

The United Nations Charter, for example, breezily offers the naive assertion that the organization will assist nations “to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours.” The Charter establishes significant rules, processes and other machinations that are designed to promote world peace, but provides no philosophical context about the ethical requirements that could provide a truly common outlook among national leaders. There is no hint about what spiritual glue might be necessary for a peaceful international order. Regarding the futility of international institutions, Babbitt quipped: “Does anyone

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suppose that when Dante says ‘His will is our peace’ he means peace of the same quality as that which is to be established (in theory) by a super-committee at Geneva?”

Ryn describes the futility of trying to establish world peace on a sentimental basis: “To minimize the weaknesses of human nature only creates false expectations and increases the likelihood that those weaknesses will be unleashed upon the world. Cross-cultural union is possible, but any progress toward that goal is likely to be limited and to depend most heavily upon the moral self-discipline and responsibility of the parties involved.”

The work that tends to bring peace in the soul takes effort. War is common in history because human nature has a strong tendency to want to avoid that ethical work. For Babbitt, modernity had simply refused to recognize that the prerequisite to a peaceful world is sound character on the part of world leaders; the issue has been avoided altogether.

At this point, one may ask whether Babbitt’s theory, particularly his concept of cosmopolitanism, had an air of utopianism. Is it realistic to expect world leaders to achieve such a level of self-mastery that they will come together in a kind of religious communion? Is it likely that a Pauline figure would rise to leadership in the West and a Confucian personality would come to lead the East? Is this a realistic hope? If the ascension of saint-like or sage-like figures to positions of leadership is the prerequisite to peace, are not more traditional theories of international relations a more reliable and realistic guide to establishing peace?

In fact, Babbitt seemed quite realistic about attaining this type of ethical leadership. In the closing pages of Democracy and Leadership, he simply said that leaders must be found who merely have “some inkling” of the true meaning of culture and civilization. And, in the

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61 Babbitt, On Being Creative, xli.
63 Babbitt, Democracy and Leadership, 339.
closing of his famous *Nation* essay of 1915, he did not argue that having superhuman, saint-like leaders provided the only realistic path to peace, he simply said we needed a culture that developed leaders who were “moderate and sensible and decent” and who would set a good example by “practicing the virtues in due proportion.”¹⁶⁴ Fifteen years later, he wrote very similar lines in a prominent essay that laid out his definition of humanism: “If the leaders of the various national and cultural groups could bring themselves to display in their dealings with one another moderation, common sense and common decency, that would accomplish a great deal—vastly more than they have been accomplishing of late.”¹⁶⁵

Babbitt’s objection to modernity was that naturalism had precluded leaders from even considering that mastering their own temperament would be an important ingredient in bringing restraint to the international stage. Saints are not expected nor required, Babbitt would say. Instead, humanistic leaders who are at least aware that there is a human law to which they, and their nation may need to conform would be a very good start. At a minimum, national leaders must find something in themselves, something strong enough to “prevail against the powers of individual and national self-assertion.”¹⁶⁶

A cold-eyed assessment of human nature was, for Babbitt, not utopian, but moral realism. “A chief task, indeed, of the Socratic critic would be to rescue the noble term ‘realist’ from its present degradation. A view of reality that overlooks the element in man that moves in an opposite direction from mere temperament, the specifically human factor in short, may prove to be singularly one-sided.”¹⁶⁷

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In his actual views on international politics, Babbitt was very much a prescient realist, correctly prognosticating on a host of future challenges that did indeed develop for the United States, many times years after his predictions. He, in fact, spent a good deal of his writings pointing out how predictions of world peace by utopian idealists had literally been exploded by violent events such as the Great War.

Babbitt had applied his concept of true cosmopolitanism to the tensions and wars of mostly Western European nation states at the dawn of the 20th century. While contemporary challenges to world order are different, Babbitt’s ideas on moral realism provide a very useful guide to analyzing current affairs. Therefore, our next task will be to consider several contemporary theories of world order and, with a Babbittian perspective, consider which of these theories may offer a more reliable outlook for peace.
Chapter 7: Babbitt and Contemporary Theories of World Order

_In the post-Cold War world, the most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political, or economic. They are cultural._

– Samuel Huntington

After two world wars and a Cold War, the nations of Western Europe desired to unite themselves around their common culture. The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 united former European enemies into a common economic, political and cultural community. Nations without this common culture, such as Turkey, were deliberately excluded from the European Union despite their NATO membership. Turkey likewise began gravitating away from its Cold War alliances and toward nations with a common cultural of Islam. After the Cold War ended, all over the world, political alliances of nations united by a common culture seemed to get stronger while alliances across cultures seemed to get weaker.

In Western Europe, nationalism did reappear on the scene, as evidenced by the recent Brexit vote and the rise of nationalistic political parties, but the current political divisions within the EU system probably derive not from a simple resurgence of nationalism but from a discomfort with foreign migration to the region that threatens the cultural and political cohesion that was the original inspiration for the Maastricht Treaty.

The contemporary challenges of world order, of peace and of war, are quite different from the nationalistic politics of Europe at the turn of the 20th century that were analyzed by Babbitt. China has emerged as an economic behemoth, casting a long shadow over Asia, the Pacific and beyond. Russia seems to be returning to its Orthodox and authoritarian roots, and asserting itself in areas that share its cultural heritage, presenting enormous security challenges by virtue of its enormous nuclear arsenal. A resurgent Islam has inflamed the Middle East and

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sparked a competition between nations seeking to lead an Islamic civilization. Many regions of the world have suffered violence at the hands of jihadists who have sprung from this Islamic or quasi-Islamic resurgence. The Cold War categories of free, communist and non-aligned nations are no longer relevant and the world seems to have organized itself around deeper cultural commonalities.

Additionally, the world has undergone an informational and technological revolution that has made it considerably “smaller.” Jihadists can provoke Western audiences with beheadings shown over the Internet, while the greatest works of political science are also available to world leaders over the Internet.

The West went through a phase of religious wars in the 17th century, a post-Enlightenment period of imperialistic nationalism with the French Revolution and Napoleon in the 18th century, and a period of nation-state tension and balancing in the 19th century. The 20th century, however, gives one the greatest pause. Beginning with the incomprehensibly brutal and nationalistic WW I, the last century then witnessed the rise of totalitarian ideology and dictatorship, another World War, followed by the Cold War confrontation that threatened a nuclear conflagration.

None of these past challenges, however, provides a historical guidepost to analyze the contemporary strategic situation. Technological change and recent world events have some rough parallels in history, but understanding contemporary trends and problems requires new approaches. Babbitt has much to contribute, but if we are to apply Babbitt’s ideas to the contemporary world, we must develop a framework for explaining and dealing with the dominant trends in the contemporary world. What are the main challenges in foreign policy and international affairs today, and how are Babbitt’s theories relevant to them?
To answer those questions, this chapter will examine a representative sampling of three prominent and contemporary theories of world order and compare those theories to Babbitt’s theory of international politics. When, in light of a discussion of these theories, we have settled upon a paradigm that seems to encapsulate the current international structure and the challenges associated with them, we will turn to Babbitt’s view of international relations and see what guidance it may offer in dealing with contemporary events.

