
Sentimental Hogwash? *On Capra's It's a Wonderful Life*

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Concern about the ethical condition of mankind has exercised great minds from the beginning of time. In Biblical chronology, the Fall follows only Creation. No longer a denizen of paradise, man began his struggle against himself and the elements, the former proving a consistently more formidable foe. Plato's description of life in a democratic regime illustrates not only how easily vice can dominate virtue, but how such an ethical inversion comes to be accepted as the norm rather than the aberration:

They praise [democratic man] extravagantly and call insolence good breeding, license liberty, extravagance generosity, and shamelessness courage . . . [i]n fact, he lives from day to day, indulging the pleasure of the moment . . . [t]here's no order or restraint in his life, and he reckons his way of living is pleasant, free and happy, and sticks to it through thick and thin.¹

What Plato considered the penultimate level of civil degradation could easily be mistaken for a *People* magazine cover story regaling the exploits of contemporary *bon vivants*. Often enough lapses in probity among even politicians and preachers prompt winks and nods as much as reproach. Such is the extent to which American popular culture lionizes the pursuit of pleasure and the avoid-

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¹ Plato, *The Republic*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin Books, 1987 [1955]), 319 (561a-d).

Man is forever susceptible to the inversion of vice and virtue.

ance of pain, adopting Hobbes's sensual calculus in place of the classical and Christian pursuit of the good for its own sake.

Some observations transcend time and place, illuminating as they do so those principles that apply to all mankind in every circumstance, past, present and future, principles universal in their application. Plato means to divine the journey to the good, the true, and the beautiful, which necessarily involves the cautionary exposition of paths of least resistance paved with self-deception and evil. Some seventy generations after Plato, a moment's reflection on his words confirms that human nature does not change much despite "progress," that man remains forever susceptible to the inversion of vice and virtue, of what merely feels good for what truly is good, and therefore at risk of alienation from that which truly vests human life with meaning.

One thinker who devoted systematic study to the manifestation in art of man's ethical condition was Irving Babbitt, and his scholarship offers an insightful and erudite guide to discerning how artistic—and, indeed, all—human activities affect the ethical order. "Life," he posited, "is a dream that needs to be managed with the utmost discretion, if it is not to turn into a nightmare."² For Babbitt, as Claes Ryn has noted, "the foundation and center of all genuinely civilized life is personal moral character and effort."³ A person's access to the true meaning of life and its attendant happiness is a function of determined moral striving of which aesthetic activity is necessarily a part. "[A]rt," therefore, "achieves greatness in proportion as it expresses the ethical essence of human existence."⁴

Given the centrality of moral striving to Babbitt's notion of a healthy social order, there can be little doubt as to how he might perceive the modern American Christmas. What began as a celebration of one of the most ethically consequential events in history, the Incarnation, has degenerated into a pretext for conspicuous consumption. The religious awe before transcendent good is increasingly, if not totally, subsumed by indulgence of the desire for material goods. Amidst the frenzied shopping and ubiquitous

² Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2004 [1919]), lxxiv.

³ Claes Ryn, from the Transaction Introduction to Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, lx.

⁴ *Ibid.*, lii.

kitsch, the film *It's a Wonderful Life* stands in America as one of the most recognizable artistic symbols of this season. Set on Christmas Eve in a post-World War II small town, the movie tells the story of the likable and selfless George Bailey who suffers scandal and ruin not of his own making only to be saved in the final act through intervention by God, family, and friends.

On the surface, the film's director, Frank Capra, appears to have manufactured the perfect feel-good holiday vehicle. The satisfaction the film provokes makes it easy for audiences and critics alike to consider it a puff-piece, a sweet and superficial sop to our nostalgia for "times gone by," heightened as it is during the holiday season when the modern American is most in need of respite from the wearing pursuit of mammon. For many, the film is no more than a cinematic candy cane, a Christmas treat that requires no assembly and induces no hangovers. Could Babbitt find any redeeming value in a work so evidently associated with the sentimental and escapist holiday dream?

