

American Intellectual Conservatism: Needs, Opportunities, Prospects

C L A E S G . R Y N

"THE ABYSS of Hell itself seems to yawn before me," wrote Edmund Burke in 1793.¹ With the presence of a sage he saw in the inhumanity of the Jacobins the horrors of a dawning age. If not checked, the pseudo-moralistic fanaticism exemplified by Rousseau and Robespierre would finally destroy Western civilization. In this century, the moral crimes committed in the name of a better world for mankind have confirmed some of Burke's worst fears: Lenin, Hitler, Mao, Stalin and the more recent rulers of Gulag Archipelago have let us look into the yawning abyss of the diabolical.

The triumphs of the modern totalitarians would not have been possible but for the weak resistance to their ideologies or their secret attraction in the soul of Western man. The armed might reared today against the remnants of a great civilization is an outward manifestation of that inner power of destruction which Walter Lippmann called "the acids of modernity." The present struggle for the world is at bottom a struggle for the will, the mind and the imagination.

For those who entertain in relation to our time some of Burke's fears in relation to his own, intellectual developments in the United States in the last several decades have been a source of encouragement. The 1950's saw several mutually supportive intellectual impulses coalesce into a new ethical and cultural conservatism. The movement created by men like Russell Kirk, Peter Viereck, Eric Voegelin, Leo Strauss, Robert Nisbet and John Hallowell, to mention just a few of the most distinguished scholars, has enjoyed steadily growing influence in the universities and society at large.

The many strengths of American intellectual conservatism have been widely and justly celebrated. Yet, like other movements of ideas, it too is liable to succumb to repetitiveness and ideological petrification unless it addresses its own inevitable weaknesses and deepens the insights it has acquired. There follows an attempt by one observer to indicate, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of *Modern Age*, a few of the areas which seem to

present notable challenges or pose obstacles to further development.

The Need for Intellectual Continuity

TRULY to absorb the contribution of a major thinker means relating it to the enduring concerns of philosophy. It requires systematic interpretation over many years. On the whole, American intellectual conservatism has not subjected its leading minds and their precursors to this type of sustained examination. For that reason it has had some difficulty really incorporating and holding on to their central insights. The movement has been kept together more on the level of broad generalities than on the level of philosophic discourse. Partly because of this lack of deeper intellectual continuity, the movement is a rather loose conglomeration of groups which sometimes give the appearance of having only a vague understanding of their own respective origins, of having little knowledge of each other and of having no strong inclination to learn from each other.

There is of course considerable truth in the conventional view that modern American intellectual conservatism took its start in the years around 1950. But it is symptomatic of the mentioned weakness that little attention has been paid to the influence of earlier thinkers on the leading contributors of that period. One American source of inspiration which has been as important as it has been overlooked is the work of Irving Babbitt (1865-1933) and Paul Elmer More (1864-1937). The influence they have exerted, directly and indirectly, extends far beyond those who have openly and repeatedly acknowledged their indebtedness, Russell Kirk and Peter Viereck prominent among them. A fascinating topic for future intellectual historians will be the covert absorption of the ideas of Babbitt and More by numerous scholars who, for complicated reasons, have not publicly recorded their debt.

Modern American intellectual conservatism has benefited greatly from the strong influence of distinguished scholars of European background.

Still, the significance of their contributions should not lead Americans to neglect the careful study of their own leading thinkers. If some Europeans tend to underestimate and even ignore American intellectual traditions (outside of the natural sciences), Americans have no reason to mimic their attitudes. To refer just to the area of social and political thought, one need only weigh the extraordinary historical fact of over two hundred years of constitutional popular government in the United States, the melting pot of the world, to infer that the American socio-political mind and the general culture that has harbored it must contain a very strong element of wisdom and realism worthy of the most serious reflection. Nothing could be more fitting than for Americans to cultivate extensive and sustained inquiry into the foundations of their regime and into the moral and intellectual requirements for its continuation and strengthening. Theoretical and historical writings of European inspiration which are ambivalent toward constitutionalism in general and popular self-government in particular can help alert Americans to the dangers of decadent democracy, but they may also create premature and exaggerated pessimism about the American form of constitutional government.