**Romantic Democratist Ideology and “The End of History”**

We turn first to a theory, laid out first at the end of the Cold War by Francis Fukuyama, which argued for the inevitable triumph of Western liberal democracy across the whole world. Statesmen, who ignore this direction of history, said Fukuyama, will likely be unable to bring “coherence and order to the daily headlines.”¹ Fukuyama has revised his theory considerably over the years, but we will focus on his original thesis that was quite influential among post-Cold War policy makers.

Fukuyama argued in his famous 1989 *National Interest* article that “something very fundamental has happened in world history” and that “there is some larger process at work” to cause “an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism.” He argued that there have been “unmistakable changes in the intellectual climate of the world’s two largest communist countries.”² These changes were reflected in phenomena such as Western consumerism in China, “cooperative restaurants and clothing stores” in Moscow, Beethoven being played in Japanese stores and rock music played in Iran.

These developments, he suspected, are not simply another phase in history, “but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the

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universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.” For Fukuyama, the “material world” of people actually living in history was lagging behind a human consciousness that had already conceded the victory of Western democracy and liberalism. History itself would eventually catch up “in the long run.”³ (Emphasis his.)

Fukuyama expressed regret that Karl Marx hijacked the dialectical theory of history promulgated by Friedrich Hegel. He pointed with sympathy to Alexandre Kojève, a Hegel scholar and Russian émigré to France who argued that Hegel saw the end of history not in a final stage of communism, but in the ideals of the French Revolution. "Kojève sought to resurrect the Hegel of the Phenomenology of the Mind, the Hegel who proclaimed history to be at an end in 1806. For as early as this Hegel saw in Napoleon’s defeat of the Prussian monarchy at the Battle of Jena the victory of the ideals of the French Revolution, and the imminent universalization of the state incorporating the principles of liberty and equality."⁴

The end of history would not mean that world events ceased in 1806. Liberty and equality had not been achieved everywhere, e.g., slavery still existed in parts of the world. Nonetheless, from an intellectual perspective, “the principles of the liberal democratic state could not be improved upon.” “There was no more work for philosophers as well, since Hegel (correctly understood) had already achieved absolute knowledge.”⁵

Kojève and other Hegelians would decry economic materialists and superficial political pundits who were failing to see the power of ideas in shaping human consciousness and driving the process of history. The ideals of the French revolutionaries and American Framers, once formed in the human consciousness, would shape history forever after.

⁴ Fukuyama, “The End of History?” 4-5.
⁵ Fukuyama, “The End of History?” 5.
For Kojève, as for all good Hegelians, understanding the underlying processes of history requires understanding developments in the realm of consciousness or ideas since consciousness will ultimately remake the material world in its own image. To say that history ended in 1806 meant that mankind’s ideological evolution ended in the ideals of the French or American Revolutions: while particular regimes in the real world might not implement these ideas fully, their theoretical truth is absolute and could not be improved upon.\textsuperscript{6}

After sympathetically laying out Kojève’s analysis of Hegel, Fukuyama turned to the question of how valuable Kojève’s theory was in interpreting contemporary events. In short, he asked: “Have we in fact reached the end of history?” Is liberalism the final word on life and politics that can, if not resolve all the mysteries of human life, at least provide the final intellectual structure for human beings pondering the “contradictions” of their existence?

Fukuyama then argued that the two great challenges to liberal democracy, fascism and communism, were both defeated on the all-important level of ideas. Even in 1940, the future of fascism was, for Fukuyama, intellectually exhausted since all it promised for the future was the total war of “expansionist ultra-nationalism.” According to Fukuyama, fascism’s material defeat in 1945 meant that it was defeated both materially and intellectually and would not have substantial appeal in the future.

Communism, on the other hand, with its Hegelian core, retained greater intellectual appeal and would not be so easy to defeat. However, over the long run, the material success of the huge middle class in capitalist societies, such as the United States, had defeated the Marxist intellectual assertion that a clash between capital and labor would destroy capitalism.

Fukuyama observed that, “As Kojève (among others) noted, the egalitarianism of modern America represents the essential achievement of the classless society envisioned by Marx.”\textsuperscript{7}

\textsuperscript{6} Fukuyama, “The End of History?” 8.
\textsuperscript{7} Fukuyama, “The End of History?” 9.
With these realizations, communism has lost its appeal, particularly among the young, and the major European communist parties have suffered from political atrophy.

Having described the inherent weaknesses of communism and fascism, Fukuyama turned to his view of how the ideals of Western liberal democracy have invaded the consciousness of Asia and the Middle East. The American occupation after World War II, had introduced Western liberal democracy to one of the most important countries in Asia and Japan, Fukuyama argued, then made an important “contribution…to world history by following in the footsteps of the United States to create a truly universal consumer culture that has become both a symbol and an underpinning of the universal homogenous state.” Other Asian nations, such as South Korea, he said, also followed this pattern whereby the consumer culture and material success open the door to political liberalism. Even in Khomeini’s Iran, a traveler would notice “the omnipresent signs advertising the products of Sony, Hitachi, and JVC, whose appeal remained virtually irresistible and gave the lie to the regime’s pretensions of restoring a state based upon the rule of the Shariah.”

Fukuyama next turned to China where, he argued, Marxism-Leninism had largely collapsed as an intellectually credible theory. China’s economy had been restructured on principles that belie communism, and a new atmosphere of capitalism, risk, and economic “dynamism” had taken hold. He wrote that “anyone familiar with the outlook and behavior of the new technocratic elite now governing China knows that Marxism and ideological principle have become virtually irrelevant as guides to policy, and that bourgeois consumerism has real meaning in that country for the first time since the revolution.”

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Fukuyama then considered the Soviet Union, where a substantial reformist turn was apparent in 1989, the time of Fukuyama’s analysis. Gorbachev, he said, faces serious short-term challenges from conservatives who would oppose substantial reform. But, he argued, the intellectual die had been cast and an “astonishing transformation” had occurred in the “sphere of ideology and consciousness” that will eventually cause the tide of history to bring liberalism to the Soviet Union.

This intellectual transformation in the Soviet Union, he argued, was unpredictable. Gorbachev’s opening of “perestroika” was unlikely to fill the intellectual vacuum that the collapse of Marxism has created. But, he said, the future shape of an ideology in the Soviet Union is less important than the fact that it had been slain by liberalism and that no competing political ideology would arise that can compete with liberal democracy. “But at the end of history it is not necessary that all societies become successful liberal societies, merely that they end their ideological pretensions of representing different and higher forms of human society.”

After he considered specific regimes that might be a challenge to liberalism, Fukuyama considered two other potential challenges: religion and nationalism. He pointed to the rise of religious fundamentalism around the world but, in a single paragraph, he swept away the possibility of religion as a serious competitor to liberalism because “modern liberalism itself was historically a consequence of the weakness of religiously-based societies which, failing to agree on the nature of the good life, could not provide even the minimal preconditions of peace and stability.” Although Islam advocates a universal theocratic state to compete with liberalism, Fukuyama was skeptical that this option would hold any universal appeal.

