
Concentric Imagination: An Alternative to Philosophical Reason

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The important thing is to live well. I think that Babbitt, Ryn, and myself are in agreement on this point. We also, I think, agree on what it means to live well in a very general sense; that is, we share in a certain wisdom about life, some guidelines (life-strategies, I call them) on how to conduct one's existence well, to gain a certain happiness; but within those guidelines the most multifarious and wildly variant arrangements of character can and should emerge: that, in William James' phrase, is the "cash value" of individualism, its pragmatic fruits. I believe, I repeat, that Ryn, Babbitt, and myself share a commitment to humanist individualism as a life-strategy, and to life-strategy as the highest work of human thought: classical philosophy of conduct modernized and understood as a clarification of the general conditions of happiness—thoroughly pragmatic knowledge, let me add, but not in any crass sense. What is at stake is the practice of individuality. From this viewpoint philosophy is thoroughly practical, at the service of living well. Philosophy in this case is criticism of the general features of life-practice, issuing in guidelines for life-strategy.

I am not claiming that Babbitt and Ryn would state the matter as I have. While I believe that we are in agreement on the mentioned points, they do not self-consciously confine themselves to a spare humanist individualism which restricts philosophy to a purely practical-analytical role. In Babbitt's case, I agree with Ryn, there is lack of clarity about the scope of philosophy: Babbitt is a great phi-

losopher of conduct and not much of a philosopher of philosophy. As Ryn himself stresses, Babbitt had his eyes on the prize. But Ryn is an acute and serious philosopher of philosophy, and he self-consciously and decisively provides a larger than pragmatic role for philosophy. Risking oversimplification, I suggest that Ryn joins with Babbitt on the matter of humanist individualism and supplements Babbitt by proposing presuppositions for his humanist-individualist discourse. Those presuppositions concern the possibilities of philosophy as a theoretical discipline constituted by a rationality that is not merely practical but that is also not abstract, but is concrete and totalizing, though not totalized.

My differences with Ryn have nothing to do with understanding and affirming Babbitt as a philosopher of conduct. As I would pose it, the question framing our dialogue is: Does humanist individualism need supplementation by a form of reason that is not simply practical-analytical? Ryn answers "yes" to this question, and my answer is "no." It is incumbent on me to engage Ryn on his chosen ground, the philosophy of philosophy, and first to show that the epistemological status of humanist individualism can be described credibly without resort to nonpractical reason, and second to present an alternative epistemic account of humanist individualism that does not rely on commitment to a nonpractical form of reason.

*Experience
and reason.*

Before I attempt to draw Ryn into an epistemological stalemate, I will try to sketch the bare bones of his position on the capabilities of reason, in particular with regard to the role of reason in the determination of ends. I do this in order to amend a position that I took in my original exegesis of Ryn on reason (HUMANITAS, Volume VI, No. 1). Ryn has convinced me that "ends-conferring reason" was a very misleading (at best) term for me to use to characterize his position. I gladly accept that he does not affirm an ends-conferring reason.

What, then, does he affirm in his reply to my commentary? "If philosophical reason has some understanding about the goal of human existence, it is not because it enjoys privileged access to 'ideal' truth or norms of perfection, but because it has knowledge about the permanent *categorical structure* of human life, of the formal conditions of goodness, truth and beauty as historically manifested in practical action, art and thinking." (85-86) "Philosophical concepts capture the *categorical* structure of experience, those fundamental, primordial dimensions of consciousness that cannot be defined out of existence but affect all human life." (83-84) I want to consider

these two important passages with some care to fix Ryn's position as precisely as I can and to contrast my own to it.

"If philosophical reason has some understanding about the goal of human existence . . ." I will assume that the "if" is rhetorical and that, for Ryn, philosophical reason has "some understanding" about ends.

". . . it is not because it enjoys privileged access to 'ideal' truth or norms of perfection . . ." Ryn here denies that he is committed to an ends-conferring reason.