Much is written at present about so-called "neoconservatives" of "liberal" and radical background, as though their ideas represented something quite new in American intellectual life. While neoconservatism is not without elements of novelty, it has much in common with ideas that have long worked their influence in the United States. Neoconservatism is but one example of how this older movement is being slowly adjusted to particular intellectual needs and finding its way into the American consciousness. Intellectual origins are obscured by fading memory. In general, much energy is spent in the United States in the laborious rediscovery of ideas which have long been available in mature form.

A partial explanation for the lack of deeper, philosophical continuity is the tendency among American intellectuals to be drawn into the sphere of "public policy." For many, the pursuit of ideas retains its attraction only so long as the applicability of those ideas to current practical problems is clearly discernible. Insofar as this pragmatic attitude reflects a view of the proper role of thought and is not just a legitimate concern for the intellectual needs of politics, it betrays a limited grasp of what decides the future of a society. The latter is decided

by those fundamental moral, intellectual and aesthetical dispositions which set the general tone and dispositions of civilization. These dispositions shape also the political inclinations that determine elections. Politicians are usually at the mercy of a cultural climate which was prepared long ago by poets, artists and thinkers caring little or not at all about the immediate practical effects of their work. Only the most tentative and limited conclusions regarding the essential direction of a society can be drawn from developments within that world of fickleness and myopia which centers on public policy and public opinion. Because of the role of fads and fashions, impressions can here be deceiving. A better indication of the future is the state of the arts and the universities. To the extent that American intellectual conservatism is diverted by shifting political issues of the day from a more truly reflective concern about the enduring issues of life, its long-term influence, including its influence on practical politics, is in doubt.

Defining the Ethical Life

THE FAILURE OF success of American intellectual conservatism will depend in the end on its ability to awaken a new spirit of ethical realism. The discovery of truth finds its ultimate justification and confirmation in the proper direction of the human will. A very promising dimension of the intellectual impulses challenging "liberalism" in the 1950's was the rejection of naturalism in various forms and the affirmation of a transcendent moral order. Yet, many learned discussions of this subject would probably have been made more effective by incorporating and stressing a certain truth about the moral life. This insight has deep implications for how we understand and deal with the predicament of modern Western civilization. According to Babbitt and More the gravest threat to Western civilization does not come from those who openly expound doctrines of naturalism and egotism; these individuals can be easily identified. More dangerous and insidious is the attack of those who perpetrate a radical perversion of the moral life behind a facade of concern about virtue and even religion. Vast confusion has been created by association of the ethical life (including religion) with sentimental sympathy. People in the Western world, and not least the intellectuals, have proved strongly susceptible to this confusion. Babbitt and More insist on an all-important distinction, one between genuine morality, which is an exercise of will based on moral

character, and a pseudo-moralistic "virtue" of the emotions. Without this distinction sharply in focus, attempts to defend Western civilization will forever fail to address properly the fundamental problem it faces.²

Jean-Jacques Rousseau exemplifies a spirit of moral decadence which has tempted man in all ages but which acquired enormous new power in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Rousseau is probably the most influential of those who have tried to redefine moral virtue in terms of emotion. More precisely, he lifts morality out of the sphere of action and places it in the sphere of morally conceited imagination. The subtle attraction of this new "morality" is that it liberates man from the painful effort of actual improvement of character. It does not require of him that he should ceaselessly criticize his own moral failings and undertake a continuous and difficult reform of self, as in the classical and Judaeo-Christian traditions in ethics. Man is essentially good and need only give free vent to a natural feeling of brotherhood. Unlike Christian love, which begins with love of neighbor and consists first of all of caring *actions* toward concrete living human beings close at hand, Rousseauistic sentimental "virtue" consists of a merely emotional benevolence toward nobody in particular. Its object is a distant and abstract "mankind." Sentimental "morality" places no burdensome obligations on the bearer; it conveniently transfers duties to some agency other than self, such as government. Far from being associated with a sense of sinfulness and need for self-improvement, Rousseauistic sympathy is inherently self-congratulatory: Only from a pure heart could issue forth such warm feelings of brotherhood. The more ambitious one's benevolent schemes for reform of society and the world, the more obvious one's superior moral sensibilities.

The grave danger of Rousseauistic "virtue" is that it encourages a profound conceit about the human self and invites neglect of the crucial training of the will. This perversion of the classical and Judaeo-Christian understanding of morality has led in the West to the multiplication of a type of individual who takes great pride in his generalized "love" for the poor or downtrodden, or some other abstract category of humanity, but who exhibits actual personal behaviour more suggestive of selfishness and hate. Some of the most passionate "lovers of humanity" are also among the leading tyrants of the modern world.