Religious sentiments, Fukuyama concluded, could be satisfied as a private activity within the sphere of liberalism.

Finally, the last possible challenge to liberalism might be nationalism. He admitted that nationalism had been a plague upon the Western world since Napoleon. Most nationalism, he argued, was not the virulent nationalism embodied by National Socialism. Rather, nationalism generally represented competition among various cultural groups and thus was not a coherent threat to liberalism. He believed that while it may cause conflict, nationalism was not an existential or intellectual threat to liberalism.

Fukuyama finally concluded that liberalism had successfully overcome its major intellectual and political competitors. Although he acknowledged that many nations, particularly in the Third World, are still “very much mired in history,” communism, nationalism, and religion had been sufficiently discredited in the consciousness of most major regions of the world. The battle of ideas seems to have ended, and the end of history means that we have entered a “de-ideologized world.”

Fukuyama argued that many observers of international relations have not caught up to this shifting consciousness and are still trapped in the obsolete paradigm of balance-of-power theory. He took issue with Charles Krauthammer’s prediction that when the Soviet Union sheds communism, Russia’s “behavior will revert to that of nineteenth century imperial Russia.” He argued that to “take ‘neo-realist’ theory seriously, one would have to believe that ‘natural’ competitive behavior would reassert itself among OECD states were Russia and China to disappear from the face of the earth.”

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Fukuyama asserted that “the evolution of human consciousness” had made a return to balance of power theory impossible and followed with a series of predictions and assertions that, with the benefit of hindsight, seem more than slightly off the mark. He predicted that the Soviet Union would probably not revert to 19th century imperial Russia, nor return to communism as “from their writings and from my own personal contacts with them, there is no question in my mind that the liberal Soviet intelligentsia rallying around Gorbachev has arrived at the end-of-history view in a remarkably short time, due in no small measure to the contacts they have had…with the larger European civilization around them.” With the end of history and ideology, Russia would turn its attention to economic concerns and to a view of world affairs in which “the use of military force becomes less legitimate.”

Regarding China, the end of history and ideology would follow a similar path. Since the Chinese leaders began their “liberal” reforms, "Chinese competitiveness and expansionism on the world scene had virtually disappeared,”15 and while China had engaged in some “troublesome” conduct on the international stage, that conduct was related to its commercial strategies, e.g., selling missile technology to the Middle East.

This new liberal consciousness would translate into a world in which economic concerns dominate and major war is less likely. “And the death of this ideology means the growing ‘Common Marketization’ of international relations, and the diminution of the likelihood of large-scale conflict between states.” Wars, he said, will still happen where regimes have not yet escaped history, but those wars would likely involve smaller countries as the large powers, such as the United States, Russia and China, were in the process of exiting history. The end of history, he said, will be boring. The martial virtues would wither,

ideological debates would recede and “there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual care taking of the museum of history.”

Within a dozen or so years of the publication of Fukuyama’s article, world events reduced his prognostications to rubble. The United States was involved in three major wars in the Middle East, driven by many of the geo-strategic motivations that he predicted would wither: balance-of-power theory (Gulf War 1) and religious fundamentalism (9/11). Russia has developed a 19th century authoritarian government and invaded Crimea, de-stabilized Eastern Ukraine, and launched military operations in Syria. China has launched an unprecedented rearmament and, through its military power, has become threatening to a number of its neighbors, including Vietnam, Japan, and others by claiming the rights to various islands where, in recent history, they had no legal claim. Religious fundamentalism overwhelmed the “Arab Spring” in the Middle East, and Fukuyama’s assertion that religion would not be a legitimate competitor to democratic liberalism in that region is, in hindsight, untenable. The Middle East, far from adopting a liberal democratic consciousness, is in the process of actively repudiating liberal principles and, in fact, is utilizing consumer culture techniques such as Twitter and Facebook that Fukuyama argued would promote the success of liberalism. Beheadings published on Facebook and YouTube seem not to embody the “universal consumer culture” that Fukuyama argued would foster liberal values.

Even in the realm of ideas or “consciousness,” democratic liberalism is losing its appeal among many peoples of the globe. The democratic regimes of the West have been rocked by economic stagnation, ballooning debt, race and ethnic tensions, cultural decadence, and

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dysfunctional political institutions. Developing nations are more likely to emulate the model of Singapore, South Korea, or China than that of Great Britain, the United States or France.

Irving Babbitt would likely have scoffed at Fukuyama’s paradigm of world order. Fukuyama’s view was that history was not decided by the struggles and choices that happen in the breast of the individual. His paradigm is the Rousseauistic model with a quasi-Hegelian flair. History, he thought, would re-shape human nature through a new consciousness, and the historical dialectic have created the final “Idea” of government: liberal democracy and market-based economies. In Fukuyama's paradigm, peace would be the inevitable result of this mysterious historical process and not of the temperament, restraint, and personal sagacity of statesmen.

Babbitt would have pointed out that the success of liberal democracy was bound up with the quality of the leadership in those democracies. Even if world events seemed to portend a rise of democratic regimes (which seems less and less the case), one should not assume that this trend would lessen the chances of world conflict, rather, it could worsen world order. Liberal democracy presupposes leaders who exhibit moderation, restraint, ethical behavior, and self-control. Babbitt would ask whether these are the characteristics that the world’s emerging leaders are likely to exhibit.

Babbitt also would have predicted that the adoption of Fukuyama’s outlook by American statesmen would breed imperialism. The assertion that liberal democracy should be the only aspiration of governments around the world would result in war because it would declare all non-liberal governments illegitimate. George W. Bush embodied this spirit of democratic imperialism when he declared an international crusade for democracy in his Second Inaugural Address: “So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of
democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.” Bush asserted that this task was not “primarily the task of arms,” yet he launched two major wars to create democracies in Iraq and Afghanistan. He also embraced Fukuyama’s quasi-Hegelian historicism by asserting: “History also has a visible direction, set by liberty and the Author of Liberty.”

From Babbitt’s point of view, Fukuyama’s paradigm would have been so implausible that it would not merit serious consideration as an interpretation of the modern world order. Not only has Fukuyama’s theory not proved predictive, it embodied a kind of sentimental historicism that Babbitt would have vigorously opposed.

Realism without a Moral Center: Kissinger

Henry Kissinger has been one of the most prolific commentators on world affairs, and he has for years been the paradigmatic realist. While Kissinger has analyzed a bewildering set of world events going back to the 1950s, his general theory of world order has remained consistent. For Kissinger, peace depends upon “a system of independent states refraining from interference in each other’s domestic affairs and checking each other’s ambitions through a general equilibrium of power.” For Kissinger, the Peace of Westphalia and, to some degree, the Congress of Vienna embodied such an arrangement, offering the lesson that realism and balance-of-power theory are indispensable outlooks in analyzing world events.

