

Introduction

If it keep on rainin' the levee gonna break

—Bob Dylan

POST-CONSTITUTIONAL AMERICA

The temperature is hovering around freezing. The clouds intermittently disburse noonday sunlight into a leaden sky. On the western front of the Capitol, President George W. Bush strides to a podium to take his second oath of office as president of the United States. In his second inaugural address, he seeks to explain the true meaning of this axial moment in human history. According to his view, since the Founding, Americans have furthered history's purpose of promoting freedom, individual rights, and self-government at home and abroad. In his time as president, the United States has acted in Afghanistan and Iraq in accordance with the country's "great liberating tradition" and has thereby kindled anew "a fire in the minds of men."¹ Much work remains to be done. The process of converting the globe to principles that are "eternally right" will be done through diplomacy, if possible; it will be done through force, if necessary.² The United States, too, is in need of substantial change. More home ownership, better health care, greater investment in education, and stronger retirement programs are vital to providing the American people with "greater freedom from want and fear," while making "our society more prosperous and just and equal."³ Returning to his universal focus, Bush channels the Prophet Isaiah and concludes his remarks, stating, "America, in this young century, proclaims liberty throughout all the world and to all the inhabitants thereof."⁴

Four years later, the United States has a new president. The temperature is below freezing when Barack Obama begins his first inaugural address. Most of his remarks touch upon domestic areas of concern and anxiety. He explains that failing infrastructure must be repaired. A recommitment to science and technological investment is needed because it will lower health-care costs and

allow Americans to “harness the sun and the winds and the soil to fuel our cars and run our factories.”⁵ The national government will play a decisive role in these efforts. He devotes some of his time to discussing the broader world. Rejecting as false a choice between security and idealism, he warns terrorists and others who might harm the United States, “We will not apologize for our way of life, nor will we waver in its defense.”⁶ He says the United States is a friend to all who desire “peace and dignity.”⁷ He offers America’s help to nations suffering from conflict and poverty. He admonishes countries with wealth to be more generous. Reflecting on the essence of American history and the realization of his vision for the future, Obama articulates his convictions that “the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself, and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace.”⁸

Despite differences in ideology and party affiliation, there are some striking similarities in these remarks from Bush and Obama. Although they place different degrees of emphasis on involvement of the federal government in American life, they both believe it has a crucial role to play in numerous policy areas and on various social scales. Both presidents share the belief that the United States is a special nation called to spread human rights and self-government to the ends of the earth; they differ over tactics rather than vision. Both of them invite Americans to pursue the realization of a domestic paradise of freedom and equality and a world at peace made possible through unflagging optimism and robust American action. Each president argues that he is stating nothing new but is reminding Americans of what they have always believed, have always been. They see their presidencies as continuations of the best in the American tradition.

In his speech, Bush asked younger Americans who might be suspicious of the truth of his remarks to “believe the evidence of your eyes.”⁹ A number of the things those eyes would see would be troubling. Among other things, the Bush years included failed wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, widespread and illegal surveillance of citizens, signing statements reflecting disregard for limitations on executive power, torture, a Great Recession, almost six trillion dollars in new national debt, and diminishing job prospects for large swaths of the population. In most respects, Obama followed in Bush’s footsteps. Torture stopped, but Guantanamo Bay remained open. The Iraq War (sort of) ended, but Afghanistan continued to deteriorate. A new war in Libya was launched and failed. Drone attacks on suspected terrorists increased, as did resulting civilian deaths. Unemployment was at one point the highest in a generation.

A proliferation of executive orders reflected contempt for the rule of law, as did the expansion of illegal surveillance of Americans. Another nearly eight trillion dollars was added to the national debt. In 2011, America's AAA credit rating was lost. In his inaugural address, Obama paraphrased St. Paul and told Americans, "The time has come to set aside childish things," imploring us to end the "petty grievances" of ordinary politics so that we may recommit ourselves to "the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of human happiness."¹⁰ These are strong words, but in light of the romantic and idealistic dreams associated with both of these presidencies, so many of the political priorities of Bush and Obama seem, well, childish.

Thinking about human nature, the eighteenth-century German humanist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe writes, "Truth is contrary to our nature, not so error, and this for a very simple reason: truth demands that we should recognize ourselves as limited, error flatters us that, in one way or another, we are unlimited."¹¹ For Goethe, truth is very much something worth living by, but individuals and societies must make strenuous moral effort for it to take hold. Such labor cannot be profitable without a broad and deep knowledge of the normative power of human historical experience. In contrast, the relative ease of ethical and intellectual indolence can be very appealing. With this in mind, it is not entirely surprising that Bush and Obama often ignored constitutional and moral constraints on their abilities to pursue allegedly noble ends. Many other American leaders and Americans in general seem to chafe under even the most modest legal barriers or ethical limitations standing between them and the realization of their momentary desires. Despite the appearance of stark divisions within the United States, the extent to which living in the error of the unlimited has come to define American politics and life in the twenty-first century is astonishing. This has serious implications for the continued existence of the United States as a constitutional republic in any meaningful sense.

