science or to reject conservatism.

But that is a mistake. Modern science is not a monolithic doctrine; it is not a metaphysical system; it does not demand either belief or disbelief. It is a network of specialist inquiries continually altered by new discoveries. The meanings of "matter" and "mechanics" in contemporary physics, for example, have a tenuous relation to their meanings in early modern science, and further inquiry will likely further strain those already antiquated words. Nor is there anything in the idea of science that requires us to adopt a social science that reduces human nature to the merely animal, much less to the merely physical. Reduction of the whole to its parts is but one alternative method; it is not an article of faith to which all communicants of the Church of Science must subscribe. It is quite possible, then, for us to develop, on wholly secular grounds, a nonreductive theory of human nature within which traditional views of the dignity of man, the value of the individual and his freedom, and so on are intelligible. In particular, it would seem to be a matter of fact, confirmed by any number of separate strands of inquiry, that man is essentially a social animal; hence we may suppose a range of virtues and corresponding vices that distinguish man from other animals, as in certain doctrines of natural right.

The strength of conservatism, at least on the account of it I have been giving here, is its humility and concreteness, its holding close to the facts and to the well-tried in their specific detail and variety, whether or not those facts and traditional sentiments are thoroughly understood and explained. For they are the sharp rocks or sunken reefs on which radical theories come to grief. Deep familiarity with the concrete produces prudence and political wisdom. Grounding is superadded. We can try to explain and justify this conservative adherence to the concrete on various grounds. We can also try, in various ways, to ground and systematize specific sentiments. All this variety of grounding makes for somewhat different conservatisms, and hence for intellectual liveliness. But among conservatives there will be a large measure of agreement on practical issues, even when we draw our inspiration and confidence from divergent sources.

The Exigence of Transcendence in a Postmodern Age

Stephen L. Tanner

The ISSUES IN THE DEBATE between theistic and nontheistic conservatism are articulated most distinctly for me in the warm and mutually stimulating friendship of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, two giants of conservative thought in America during the first third of the twentieth century. These men met as graduate stu-

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dents at Harvard in 1892 and remained friends and allies in the cause known then as "New Humanism" until Babbitt's death in 1933. More's death followed four years later. In the course of his adult life, More gravitated from religious skepticism to orthodox Christianity, a pilgrimage that T. S. Eliot acknowledged in a tribute to More as a model for his own religious journey. Babbitt's humanism, on the other hand, was avowedly nontheistic—not hostile to the religious impulse, but critical of religion in its dogmatic and institutional forms.

More believed that a religious soil, though some may be unaware of it, supports our quest for justice and beauty and our search for meaning and value. Without this sense of otherworldliness, he insisted, we will be unable to stem the tide of relativistic materialism: "Will not the humanist, unless he adds to his creed the faith and hope of religion, find himself at the last, despite his protests, dragged back into the camp of the naturalist?" He valued the sense of tragedy, which, in his view, was ultimately a sense of sin. This sense, he believed, cannot evolve from a nontheistic humanism: "I think we must dig deeper. At bottom the sense of tragedy is the child of religion, of the realization of the pathetic or grim insufficiency of our life amid sensible, palpable, ephemeral things under the light of an order of things utterly different in nature and value, whether we firmly believe in that other world or passionately long to believe in it."

Babbitt, on the other hand, found it wisest to lay stress on the humanistic virtues and let the fundamental religious questions lie in the background as matters of suspended judgment. He did not, however, suspend his judgment regarding the institutionalized church. A lifelong student of Buddhism, Babbitt found metaphysics, theology, and ecclesiasticism more harmful than helpful to the spiritual life. More remembered him in the early days of their friendship "stopping before a church in North Avenue, and, with a gesture of bitter contempt, exclaiming: 'There is the enemy! There is the thing I hate."' This anecdote is revealing, but also misleading. It ought to be balanced with Babbitt's later written expression of agreement with Pascal's point that the humanist must take a side in the debate between naturalists and supernaturalists: "For my own part, I range myself unhesitatingly on the side of the supernaturalists. Though I see no evidence that humanism is necessarily ineffective apart from dogmatic and revealed religion, there is, as it seems to me, evidence that it gains immediately in effectiveness when it has a background of religious insight." He observes in the same essay, "Humanism: An Essay at Definition," that "it is an error to hold that humanism can take the place of religion. Religion indeed may more readily dispense with humanism than humanism with religion."

Despite such statements from his friend, More thought that Babbitt's treatment of the "supernatural" late in life grew "at once more insistent and more cloudy." He suggested it would be helpful if Babbitt in his writing would define his notion of the higher will the way he had done for More in conversation—conversation in which, according to More, Babbitt talked "like Samuel Johnson and S. T. Coleridge rolled into one." In a letter just a year before Babbitt's death, More questioned him pointedly as to exactly what he meant by "supernatural": "I cannot escape the feeling that you are a little inclined to play fast and loose with your supernatural, dealing with it as a reality at one time, and then retracting it to a mere quality of the will. One can't, in this world, have his cake and eat it. And I may say that it is just impossible to get the psychological benefit of Christianity while rejecting the Christian (and Platonic) concept of the supernatural as

a reality." More doubted that Babbitt's notion of the higher will, as admirable as it was, "would be sufficient to supply the place, in any but an extremely few men, of that sense of the supernatural which they need as a makeweight against the world and the flesh—not to say the devil."