The substitution of a merely sentimental brotherhood for a morality of character continues to wreak havoc within Western society, including its Churches. Here lies the heart of that moral decadence and escapism which is eating away at the life nerve of Western civilization. The key to a restoration of ethical realism may be this deceptively simple and elusive truth: The only morality that counts is one which proves itself in actual personal conduct.

Social thought not strongly attentive to the mentioned problem of ethics and related questions is likely to give precedence to issues of secondary philosophical importance. A single example from the field of American political thought may illustrate the point. The conventional categories, "federalists" and "anti-federalists," are most useful for some purposes. Philosophically more important, however, are the sharply contrasting views of human nature and morality which can be found behind either of these positions. To consider the anti-federalist orientation, there is a world of difference between a belief in local community, closeness to nature, smallness and public-spiritedness which has a sentimental and utopian cast, as in the case of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and one that is derived from the classical and Judaeo-Christian tradition. Granted that Thomas Jefferson is a complex figure exhibiting some conflicting strains of thought, his brand of anti-federalism is rooted to a large extent in a sentimental moralism and faith in "the people" which can be very easily transformed by circumstances into a nationalizing, centralizing social benevolence.³ It is only superficially a paradox that Jefferson should be invoked by modern American believers in the centralized Welfare State. The differences between, for example, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson are poorly accounted for by such categories of interpretation as "federalists" and "anti-federalists." At issue between them is the nature of man and society, and it is Adams, the federalist, who provides the more reliable moral basis for a decentralized society. The old-age correspondence between Adams and Jefferson is just one source of evidence for regarding the latter, with some important qualifications, as an American Rousseau, and the former, also with qualifications, as an American Burke.⁴

The Problem of Individuality and "Historicism"

AMERICAN intellectual conservatism has given new life to the old truth that the central purpose of socie-

ty and government is to aid man in the realization of his moral potential and of other goods as means to this highest end. One important example of this salutary development has been Russell Kirk's influential criticism of old-fashioned utilitarian liberalism.⁵ Kirk has shown that "libertarianism" with its moral subjectivism and glorification of the autonomous individual is incompatible with a philosophy of universal values which also regards those values as finding realization in community and cooperation. There is a radical difference in fundamental assumptions between a doctrine of economic liberal atomism derived from Hobbes, Locke, Smith and Mill and a conservatism with deep roots in the classical and Christian notion of man as a social and political being. A prominent economist and social thinker who belongs to the latter tradition but who is also highly respectful of the economic insights of modern liberalism is Wilhelm Roepke (1899-1966), a writer whose reputation in the United States has deservedly only grown with time.⁶ With Roepke, Kirk has insisted that any truly humane society seeks to implement civilized priorities. Economic production must ultimately serve the moral and cultural ends of society which lie "beyond the dreams of avarice." The free market envisioned by Roepke is not an unleashing of isolated individuals who would be restrained only by minimal laws and their own more or less enlightened self-interest. A free economy compatible with the good society presupposes strong social groups and ties and a commitment among the citizens to moral-cultural norms which give rise to civilized demands in the market place and to intrinsic and extrinsic restraints on the forces of competition. Roepke's concerns are similar to those of Robert Nisbet, another major social thinker who was discovered early by Russell Kirk. Nisbet's argument that human well-being is dependent to a very large extent on the strength and vitality of society's "autonomous groups" has helped to demonstrate the futility of trying to reconcile radical individualism with genuine conservatism.⁸

Perhaps the most uncompromising critique of modern liberalism of different types has come from that distinguished historian of ideas, Leo Strauss. Condemnations of "modernity" of similar severity have been advanced in the name of Christianity. The rather sweeping nature of some contemporary criticisms which go much beyond those of thinkers like Kirk, Roepke and Nisbet brings up an ever present danger: Reaction against the glaring

weaknesses of an historical movement may lead to neglect of its possible strengths. Modern liberalism in the widest sense is a movement of extraordinary breadth and complexity and with strains and potentialities pointing in very different directions. Awareness of the enormous danger to civilization from an unleashing of the selfish ego should not stifle inquiry into higher elements in liberalism and "modernity" which may offer opportunities for strengthening the older traditions. Not to examine the possible justifications for assertions of individual freedom and uniqueness in the seventeenth and eighteenth century implies the desirability of simply returning to premodern ways of life and thought. The Greeks in particular did not stress —indeed, rather ignored— the value of human individuality to personhood and the common good. Their predominant tendency was to shun individual uniqueness and historical particularity in general for the sake of a universality conceived as ahistorical.