Kissinger seeks to extinguish any hint of idealism. He believes that “the Westphalian peace reflected a practical accommodation to reality, not a unique moral insight. It relied upon a system of independent states refraining from interference in each other’s domestic affairs and checking each other’s ambitions through a general equilibrium of power.”20 European statesmen of the era “reserved judgment on the absolute in favor of the practical and the ecumenical,” and they created order “from multiplicity and restraint.”21

At the time, these Westphalian principles were not accepted by non-European nations or empires, such as China and the Ottoman Empire. Yet, as European influence spread, the Westphalian principles spread too, despite the competing worldviews in other regions: “Westphalian principles are...the sole generally recognized basis of what exists of a world order.”22 The modern system of nation states, which now “encompasses every culture and region,” is a creation of Westphalia, and the rules of engagement among nation states are still guided by Westphalia. Out of Westphalian principles grew the contemporary network of international institutions, trade treaties, international financial systems, and other “accepted principles of resolving international disputes," principles that "set limits on the conduct of wars when they do occur.”23

Kissinger however expresses deep concern that the Westphalian system has begun to fray. Religious fundamentalists in the Middle East pine for a regional or even worldwide Caliphate. Some large Asian nations look back to a time when they were regional hegemons and nation-states were less important than Imperial warrants. The United States, the nation that kept world order for decades, has been traumatized by successive wars and has historically

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20 Kissinger, World Order, 3.
21 Kissinger, World Order, 4.
22 Kissinger, World Order, 6.
23 Kissinger, World Order, 7.
been ambivalent about Westphalian balance-of-power principles that contrasted with its propensity for democratic idealism.

Kissinger is concerned that these fissures in the Westphalian system are leading to a crisis in world order. He worries that “all of the major centers of power practice elements of Westphalian order to some degree, but none considers itself the natural defender of the system. All are undergoing significant internal shifts. Can regions with such diverse cultures, histories, and traditional theories of order vindicate the legitimacy of any common system?”24

The problem for Kissinger is that the Westphalian system was easier to implement and maintain in the small geographic area of Western Europe with a common culture and civilization than it is in the modern world: “The smaller the geographic area to which it applies and the more coherent the cultural convictions within it, the easier it is to distill a working consensus. But in the modern world the need is for a global world order. An array of entities unrelated to each other by history or values (except at arm’s length), and defining themselves essentially by the limits of their capabilities, is likely to generate conflict, not order.”25 What Kissinger recommends is “a modernization of the Westphalian system informed by contemporary realities.”26

Kissinger sees the world always precariously balanced and always ready to tip into imbalance and conflagration, rather than moving, Hegelian-style, toward some mysterious consensus of consciousness. Diverse histories and cultures prevent statesmen from a variety of power centers from accepting the same rules. Order can erode from swings in relative economic and military power or religious eruptions and ideological outbursts. The only answer

24 Kissinger, World Order, 8.
26 Kissinger, World Order, 373.
to this volatility is for enlightened statesmen in the most important power centers of the world to accept that Westphalian consensus, “a set of commonly accepted rules that define the limits of permissible action and a balance of power that enforces restraint where rules break down, preventing one political unit from subjugating all others.”

Such a consensus will not prevent all conflict but it will mitigate the possibility of a fundamental breakdown in world order. “A consensus on the legitimacy of existing arrangements does not – now or in the past – foreclose competitions or confrontations, but it helps ensure that they will occur as adjustments within the existing order rather than as fundamental challenges to it.”

While Kissinger has always been described as a “realist” or a “balance-of-power theorist,” there is a kernel of something deeper in his thought. Kissinger strongly implies that, for world order to take hold, statesmen must have a certain temperament. There is an unmistakable similarity in Kissinger’s language and concepts with the authors of *The Federalist*, who urged the construction of a system in which the passions and ambitions of the people would be cooled, “through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country” and who would be “least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations.” When Kissinger says that the Westphalian system was designed so that nation states could “check each other’s ambitions through a general equilibrium of power,” the echo of James Madison in Federalist 51 is clear: “The provision for

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defence must in this, as in all other cases, be made commensurate to the danger of the attack. Ambition must be made to counteract ambition.”30

For Kissinger, the Westphalian statesman achieves order, not simply through a balance-of-power but from “restraint,” a word he uses several times to describe what is required of statesmen. Enlightened diplomats and statesmen must accept certain “limits of permissible action.” Kissinger does not use philosophical language to describe this type of self-controlled statesman, he uses the term “consensus legitimacy” or refers to the quest to find statesmen and nations who will accept certain rules that will lead them to act with “restraint when rules break down” and will not collaborate in “subjugating” other nations. Kissinger states explicitly that a balance-of-power “does not in itself secure peace.” The essential ingredient in Kissinger’s thought is enlightened and restrained leaders who will recognize the realities of power politics but who can then craft a common consensus of legitimacy. A balance-of-power must be “thoughtfully assembled and invoked” so that it can “limit” and “curtail” the “fundamental challenges” to an orderly world.

Kissinger’s realism contrasts strongly with Fukuyama’s idealism. Kissinger, in fact, gives Fukuyama a kind of rhetorical pat on the head in the last paragraph of his most recent book, World Order. “Long ago, in youth, I was brash enough to think myself able to pronounce on ‘The Meaning of History.’ I now know that meaning is a matter to be discovered, not declared.” 31

Kissinger may eschew that there is any moral dimension to his thought, but he implicitly acknowledges that the clever navigation of power politics will not be enough to ensure world order. His thought is more complex and philosophical than even he may be aware.

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31 Kissinger, World Order, 374.
of, for he has an inchoate sense that a “common order” will require leadership by persons of a certain moral temperament and character. Statesmen must be willing to refrain, to set limits on their own (and their nation’s) ambitions, to find common ground with diverse cultures, and to achieve cosmopolitanism in their approach toward leaders from different cultures. “The mystery to be overcome is one all peoples share – how divergent historic experiences and values can be shaped into a common order.”32

Kissinger does not address this philosophical challenge in his writings. He presents a common sense, realistic analysis of contemporary world affairs and the obstacles to creating a Westphalian order when contemporary events display a resurgent Islam, a democracy-crusading United States, rising hegemony in parts of Asia, the explosive growth of deadly weaponry and other impediments to finding a “common order.” He seems to avoid taking the next step of exploring possible sources of the desirable restraint and cosmopolitanism and instead insists on proceeding from a kind of self-contained, amoral balance-of-power realism. This is in contrast to Babbitt’s moral realism that argued the creation of Westphalian statesmen of moderate temperament is the root problem to be solved. Babbitt argued that the more fundamental challenge is how to shape the culture and the educational system so that leaders of moderation, character and self-control will emerge. If you ignore the moral challenge of how to actually create the Westphalian statesman, Babbitt pointed out, you will not have one.

A Clash of Civilizations

While Kissinger’s contemporary writings provide a well-informed description of the challenges of modern international affairs, they lack an analytical paradigm for explaining why contemporary challenges have arisen. Why did the first, post-Cold War conflagration take

32 Kissinger, World Order, 10.
place in the former Yugoslavia? Why has a resurgent Russia attacked Crimea and the Ukraine?

Why did Western European nationalism partially recede and give birth to a common market, currency, and even political order? Why has Greece been the most uncomfortable participant in the EU and turned to Russia for support? Why has travel increased exponentially between mainland China and Taiwan? Why has Turkey become more Islamic and less Western in its culture and politics? Why has the United States not succeeded in bringing Western democracy to the Middle Eastern nations that she invaded?