John Adams once described republican government as the best form of government, because it makes possible an "empire of laws, and not of men."¹² He and many of his fellow Framers understood that free government works only when a people possesses a level of virtue and self-control sufficient not only to make laws, but to *govern* themselves by them. Human history confirms this view, they believed. In his second inaugural, even Bush acknowledges as much, saying, "Self-government relies, in the end, on the governing of the self."¹³ Unfortunately, when the words and deeds of many contemporary political figures and ordinary citizens are weighed, it is clear that the ethical wisdom

of history on which Adams and his contemporaries relied for guidance and inspiration has lost a great deal of its normative authority. When leaders and citizens will not enforce and live according to self-imposed limits, both constitutional and moral, Adams believes, history teaches that “the people, when they have been unchecked, have been just as unjust, tyrannical, brutal, barbarous, and cruel, as any king or senate possessed of uncontrollable power.”¹⁴ In other words, political institutions ultimately cannot function without the presence of ethically sensible citizens. The degree to which the United States of the present reflects Adams’s description of an unprincipled people reveling in the exercise of unrestrained power is the degree to which America has transitioned from a constitutional republic to what may be described as a post-constitutional government and society.

Americans do seem to have an inkling that something is wrong in the United States. Sadly, the sources of the problems they sense are often overlooked. It is true that Americans frequently and vigorously complain about transgressions by this leader or that party, but such protests seem often motivated by rank partisanship, toxic ideology, or perceived electoral advantages. Principled concerns about ethical character, institutional durability, or fidelity to the Constitution are rarely raised or taken seriously. Countless politicians, public intellectuals, political operatives, business leaders, and others routinely invoke various aspects of the American past to justify any number of policy, electoral, or social goals. The vagueness and inaccuracy of many such claims exposes how unhistorical, how dreamlike, the American understanding of its own past has become. Further, it betrays an ignorance of the cultural foundations that once supported America’s historical institutions and policy choices. Conventional political activities including campaigning, voting, promoting policies, and legislating remain important, but no amount of success or reform in these areas can adequately address the more fundamental crisis of post-constitutionalism in the United States.

To get to the heart of the predicament felt but misunderstood by many, the deeper problem of America’s deteriorating constitutional culture must be confronted. A genuine revival of America’s constitutional spirit is possible only if a revitalized historical consciousness and renewed emphasis on moral character become socially authoritative. Scholarship has a role to play in facilitating such rejuvenation, insofar as it provides essential intellectual elucidation and the rationale for prescribed changes. That is the purpose of this volume. At the same time, it is worth acknowledging at the outset that more than sound thinking is needed to address the current crisis. Historical consciousness and

moral character are ultimately grounded in the customs and habits that define the ways in which Americans *live* as well as reason. Therefore, such intellectual arguments, while essential, will not by themselves suffice but must be accompanied by changes in these concrete ways of living.

The Historical Mind engages with the intellectual dimensions of this broader cultural challenge in a number of ways. It draws together scholars from disciplines such as political theory, philosophy, law, and history. Regardless of each scholar's field of study, their chapters take seriously the truths derived from historical human experience. In so doing, many contributions illuminate the complexity and richness of the past, what Edmund Burke called "the general bank and capital of nations and of ages."¹⁵ For readers disoriented by the omnipresent unreality of the present, this book can help them gain clearer understanding of different problems, thereby awakening their senses of history as a living force. This is especially true of what historical experience has to say about human nature, that is, that we are self-interested as well as capable of acquiring wisdom and self-control, and that sound institutions will be insufficient for thriving regimes, which also require ethically mature individuals. Beyond identifying what the past can impart about politics and the human condition, much of this text actually demonstrates how this sort of historical awareness can inform one's approach to politics and culture.

A HISTORICAL HUMANISM

Addressing areas including imagination and culture, moral philosophy, constitutionalism, and foreign policy, the following chapters are engaged to varying degrees with ideas from Irving Babbitt, the twentieth-century pioneer of the American New Humanism movement, and Claes G. Ryn, a political theorist and Babbitt's foremost interpreter. The humanism of Babbitt and Ryn has been incorporated into this book, because it strives to provide greater conceptual clarity regarding universal truths of life's moral order without resorting to ahistorical thinking or ideological assertions about politics and human nature.¹⁶ Though neither thinker uses the term *post-constitutional*, they repeatedly bring their philosophical, aesthetic, and ethical insights to bear on analyses of threats to the constitutional spirit needed to make American democracy serve its proper political and moral ends. Whether or not each contributing scholar is wholly aligned with Ryn and Babbitt, and, indeed, some would politely decline being described as humanist, each is similarly aware of how much a flourishing society depends on a culture steeped in historical knowledge and the atten-

dant ethical character that defines the human being of ethical proportion or measure. These concerns are at the very heart of Babbitt and Ryn's thinking.

