



On being creative

and other essays

by Irving Babbitt.

ON BEING CREATIVE

And Other Essays

15530

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DEMOCRACY AND LEADERSHIP.
ROUSSEAU AND ROMANTICISM.
THE MASTERS OF MODERN FRENCH CRITICISM.
THE NEW LAOKOON.

An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts.

LITERATURE AND THE AMERICAN COLLEGE.

Essays in Defense of the Humanities.

ON BEING CREATIVE.

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BY
IRVING BABBITT 1865-



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Τὸ πρῶτον οὐ σπέρμα ἐστὶν ἀλλὰ τὸ τέλειον.
ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, 1072^b.

PREFATORY NOTE

THE essay in this volume on *The Primitivism of Wordsworth* contains the substance of three lectures given at the University of Toronto on the Foundation established by his old students in honor of Professor William J. Alexander. I desire to express my appreciation of numerous courtesies extended to me during my stay in Toronto, especially by Principal Malcolm W. Wallace of University College.

The essay on Julien Benda is taken from my Introduction to the translation of his *Belphégor* (Brewer, Warren and Putnam). I wish to thank the publishers of this work for permission to reprint. The essay on Coleridge appeared originally in *The Nineteenth Century and After*; that on Dr. Johnson in *The Southwest Review*; that on *The Critic and American Life* in *The Forum*; the essays entitled *On Being Creative* and *Romanticism and the Orient* in *The Bookman* (New York). I have made a few additions and omissions in order to adjust the essays to one another. I have not, however, eliminated all repetitions. My excuse for them, so far as there is any, is that they may serve in some small measure to dissipate certain current confusions on the subject of humanism.

I. B.

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
March, 1932

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INTRODUCTION

THE connecting theme of these essays is found in the Aristotelian dictum¹ that I have taken as my epigraph with its implied disapproval of what we should term nowadays the genetic method. For some time past there has been an interest in origins rather than in ends far beyond anything with which Aristotle was familiar. According to Nietzsche, the German has a predilection for everything that is 'damp,' 'obscure,' and 'evolving.' This predilection, far from being exclusively Teutonic, has been so universal that it has put its stamp on an entire epoch. We are still living in what may be termed a primitivistic movement. Certain persons in the past, especially certain poets, have toyed with primitivistic fancies, but it is only within the last two centuries, at least in the Occident, that primitivism has set up as a serious philosophy of life and threatened the overthrow of humanistic and religious standards.

¹ Literally rendered: 'The first is not the seed but the perfect.'

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In his attack on traditional standards the primitivist takes as a rule his point of departure in some form of the contrast between the 'natural' and the 'artificial.' More, however, than an insistence on this contrast is needed to make a full-fledged primitivist. Certain Greeks, especially during the post-Socratic period, worked out an opposition between 'nature' (*physis*) and 'convention' (*nomos*) at least as radical as anything achieved in modern times. As a rule, however, the Greek did not, even in the extremity of his revolt from convention, cease to be rationalistic. When he finally abdicated his pride of reason, so far as he did abdicate it, it was not before emotion or instinct or the like, but before the divine will proclaimed by Christianity. In short, to put the matter psychologically, the 'natural,' as conceived by the Stoics and other ancient rationalists, tended to give way to the supernatural in the form of grace.

The surrender to the subrational has, on the other hand, been very marked in our modern movement. If all that the opponent of the 'return to nature' needed to do was to reaffirm the claims of reason, his task would be a comparatively easy one. But behind the problem of the reason, there lurks a

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far more formidable problem — that of the will. A difference of opinion is possible as to what is most fundamental in traditional Christianity. Many would accord this supreme and central place to the dogma of the Incarnation. One may perhaps affirm on strictly theological grounds that grace underlies even the Incarnation; inasmuch as it was by the grace of the Father that the Son was sent. If we consider the problem from the psychological rather than the theological angle, we are led almost inevitably, as I have just suggested, to put prime emphasis on grace.