These developments in world events are not explained, nor anticipated, by either Fukuyama or Kissinger. For perhaps the soundest of widely known paradigms for explaining contemporary events, we turn to Harvard historian and political scientist Samuel Huntington, who published a much-discussed article on the clash of civilizations in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993. It was followed by a larger book-length work: *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. In these writings, Huntington sought to explain the world that emerged after the Cold War and then, in the conclusion of his book, he offered a very specific description of how statesmen from different civilizations might create peace in this new world order. Huntington’s description of how civilizations might come together in peace was strikingly similar to Babbitt’s concept of cosmopolitanism.

Huntington opened his book by describing how many current theories of world order were unsatisfying. He saw some merit in some of these theories, but he ultimately finds them wanting. Liberal democracy had not triumphed, as Fukuyama predicted, and the many theories that split the world in two camps, e.g., rich and poor or civilized and barbaric, did not capture the complexity of the current environment. The realist theories that view state actors as

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33 See: Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations,” *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993); 22-49.
the most important units of analysis failed to capture how international alliances are increasingly formed not on the basis of pure national interest but because “publics and statesmen are less likely to see threats emerging from people they feel they understand and can trust because of shared language, religion, values, institutions and culture.”

Finally, Huntington addressed the “chaos” theories of Zbigniew Brzezinski and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. The world was indeed chaotic, he pointed out, but the truth is more complex. “The world may be chaos but is not totally without order”.

Huntington accepted that some of these theories could help explain pieces of the world scene, but he believed that none could serve as a contemporary paradigm of current world order. Instead, he argued that the world that emerged after the Cold War was a world with a multiplicity of civilizations organized around common cultures.

In the post-Cold War world, for the first time in history, global politics has become multipolar and multicivilizational…In the post-Cold War world, the most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political or economic. They are cultural. Peoples and nations are attempting to answer the most basic questions humans can face: Who are we? And they are answering that question in the traditional way human beings have answered it, by reference to things that mean the most to them. People define themselves in terms of ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs and institutions. They identify with cultural groups: tribes, ethnic groups, religious communities, nations and, at the broadest level, civilizations.

Huntington observed that as the free, communist and non-aligned blocs had faded from history, the world has organized itself around “seven or eight” civilizational units: Western, Latin American, African, Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, Orthodox, Buddhist, and Japanese. He explained that “the rivalry of the superpowers is replaced by the clash of civilizations” and that in looking for threats to world order, threats were most dangerous when they represented

“cultural conflicts” found “along the fault lines between civilizations” such as in the former Yugoslavia.

Before we discuss common themes and ideas found in Babbitt and Huntington, we should ask whether Babbitt influenced Huntington. We can say with some confidence that Huntington had read Babbitt, a famous Harvard predecessor. He may have been nudged to do so by reading Russell Kirk. In an article on conservative thought, published in 1957, Huntington harshly criticized Kirk’s *Conservative Mind*, as an “effort to uncover a conservative intellectual tradition in America” by “resurrecting political and intellectual figures long forgotten.” Huntington remarked that “few enterprises could be more futile or irrelevant,” and he argued that many of the figures resurrected by Kirk are not defenders of “established institutions” but “malcontents” who were severe critics of American culture and society.

Huntington argued that Irving Babbitt was one of these “malcontents” who “fled from America to Buddhism.” We can surmise from this statement that Huntington’s sole exposure to Babbitt was not through Kirk’s summary of Babbitt’s thought in *The Conservative Mind*. That book contains 21 pages that mention or discuss Babbitt’s thought. In those pages, there are 4 mentions of “Buddha” or “Buddhism,” as an influence on Babbitt’s thought while there are a similar number of mentions of Plato, Socrates and Aristotle. One could not conclude from Kirk’s summary alone that Babbitt had “fled…to Buddhism.” Huntington might have reached his conclusion on the basis of reading Babbitt’s last written essay, “Buddha and the

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40 Huntington, “Conservatism as an Ideology,” 472.
Occident” written as a companion to his translation of *The Dhammapada* and published posthumously in 1936.

Huntington’s characterization of Babbitt’s thought as representing a flight to Buddhism has an element of truth. Babbitt certainly felt that the Western tradition of abstract rationalism and sentimental Romanticism contained the seeds of errors that might be corrected by an exposure to the great religious and humanistic thinkers of Asia. The West had been diverted from its classical and Christian traditions and, from the perspective of ethics, had been diverted into the worship of science and sentimental humanitarianism. The Asian focus on ethical concentration and the higher will was a fitting antidote to these Western trends. The thrust of Babbitt’s thought was not an abandonment of the West and a flight into Buddhism. It was a project of diagnosis and treatment of the West, to strengthen it through an ecumenical exposure to other humanistic and religious traditions that could balance adverse trends in Western thought.

This leaves open the question of whether Babbitt’s thought influenced Huntington since, as demonstrated, it is clear that Huntington was familiar with Babbitt. There is, in fact, some circumstantial evidence that Babbitt’s ideas made their way into Huntington’s theories. In the conclusions to Huntington’s two most important works, there are concepts and terminology that contain significant echoes of Babbitt. In his last book, *Who Are We: The Challenges to America’s Nationality*, Huntington concludes that Americans had three alternative ways to consider their national identity: cosmopolitan, imperialistic, and nationalistic. As has been discussed, these are key concepts in Babbitt’s theory of internationalism.
Yet, weighing against a more than partial Babbittian influence, these concepts have different meanings for Huntington. Cosmopolitanism for Babbitt was an outlook that develops between world leaders who have accesses to a certain understanding of human existence and who can see the opportunity for peace with leaders of similar ethical elevation. For Huntington, cosmopolitanism simply meant globalism: “The ideal would be an open society with open borders, encouraging subnational ethnic, racial, and cultural identities, dual citizenship, diasporas, and led by elites who increasingly identified with global institutions, norms, and rules rather than national ones.”

Yet, on the subject of imperialism, Babbitt and Huntington shared nearly identical views. For Babbitt, imperialism was driven by humanitarianism, a desire to “serve” fellow human beings that ignored the ethical obligations of individuals. Huntington similarly characterized imperialism as driven by “humanitarian intervention” and “foreign policy as social work.” Babbitt’s phraseology was similar: “The humanitarian would, of course, have us meddle in foreign affairs as part of his program of world service.” Babbitt could have written the following sentence from Huntington’s book: “The imperial impulse was thus fueled by beliefs in the supremacy of American power and the universality of American values.” American imperialism was a crusade by the nation that felt itself superior. Huntington wrote, “In the cosmopolitan alternative, the world reshapes America. In the imperial alternative, America remakes the world.”

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44 Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity*, 364.
45 Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity*, 363.
Finally, Huntington’s concept of nationalism, while different from Babbitt’s, clearly contained elements of Babbitt’s view of history and culture. Babbitt viewed nationalism as a modern disease; a product of Rousseau’s vision of a diversity of nations with separate and distinct democratic national wills that would push up against neighboring states. This form of nationalism would prevent nations from finding common ground and, in his view, led to the Great War.