In *Literature and the American College*, Babbitt draws inspiration from Socrates and explains that especially in an age in which much philosophical, political, aesthetic, and moral confusion reigns, one task in which society in general and scholars in particular must engage is that of "right defining."¹⁷ Heeding Babbitt's words, the reader must be given a perspective from which to observe the unity of this volume's thoughtful contributions. A brief orientation to Ryn and Babbitt's major ideas and areas of interest, especially those related to their thoughts on American constitutionalism in the deepest sense, must be offered. In the course of these remarks, it will be made clearer precisely how this historically informed variety of humanism will be helpful in promoting the constitutional spirit that is seen as no longer supporting American political life.

Like democracy and liberty, humanism is a term with various meanings and representatives. Ancient Greek and Roman philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca have been described as classical humanists. Christians too have a kind of humanism—one that is present in the writings of figures, including Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Thomas More, and John Paul II. More recently, a secular type of humanism has emerged in the West as a conscious alternative to theistic religions, especially Christianity, and can be traced from the Renaissance thinker, Niccolò Machiavelli, through Enlightenment liberals such as Thomas Paine, and more recently to popular intellectuals, such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. All of these humanisms are united in the belief that conceptualization of human experience illuminates the nature of human beings and the structure of reality. Further, these types of humanism are in agreement that their theoretical insights *ought* to shape the ways in which people conduct their lives as individuals and as members of societies. Hence, each has descriptive and normative dimensions. At the same time, these humanisms produce diverging accounts of human nature, the world, ethics, and politics because they place different emphases on the importance of and relationships among philosophy, religion, and science.

The humanism of Ryn and Babbitt intersects with elements in each of these traditions mentioned above, but it has more in common with the classical and Christian humanisms than with the modern varieties. Both thinkers see humanism as occupying a philosophical and experiential middle ground between scientific rationalism and materialism, on the one hand, and counterfeit spirituality, either of a rigidly doctrinal or sentimental variety, on the

other hand. Ryn and Babbitt find much to admire in traditional religions of the East and West, as well as in the methods and fruits of modern positive science. Still, they see their kind of humanism as *more* “positive” than most conventional approaches because it realizes the full meaning of the positivist project by giving spiritual (nonmaterial) experiences conceptual elucidation without reducing such occurrences to epiphenomena of material being. At the same time, by refusing to prioritize social uplift or dogmatic disputation, by focusing on the commands to undertake a journey of moral discipline found in the shared insights of Jesus, the Buddha, and others, Babbitt and Ryn see their type of humanism as *more* religious than the sham spiritualities that have been ascendant in the West, particularly in the United States, since the early twentieth century. While never claiming humanism can or should replace various religions, Babbitt and Ryn see humanism as entirely compatible with and a manifestation of the truths about human life found in Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

Such truths, Babbitt would say, are made manifest in the historical experience of each of these great traditions, which provide evidence of our universal human nature. For Babbitt, synthesizing such experience of the human species means nothing less than bringing the past to life in the present. Benedetto Croce, a twentieth-century Italian philosopher known to Babbitt and much admired by Ryn, writes, “Man is a microcosm, not in the natural sense, but in the historical sense, a compendium of universal history.”¹⁸ Think of how we might get by on a daily basis. We set an alarm to wake up in the morning. We dress, eat breakfast, go to work, and engage others in conversation. Similar actions are taken throughout the day. Most of these routine activities would seem to be done almost unconsciously, but we are making decisions all the time, deciding what and what not to will. For moments that can be too brief to recognize, the present is giving us obstacles to overcome. Waking, grooming, cooking, walking, eating, speaking, and so forth are not discovered anew each day and relearned. At the same time, every day is not quite the same as any other. Thus our need to act in the circumstances of each day can be satisfied only by synthesizing our past and our present. Whether or not we recognize it, our ability to live as coherent beings over time is possible only because we are our living history. Our history, in turn, is shaped in ways we do and do not know by the history of our country, civilization, and humanity as a whole.

When confronted with unusual situations, including those involving great political change and civilizational crises, we become acutely aware of our need for more knowledge. We may feel compelled to spend a great deal of time dis-

covering and thinking about those things that dwell in the deep of the past. In a general sense, history is the record of various things that have been done by and happened to people. In a more meaningful sense, history is embedded with knowledge of how different peoples and ages conceptualized and lived goodness, truth, and beauty, as well as their opposites. Taken together, history has wisdom to impart about relationships between unique circumstances and recurring “oughts” and “ought nots.” People in search of this kind of knowledge are not looking for ahistorical principles that can be grafted on to the present. The normative dimension of history can no more be severed from the diverse experiences that generates it than a trunk can be removed from the branches without killing the tree. Inspiration for creative action in the distinct present, not identifying for transplantation allegedly unchanging ideas from the past, is what we seek. In ordinary and extraordinary circumstances, this process of bringing the past to bear on the present is the same. In other words, human beings are historical creatures. The knowledge people carry and act on is always and unavoidably historical knowledge.