Many thinkers suspect or assume that emphasis on the inescapably historical nature of human existence and on the importance of respecting human individuality must lead to moral relativism or nihilism. Unrevised premodern philosophical instruments of interpretation do not allow for the possibility of a *value-centered* historicism, that is, for an historicism which stresses both the existence of a transcendent moral order and the historical nature of man's participation in that order. Left out of consideration is the *synthesis* of universal and particular. Needed in order faithfully to interpret human experience is the concept of transcendence and immanence in indistinguishable unity and tension. The transcendent is present to man in concrete manifestations, without ever being exhausted by or perfectly manifested in the material of immanence. Man is never aware of the universal in the abstract, that is, apart from all historical particularity. He always experiences, and has knowledge of, *something*; he is conscious of the universal through its concrete incarnations. For example, the transcendent moral order becomes historically immanent and is experienced by man in particular good actions.⁹

A fundamental distinction is called for between a type of individualism and liberalism that refuses obedience to any transcendent principle and one that conceives of man as properly the mediator between universal and particular. If we ought not to denigrate personal uniqueness and other historical particularity, it is because they may have value as

unique and particular. When ordered with reference to the transcendent they are the material for the renewal and continuing manifestation of the universal in forever changing circumstances.

Edmund Burke's deep respect for tradition and his insistence on the need for adjusting to particular circumstances do not diminish or undermine universality; neither do they deify history. Although Burke does not himself systematically formulate the concept of synthesis, his emphasis on the historical represents a deepening understanding of the ancient idea of the participation of the One in the Many. He throws new light on the reality of *methexis*, a reality which has remained philosophically problematic in the Greek tradition because of the tendency in that tradition, especially in epistemology, to separate sharply the universal from the particular. Thinkers who are dedicated to the defense of the universal but do not draw on the notion of synthesis see in a thinker like Burke either a largely "modern" figure ushering in historical relativism and positivism or a thinker predominantly in the "ancient" mold who represents the tradition of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and the doctrine of natural law.¹⁰ The philosophical categories used do not allow for a third possibility, namely, that Burke is at the same time and indistinguishably "ancient" and "modern": a representative of the classical and Judaeo-Christian heritage in that he strongly affirms the existence of a universal moral order and the social and political nature of man, a conservative "modern" in that he sees history at its noblest as manifesting the transcendent, if only imperfectly, and thus as an invaluable guide in the realization of man's moral destiny. Burke's value-centered historicism is in sharp contrast both to value-relativistic or nihilistic positivism and to a monistic Hegelian metaphysic of history.

Definitions of "liberalism" and "modernity" which lump together a Hobbes and a Locke with a Burke or a Tocqueville play down or overlook so many important distinctions that they have only the most limited utility. For example, it is not possible to do justice to the American political regime without the distinction between the two different types of liberalism mentioned above, one boosting individuality and particularity for their own sake, the other more conservative and blending with the classical and Judaeo-Christian traditions.

Absorption of valid elements of historicism would counteract another, related weakness: the belief that political regimes can be the wholly deliberate

intellectual constructions of particular individuals or generations. In reality, regimes are also the creations of a living past, of an historically evolving ethos of whose meaning and direction each individual and generation is only imperfectly aware.

If conservatism is in some sense an attempt to conserve something historically existing, it needs to be more clearly shown how this respect for history and concrete circumstances is compatible with respect for that universal moral order which is alone worthy of our allegiance. The alternative to the systematic development of a value-centered historicism is to attempt a return to a premodern static and ahistorical conception of the universal. Such an attempt, however, neglects the higher opportunities of modernity because of disaffection with modernity's obvious and more easily discernible dangers.