Beneath the illusory glow of Christmas-time consumerism that has enveloped *It's a Wonderful Life*, Capra operates within a series of ethical paradoxes, directly confronting the inversion of virtue and vice that Plato laments: the ties of responsibility and duty serve to liberate rather than repress; the seemingly mundane and commonplace hold as much potential for transcendence of self as the epic and the adventurous; moral-spiritual rather than material units mark the measure of a man; and true happiness is more likely attained through what is foregone than what is indulged.

The seemingly mundane holds as much potential for transcendence of self as the epic and adventurous.

Frank Capra reminds us of what is truly meaningful in life, warning how easily distracted from that truth we become if we give in to "indulging the pleasure of the moment."⁵ *It's a Wonderful Life* deserves consideration as a classic of cinematic art because it conveys this delicate ethical condition in easily recognizable terms and grounds in stark imagery the notion that the choices we make in life have consequences beyond our own particular existence.

I. Frank Capra and the American Dream

As an artist, Capra grasped intuitively Irving Babbitt's reflection on the role of the imagination:

The type of imagination by which most men are governed may

⁵ Plato, *The Republic*, 319 (561a – d).

be defined in the widest sense of the word as romantic. Nearly every man cherishes his dream, his conceit of himself as he would like to be, a sort of "ideal" projection of his own desires in comparison with which his actual life seems a hard and cramping routine.⁶

With that in mind, why not simply make films that appealed to this ideal projection? The production of *It's a Wonderful Life* during the summer of 1946 marked Capra's return from war-time service, before which he had developed an Academy Award-winning reputation for his skill in balancing the ideal with the real in regard to the American Dream. The dream seemed possible in his films, but only insofar as it was contained within the real. Any other circumstance of realization of the ideal would be a fantasy, a "land of chimeras."⁷ Capra's work, as inspiring and creative as it could be, comported with the importance Babbitt ascribed to the distinction between the real and the ideal:

The important thing . . . is that a man . . . should not cease to discriminate between his fact and his fiction. If he confuses what he dreams himself to be with what he actually is, he has already entered upon the pathway of madness.⁸

That grounding of the American Dream in the real and the mundane of American life rang true with a wide audience.

Postwar America, however, presented unique challenges regarding the dream's perception and realization.⁹ In 1945, millions of servicemen returned to pursue the American Dream as they had idealized it while risking their lives in its defense. If World War II was a conflict to defend the American way of life, the immediate postwar period was a time to get home and live it. The distorting effect of close proximity to mortality opened an abnormally wide chasm between the expectations of returning G.I.'s for unlimited

⁶ Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 71.

⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, quoted in Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 72.

⁸ Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 73.

⁹ My analysis of postwar disillusionment developed out of a review of cinematic scholarship of the period, including Barbara Deming's *Running Away from Myself—A dream portrait of America drawn from the films of the forties* (New York, Grossman Publishers, 1969); Sam B. Girgus's *The American Self—Myth, Ideology, and Popular Culture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981); Leonard Quart's and Albert Auster's *American Film and Society since 1945*, Third Edition (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002); and Robert Ray's *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930–1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

opportunity at home and the more mundane reality of civilian life. Participation in the war produced two effects that postwar civilian life seemed unable to duplicate: a unity of purpose among the broader population and a sense of participation in something of historical significance. Americans had, effectively, been living in the context of an ideal which not only transcended their personal lives but necessarily elevated the universal wartime cause above their particular circumstances to such a degree that their daily lives dwindled to insignificance.

The sacrifice of the particular and the personal, however, was no Augustinian embrace of the spiritual over the temporal; it was an existential bargain. The G.I.'s fought for the cause, for the ideal, so that they could live it once the war was won. What greeted them upon their return home, however, was the reality that the realization of the ideal could not be guaranteed. The American Dream was in reality, as always, what the individual made of it, and whatever it was, it certainly was not an effort elevated by unity of purpose or historical significance. The relationship between the ideal which vests every human life with meaning and the individual search for and experience of that meaning had resumed its peacetime parochialism. The wartime imbalance favoring the universal cause over personal particular life was restored to peacetime equilibrium with the consequence that civilian life seemed somehow diminished.