The more we develop our sense of the past, that is, our historical consciousness, the more we understand a seemingly contradictory truth: the universal manifests itself and is known to human beings in the diverse particulars to which it is inextricably linked. Truth, goodness, and beauty are present in but are never consumed by historical examples. There are no fixed models for philosophy, ethics, politics, or art. There are only diverse instances of universality that stand on their own and stand ready as inspiration for new acts in each of these areas. Every instance of universality simultaneously brings forward and remains distinct from the past. Specifically with regard to truths in philosophical ideas, Ryn argues, “Knowledge is carried by concepts that can be forever improved. Cognition is a dialectical straining towards, never the achievement of, perfect clarity.”¹⁹

The idea that universality and particularity exist in a relationship of fruitful tension will likely meet with some misgivings. Historical relativists might be pleased to see attention called to the diversity of historical experiences, but they will likely bristle under the notion that the past can be more than one thing after another, something greater than random beads on a meaningless string. Babbitt sees the Romantic movement’s reaction to scientific rationalism as an understandable reassertion of the particularity of human life. However, what philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Henri Bergson miss in the “philosophy of the flux” is the Oneness that unites all of human existence—the abiding and eternal order that brings coherence and deep satisfaction

(*eudaimonia*) to a life well-lived.²⁰ While these thinkers correctly recognize life's undeniable historical dimension, the novelty that characterizes each particular person and moment, they fail to appreciate its permanent, higher potential. The moral, intellectual, and aesthetic standards internal to human life are thus not arbitrary, for Babbitt and Ryn, but reveal themselves in all their objectivity in human experience through the ages. While it is possible to ignore these standards and live according to the romantic's dream of idiosyncrasy and eccentricity, "the person who flees from their authority is left no peace."²¹

Abstract rationalists might applaud this embrace of universality, but they will probably become apprehensive when it is not tied to celebrations of "universal values" raised above or somehow separate from the dangerous flow of history. However, for both Babbitt and Ryn, several problems emerge with regard to this strain of antihistorical philosophy going back to Plato, which actually hinders rather than promotes, universal values. In the first place, by identifying the standards by which human conduct is to be judged with some abstract, noetic realm, severed from concrete, historical life, such thinkers create fixed intellectual precepts, whose rigidity renders them unable to meet the moral needs of historically diverse circumstances.²² Consequently, in the name of moral universality, these philosophers impose principles on a changing reality toward which they are insensitive and for which they are entirely inappropriate, paradoxically bringing about an unjust states of affairs.²³ In the second place, invocations of abstract principles of "natural right" often serve as cover for evading moral responsibility, insofar as they use the perfect nature of their ideals as a pretext for shunning the messiness of the ethical life and foregoing difficult but necessary decisions. In the name of noble principles, moral idealists often reject discriminating between "shades of gray" as mere relativism or as compromising one's principles, effectively preaching abstention from moral and political life in the name of remaining pure.²⁴

In the development of Babbitt's idea of a "oneness that is always changing," or what Ryn calls "value centered historicism," their historically conscious humanism recognizes both the persistence of the universal moral order as well as the historical life within which it always resides and operates. In various writings, Babbitt argues that all philosophers must eventually confront the relationship between universality and particularity, what he describes as the Platonic problem of the One and the Many. Often in Western philosophy, this relationship has been seen as adversarial or illusory. Different thinkers, including many of the great philosophers in the Western tradition, have eventually sided with one and discounted or rejected the other. Babbitt and Ryn

see the choice that is often presented between history and universality as ultimately false. In truth, both elements are always present, always making life possible. The satisfaction to be derived from the simplicity of relativism, on the one hand, and absolutism, on the other, does not change the barrenness of each of these views. Such theories are gray, but historical life, in all its splendor and paradox, is green.

IMAGINATION, CHARACTER, AND CULTURE

A person's knowledge of the relationship between the universal and the particular described above does not rest exclusively on the possession of a sophisticated intellect. Most people are not philosophers. How then can we come to know what we know? For Babbitt and Ryn, people experience universality first and most potently through the mutually reinforcing relationship between imagination and will. Every person has a host of impulses seeking translation into action. Whether the needs are mundane or extraordinary, the stirrings of will in an individual become known to the extent that those desires take on the immediacy and texture provided by the imagination. The images generated by the intuition intensify the power of growing volitions, giving us a preconceptual awareness of what we might do. As this occurs, the will rejects some invitations to act and accepts others, according to habits developed over the course of a life. When confronted with elaborate and comprehensive imaginings, the reason can also become involved in the process, seeking the truth of an intuition by scrutinizing its constituent parts, testing them against reality. The development of historical consciousness is the growth of imagination and will as well as reason.

The imagination always gives a unity, but it does not always give one that is real, which is to say, it is not always commensurate with the concrete, historical experience of human life. To distinguish between intuitions grounded in reality and those of pure fantasy, Ryn and Babbitt, and others such as Peter Viereck and Russell Kirk, dichotomize qualities or types of imagination into moral and romantic. The moral imagination is nourished by the experience of daily life as well as encounters with works of philosophy, history, theology, and literature. A person who has this quality of imagination sees human nature as dualistic, that is, as comprised not merely of various desires but of impulses both ethical and unethical. The will works along with moral imagination to restrain the latter while allowing itself to become realized in concrete action.