The Importance of the Imagination

AMONG the American scholars who do have a deep sense of the possible inherence of universality in history and who are building on the insights of Burke and related thinkers are Russell Kirk and Peter Viereck. They view the historical heritage as offering indispensable material for our experiential and imaginative grasp of the universal moral order. A sense of transcendent reality permeates the history of civilized life. It lives most concretely and richly in the imagination, especially in the imagination of the great poets.¹¹ Explicating Burke, Irving Babbitt writes: "A man's imagination may realize in his ancestors a standard of virtue and wisdom beyond the vulgar practice of the hour; so that he may be enabled to rise with the example to whose imitation he has aspired." However, what Babbitt calls the moral imagination does not simply repeat or imitate the past. Burke "saw how much of the wisdom of life consists in an imaginative assumption of the experience of the past in such fashion as to bring it to bear as a living force upon the present."¹² The moral imagination creatively perceives life's transcendent purpose through the noble examples of civilization and creatively applies this sense of direction to the here and now.

In spite of the work of Babbitt, Kirk, Viereck and others, American intellectual conservatism seems not yet to appreciate fully the extent to which our understanding of life is shaped by the imagination. The poets provide in the most intense form a direct, experiential, intuitive sense of human existence. While they do in a sense invent their characters and

events, these embody and transmit a vision of the nature of reality. This vision deeply affects the general outlook of a civilization. Even when the members of a society are not aware of it, they tend to see life, including everyday experience, through the eyes of the poet.

The visions of the great poets are not low-grade visions of intellectual ideas, i.e., preliminary or incidental to more profound philosophical insights. Instead, the philosophers are dependent on the poets and able to capture in their prose accounts of life only a part of what the latter have seen more immediately, more richly and more deeply, although not conceptually.¹³ A pseudo-intellectual conceit lurks behind the view that the highest significance of poetic expression is the intellectual meaning which can be culled from it by the philosophic mind.

If the imagination has enormous influence over our view of reality, it is far from always faithful to life as it really is. An entire civilization may become captivated by intuitions which draw man deeply into illusion. Such a civilization invites horror and extinction. Only the truly great poets and sages of the human race convey a realistic sense of the enduring essence of human existence, its promises and dangers. The welfare of society depends on the quality of the imagination which inspires its actions. A central theme in the work of Babbitt with profound implications for how we view the crisis of Western civilization is his argument that dispositions of will and dispositions of the imagination are intimately connected. The quality of will dominant in an individual, whether moral or immoral, tends to produce a corresponding quality of the imagination. So also does the quality of the imagination dominant in a person tend to call forth a corresponding quality of action. We are prone to see life in such a manner as will allow us to indulge our strongest desire. Intuitions which question our present wishes we incline to ignore or overpower. Only men of strong and noble character permit themselves to view life without pleasing illusions and thus to face the truth about themselves and humanity in general. This is to recognize the need for difficult and painful self-improvement. Inspiring the imagination of a Jean-Jacques Rousseau is a wish to escape from the moral consequences of the human predicament.¹⁴ Seeing man as inherently good and seeing evil as something to be blamed on historical society excuses the individual from that uncomfortable self-scrutiny and purification of action which the classical and Judaeo-Christian

traditions see as necessary to real happiness.

The crisis of the modern Western world, Babbitt argues, is at heart a crisis of moral character in which a perversion of the imagination plays a central role. Flight from real moral effort has given rise to and been induced by visions of life which sanction a perversion of the will. A certain quality of will and a certain quality of imagination beget and reinforce each other. The interplay of will and imagination in the morally irresponsible soul tends to produce progressive self-delusion and moral decline. If Western society is to survive, Babbitt contends, there must appear an incisive and relentless critique of those dominant forms of the imagination which entice the will with pleasing but decadent illusions. There is a need for a joint training of the will and the imagination in which literary examples provide concrete illustrations of opposing modes of life. No amount of intellectual affirmation of sound ideas can change Western society unless there is also a reawakening of that highest form of the imagination whose nature it is to let man see life as it truly is and which makes his will stir with abhorrence of evil and love of good. To think that abstract intellectual doctrines in isolation can effect the needed reorientation is to attribute to reason a power it does not have.