One must admit that grace does not appeal in the psychological or any other sense to those who have entered into the naturalistic current that has been running with increasing force since the Renaissance and has become in our day well-nigh irresistible. The individualist of the naturalistic type has not only discarded grace but along with it the whole notion of a transcendent will. In short, he does not grant that man needs to be humble. Those who are convinced of the unsoundness of this attitude may simply repudiate individualism and revert to a purely traditionalist attitude — the attitude that is

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usually associated, at least in matters of faith and morals, with the Roman Catholic Church; or again he may, like Mr. P. E. More, seek to steer a middle course between a traditional authority in religion that has become so absolute as to be oppressive and the mere anarchy of private judgment.

My own attempt to solve the problem of standards is, as readers of my previous volumes are aware, distinctly different. At the risk of seeming unduly repetitious, I am going to recapitulate the main argument developed in these volumes, first, because it is hardly fair to assume that all my present readers are familiar with this argument, secondly, because it has become apparent that it is in certain respects in need of further elucidation.

I am seeking, then, here and elsewhere to defend what I would define as a positive and critical humanism. The aim of the humanist, and that from the time of the ancient Greeks, has been the avoidance of excess. Anyone who sets out to live temperately and proportionately will find that he will need to impose upon himself a difficult discipline. His attitude towards life will necessarily be dualistic. It will be dualistic in the sense that he recognizes in

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man a 'self' that is capable of exercising control and another 'self' that needs controlling. The opposition between the two selves is well put by Cicero, one of the most influential of occidental humanists. 'The natural constitution of the human mind,' he says, 'is twofold. One part consists in appetite, by the Greeks termed *hormé* ("impulse"), which hurries a man hither and thither; the other is reason, which instructs and makes clear what is to be done or avoided; thus it follows that reason fitly commands and appetite obeys.'¹

The primitivist seeks on various grounds to get rid of this dualism. Thus, according to Rousseau, man is 'naturally good.' If evil appears, it is to be referred not to a failure on the part of the individual to control himself but to 'institutions.' In that case, it may be asked, why not simply reaffirm, by way of reply to Rousseau and other sentimental naturalists, the humanistic dualism in much the form in which Cicero stated it? Why complicate the situation by bringing in a discussion of grace, a purely religious problem? I have expressed the opinion on more than one occasion that there has been a serious

¹ *De Officiis*, Lib. I, c. 28.

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omission in our modern attempts to construct sound philosophies of life — something that may turn out indeed to be the keystone of the arch. It may be that more is required, if we are to make good this omission, than simply to reassert 'reason' in the Ciceronian sense. A comparison may be of help at this point between occidental humanism and the great tradition of the Far East that is associated with Confucius. According to Hegel,¹ the occidental will find nothing in Confucius that has not been said, and better said by Cicero. There is, however, an idea to which Confucius gives a central place and which is almost entirely absent, not only from Cicero but from Aristotle, who may be considered, doctrinally at least, as the most important of occidental humanists — the idea, namely, of humility. It is hard to distinguish between a humanism, like that of Cicero, which does not go beyond reason, and Stoicism. This more or less stoical humanism has entered as an element, often as the dominant element, into many noble lives; yet the reason that has the support of a higher will, that is, in Confucian phrase, submissive to 'the will

¹ As quoted by J. E. Spingarn.

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of heaven,' would seem better able to exercise control over the natural man than a reason that is purely self-reliant. At all events, it is this higher will that I have in mind when I raise the question whether something has not been omitted in our modern philosophies of life that may turn out to be the keystone of the arch. Now the assertion of this quality of will has been almost inseparably bound up in the Occident with dogmatic and revealed religion. The higher will has been identified with God's will, its operation with the doctrine of grace. In that case, it may be urged, if the humanist seeks support in something higher than reason, he must needs turn to Christian theology. I have no quarrel with those who assume this traditionalist attitude.¹ At the same time I am unable to agree with those who deny humanism independent validity, who hold that it must be *ancilla theologiae* or at least *religionis*. One has to face the fact, an unfortunate fact perhaps, that there are many men of good will for whom dogmatic and revealed religion has become impossible. Are they therefore to be banished into outer darkness where there is

¹ Cf. *Democracy and Leadership*, pp. 316-17.