Over time, repeated exercise of the ethical will produces habits of true moral character in an individual. With moral imaginative vision, one sees politics as capable of providing some level of justice and space for human flourishing, but expectations of what can be accomplished through such activity are modest. A morally imaginative conception of politics accounts for both the best and the worst of which people are capable.

Romantic imagination is also formed through experience and learning, but the results are quite different. For someone attached to such intuitions, human beings are not seen as suffering from a chronic moral weakness that can be mitigated to some extent through protracted effort. People are either held to be so naturally good or rational that injustice and unhappiness are attributed to ignorance or, more commonly, to the machinations of malevolent external forces. With no need to work on the self, the romantic imagination focuses a person's attention on the reconfiguration of social, economic, and governmental institutions. The possibilities of politics are felt to be unlimited with the attainment of sufficient knowledge and the power to reform institutions. Through a mixture of technical sophistication and a deep if ultimately vague sense of sympathy for other human beings, those who have this quality of imagination believe problems that have afflicted humanity for generations can be completely and permanently resolved. In the language of T. S. Eliot, those who have this sense of the world dream "of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good."²⁵ In the event that things do not go as planned, it is rare that the alleged nobility of romantic vision itself is called into question. Something or someone else often takes the blame for disappointment or failure.

Mention was made above of the relationship between historical consciousness and universality and of the connections between will, reason, and imagination. Ryn writes, "Only an imagination which is sensitive to possibilities of experience in their relation to what is ultimately real—exercise of the ethical will and the happiness it brings—can express the essence of the human condition."²⁶ To be more specific, historical consciousness is acquired through and part of moral imagination. It is only under the guidance of this type of imagination that the will can act as an "ethical check," to use Babbitt's language. Rationalism and dreaminess, unaware of or uninterested in the normative aspects of history, are not shaped by such intuitions. Moral imagination is where true universality is most intensely experienced. In contrast, romantic imagination seduces its possessor into denials or distortions of genuine universals. Reason is capable of distinguishing qualities of imagination, but in a practical sense this is only possible in a person of moral imagina-

tion. For one who thrills to romantic intuitions, will, and imagination often undermine the proper functioning of reason precisely because that is what the individual desires.

One of these forms of imagination tends to predominate in the individual, defining one's character as sober or frenzied, humble or hubristic, moral or licentious. One leads to happiness, the other does not. What is true about the imagination of an individual is true about the representative quality of imagination in a nation. A society's intuitive disposition is reflected in its laws, customs, religions, economic arrangements, and understandings of leisure, architecture, music, and so forth. The presence of moral imagination in these areas provides the bonds of community and civility that make not merely for life but for good, peaceful living. When romantic imagination permeates these areas, a society tends toward fragmentation and division. Suspicion, opportunism, deceit, vulgarity, cravenness, and violence are common features of a country in which this type of imagination prevails. Nations can get by, for a time, on such impoverished vision, but not much more than that. Moral imagination is the lodestone of civilization; romantic imagination is the engine of decadence.

DEMOCRACIES AND AMERICA

In *Democracy and the Ethical Life*, Ryn argues the word *democracy* is so frequently used and variously defined as to make the concept appear meaningless.²⁷ To bring theoretical weight to bear on meanings of democracy, both he and Babbitt dichotomize the idea into two types: constitutional democracy and direct democracy. For both thinkers, a constitutional democracy is one in which laws, decentralized power, and social customs all act together as the ethical check writ large. About this kind of democracy Ryn writes, it "is the political dimension of ethical self-restraint and hence the necessary political condition for the furtherance of the ethical life."²⁸ In contrast, a direct or plebiscitary democracy is one in which popular sovereignty is conceived of as the exercise of undiluted power by an undifferentiated mass in the pursuit of the political whim of the moment. Despite their shared use of the term "democracy," Babbitt and Ryn do not see these as variations on a similar theme. About the distinction between the two, Babbitt explains, "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.”²⁹ The difference, one might say, between such first principles is the presence or absence of the constitutional spirit.

The idea of a constitutional democracy, it is worth noting, abounded in the minds of many leading figures in the American Framing, whose view of human nature was clearly aligned with the humanistic priority of restraint and placing checks on impulse. In Federalist No. 71, Alexander Hamilton explains the very notion of a republic carries with it a commitment to popular sovereignty, but “it does not require an unqualified complaisance to every sudden breeze of passion.”³⁰ In some instances, the people need government to protect them from suffering the consequences of mass exercises of the lower will. But government itself also needs to be restrained. An essential purpose of a constitution is to establish durable institutions and procedures by which the ends of government can be pursued to the benefit of all and the threat of factious political movements and legislation can be minimized to the most realistic extent.

As important as a written constitution can be, it ultimately fails without a corresponding constitutional character predominant in politics and the broader society. In Federalist No. 55, Madison draws on historical wisdom and the moral imagination, arguing, “As there is a degree of depravity in mankind, which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust: so there are other qualities in human nature, which justify a certain proportion of esteem and confidence. Republican government presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form.”³¹ The best relationship between constraint and freedom cannot be determined in the abstract. In a society in which ethical maturity is in short supply, government tends to use a heavy hand to establish some degree of order. In a constitutional democracy, as Madison and many others at the time knew, citizens must assume the primary responsibility for exercising the moral self-discipline that distinguishes true freedom from license.