". . . but because it has knowledge about the permanent *categorical structure* of human life . . ." Here is the nub. Ryn's use of italics shows that he is aware of that. Ryn's key epistemological claim is that "life" (Ryn uses the terms "consciousness," "existence," and, most importantly, "experience" to perform a similar grounding function to "life" elsewhere in his essay) has a permanent categorical structure that is to some degree or in some way available to reason. That claim is made even more strongly in the second quoted passage in which the "*categorical* [again italicized by Ryn] structure of experience" is identified with "fundamental, primordial dimensions of consciousness that . . . affect all human life." That is, in the passages presently under consideration, Ryn appears to be decidedly foundationalist, in the sense of affirming that philosophical reason can be revelatory of, can generate an imperfect but somewhat accurate language to describe, a universal structure of human life/existence/consciousness/experience. What is referred to in Ryn's grounding words is something that is somehow free enough of constitution by discursive imagination to be available to an imperfect but genuinely revelatory *rational* discourse.

At this point I break with him. My stalemating position to Ryn is anti-foundationalist. Rather than claiming that reason has access to universal experience, I claim that reason appears within a field already being organized by discursive imagination. Since imagination is heterogeneous, falling at least into concentric and eccentric types, there is no way for reason to pass judgment from some independent position on which form of imagination is veracious. That is, reason cannot justify moral will; it can only serve the moral will instrumentally and analytically when that will is actualized. It is my sense of his text that Ryn wants reason to justify the moral will by interpreting what I view as categories of the concentric imagination as the categories of experience as such.

*Categories of
concentric
imagination.*

“. . . of the formal conditions of goodness, truth and beauty as historically manifested in practical action, art and thinking.” Here is Ryn’s account of reason’s capacity with regard to the determination of ends. Reason can provide the formal conditions of the norms inherent in experience itself. As he advises in his next sentence, reason “does not know how, concretely, the values of goodness, truth and beauty will be realized in circumstances to come.” (86) But reason does, I suggest, in Ryn’s account, reveal that experience itself is structured by certain norms. This is what my position denies. Reason only operates within a prior form of imagination and, therefore, encounters only the ends established by the form of imagination that it is serving. What Ryn calls “experience” is for my position dirempted. The presence of the one within the many is a mystery that reason cannot penetrate but can only identify in its analytic office under the aegis of concentric imagination. I would change the claim in my original essay that Ryn affirms an ends-conferring reason to the suggestion that he affirms an ends-discerning reason.

Now that I have sketched Ryn’s position and the essentials of my stalemating position, I need to show how the latter position meets Ryn’s demands for the presuppositions of humanist individualism.

*Imagination
served by
pragmatic-
analytic
rationality.*

Ryn believes that a philosophical reason of the kind that he has defined is required to ground the possibility of the intelligible use of certain general terms and basic commitments that appear in Babbitt’s texts. At several points he asks whether anything but philosophical reason could make such terms and affirmations meaningful.

Ryn begins this line of questioning with broad framing questions: “If [Babbitt’s] various penetrating observations are not, or not mainly, products of reason—reason being incapable of faithfully expressing what is truly in experience and important—what exactly are they?” (84) I respond that those “observations” are, at this level of generality, products of the concentric imagination disciplined/constituted/served by pragmatic-analytic rationality. They are elements of philosophy of conduct, that is, criticism of life, which is relative to the form of imagination (concentric) that they bring to self-conscious reflection. They are the most general and central terms and propositions in a concentric view of life.

“What is it, then, that gives theoretical-conceptual form to the facts of immediate experience, making critical discussion of them possible?” (84) I answer, again at the level of generality of the ques-

tion, that if there is immediate experience for adult human beings it is not very frequent. "Experience" is on the whole mediated and is being constituted by the discursive powers of imagination before rational operations give it "theoretical-conceptual form." What is given theoretical-conceptual form is a complex of discursively mediated "experience," a product of imagination in readiness to be refined and clarified.

In another line of questioning, Ryn asks how, if not through philosophical reason, imaginative-intuitive constructions can be assessed as to their reality. "Is the particular whole sheer fancy, or does it express life as actually lived? What power in man answers this question?" (86) I respond that it is not a single power that answers the question, but a constellation of powers held in balance by the moral will: spontaneous perception itself, the intuited difference between perception and fantasy, the concentric imagination in its comprehensive aspect, and pragmatic-analytical reason. All of these, along with responsiveness to others, hold the line between perception-illusion and delusion. I prefer to use, from my position, the distinction between illusion (concentric imagination) and delusion (eccentric imagination) rather than that between fancy and reality. "Reality" appears in terms of imaginative constructions.