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wailing and gnashing of teeth? What has at bottom undermined dogmatic and revealed religion is the growth of the positive and critical spirit. My own somewhat limited programme — for I am not setting up humanism as a substitute for religion — is to meet those who profess to be positive and critical on their own ground and to undertake to show them that in an essential respect they have not been positive and critical enough. The point may perhaps be best illustrated in connection with contemporary psychology. On the pretext of being fully experimental, the psychologist has come to be almost entirely concerned with the subrational and animal sides of human nature. It seems, indeed, to be taken as self-evident that psychology is a purely naturalistic subject; so much so that in some institutions of learning, it has been divorced from the department of philosophy and annexed to that of biology. It is possible, however, to conceive of a humanistic or even a religious psychology that is in its own way experimental or experiential. Though the higher will in man is not amenable to the methods of the laboratory, it may nevertheless be asserted as a primordial fact — something of which

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one is immediately aware. This awareness, to be sure, exists in very different degrees in different individuals, so that one encounters in purely psychological form the equivalent of the mystery of grace. If one undertakes to define positively the higher will, one cannot perhaps hit upon a better phrase than that devised by Mr. Walter Lippmann to describe the belief that the modern man has tended to lose — the belief, namely, that 'there is an immortal essence presiding like a king over his appetites.' This 'immortal essence,' so far as it has bearing on actual conduct, means the imposition of limits on the expansive 'lusts' of the natural man. The modernist has sought to identify this act of self-limitation, concentration, and selection — the human act, *par excellence* — with mere contraction and impoverishment, with what William James terms 'wintry negativity.'

How, it may be asked, does the modernist who is unfriendly to the idea of an 'immortal essence,' and in general to the idea of an inner principle of control set above the temperamental self, propose to avoid the evils that have always been associated with unrestraint? I would preface my reply to this

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question by quoting a sentence from *Democracy and Leadership*: 'What is disquieting about the time is not so much its open and avowed materialism as what it takes to be its spirituality.' This sham spirituality, as one may say, will be found to consist in a sort of subrational parody of grace: so that even the humanist who does not feel the need of going beyond a Ciceronian dualism will need to take account of the doctrine of grace and its counterfeits, if he is to understand the situation that has grown up since the eighteenth century in connection with the rise of primitivism or emotional romanticism. Professor Arthur O. Lovejoy has maintained that there is no such thing as a single romantic movement during this period but only romanticisms, each one of which needs to be carefully discriminated from the others. I am, on the contrary, ready to maintain with all the emphasis of which I am capable that there is a single romantic movement which culminates, so far as the traditional disciplines are concerned, in an opposition, variously conceived, between the idea of imitation and that of spontaneity. Out of the idea of spontaneity grows in turn the notion of 'creativity,'

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still dominant internationally, with which I have sought to deal in the title essay of this volume. A still more important aspect of the gospel of spontaneity that has also assumed many forms in many lands is the assumption that one may achieve by a subrational overflow of feeling the 'love' that has been associated traditionally with superrational will in the form of grace. At this essential point primitivism may be regarded as a Christian heresy. I have sought to deal psychologically rather than theologically with the whole problem in several of the following essays, especially perhaps in the essay on Wordsworth.

If I am positive in my mode of affirming the higher will and humanistic in that I am primarily concerned with the bearing of this will on the mediatory virtues, in what sense do I seek to be critical? In brief, one needs, I hold, to be critical if one is to solve on the terms imposed by the modern spirit the problem of standards. The person who yields to his temperamental urges is wont to oscillate from one extreme to the other. 'For me,' said Rousseau, the temperamentalist par excellence, 'there is no intermediary term between

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everything and nothing.' If any one sets himself the humanistic task of achieving the intermediary term between extremes, he will find that it is not enough to exercise an inner check on temperament, he will need to exercise this check intelligently; and to exercise it intelligently he will need to look up to some norm. Norms and standards have been very much associated in the past with the absolute in either its metaphysical or its theological form; so that anyone who sets out to defend standards is at once suspect of absolutism. Thus Mr. Santayana concludes triumphantly what is meant in part apparently as a refutation of my own position: 'Absolutism smells of fustiness as well as of fag-gots.'¹ Absolutism may not be quite so sinister as Mr. Santayana supposes, but in any case my withers are unwrung. My endeavor has been to show that, even if one dispenses with absolutes, one may still retain standards.