For most of those who drafted, debated, and implemented the Philadelphia Constitution, commitments to federalism, separation of powers, popular sovereignty under law, and limited government grew out of concrete experience and varying degrees of historical understanding of human nature and politics. In this light, the Constitution’s purpose of forming “a more perfect union” is in continuity with colonial aims such as promoting “orderly and decent government” found in the “Fundamental Orders of Connecticut” over a century earlier.³² John Adams had an especially keen sense of America’s historical indebtedness, explaining how much its political thought and practice owed to the broader

Western past, especially America's English heritage. In a letter to John Taylor of Caroline, Adams flatly rejects the idea that in the late eighteenth century the United States invented a novel approach to politics, stating, "America has made no discoveries of principles of government that have not been long known."³³ In other words, the basic constitutional disposition of many Framers was not informed by doctrinaire adherence to untested ideas from the Enlightenment.³⁴

Though it was a minority view during the Framing, what Babbitt and Ryn call direct democracy had notable advocates. Like others, Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine were proponents of a very different type of constitutionalism. For each, a constitution was a deliberate, written expression of the rational consensus of a people. In *The Rights of Man*, Paine argues that the formation of a social contract "is the only mode in which governments have a right to arise, and the only principle on which they have a right to exist."³⁵ For Jefferson, a constitution is necessary because government has a natural tendency toward tyranny; it must be bound in manacles of legal iron to protect the rights of the people. About the people themselves, both he and Paine see them as a group that can do little wrong by accident—and nothing intentionally dishonest. The majority in such a democracy should prevail over the minority. In public remarks upon accepting his appointment as secretary of State, Jefferson intones, "Let us, then, my dear friends, for ever bow down to the general reason of society."³⁶ For Jefferson and Paine, a dichotomy exists between the people, naturally good and reasonable, and government, naturally inclined toward despotism.

Whereas Adams sees continuity between the American past and present, even after July 4, 1776, Jefferson observes a fresh start for Americans and the rest of the world as the fruits of the independence movement. Finding the principles of the American Revolution "engraved in our hearts," Jefferson feels no need to "investigate the laws and institutions of a semi-barbarous ancestry."³⁷ In *Common Sense*, Paine also dismisses the normative importance of history, stating the following about the then impending American separation from England: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again."³⁸ Reflecting on the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson expresses his hope for the future significance of the American Revolution, writing, "May it be to the world, what I believe it will be . . . the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government."³⁹ For Jefferson and Paine, visions of the American independence movement grounded in aspirations more modest than global transformation are contemptible.

Especially since the turn of the twentieth century, this mixture of belief in natural human goodness and rationality, combined with a disposition to ignore or reject history as a source of inspiration and wisdom in the present, has gained ascendancy in the US. As a thinker and president, Woodrow Wilson exemplifies this development. He dismisses much of what the Framers believe about government and human nature as the unfortunate product of applying the imagery of Newtonian physics to politics. Impressed by Darwinism and an evolutionary conception of societies, he seeks to redirect the American mind and imagination away from cultivating moral and legal restraints on rash, unchecked action and toward harnessing power to provide humanitarian service to all. Because Wilson sees his responsibilities as shepherding popular opinion and translating the desires of the people into action, he disparages the diversity of views found in Congress as provincial and inefficient. About the American presidency, he states, "The president is at liberty, both in law and conscience, to be as big a man as he can. His capacity will set the limit."⁴⁰ Under benevolent leadership, and provided the results are approved by the people, traditional concerns about constitutionalism recede into the background.

Despite having a number of things in common with Wilson, both Jefferson and Paine would likely be dismayed over the lack of suspicion of government and political power found in Wilson's political thought. At the same time, Jefferson and Paine make explicit room for each generation to determine for itself how to govern and by what beliefs it wants to live. Both figures celebrate the nobility of the people and place great faith in their common sense. That Americans would end up embracing a presidentially centered and increasingly centralized national government of the kind admired by Wilson and many of his successors is not the inexorable outcome of Jefferson and Paine's way of thinking, but neither is it a bizarre result. Unmoored from the historical, the romantic imaginative dimensions of the ideas of Jefferson, Paine, and Wilson retain their potency and have an increased field on which to act. Babbitt appears to be right when he claims that the differences between constitutional and direct democracy are existential rather than trivial. They are incompatible approaches to politics and reflect irreconcilable philosophical anthropologies.

AMERICA AND THE WORLD

These very different types of democracies, Babbitt and Ryn agree, also generate distinct approaches to American foreign policy. In many instances, the spirit of constitutional democracy is manifest in a foreign policy of restraint

that finds the roots of international disorder to be the same as those that cause strife at home: human moral failing. Such a foreign policy does not avoid using force to defend national sovereignty and other legitimate interests, but neither does it resort to such means without careful ethical consideration and submission to the relevant constitutional and other legal decision-making procedures. Peace among nations is a goal, but hopes for anything approaching such an achievement must be grounded in a sober understanding of the human condition, as well as knowledge of and respect for international cultural and political diversity. On this view, the good society and the democratic society are not always synonymous. Rather, historical wisdom is the essential prerequisite for formulating such a vision, which may be properly described as that of moral realism. As Ryn writes, “Only on the basis of intimate familiarity with the highest achievements of one’s own society is it possible to have more than shallow appreciation for the corresponding highest achievements of other societies.”⁴¹ Such a sense of a nation’s past, along with the unique traditions of others, is essential to cultivating relationships with other countries that are both informed and circumspect, open and restrained.