After wartime service, peacetime life seemed insignificant.

Capra sensed the disillusionment of the returning G.I.'s in no small part because he felt it himself. In this postwar context, his previously successful formula of portraying American ideals at work in the lives of ordinary people risked appearing absurd. He saw the script for *It's a Wonderful Life* as the perfect antidote for threatening disillusionment because it portrayed in starkly resonant terms the value and meaning of an individual human life. In his autobiography, Capra recounted his initial reaction to the story:

It was the story I had been looking for all of my life! Small town. A man. A good man, ambitious. But so busy helping others, life seems to pass him by. Despondent. He wishes he'd never been born. He gets his wish. Through the eyes of a guardian angel he sees the world as it would have been had he not been born. Wow! What an idea.¹⁰

¹⁰ Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1971), 376.

Having grown up a poor Italian Catholic immigrant, Capra understood that human experience need not be of epic proportion to contain epic feats of humanity. Beneath the prosaic veil of everyday life lay the human condition in all its tensions and potentialities as vivid as in the life of a statesman or a magnate:

It was my kind of film for my kind of people A film to tell the weary, the disheartened, and the disillusioned . . . that *no man is a failure!* To show those born slow of foot or slow of mind, those oldest sisters condemned to spinsterhood, and those oldest sons condemned to unschooled toil, that *each man's life touches so many other lives*. And that if he isn't around it would leave an awful hole. A film that said to the downtrodden, the pushed-around, the pauper, "Heads up, fella. No man is poor who has one friend. Three friends and you're filthy rich." A film that expresses its love for the homeless and the loveless; for her whose cross is heavy and him whose touch is ashes I wanted to shout, "You are the salt of the earth. And *It's a Wonderful Life* is my memorial to you!"¹¹

Life's value measured by moral-spiritual, rather than material, standards.

Frank Capra never feigned righteousness, and he persisted in his apathy for the Roman Catholic faith throughout his adult life. But the substance of his own words, consciously or not, conveyed the unmistakable message that the making of *It's a Wonderful Life* was, whatever else it may have been, essentially an act of Christian charity. It was an act of community, a deliberate effort to illuminate a few universal and fundamental truths that he thought were too often forgotten: that each human life has value; that its value is measured by moral-spiritual, rather than material, standards; that true wealth, spiritual wealth, comes from an orientation toward others; and that no material condition can prevent a man from attaining this wealth. The American Dream in its deepest dimension is not exclusively "American" at all; it is a universal dream attainable by all men in every conceivable circumstance. The central prerequisite is loving your neighbor. To combat the disillusionment of postwar America, Capra used Bedford Falls and George Bailey to show how regular people doing commonplace things could lead extraordinarily "rich" lives.

II. The Film

Capra frames the opening of the film in snowy, night-time scenes of a small town in upstate New York with various voices praying for the well-being of his protagonist, George Bailey,

¹¹ Ibid., 383 (emphasis in the original).

thereby introducing three central themes: God, family, and community. From this point, the film unfolds in the form of a retrospective undertaken for the benefit of George's guardian angel, Clarence, who appears only midway through the film after the retrospective is complete. His superior angels, prompted by the prayers in the opening scenes, want to prepare Clarence for an intervention in George's life by reviewing its critical moments from boyhood to present-day adulthood. Clarence and the audience come to know a gregarious and thoroughly decent man who, through no fault of his own, finds himself confronted with a financial crisis that threatens to ruin his business, his home, and his standing in the community. Faced with scandal and prison, George storms out of his home, leaving his wife, Mary, and their four children cowering behind, and stumbles into the snowy Christmas Eve night in search of reprieve. In a local tavern, his prayer is answered by a punch in the mouth thrown by a neighbor he offended, sending the despondent George to the Bedford Falls Bridge that spans a dark and icy river. In the mortal menace of the river, George finds his avenue of escape, the means of his permanent deliverance. At that moment, Clarence intervenes, and tries to convince the incredulous George of the value of "God's greatest gift"¹² by granting him his self-pitying wish and showing him what Bedford Falls would have been like if he had never been born.

The film's central themes: God, family, and community.