Huntington’s term “nationalism” was not a pejorative but merely descriptive. Nationalism was the sum total of a nation’s “culture, values, traditions and institutions.” Yet Huntington obviously had a broader definition of nationalism when he asserted that much of the success of America is bound up with “its Anglo-Protestant culture and its religiosity.” This view was not very different from Babbitt’s assertion that America’s greatness derived from a genuine Christian humility found in a character such as Washington. “Our unionist leaders, Washington, Marshall and Lincoln, though not narrowly orthodox, were still religious in the traditional sense.”

Yet, Babbitt and Huntington probably had different understandings of nationalism because of the historical realities of nationalism that each faced. Babbitt faced the growth of a centrifugal nationalism in Europe that would lead to the disaster of the First World War, a cataclysmic event for the West. The greatest danger for the contemporary world comes from the post-Cold War order in which, as Huntington pointed out, the world had divided into civilizational blocs with separate and distinct religious and cultural traditions. As the nations of Western Europe in the early 20th century could not find common ground, so the great

civilizational blocs of the 21st first century, Western, Orthodox, Sinic, and Islamic, either clashed or seem destined to clash. For Huntington, the two predominant American paradigms for foreign policy were a soft, sentimental globalism based on international institutions and an imperialistic, ideological democracy promotion based on American invasions. He believed both to be unsuited to address the challenges arising from the clash of civilizational blocs because their premises represented a fundamental refusal to recognize the re-ordering of the world along civilizational lines since the end of the Cold War.

Huntington argued that after the Cold War, when the world re-ordered along civilizational lines, “the U.S. government has had extraordinary difficulty adapting to an era in which global politics is shaped by cultural and civilizational tides.”

The first Bush Administration and the Clinton Administration continued to operate under the assumption that global and “multicivilizational” mechanisms would be more important than historical and cultural heritage. This oversight led to terrible blunders in U.S. foreign policy decision-making. Huntington pointed to several mistakes of U.S. foreign policy in the immediate post-Cold War world:

The Bush and Clinton Administrations supported the unity of a multicivilizational Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Bosnia, and Russia, in vain efforts to halt the powerful ethnic and cultural forces pushing for disunion. They promoted multicivilizational economic integration plans which are either meaningless, as with APEC, or involve major unanticipated economic or political costs, as with NAFTA and Mexico. They attempted to develop close relationships with the core states of other civilizations in the form of a ‘global partnership’ with Russia or ‘constructive engagement’ with China, in the face of the natural conflicts of interest between the United States and those countries. At the same time, the Clinton Administration failed to involve Russia wholeheartedly in the search for peace in Bosnia, despite Russia’s major interest in that war as Orthodoxy’s core state. Pursuing the chimera of a multicivilizational country, the Clinton Administration denied self-determination to the Serbian and Croatia minorities and helped bring into

being a Balkan one-party Islamist partner of Iran. In similar fashion the U.S. government also supported the subjection of Muslims to Orthodox rule, maintaining that ‘Without question, Chechnya is part of the Russian federation.\textsuperscript{50}

This failure to recognize the emergence of civilizational blocs has continued to generate fundamental errors in U.S. diplomacy. One could point to an endless number of examples, but we should point out a few of the most important. The greatest U.S. blunder was probably the belief by many prominent policy-makers that the Iraqi people would heartily embrace a model of Western democracy and ignore many generations of sectarian and ethnic connections. More recently, U.S. diplomats in Ukraine severely underestimated the potential reaction of Russia to a U.S.-backed coup in 2014 that led directly to the Russian invasion of Crimea. In the case of Ukraine, the supposed desirability of democracy promotion blinded Obama Administration policy makers to the importance of the cultural and historical desire of Orthodox Russia to preserve their links to Orthodox peoples in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. The drift of Turkey away from NATO and that of Greece from the EU as well as the partial accommodation of Taiwan toward China were all largely unanticipated by U.S. policy-makers, who continue to stress international organizations and norms.

Huntington’s view was that the failure to recognize the civilizational model has been driven by two separate and distinct U.S. foreign policy approaches. First, there were the soft globalists, such as Barack Obama, who argued that international law, institutions and norms should underlie U.S. foreign policy decision-making. The approach of the soft globalists is marked by summity and international conferences designed to address human rights, environmentalism, nuclear proliferation, and other multicivilizational issues.

\textsuperscript{50} Huntington, \textit{The Clash of Civilizations}, 308-09.
Huntington made clear that the far greater danger to the international order would be the
democracy crusading promoted by neoconservative foreign policy elite who populated the
Bush Administration. “In the emerging world of ethnic conflict and civilizational clash,
Western belief in the universality of Western culture suffers from three problems: it is false; it
is immoral; and it is dangerous.”

It is false, Huntington said, because the Fukuyama thesis is false: the world’s cultural
diversity is not eroding and giving way to Western values. It is immoral, Huntington said,
because “of what would be necessary to bring it about.” As we have seen in Iraq, the
resistance to the imposition of Western values is significant, and only brutal imperialistic
tactics have any hope of success in the imposition of those values. On a worldwide scale, the
attempt to impose these values would be catastrophic. Finally, “Western universalism is
dangerous to the world because it could lead to a major intercivilizational war between core
states, and it is dangerous to the West because it could lead to the defeat of the West.” The
failure to recognize the historical and cultural claims of China in the Sinic region or of Russia
in the Orthodox region could generate a world war of unimaginable proportions. The
obliviousness of U.S. policy makers in backing a coup in Ukraine, for example, was the kind of
reckless interventionism that could initiate a chain of events leading to a nuclear conflict.

Huntington, like Babbitt, urged moderation and restraint: “The prudent course for the
West is not to attempt to stop the shift in power but to learn to navigate the shallows, endure the
miseries, moderate its ventures, and safeguard its culture.” Much like Babbitt, Huntington
argued that Western values are rooted in the unique historical cultural traditions of the West
such as “Christianity, pluralism, individualism, and the rule of law.” These values had made

51 Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations, 310.
the West great, but they were unique to the West and, while they might be admired by other civilizations, their adoption would not result from Western leaders simply proclaiming them to be universal. And their forced imposition, at gunpoint, would generate enormous cultural resistance. Huntington argued that the priorities of Western leaders should be renewal at home, not evangelization abroad: “The principal responsibility of Western leaders, consequently, is not to attempt to reshape other civilizations in the image of the West, which is beyond their declining power, but to preserve, protect and renew the unique qualities of Western civilization.”

Historically, while Babbitt faced a clash of nation-states and Huntington saw a clash of civilizations blocs, their situations were analogous and Babbitt fully anticipated and addressed the danger of conflict between civilizations. When faced with a volatile international order both at the turn of the 20th century and in the post-Cold War environment, U.S. policy makers responded with two similarly feckless foreign policy approaches. The first was a sentimental internationalism that placed inordinate faith in international institutions and that soft-peddled deep historical and culture differences rooted in religion and history. The second was a democratic imperialism that sought to impose “universal” Western values under the false belief that the spread of those values would lead to peace and that soft-peddled deep historical and cultural differences between societies.