The passion that drives plebiscitary democracy, in contrast, tends to produce a foreign policy prone to dreamy and abstract thinking. On this view, human beings are more or less the same wherever they live. People are good and want more or less the same things in life. Their cultural and historical differences are deemed superficial and ultimately unimportant, if they are acknowledged at all. International disorder is attributed to many external causes. Peace remains a goal, but it is believed to be achievable—even on a permanent basis—through the establishment of liberal democratic political, economic, and other institutions. War can still be fought for traditional reasons, but it is more common to use force as a means of delivering economic uplift and democratic progress around the world. About the international relations of such a democracy, Babbitt draws a startling conclusion, writing that such a regime “is likely to be idealistic in its feelings about itself, but imperialistic in its practice.” This observation probably sounds illogical to those who equate democracy with goodness and interpret this kind of foreign policy as the model of moral service to the world. However, because Babbitt can distinguish types of democracy, he believes he is on firm historical ground in claiming a connection between this romantic kind of democracy and imperialism.⁴²

Both strains of thought can be found in the American foreign policy tradition. In his Farewell Address, George Washington speaks as a moral realist when he reminds Americans that “religion and morality” are vital to domestic

harmony and recommends the following to them: “The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations is in extending our commercial relations to have with them as little *political* connection as possible.”⁴³ In a similar spirit, John Quincy Adams admonishes Americans not to allow their successes with self-government to tempt them into benevolent empire, scanning the world for “monsters to destroy,” because it would mean the end of their constitutional republic.⁴⁴ The nineteenth-century American thinker Orestes Brownson writes at length about the relationship between culture, what he calls the unwritten constitution, and government, successful examples of which he believes emerge out of distinct national unwritten constitutions. In this way, he makes ample theoretical room in American foreign policy for respecting the distinct ways of life prevailing in many nations. For him, the pursuit of peace needs humane understanding of other cultures, not demands to implement a universal political template. These and other American moral realists held such views because they were attuned to the ethical center of existence that comes with historical insight.

What Babbitt describes as a type of democratic imperialism has been ascendant in the United States since the early twentieth century. Woodrow Wilson sees America as the most unselfish of nations, charged with a divine mission to share its ways with everyone. “The world must be made safe for democracy,” he tells Congress in April 1917, and the US bears primary responsibility for making this come true.⁴⁵ In 1941, Franklin Roosevelt announces America’s obligation to promote free speech, religious liberty, economic prosperity, and peace “everywhere in the world.”⁴⁶ Four decades later, Ronald Reagan makes a similar commitment, stating that under his guidance the United States will “foster the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, [and] universities” around the globe.⁴⁷ To those who resist joining the League of Nations, Wilson says they run the risk of breaking “the heart of the world.”⁴⁸ Roosevelt cites America itself, a nation “engaged in change, in a perpetual, peaceful revolution” since its inception, as proof that his foreign policy is “no vision of a distant millennium.”⁴⁹ Reagan rejects the idea that his proposals amount to “cultural imperialism,” accusing opponents of engaging in “cultural condescension, or worse.”⁵⁰ This kind of American foreign policy inclines toward expansiveness, sentimentality, ahistorical thought, and avoidance of serious debate.

These visions assign different levels of importance to respecting the rule of law when operating in the realm of foreign affairs. In the early republican period, the norm in making foreign policy was close adherence to constitu-

tional procedures. Presidents felt legally and morally obligated to submit to Congress in deciding questions of war. Congress appropriated funds to raise an army and navy as circumstances required, made Washington's Neutrality Proclamation enforceable, set clear limits on Adams and his conduct of the Quasi-War with France, and circumscribed the American response to the Barbary pirates during the Jefferson and Madison presidencies. Political leaders saw participating in this process as vital to maintaining popular control over government on such issues. However, American constitutionalism has suffered much harm from foreign policy practice since the early twentieth century. From Korea, to Grenada, to Serbia, to Libya, American wars both great and small have been conducted with increasing executive mendacity, as well as impatience with and avoidance of constitutional requirements. Congress and the American people have largely shirked their responsibility to hold presidents accountable for their actions. Perhaps Dean Acheson, Harry Truman's Secretary of State, expressed best this new attitude when he told Congress in 1951: "If we could all agree on the fact that something should be done, we will perform a much greater role in the world, than by quarreling about who ought to do it."⁵¹

Dubious ideas and indifference to law are not the only reasons one can accurately categorize this latter foreign policy as democratic imperialism. To pursue the visions of Wilson, Roosevelt, Truman, Reagan, Clinton, Bush, Obama, and other like-minded leaders, substantial power must be harnessed and expended. Such policies would require much of what has actually happened in American national politics since the early 1900s. Political, economic, and administrative power has moved away from states and localities toward the national government. Defense expenditures in the US are often the same as those of the next dozen countries combined. The US leads a number of permanent military treaties and alliances. American soldiers are deployed around the world. All of this requires staggering budgetary expenditures, and these funds are derived from a combination of high taxation and the increasing accumulation of debt. In *Democracy and Leadership*, Babbitt writes, "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."⁵² The historical record of US foreign policy over the last century appears to support this claim.