Illusion and delusion.

In yet another line of questioning, Ryn asks after the "epistemological basis of 'criticism.'" What formulates concepts of criticism such as, in Babbitt's case, "'high seriousness,' 'romanticism,' 'classicism,' 'sentimental humanitarianism,' 'sham spirituality'?" (88) I answer, predictably, that they are products of the analytic reason acting on the products of the concentric imagination; but Ryn would find a problem with that answer, at least in terms of my fidelity to Babbitt. Babbitt, as Ryn notes, was no friend of analytical reason, holding sometimes that it distorted experience. Thus, Ryn argues that if analytical reason is the source of Babbitt's concepts of criticism, these concepts would have to be, from Babbitt's viewpoint, distorting or false. My response here is to break with the Bergsonian Babbitt, who sometimes goes to anti-intellectualist excess, and advance a concept of analytical reason as an organ of concentric imagination and moral will.

Products of analytic reason.

Analytic reason is the set of operations that formulates distinct concepts from the elements of ongoing discourses and then compares those concepts according to a set of diverse relations, including those of formal logical consistency, but also those of causality

and purposiveness. Functioning within a concentric imagination, analytical reason brings the judgments of that imagination and its structures to conceptual clarity.

*Pragmatic
reason
criticizes
itself.*

I will now try to forestall a possible question from Ryn: What makes it possible for me to distinguish between the concentric and eccentric imaginations? If I am always within one or the other of them, how can I compare them? This is what I believe that I am presupposing: Under the protection of moral will and a strong concentric imagination, reason has the capacity to criticize itself and to determine the possibilities of its relations to imagination. The ground for comparison between the two forms of imagination is the comprehensive aspect of the concentric imagination, which can and must entertain its opposite (eccentric imagination) imaginatively and even playfully, even if also censoriously: a feat that Babbitt accomplished much of the time.

That ends my effort to stalemate Ryn in the name of a spare humanist individualism. Now I want to conclude my discussion with an account of the function of reason in the good life alternative to that offered by Ryn's reason-and-experience discourse.

I am not through with Ryn just yet. I want to identify a point at which we connect, the point of what I call humanist individualism. I will let Ryn carry us from his major discourse of reason and experience to one of his minor discourses of discourse and imagination, the one in which I operate. First, a question, a problem, an important concern: "Without the reality check that [philosophical reason] performs we would drift into unrestrained illusion, even madness." (87) I do not agree that "philosophical reason" performs the "reality check," but I do agree that the reality check (I would prefer to call it a "delusion check") is of the highest importance in living well. Indeed, for me, it is the primary work of self-formation. Here is where I have my deep affinity with Babbitt, the only American of the golden age of thought to thematize life as the practice of sanity. That is what I mean by humanist individualism. This is why I feel justified in calling Ryn a humanist individualist, whatever other titles he might legitimately claim: sanity is important to him. It is more important to me than epistemology is.

*Interior
monologue.*

Now, drawing a passage from Ryn's book *Will, Imagination and Reason*, we move to the alternative discourse: "[Babbitt's] view should be kept in mind that at the basis of our outlook on life lies an intuitively constituted vision of reality." I would substitute here for

“intuitively constituted vision of reality” the phrase “imaginative construction” (illusion). Ryn continues: “The individual holds and develops this intuitive whole [imaginative whole, illusion] in an ‘inner monologue’ by means of linguistic symbols. ‘Words govern the imagination.’”¹ With the one change that I introduced, the last two sentences are ones that I would use to characterize my position.