George's experience resembles in many ways the biblical story of Job: both men serve their communities well, express devotion to family, and win the admiration of their friends and neighbors. They are, by all accounts, "righteous" in the sense that they exhibit virtuous natures and fear God, each in his own way. Yet, all their commitment, sacrifice, and right-living fail to protect them from catastrophe, ruin, and despair. They both question whether the life choices they have made were correct, whether their faith in God, family, and community serves any purpose if it cannot protect them from shame and grief. As the darkness of self-pity and hopelessness descends upon them, both succumb to the ulti-

¹² *It's a Wonderful Life*, Final Script as Shot, Liberty Films; an RKO Radio Picture; produced and directed by Frank Capra; screenplay by Frances Goodrich, Albert Hackett and Frank Capra with additional scenes by Jo Swerling, 1946, as contained in *The It's A Wonderful Life Book*, by Jeanine Basinger (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 112; hereinafter referred to in the footnotes as "Final Script."

George Bailey's experience resembles the biblical story of Job.

mate self-indulgence of wishing they had never been born so that their torment could have been averted. In these moments of profound existential despair, both Job and George abandon the probity and fortitude with which they had previously conducted their lives. Rather than endure and overcome the hardships, painful as they might be, their impulse is to escape not just through death, but through comprehensive self-annihilation. While death might provide immediate relief from their suffering but leave intact the legacy of their having lived, they preferred never to have lived at all. When their faith in God and every other aspect of life that they value is put to the test, Job and George decide that none of it is worth their suffering: "Why," laments Job, "did I not perish at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?"¹³ George surmises, "I suppose it would have been better if I'd never been born at all. . . . I wish I'd never been born."¹⁴

Capra framed George Bailey's life and crisis in the biblical context of Job for the purpose of demonstrating the moral-spiritual fragility of human existence. As both men are models of probity and moral strength, their respective falls seriously subvert the security and peace they and their audience have taken for granted; if it can happen to these men, it can happen to anyone. Moreover, George and Job, presumably among the strongest within their respective communities, respond to the crisis by repudiating all that had, until that moment, constituted meaning in their lives. In drawing parallels between George Bailey and Job, Capra drew on ancient and enduring biblical wisdom to accentuate the significance of the universal principles of faith, family, and community at stake within this particular drama.

In order to construct the revelatory experience for both George Bailey and the audience, Capra obscured the vision of what is ultimately meaningful, locating it in those images that may otherwise escape our detection, more attracted as we usually are by what makes us feel good for the moment than what truly is good. George Bailey struggles with idyllic, material, and selfish currents that appeal to the entirely human desire for adventure, freedom and status. As a boy, George dreams of exotic South Sea adventures and harems; in early adulthood, he regales friends and fam-

¹³ Job 3:11, *The Holy Bible*, Authorized King James Version (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 697.

¹⁴ Final Script, 280.

ily with his desire to travel the world and build monumental bridges and skyscrapers. The dominant orientation of George's immature imagination is escaping the narrow constraints of Bedford Falls and the family business, the Bailey Building & Loan, for the unfettered adventure of the peripatetic.

Beneath these dreamy distractions from the substance of life lie the universal themes Capra wished to invigorate and restore to rightful significance in the modern imagination: faith, family, and community. Most importantly, rather than pitting the distractions in a zero-sum struggle to the death with the universal principles, Capra sought to reconcile them. The real fallacy infecting George Bailey and the modern imagination at large is the presumption that adventure, freedom, and status can only be experienced in exotic locales with boundless wealth to fund impulse and whimsy. In *It's a Wonderful Life*, Capra made the compelling case that status, freedom, and adventure are not only available to George but are already part of his daily life. What may on the surface appear to bind or restrict our conscience and our appetites actually liberates and enriches our lives.

Unrealistic fantasies can obscure life's real substance.