I hope that, especially at this point, where it is so hard to avoid misunderstanding, I may be allowed a good deal of repetition and recapitulation. Strictly speaking, I have said, life does not give here an ele-

¹ *The Genteel Tradition at Bay*, p. 74.

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ment of oneness and there an element of change: it gives a oneness that is always changing. Moreover, man does not contemplate this oneness from without: he is himself a oneness that is always changing. Now it is a psychological fact that the change-ful element both in man himself and in the outer world is closely associated with the sense of illusion: so that the most critical report on life in the whole of English literature is perhaps that of Shakespeare: 'We are such stuff as dreams are made on.' The world, however, did not have to wait for Shakespeare to learn that life is dreamlike and illusory. This is a topic that has been much enlarged on throughout the ages and is not in itself especially edifying. The rôle that many Hindus assign to *māyā*, for example, would seem altogether inordinate. The early Buddhists are more satisfactory than most other Hindu philosophers on this point, not only because they deal more psychologically and less metaphysically with the idea that life is a dream, but also because they are more definite as to the nature of the true awakening. The very word Buddha means the Awakened. Compared with the founder of their faith, the rest of us, if we are to

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believe the Buddhists, are mere somnambulists. One is reminded of a saying of Goethe: 'Error stands in the same relation to truth as sleeping to waking.' In that case the genuineness of one's awakening will be in direct ratio to one's apprehension of the truth. As to the difficulty of any such apprehension there are still many who are in sympathy with Pontius Pilate. One may, however, make certain broad distinctions regarding what may be understood by the truth. 'Ye shall know the truth,' we read in the Gospel, 'and the truth shall make you free.' A truth that makes one free is at all events not the truth of the behaviorist. On the other hand, there is a certain psychological agreement between Christian and Buddhist, however far apart they may be theologically, as to the nature of truth: they both include in their truth, for example, the belief in a higher will and make freedom depend, though it must be admitted in very different ways, on the activity of this will.

Truth, humanistic as well as religious, so far as it involves the assertion of a specifically human quality of will, has evidently been compromised not only by the primitivists of whom I have spoken, who have

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set up a sort of subrational parody of it, but by the mechanists and determinists who have virtually denied it. Many observers look on the latter class as more dangerous than the former. The essential problem today is, they hold, how to escape from the excess of mechanism, whether one understand by mechanism the mechanizing of mind itself or the multiplication of machines in the outer world. I am not convinced as to the soundness of this view. There would seem to be no harm in man's gaining control of the forces of nature — and the mechanistic hypothesis has been a powerful aid to this end — provided he does not in the process lose control of himself. The primitivist undermines the principle of control in more insidious fashion than the mechanist. He not only sets up dubious substitutes for the traditional disciplines, but often assails the scientific intellect itself, even to the point of falling into obscurantism. No one indeed is wont to make louder lament over the triumph of mechanism than the primitivist.

The tendency of science to overstep its due boundaries and so to run into pseudo-science is none the less a serious evil. Much of the prestige now

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enjoyed by the man of science can be shown to arise from a fundamental confusion of categories. People look to him for illumination on subjects on which, merely as a man of science, he is no more qualified to speak than the ordinary person. They listen, for example, to a debate between Messrs. Millikan and Eddington on the question whether the universe is or is not 'running down,' as though this debate had a deep religious significance. The man of science himself often enters into the illusion. Thus an eminent physicist writes of certain recent bewildering developments in his subject that these developments must not be taken to mean that science is baffled; they may mean, on the contrary, that it is on the point of discovering the Godhead. One should, to be sure, beware of speaking too absolutely; one should not, for instance, deny all validity to the so-called argument from design in either its older or its more recent form. The eighteenth century deist saw behind the phenomena of nature a sort of divine watch-maker. Sir James Jeans infers from his searching of the heavens that God is rather a super-mathematician.