Babbitt does not develop one very important implication of his insight into the relationship between will and imagination: the implication for how we understand the role of reason. Reason never works in an experiential vacuum. It has for its material what has first been constituted into a coherent whole by the imagination. The philosophical mind is rooted in a prelogical intuition of reality. That intuition is truthful only in proportion as it does not repress elements of life, that is, in proportion as the will which underlies it wants to see life steadily and see it whole, to use Matthew Arnold's phrase. An imagination succumbing to illusion will offer to the mind for conceptual elaboration distorted views of reality. And no amount of intellectual brilliance can turn imaginative untruth into conceptual truth. Philosophers without a sensitive and open imagination will of necessity formulate misleading concepts of reality, even if is done with intellectual brilliance. The weakness of a Karl Marx or a Bertrand Russell is not lack of intellectual power but a distorting intuition concealing from view what would have given genuine proportion to the perception of life. The modern world offers plentiful illustrations of the same point. For example, contemporary man has

available to him overwhelming evidence of the inhumanity of the forces which would destroy Western civilization. Solzhenitsyn and countless others have spread the evidence before our eyes. But we cannot permit ourselves truly to face the truth, for really to do so would be to face all the uncomfortable and frightening consequences; indeed, to face the unpleasant truth about ourselves. And so we look, but do not see. The imagination creates for us convenient avenues of escape; and on the heels of imagination entire intellectual doctrines spring up which sanction our moral escapism. By subtle steps of self-deception the need to reorient action is evaded, postponed or transferred to others. In the United States, attempts are made to soothe the resulting nagging national conscience by piously berating President Nixon for Watergate crimes; but the truly enormous culpability of the forces which caused military-political disaster in Southeast Asia somehow escapes attention. As Russell Kirk has written in a different context, "Like a false religion, a false morality cannot tolerate a true."¹⁵

Philosophical thought, thus, is dependent on the imagination for the depth and comprehensiveness of its concepts; and the imagination is dependent for its depth and comprehensiveness on a will sufficiently selfless to permit the contemplation of uncomfortable truths. Hence, the training of the will and the imagination may be even more important than the training of the philosophical mind. Conservative intellectual victories not intimately tied to a genuine reorientation of imagination and character are likely to be precarious and easily reversible.

This is perhaps a good place to mention the danger of academic formalism. Also within conservative academic circles there seems to be a tendency to be impressed by books because they are rich in dry and involved scholarly prose, elaborate technical terminology, footnotes and other displays of learning and academic respectability and to be suspicious or even condescending toward books because they have a shortage of same. It is well to remember that a preoccupation with form rather than substance is usually evidence of a lack of scholarly identity and self-confidence. It goes without saying that academic scholarship has its special standards to maintain and that there is such a thing as a proper concern about the mode of discourse; for example, philosophy has its special and necessary demand for systematic conceptual elaboration. But it should not be forgotten that for men of the most genuine learning and profound insights, that is, for the sages

of the human race, the expectations of academia may seem irrelevant to the expression of truth. Works written in a "literary" or essayistic style can contain infinitely more wisdom than pretentious scholarly treatises. The former may be worthy of humble respect and the closest attention among academics who are attentive to the canons of scholarly communication.

A Restoration of Reason

THOSE WITHIN American intellectual conservatism who have best understood the decisive importance of the imagination in the shaping of man's view of reality have not set themselves the task of examining in depth the role and meaning of reason. They have typically limited themselves to criticizing what is normally called reason today as being inadequate to understanding the essence of the human condition. This criticism has been amply justified. Rationalistic and positivistic reason sets reductionistic abstractions in the place of life as directly experienced; it knows nothing about the living and infinitely complex reality of human existence. Positivistic "data" are but reified fragments torn from a more fundamental and continuous whole. To grasp what is truly universal, it is necessary to have recourse to actual experience. Humane studies require sensitivity and openness to the full range of man's consciousness of the whole.

And yet, the tendency within some strains of American intellectual conservatism to assume a conflict between conceptual intellection and the needs of humane knowledge is based on a one-sided notion of reason. The abstract and reified thought-processes which are commonly called reason today have no monopoly on rationality. On the contrary, they have only limited utility and are wholly subordinate to philosophical reason. The kind of pragmatic thought which must dominate in the natural sciences has been mistakenly employed in the study of man as a social and creative being. To liberate the humanities and social sciences from the deadening influence of narrow empiricism and positivism it is not sufficient to insist on actual experience as a source of knowledge, essential though that insistence is. Experience as such is intellectually mute; it offers direct intuition of reality, not argument. A central idea which has yet to be widely considered within American intellectual conservatism is that truly philosophical reason is the close ally of experiential openness. Far from violating immediate awareness of the whole by forcing it into

abstract formalistic or mechanistic schemes of explanation, philosophical reason is scrupulously faithful to this awareness. The office of philosophical thought is to raise intellectually mute intuition into conceptual, systematic self-awareness. Experience *per se* has no voice in intellectual debate, but *conceptual accounts* of experience can refute distorted views of life.