III. George Bailey's Moral Imagination

In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke coined the phrase "moral imagination" by which he meant the human capacity intuitively to apprehend ethical truths as we encounter them in our historical existence. These truths may be manifested in pedestrian expressions of dialogue and debate, custom and tradition, and decorum and piety as well as in great works of art and literature. The well-developed moral imagination divines what Plato called "the good, the true, and the beautiful" as they exist in concrete, historical experience. Such imagination provides its possessor with a sense of how aspects of human existence give meaning to life and inclines him to strive to realize them more fully. A person lacking a properly developed moral imagination, wrote Burke, would suffer alienation "from this world of reason, and order, and peace, and virtue, and fruitful penitence," and drift "into the antagonist world of madness, discord, vice, confusion, and un-availing sorrow."¹⁵

The moral imagination divines the universal as embodied in concrete, historical experience.

¹⁵ Edmund Burke, quoted in Russell Kirk, *Redeeming the Time* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1996), 71.

Escapist imagination distorts ethical perception.

Capra revealed through George Bailey's moral imagination an ethical order consistent with his thesis of the value of the individual and the obligation of Christian charity. Through the nexus of community, George's moral imagination informs, consciously and unconsciously, the ethical order of all those he encounters. George, however, is flawed, an imperfection he shares with the other characters in Bedford Falls and his audience as well. As a result, alternative imaginative inclinations, of an escapist variety for example, serve to distort the perception George might otherwise have of ethical truths. In that way, the audience perceives him as someone more than an idealized do-gooder; they witness in George a tension they experience themselves everyday, a recognition that "the human desires in their endless diversity" present frequent and sometimes daunting distractions, but "[s]tanding against [them] is an unvarying sense of higher moral purpose that transcends all particular impulses."¹⁶

George's inner struggle exemplifies man's duality of will and imagination.

The susceptibility of George Bailey's moral imagination to inclinations opposed to its apprehension of ethical truths corresponds with Irving Babbitt's theory of the duality of will and imagination. In short, Babbitt asserted that human consciousness can be divided into three categories: will, imagination, and reason. While the three constantly interact and influence each other, the will dominates because it is ultimately the source of all internal and external activity. The will itself, contended Babbitt, is divided between a higher and a lower inclination, the one a proclivity toward moral action, the other a proclivity in the opposite direction. Both are informed by the imagination, which colors and shades our experiences in conjunction with our character. Strong character marked by a heightened sense of moral duty will influence the imagination to shade morally questionable acts in a distasteful light, activating the higher will to avoid or denounce them. Conversely, a more accommodative character might shade the same morally questionable acts in a benign light, encouraging the lower will to engage in or support them. All human beings, Babbitt maintained, experience a perpetual internal struggle between their higher and lower wills, and in some, the "inner check," the moral will, is more operative than in others. Babbitt's

¹⁶ Claes G. Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality*, second expanded edition (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1997 [1986]), 30.

view of the human consciousness assumes man's moral imperfection; for moral perfection, were it possible, would engender no inner conflict and oblige no inner check.

IV. George Bailey's Moral Education

As the abiding symbol of moral probity, persistence, and selflessness, George's father, Peter Bailey, informs and influences, more than any other source, George's will and imagination. Peter Bailey founded and managed, along with his brother, Billy, the Bailey Building & Loan, an institution that makes up in moral purpose what it lacks in profitability. It not only supports the entire extended Bailey family, it plays the essential role of financing home building for the working class of Bedford Falls. Where some might see a commercial utility in home building, Peter Bailey sees a moral and social utility. When George resists "being cooped up for the rest of [his] life in a shabby little office," complaining, "I'd go crazy, I want to do something big and something important,"¹⁷ his father explains that "big" and "important" are not necessarily measured in material units. "I feel that in a small way we are doing something important, satisfying a fundamental urge," he relates, "it's deep in the race for a man to want his own roof and walls and fireplace, and we're helping him get those things in our shabby little office."¹⁸ Peter Bailey lives the changes he wishes to see in the world; he makes his "ought" his "is."

While Peter Bailey has in his heart and mind the good of his community, he does not indulge the conceit that it must be wholly remade in order to conform to his vision of what constitutes its best interests. Instead, he starts a business that, of course, provides sustenance for his family, but also serves what he judges to be a "fundamental urge . . . deep in the race." Not content merely to contemplate the ideal, he makes it reality, concretely and directly, by helping his neighbors, and in that way, also fulfills their "dream," their "fundamental urge." Peter Bailey's dream is no mere flight of fancy. It lies within his grasp.