While Babbitt and Huntington agreed on the folly of certain foreign policy approaches rooted in a misplaced idealism, they were applying their principles to different aspects of the international order. Babbitt foresaw the danger of tensions between civilizations but wrote about foreign policy and international affairs largely in the context of the Great War and the

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potential coming clash of European nation-states. In Huntington’s case, the world had become what contemporary theorists characterize as “smaller.” Huntington warned of clashes between blocs of civilizations that, due to technology, were more easily coming into contact and that, in many important respects, do not have common outlooks, values, and institutions.

Babbitt and Huntington both diagnosed and then rejected the two modern forms of idealism in foreign policy, and they arrived at very similar conclusions concerning the solution to the challenges that they posed for the international order. At the very end of *The Clash of Civilizations*, Huntington parallels Babbitt when he argued that, while cultural and historical diversity is a fact of existence and cannot be ignored, human beings can, and do sometimes, unite on a higher, religious or humanistic level. Huntington said that “whatever the degree to which they divided humankind, the world’s major religions - Western Christianity, Orthodoxy, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism - also share key values in common.”

Huntington then argued that “commonalities” between culturally diverse civilizations could unite humankind on a higher level, a level that he characterized, using a capital “C,” as “Civilization.” Babbitt, too, termed the higher general striving of mankind as a striving for “civilization.” Unlike Babbitt, Huntington did not try in any depth to explain what “commonalities” might have the desired effect. He did, however, ask precisely the question that Babbitt had asked, whether the religious and dogmatic differences between societies could be overcome by a common humanism that would cultivate the higher commonalities that can be drawn out of the cultural diversity. When Babbitt argued for his New Humanism he asked and addressed questions such as the following that Huntington asked: “Is there a general,

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secular trend, transcending individual civilizations, towards higher levels of Civilization?\textsuperscript{55}

Since this is a topic that Babbitt explored in considerable depth, a deeper familiarity with Babbitt might have filled a gap in Huntington’s work on international relations.

Huntington seemed at one with Babbitt when he argued that the only true answer to the challenges of the international order would be found when world leaders unite on a higher plane while respecting cultural diversity: “The futures of both peace and Civilization depend upon understanding and cooperation among the political, spiritual, and intellectual leaders of the world’s major civilizations.”\textsuperscript{56}

While Huntington’s more philosophical musings never went as deep as Babbitt’s and he never defined his terms as clearly as Babbitt, he embraced in his own way Babbitt’s ultimate conclusion that questions of war and peace revolve around the ability of leaders to attain a higher plane of existence. If they have not, disastrous conflict may result. Huntington wrote: “In the greater clash, the global ‘real clash,’ between Civilization and barbarism, the world’s great civilizations, with their rich accomplishments in religion, art, literature, philosophy, science, technology, morality, and compassion, will also hang together or hang separately.”\textsuperscript{57}

Huntington provided a valuable paradigm for understanding the contemporary international order. He also offered a conclusion very similar to Babbitt’s in that he believed that statesmen must respect and to some extent absorb the great human achievements across civilizations, achievements that would of necessity also bear the distinctive marks of the world’s diverse cultures and civilizations. Babbitt and Huntington serve as reminders to U.S. policy makers that a strong dose of humility and a healthy respect for other cultures and

\textsuperscript{55} Huntington, \textit{The Clash of Civilizations}, 320.

\textsuperscript{56} Huntington, \textit{The Clash of Civilizations}, 321.

\textsuperscript{57} Huntington, \textit{The Clash of Civilizations}, 321.
civilizations, made possible by a proper familiarity with their own, represent the path to peace.

Going considerably beyond Huntington, Babbitt provided a major and indispensable supplement to the best of international relations theory.
Conclusion

Societies are not made of sticks and stones, but of men whose individual characters, by turning the scale one way or the other, determine the direction of the whole.  
-Plato

When President Barack Obama was elected, political observers prognosticated that the Bush policy of preemptive wars would come to an end and the United States would turn toward domestic concerns. A few days after Obama's 2008 election, for example, one NPR columnist expressed the hope that the new President would keep his campaign promise of scaling back the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan by asking: "Can Obama Make Good on Promises About Wars?" Bush's Iraq War exhausted both the American public and the United States military as the crusade for democracy degenerated into a bloody quagmire. In 2008, Obama found broad appeal as a peace candidate, promising to scale down and end the wars in the Middle East and to direct his full attention to fixing the wobbly economy. Obama's First Inaugural Address echoed George Washington’s call for restraint in foreign affairs: “Our power alone cannot protect us, nor does it entitle us to do as we please…our power grows through its prudent use; our security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint.”

To the surprise of many, President Obama's foreign policy has been instead characterized by a Bush-like penchant for preemptive military action, including an expansion of interventions beyond Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan to other Middle Eastern nations such as

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Syria and Libya. In fact, the *Financial Times* reported in September 2015 that President Obama had ordered ten times as many drone strike assassinations as President Bush.¹ Through aggressive bombing campaigns, funding for insurgencies, and the liberal deployment of U.S. Special Forces, Obama was instrumental in toppling the leader of Libya, and helped to accelerate the brutal civil war in Syria. He has interfered in the affairs of other great powers, such as China and Russia, and lectured them about their own domestic politics and their regional security policies.

Setting aside the issue of whether this policy shift was wise, there is the question of how the peace candidate, a man who committed to “humility and restraint,” had embraced interventionism. The President’s reversal seems to have been driven by an inability to resist the cultural pressure of the bipartisan foreign policy establishment, who view interventionism as *de rigueur* and even, some would say, patriotic. Whether propelled by a change of heart or overwhelmed by an institutional culture prone toward interventionism, the new President shifted his views and aligned himself with the policies of other post-Cold War presidents. Since the end of the Cold War, the bipartisan consensus on issues of war and peace has been in favor of aggressive interventionism. The foreign policy establishment's calls for U.S. engagement in numerous global conflicts is tinged with what Babbitt would describe as humanitarianism, a *noblesse oblige* that asserts American elites know what is best for other cultures and nations. From Bill Clinton’s wars of choice in the Balkans² to George Bush’s preemptive war in Iraq to Barack Obama’s decapitation of the Libyan regime, the policy of the

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United States has been to use force wherever and whenever it chooses even when such interventions have a tenuous connection to the U.S. national interest.

President Obama’s capitulation is not singular in another sense: presidential decision-making is hardly the only area where important procedural emergency brakes against war have failed to slow an imperial impulse. The U.S. Constitution, the legal embodiment of procedural and policy restraint, is no longer serving as a significant limiting factor in decisions about war and peace. None of the U.S. military interventions since the Iraq War have secured the congressional approval of a declaration of war and there seems no urgency on the part of the executive or legislative branches to embrace their traditional constitutional roles. Congress seems to have abdicated one of its primary Article 1 powers, and the executive, the benefactor of the congressional abdication, seems happy to embrace its new extra-constitutional powers. Likewise, other Article 1 powers of the Congress to appropriate funds (or not) for these military operations have not served as a restraining force against interventionism. For example, a recent study released by the Watson Institute at Brown University estimates that the costs of war since 2001 are a staggering $4.7 trillion dollars. Despite the country's huge deficits and national debt, these wars have been lavishly funded (often with off-budget "emergency funds").