To conduct a sane inner monologue is the primary work of living well. It must be a monologue or, perhaps, what Unamuno called an auto-dialogue, a play of personae conducted by the self. It cannot be a dialogue. The sane individual is centered; that individual’s consciousness is not an arena of warring personality fragments but the realm of a benevolent despot ever ready to apply the inner check when concentricity is threatened and things start to fall apart, as they always do. The monologue is inward. The core of a sane inner monologue is a reflective review of one’s practices and discourses (experiences and thoughts) in terms of their standing within one’s imaginatively constructed whole, which includes one’s commitments to action. To be within the concentric imagination means to be positioned within ego-centered discourse, not within any discourse centered outside the monologist nor within a purposefully de-centered discourse such as one finds in deconstructionist texts. Ego-centered does not mean egocentric. In the former the conscious self takes responsibility for giving its life a character, whereas in the latter the self refers everything other than itself to its own selfish agenda. Ego-centered discourse conducted with sane imagination is the way in which a strong human individual is co-constituted through language: “‘Words govern the imagination.’” Ego-centered discourse establishes individuals as self-conscious critics of their lives.

It was Babbitt’s contribution to have taken Matthew Arnold’s suggestion that criticism of art might serve as the paradigm for criticism of life and to have developed it into an account of the sane imagination. Following from the point in the previous section that the reliable discrimination of illusion from delusion is the result of a complex of factors and forces regulated by moral will (the ego as executor of a concentric imagination), sanity is also a complex product requiring the contribution and balancing of physical, emotional and

*Concentric
imagination as
sanity.*

¹ Claes G. Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason: Irving Babbitt and the Problem of Reality* (Chicago: Regnery Books, 1986), 161. Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1979), 217-18.

intellectual components. The imagination is so important not because it has more reality than any of the other factors and features of life, but because it is the connective tissue of the self, the way the self gives itself form. The concentric imagination constructs a form that includes wide ranges of practice and discourse, and judges them according to their contributions to living well. The latter I will not close off by definition, but will qualify by the word "happiness." My Babbitt is a eudaemonist, I would even say "hedonist," were it not for the unfortunate associations of that word. Eudaemonic living demands attention to proportion, the cultivation of a sense of proportion, which is the keystone of concentric (sane) imagination. It is a sense of proportion that maintains sanity, keeps the imagination from getting caught in a psychotic corner of thought and action. Illusion is proportionate. Delusion is excessive or defective. Proportionate to what? It is here that Ryn would call upon reason, experience, and reality. I can only say that sane illusion is proportionate to the products of a concentric imagination operating with pragmatic-analytical reason; that is, concentric imagination is what brings forth the proportion that defines its products and operations—a kind of Heideggerian circle.

We gain proportion by using pragmatic reason to show us how things work and what their consequences are. We gain proportion by using analytical reason to determine the presuppositions of our discourses and, therefore, their limits. We gain proportion by the non-rational operations of concentricity, association, analogy, sensitivity, imagination, perception, kinaesthesia; and by the quasi-rational practices of good conduct and inner monologue. Reason here is a function of sanity.

In the practice of the concentric life the inner monologue takes on decisive importance. The humanist individual makes of that monologue a medium of life-strategy, a discourse oriented to life-practice that checks itself for delusion, that is continually entertaining new evidence and arguments, and sorting them out and connecting them by the most diverse rational and nonrational operations, under the guidance of a concentric will. A sane inner monologue is the sustainer and one of the finite perfections of living well.

We have no choice but to form our individualities from the discourses (illusions) through which we emerge as individuals with inwardness. Language co-constitutes the self and is so intimately in-

volved with it that all of our judgments have a touch of illusion in them. We must work with what we have, especially with the culturally available products of sane imagination that others from past and present give to us. The deepest form of madness is to confuse the other-than-oneself with the fantasies that one might have about the other. That is the discourse of psychosis, an inner monologue lost in the delusion of its own sufficiency, not open to discourses and texts that might challenge it and give it amplitude. Here disproportion slips over into non-recognition, which leads to the curse that Babbitt identified and warned against: efficient megalomania.

*Avoiding
psychosis.*

It is not that there is no reality, but that the reality is co-constituted by illusion, veiled and revealed by it, to take a Heideggerian turn. The requirement of a spare humanist individualism is to accept the necessity of illusion; its task is to protect illusion from the encroachment of delusion. For achieving this acceptance and accomplishing this task pragmatic-analytical reason is a necessary but not a sufficient condition.