No one can fault a young man for preferring his romantic dreams to the family business, especially considering the conflict and stress that George witnesses his father endure. The difficul-

*Peter Bailey's
dream no
flight of fancy.*

¹⁷ Final Script, 143.

¹⁸ Ibid.

ties arise mostly from one source: Henry Potter, the curmudgeonly magnate, slumlord, and Building & Loan board member. During one exchange, Potter first accuses Peter Bailey of “crying,” and then of being a “miserable failure,” prompting the adolescent George to leap to his father’s defense: “He’s not a failure. You can’t say that about my father! (To his father) You’re not. You’re the biggest man in town. (To Potter) Bigger than him! (George pushes Potter’s shoulder.)”¹⁹ Even at that early age, George personally experiences Potter’s contempt and the opposition against which his father must contend.

George both recognizes and questions the value of his father’s work and example.

Ten years later, George dines with his father and asks why he looks so tired. “I had another tussle with Potter today.”²⁰ Clearly, crisis is a recurring theme at the Building & Loan, and one can understand why George would prefer to escape rather than face a destiny of fighting the same battles. Capra implied that George recognizes his father’s legacy within him, the imprint his father has made on his character and will, but he fears giving in to this legacy because he bears witness to the sacrifice and pain that accompanies it. Moreover, he knows that material reward cannot motivate his father to tolerate such abuse and struggle, because such fruits are absent from the Bailey tree. George understands that something intangible and perhaps more meaningful motivates his father but always questions the value of such compensation.

Little in character separates George from his father. He may, in fact, be a better Peter Bailey than the original. When Peter suddenly dies, George postpones a trip to Europe to temporarily assume his father’s position. He expects the board of directors to appoint his Uncle Billy as Peter’s successor only to hear Potter propose that the Building & Loan be dissolved. An incensed George comes to the defense of both the institution and the man who founded it:

Why he ever started this cheap, penny-ante Building & Loan, I’ll never know. . . . But he did help a few people get out of your slums, Mr. Potter. . . . Doesn’t it make them better citizens? Doesn’t it make them better customers? Just remember this, Mr. Potter, that this rabble you’re talking about . . . they do most of the working and paying and living and dying in this community. Well, is it too much to have them work and pay and live and die in a couple of decent rooms and a bath? Anyway, my father didn’t think so.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

People were human beings to him, but to you, a warped, frustrated old man, they're cattle. Well, in my book he died a much richer man than you'll ever be!²¹

In this passage George articulates the Christian charity that Capra so fervently sought to convey. George reveals a profound understanding of and empathy for the source of his father's vocation, and the moral weight of that calling ultimately impels him to choose it over the many available avenues of escape. In Peter Bailey, George has an admirable model to emulate, but one which obliges sacrifice and occasional hardship. His higher will, that which inclines him toward morally responsible action, responds to the calling while his lower will, that which indulges pure self-interest and pleasure seeking, resists it, preordaining a profound struggle between rootedness and flight, between the real and the idyllic.

Capra sought to convey Christian charity by concrete example.

V. The Battle of Wills

Having located a chief source of George Bailey's ethical formation in his relationship with his father, Frank Capra presented a character well-suited to Babbittian analysis. George's inner tensions lay bare for all to see: while he indulges exotic images of far-away places and convention-busting adventure, he works hard and saves money for college; when buying a suitcase for his pre-college trip, George exclaims, "I don't want one for one night. I want something for a thousand and one nights, with plenty of room for labels from Italy and Baghdad and Samarkand." Yet, when his father suddenly passes away, he assumes executive responsibility for the Building & Loan, foregoing first his trip, then college altogether.