Babbitt himself was certainly one of "an extremely few men." He was, as T. S. Eliot pointed out, unique as a spokesman for secular philosophy who "attacked the foundations of secularism more deeply and comprehensively than any other writer of our time." He was informed by a certain religious sense and possessed a spiritual quality. Nevertheless, as More asserted after Babbitt's death, when his friend's religious views were still being debated, "As for the question of theism...Babbitt had grown tolerant of other men's beliefs, if they did not clash with his ethical principles, but—I speak from certain knowledge—there was no room for a god, in any proper sense of the word, or for Grace in his own philosophy."

As much as I admire Babbitt, I side with More in my conviction that all meaning, value, and standards ultimately require a transcendent foundation or authority. There must be an ultimate justification for the conservative's conserving and an ultimate ground for standards to guide that conserving. Moreover, the exigence of transcendence has intensified dramatically since these two friends spent long nights in hot discussion of the question. When push came to shove, Babbitt apparently sided with the party of transcendence. But we must recognize that he was never called upon to absorb a shove as fierce as the one presently administered by postmodernism in its manifold inflections. In his day, he saw no evidence that what he called humanism (which really meant the core of conservative thought) was necessarily ineffective apart from religion; religious insight was simply an added bonus to cash in now or hold in reserve. Were he alive today, he would brilliantly comprehend the full ramifications of the varieties of postmodernism, and—I suggest—would consider transcendent authority a necessity rather than a reserve bonus.

Babbitt was able to defer the exigence of transcendence because he lived in an age in which religion and metaphysics still grounded values even when that fact went unrecognized or even denied. Unexamined assumptions were not, as they are nowadays, dragged into distorted light by ruthless problematizing patrols under the auspices of the hermeneutics of suspicion. And besides that, he was an erudite generalist the likes of which our universities today are incapable of producing. He had read widely enough to compile evidence of universal moral order. Most people today lack that broad education and are thus ill-equipped for confronting the challenge of postmodernism, which calls into question each word in the phrase "universal moral order." When we lose our balance in consequence of the postmodern shove, we need the makeweight of transcendence More spoke of in order to maintain our equilibrium.

George Steiner argues for this point of view in *Real Presences* (1989). He makes his case in the context of literature and art, but his ideas have wider application. His thesis is "that any coherent understanding of what language is and how language performs, that any coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is, in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God's presence." Steiner contends that the wager on the meaning of meaning is a wager on transcendence. Because a secular or positivist model of understanding is not adequate to face the nihilism of postmoderninsm, the only alternative is a postulate of transcendence: "A semantics, a poetics of correspondence, or decipherability and truth-

values arrived at across time and consensus, are strictly inseparable from the postulate of theological-metaphysical transcendence." Steiner directs his argument specifically against deconstruction, a prominent postmodernism at the time the book was written, but he clearly meant deconstruction to represent the core of postmodernism.

Steiner allows that deconstruction is vulnerable to criticism for such things as its jargon and arrogance, but these criticisms do not invalidate its central case, which epitomizes ideas and attitudes now finding prominence after evolving for many years from multiple sources. "*On its own terms and planes of argument,* terms by no means trivial if only in respect of their bracing acceptance of ephemerality and self-dissolution, the challenge of deconstruction does seem to me irrefutable." It is in light of this admission that Steiner affirms the exigence of transcendence. "Where the theologically and metaphysically posited principle of a continuous individuality, of a cognitively coherent and ethically responsible ego is dissolved," there can be no belief in the shared truth-seeking which from the beginning has underwritten the ideal of religion, of humanism, and of communication. It is this very impossibility which defines postmodernism.

In my view, without some transcendental foundation, one is left with a denuded self whose only virtues are freedom, or at best sincerity, or an everyday reasonableness. Conservatism was generated out of a more complete and complex understanding of self. Neither the inspiring ideas of freedom and sincerity, nor the plain wholesome concept of a rational discernment of duty, seem complex enough to do justice to what we really are. Determining what we are and what we ought to be, what we should conserve and what we should replace, requires theological-metaphysical guarantors and arbiters. Steiner suggests that we must postulate these and wager on them, but for many of us religious belief is an instinct or profound intuition rather than a postulation, a matter of faith rather than of wagering. In either case, the prevailing contemporary intellectual world view—the hostility to foundationalism and logocentricism; the insistence on the cultural parochialism and historical relativity of all knowledge; the pervasive sense of radical uncertainty and displacement; the demonization of Western humanism (and the list continues)—has generated an opposing religious or metaphysical imperative that seems incumbent on conservatism as I understand it.