Nevertheless one may say in the words of the

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Imitation — and that without a particle of obscurantism — of certain efforts now being made to wrest from Nature her more recondite secrets: 'Why dispute about hidden and obscure matters for our ignorance of which we shall not be reproved at the Judgment?' One suspects the more ambitious of the scientific theorists of attempting to do something that Pascal, himself an eminent man of science, declared to be impossible — namely, to grasp either one or both of the two 'infinities' — the infinite of largeness and that of smallness — by which man is encompassed. But even though the science be genuine it is largely irrelevant, as Pascal again has pointed out, in the realm of specifically human values. One can scarcely repeat too often his distinction between the three orders — first, the order of material nature, second, the order of mind, third, the order of charity. To this last order alone he applies the epithet supernatural; it transcends at all events the proper domain of physical science.

The tendency of physical science to presume beyond its due bounds can be traced to a certain

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usurpation on the part of reason — a particular form of the triumph of pride over humility. If one admit a higher will at all, one must grant at the same time that the rôle of reason in its relation to this will is not primary but at most instrumental, that reason cannot hope to formulate finally what is by definition above it. I have already pointed out another respect in which life baffles the mere rationalist: its unity and its diversity are indissolubly blended — only another way of saying that its reality is indissolubly blended with illusion. Try to separate the unity and the diversity too absolutely, as the rationalist is always tempted to do, and one falls either into a metaphysic of the One or a metaphysic of the Many. Western philosophy is largely a rather unprofitable record of the clashes between these two types of metaphysicians. One must therefore conclude that it is reasonable not to be a rationalist.

Those who make exaggerated claims for physical science are as a rule rationalistic rather than genuinely positive and critical. A reporter of the *Paris Figaro* recently interviewed an eminent astronomer as to the relative importance of poetry

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and science. The astronomer dismissed poetry with disdain on the ground that it is mere illusion whereas science gives 'truth' and 'reality' (apparently purged of all illusion). This attitude, though still common, is not exactly that of the most recent type of speculative scientist. Eddington, for example, is so ready to recognize the rôle of illusion, even in science, that, if some of his statements were taken at their face value, one would have to conclude that scientific 'truth' is scarcely to be distinguished from it. Eddington, however, is not only in danger of slipping into a dubious mysticism, but offers no criterion for discriminating between such truth as may be attained by the man of science and other types of truth — for example, the type aimed at by the humanist.

While repudiating the absolute and exclusive claims of science to truth and reality, one must grant that it has established by soundly experimental methods that there is a constant element in physical nature, even though it is not possible to disengage this element completely from contingency. Similarly one may hope to establish, if not experimentally in the narrower sense, at least ex-

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perientially that there is in human nature something that abides through all vicissitudes. I have sought to show that anyone who proceeds positively and critically in the realm of human values and at the same time hopes to achieve standards which, without being absolute, are still far from being merely illusory, must seek to coördinate rightly in himself two powers: on the one hand, a power which I term imagination that reaches out and seizes likenesses and analogies; secondly, a power which may be termed analytical reason that discriminates and tests this unifying activity of the imagination, not with reference to any theory, but to the actual data of experience.

The standards thus obtained may be pressed into the service of what I have termed a purely Ciceronian humanism. The humanistic virtues — moderation, common sense and common decency — have often been achieved on these lines in the past and may very well be so achieved in the future. If one goes further and undertakes to deal with the primitivistic parody of the 'order of charity' and in general with the problem of the higher will, more delicate questions evidently arise. To deal adequately with these

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questions one needs, we are told, the support of dogma and revelation. I have no quarrel, as I have said, with those who take this position, though holding that it is possible even here to proceed positively and critically.

The most weighty argument that has been advanced for the belief that humanism is likely to prove ineffective save in subordination to Christian orthodoxy is that this orthodoxy can alone supply our modern life with the central purpose it so plainly lacks. That the elimination of the teleological element from life has been in almost direct ratio to the decline of traditional religion is beyond question. The scientific naturalists have been especially unfriendly to what is known in philosophy as final causes. This unfriendliness can, to be sure, be traced in part to the indiscreet use of final causes not only by certain orthodox theologians but by the deists of the eighteenth century. The issue is at all events one that must be faced by every serious thinker. When Aristotle (to return to my epigraph) gives the primacy to ends over origins, he has in mind the supreme and perfect End itself. He conceives of this end of ends as an 'unmoved Mover.'

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