The reason which can speak faithfully and confidently about reality is not abstract or ahistorical: It grasps the universal in concrete experience. The whole of which it has knowledge is at once immanent and transcendent. The imposing work of Eric Voegelin has contributed greatly to our understanding of human life as the "in-between." His argument runs parallel to the ethical dualism of Babbitt and More. The needed epistemological supplement is the insight that philosophical thought is the conceptual perception and elaboration of the tension and unity of universal and particular. Affirming both history and what lies beyond it, American intellectual conservatism may here find the foundation for a sorely needed restoration of philosophical

reason. In the often neglected field of epistemology, the now dominant assumptions seem to be either that conceptual thought is poorly equipped to deal with life's central questions or that a premodern, ahistorical notion of reason is still adequate.¹⁶

It is paradoxical that the term "historicism" should today be widely associated with the positivistic collection of "data." This methodological orientation is only tenuously related to the central themes of historicism and owes as much, or more, to the likes of Comte, Mill and Spencer. Indeed, it represents the *denial* of historical-philosophical reflection as we find it in a Benedetto Croce.¹⁷ In epistemology and elsewhere historicism does present weaknesses and dangers. One of them is its strong monistic tendency which explains away the reality of evil. But systematic and discriminating analysis reveals other elements which can be reconciled with and used to strengthen the classical and Judaeo-Christian traditions. Philosophical efforts of that kind are still rare but offer perhaps the most promising opportunities for the continued development of intellectual conservatism.

¹Letter from Burke to Earl Fitzwilliam, Nov. 29, 1793, quoted in Russell Kirk, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered* (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1967), p. 128. ²Babbitt develops aspects of this distinction in all of his several books. See, in particular, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1978), and *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1979). ³This argument is developed in my *Democracy and the Ethical Life* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), esp. ch. XI. ⁴See Lester J. Cappon, ed., *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, Vol. II (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959). ⁵Early examples of this theme are found in *The Conservative Mind* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953) and *A Program for Conservatives* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1954) where Kirk assesses the doctrines of von Mises and Hayek. ⁶Roepke's social and economic thought is well represented by his *A Humane Economy* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1971). ⁷This is also the title of one of Kirk's books, *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1956). ⁸See Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953). ⁹The idea of a value-centered historicism is developed in my "History and the Moral Order," in Francis J. Canavan, ed., *The Ethical Dimension of Political Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1982; forthcoming). ¹⁰Leo Strauss' interpretation of Burke in *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1953), which portrays him as largely a precursor of historical relativism, is hardly on par with Strauss' best scholarly efforts. A partial corrective is Peter

Stanlis' *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1958). However, Stanlis leaves mostly unexplored that important dimension of Burke which transcends the tradition of natural law.

¹¹The subject of the imagination is treated throughout the work of Kirk and Viereck. See, for example, Kirk's *Enemies of The Permanent Things* (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1969), Part Two, and Viereck's *The Unadjusted Man* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1973), Part Five.

¹²Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, pp. 127-28. ¹³Of course, the poets also need and are influenced by the philosophers. Concepts are absorbed into but transmuted by intuition. See, John Dewey, *Essays in Experimental Logic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1916), p. 17; and *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Minton, Balch and Co., 1929), p. 167 ff. ¹⁴See Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*. ¹⁵Kirk, *Edmund Burke*, p. 173. Perhaps it needs to be said: it is not implied in this illustration that President Nixon is blameless. ¹⁶The problem of epistemology in its ethical, aesthetic and logical dimensions is treated in depth in Folke Leander and Claes G. Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason: Irving Babbitt and Benedetto Croce* (forthcoming). ¹⁷Croce is still under the influence of Hegel's monism but he has valid logical and other insights which can be extracted from this questionable setting. See Croce, *Logic* (London: Macmillan, 1917). For a treatment of the problem of knowledge which is informed by elements of historicism but which is far removed from the doctrine of positivism, see my "Knowledge and History," *Journal of Politics*, May, 1982.