Despite its many costs and failures, democratic empire remains appealing for American leaders and ordinary citizens. In *America the Virtuous*, Ryn argues,

“As the United States is called to bestow its high principles and general benevolence on all of humanity, it must of course have power over all of humanity. Since communism, no ideology has provided so much stimulation for the will to power, and many of America’s leading policymakers are embracing this doctrine.”⁵³ As is the case with qualities of imagination and types of democracy, the differences between moral realism and democratic imperialism come down to character. Just as constitutional democracy informed by moral realism hinges on the socially authoritative presence of the constitutional personality, democratic empire cannot function without a corresponding imperial personality at its core. Possessing self-control, historical wisdom, and a desire to pursue the common good, the constitutional spirit can live on peaceful terms with other nations. At war with itself and others, the imperial soul, even of the sentimental variety, cannot make good on its promises to provide peace and justice. According to Babbitt and Ryn, such a person’s lust for power and misunderstanding of the world is too great.

HUMANISTIC RENEWAL

The foundation of the American constitutional way of life has been seriously weakened, especially over the last few decades, but the authors here do not despair. Like Babbitt and Ryn, they value historical thinking, or “the historical mind,” because the past matters now. History is a well that never runs dry. It invites those attuned to it to draw to the surface the wisdom of human experience and to use such resources to make the best of given circumstances, however bleak they may seem. Considered in this light, historical consciousness actually yields cautious optimism about the future—even in situations as dire as those indicating the arrival of “post-constitutionalism” in America. Insofar as the contributors to this volume share this experiential (some might say Burkean) orientation of Babbitt’s New Humanism, they may correctly be described as seeking a truly *humanistic* renewal of the constitutional spirit.

While these scholars are thus working in a frame similar to that of Babbitt and Ryn, it should be understood that this collection of essays does not constitute a single “argument,” according to which its contributors march in predictable and bland lockstep. In *The Politics*, Aristotle criticizes Plato for desiring too much unity among the people who form the ideal city depicted in *The Republic*: “Socrates thinks that if all unanimously say ‘mine’ and ‘not mine,’ this is an indication of the state’s complete unity. But the word ‘all’ is used in two senses: ‘all separately’ and ‘all together.’ Used in the former sense

this might better bring about what Socrates wants.”⁵⁴ The unity in the present volume, it might be said, has the sort of harmonious diversity that would be appreciated by Aristotle if not necessarily by Plato. To elaborate on a musical metaphor Aristotle uses in the same section of *The Politics*, the “sound” of these chapters is polyphonic harmonious rather than monophonic excessive unity or atonal excessive diversity. Thus, the reader is invited to enter into a conversation in which meaningful affinities as well as differences are identified among the individual authors and the two humanists that are its focal point. As with any conversation, the agreements and objections that arise among interlocutors move the dialogue forward and help clarify many of the fundamental issues at stake.

The first section of the book provides representative illustrations of the work of Babbitt and Ryn. It serves as a linchpin of sorts, orienting those who may be unfamiliar with either thinker to the central ideas in this volume. It also conveys the broader context within which the cultural, moral, and political needs of Western civilization are contemplated and discussed by each of the book’s contributors. This section begins with a piece of Babbitt’s, which is a synoptic statement of what he thinks is needed to save the West from the cultural decay or anomie into which it has been declining since the late eighteenth century. In the second essay, Ryn gives Babbittian scrutiny to contemporary American understandings of “idealism.” The troubling idealism Ryn has in his sights is one that uses highly moralistic terms such as “justice” and “fairness,” not only for American citizens but also for those of all nations, as a means for expanding governmental power and eroding the capacity of Americans to govern themselves. Such claims, palpably demonstrated in the rhetoric of Bush and Obama above, betray what Ryn calls a “new morality,” one that is fundamentally incompatible with the “old” or traditional morality that underpins America’s constitutional order.

In the next section, three authors focus specifically on the cultural element, each reflecting on the priority of the aesthetic or imaginative dimension of human life. Bradley Birzer, who has elsewhere written extensively on twentieth-century luminary and cultural critic Russell Kirk, examines the influence of Babbitt on Kirk and exposes a subtle but important difference between them—their distinctive attitudes toward romanticism. In calling our attention to this, Birzer implicitly raises the important question for anyone influenced by Babbitt, which is whether there may be cultural circumstances in which the romantic spirit actually needs to be stoked in order to confront the scientific rationalism against which Babbitt himself rails. Justin Garrison’s chapter also