With his theory of imperialism, Irving Babbitt pointed squarely at deep cultural currents that shape the temperament of the leaders who ultimately determine war and peace. As

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President Obama quickly learned, the fact that the foreign policy establishment exudes an imperialistic outlook does not derive from mere policy errors that can simply and easily be corrected by a new president and a new policy statement. The decades-long policy outlook, Babbitt would say, has been shaped by far deeper cultural, moral and intellectual currents that have developed over three hundred years. The moral and cultural forces influencing recent presidents seem to undercut foreign policy restraint, even for presidents elected on a platform of restraint.

In the world of ideas, a reconsideration of the very concept of idealism in foreign policy seems warranted. The two most prominent schools of idealism in U.S. foreign policy, a soft globalism of international institutions and a crusading spirit of democracy promotion, have not promoted and have often undermined international peace and stability. Their failures may derive not primarily from an inability to find the proper tactics to implement their ideas but from the philosophical and imaginative premises underlying idealism itself.

Claes Ryn has pointed out that Babbitt's characterization of idealism as deriving from an "idyllic imagination" does not completely capture the pernicious nature of idealism. "Ideals" seem to imply good intentions that could be realized if only the proper strategies could be employed. In foreign policy, "ideals" tend toward military tactics and solutions. But, as Ryn points out, "The problem is not with poorly chosen means but with the impossible dream itself. The dream ignores the basic facts of life, specifically the need for moral character." If "idealism" were instead to gain a reputation as an intellectual pejorative, it might be a signal that the West is gaining a more rational perspective on foreign policy. Rather than a foreign policy consensus that stresses "noble ideals," U.S. policymakers may wish to consider a more

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realistic emphasis on our national interests, combined with humility and a respect for other nations.

Babbitt always believed that the foreign policy failures that he witnessed did not involve strictly intellectual errors but sprang from a decaying culture in need of a kind of spiritual awakening, a moral conversion among the nation's leaders that would restore restraint and humility. Just as a dissolute and boastful person will not get along with others without a sincere change of heart, a well-armed nation puffed up on self-congratulatory conceits will also not bring order or peace to the world without undergoing what Plato called the *periagoge*, a turning-around of the whole soul.\(^5\)

If the central axiom of classical political philosophy is correct, i.e., that the city is the soul written in large letters, then Babbitt’s theory of imperialism has a compelling internal logic: the aggressive soul will give birth to the aggressive nation. By his assertion of this anthropological principle, Babbitt therefore locates himself squarely in the tradition of classical and Christian political philosophy. Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and a number of other traditional Western political philosophers have all emphasized the foundational assumption that the tendencies of good and evil found in human heart will exhibit themselves on a larger scale in the regime.\(^6\)

Yet Babbitt makes a unique philosophical contribution by extending this city-soul parallel to the field of international affairs. In his analyses of Napoleon and World War I, for


\(^6\) Maybe the most famous exposition of this concept is found in the *Republic* where, in Book IX, Plato describes the different parts of the soul before laying out the regime types that correspond to those various tendencies in the soul.
example, he applies the city-soul parallel to the interactions *between* nation-states. Therefore, one might postulate that there is a “Babbitt Corollary” to the city-soul principle that may be described as the world-city-soul principle. The international order, no less than the domestic order, is going to reflect the soul type of world leaders and the culture that those leaders represent.

When the Western world exploded in mass warfare in 1914, Irving Babbitt analyzed events through this extended world-city-soul paradigm, and in 1917 he wrote:

> Christianity, before its present humanitarian perversion, showed the force of a right example in solving the problem that now concerns us, in promoting peace. “My peace I give unto you.” Humanism is at one with religion in asserting that a doctrine that professes peace must show its efficacy, first of all, by establishing peace in the breast of the individual. To suppose that men who are filled individually with every manner of restlessness, maddened by the lust for power and speed, votaries of the god Whirl, will leave in peace either with themselves or with others, is the vainest of chimeras. Whatever degree of peace is ever achieved in international relations in particular will be due to the fact that the responsible leaders in the countries concerned are not mere imperialistic expansionists, but, whether as a result of religious or humanistic discipline, have submitted a vital impulse to a no less vital control; there will then be hope that they may get within hailing distance of one another, even hope that they may subordinate to some extent the private interests of their respective states to the larger interests of civilization.7

At the turn of the 20th century, Babbitt believed that Rousseauistic propaganda about the natural goodness of the human heart had, 150 years later, given birth to a rabid nationalism in the West. With the elimination of traditional responsibility of individuals to rein in their passions, Romanticism and utilitarianism brought an intellectual, moral and political disaster for the West as military power and prowess were unrestrained by any countervailing moral

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force. The leaders of the West at the turn of the 20th century, aided by utilitarianism, now had vast powers for mass killing at their disposal, yet lived in an intellectual milieu in which spontaneous outbursts of nationalism by agitated populations were thought to be a form of democratic virtue. Appeals for peace on the basis of higher, trans-national moral aspirations went unheeded. “Europe,” Babbitt lamented in 1915, “is to-day less cosmopolitan in any genuine sense of the word than it was at almost any period in the Middle Ages.”

Babbitt can teach Americans today that the present national security challenges of the United States are substantially more complex than is presently understood. They require a long-term solution and would involve a substantial cultural renovation rather than simply improved policy analysis. For the United States to find common ground with other nations, a kind of cultural conversion seems required, yet politicians and policy analysts who are far downstream from moral and spiritual matters seem neither inclined nor equipped to consider or understand the need for such a cultural renewal. A more fruitful alternative may be to turn to those in society who move and shape the spirit: artists, poets, authors, filmmakers, educators, clergy, and others who influence the imagination.

Babbitt would wholeheartedly agree that the outlooks of politicians are the products of deeper cultural currents and that a healthy culture is more likely to produce healthy politicians. Yet, with respect to the contemporary United States, the prudential question is whether there is enough time and enough cultural raw materials to conduct such a renovation. While small pockets of cultural resistance and renewal exist, the prospect for a broad traditionalist renaissance do not seem great. In academia, for example, there is increasing hostility to and

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sometimes deliberate suppression of Western traditions rather than attempts to breathe new life into them.

The present condition of the United States is one in which the possibility of a broad and profound cultural renovation may be remote. Some severe political problems might portend a gradual, or even catastrophic, decline. Yet Babbitt deplored historical determinism, and he believed that human beings and nations make their own fate through moral and other exertions. The only possible remedy for the current conditions would, for Babbitt, be the emergence of leaders who are sensible, moderate and decent so that the body politic can undergo a period of political stabilization. As James Madison said about ancient Athens, “In these critical moments, how salutary will be the interference of some temperate and respectable body of citizens…What bitter anguish would not the people of Athens have often escaped, if their government had contained so provident a safeguard against the tyranny of their own passions?”¹

Babbitt's central piece of advice to contemporary leaders and to the rising generation would be to look inward, to find in themselves humility, modesty and temperance. His advice might be captured in a single sentence from *Democracy and Leadership*: “The final reply to all the doubts that torment the human heart is not some theory of conduct, however perfect, but the man of character.”²

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