Despite his highly acute sense of the needs of others and his inclination to subordinate his own interests to those of his family, friends, and community, George harbors a persistent desire to escape Bedford Falls and all of the binding commitments and responsibilities it entails. All of the flights of fancy he entertains are solo flights: he's going to travel the world, work a cattle boat, and build vast bridges. Even when sharing his romantic vision with his future wife, Mary, George describes a solitary sojourn. He never once invites Mary to join him or entertains the thought that

²¹ Ibid., 164.

it might be pleasant to have a traveling companion. Nevertheless, though George is free in each case to pursue that course which appeals to his sense of adventure and his desire for escape, he chooses instead to remain in the town of his birth to undertake the responsibilities that invariably come his way.

Countless examples of concern for and deference to others have oriented George's will.

As vivid a romantic imagination as he has, George rarely permits it to dictate his course of action when confronted with a choice between the ideal and the real. Until the night of his crisis, George Bailey's sense of duty usually overcomes his desire to escape it. His higher will, his "inner check," thwarts his lower will and its accomplice, the escapist imagination, because his character is imbued with a redoubtable orientation toward the needs of others derived from witnessing his father, family, and community engage in countless acts of concern for and deference to others. Charity is a pervasive force in the life of his community.

Events certainly seem to conspire against him, but to believe him unlucky is fundamentally to misunderstand the message Capra intended to convey through his protagonist: the small-town, small-time, family-man life George Bailey leads is not only one he has consciously chosen, but one which ultimately fulfills the status, wealth, and adventure for which he yearns, albeit in real rather than ideal, merely imaginary, terms, that is, in terms that correspond with the life he has chosen rather than the life he occasionally covets. Even George fails to perceive this reality; he sees through the distractions of his lower will and recognizes the value of his existence for what it is only after suffering a harrowing crisis and even an encounter with the agent of his Maker.

George never totally subdues his desire to "do big things," although, as he matures, marries, and starts a family, he manages to confine it to that which he can concretely accomplish within his bourgeois existence in Bedford Falls. Through the Building & Loan, for example, he develops a tract of modest homes for working families, consigning the bridges and skyscrapers to the scale-model sets he tinkers with at home. The mature George Bailey seems contentedly resigned to lead the life of probity and charity that his father led before him.

When faced with a dire financial scandal, George, like Job, does succumb to frustration and anger because he feels betrayed by fate; he has always done what would be expected of a good, decent man, and yet his clean living could not protect him from fi-

nancial ruin and social scorn. He is rocked to the core of his being out of frustration that, sometimes, bad things befall good people. While precipitated by money, the crisis quickly becomes one of faith. At that moment, at the nadir of his discouragement, George tragically allows his escapist imagination wholly to distort his perception of reality. His latent weakness for escape revives to obscure the fund of good will, mutual appreciation, and love in which he had invested his entire life. Capra constructed this crisis of faith and the attendant descent into the ultimate form of self-indulgence in order to illustrate how fragile man's ethical condition truly is. Even a character as strong and ethical as George Bailey can be overwhelmed by destructive impulses.

*George's
latent escapism
reemerges
during crisis.*

VI. The Romantic and the Classical—George and Mary

The audience's first glimpse of Bedford Falls captures the paradox of the snowy serenity of its deserted streets on Christmas Eve, the carol "O Come All Ye Faithful" yielding to a succession of voices praying for George Bailey's deliverance. A severe crisis has befallen the protagonist who, despite his evident traits of ingenuity and perseverance, seems at a loss for any viable solution. Overcome with despair, he drunkenly staggers to a bridge on which he contemplates his self-destruction, "worth," according to his nemesis, Potter, "more dead than alive."²²

The other character chiefly concerned with the crisis and George's well-being, his wife, Mary, responds differently. Intuiting that her husband is gravely troubled, Mary implores their children to "pray, pray very hard," and, suspecting that the crisis is related to the Building & Loan, contacts George's Uncle Billy. Although deeply troubled, Mary remains composed and resolute.

Irving Babbitt's analysis in *Rousseau and Romanticism* of different types of imagination might explain the divergence of George's and Mary's reactions to the crisis. Babbitt would describe George's imagination during the crisis as "romantic" and Mary's as "classical." "In general a thing is romantic when . . . it is wonderful rather than probable; in other words when it violates the normal sequence of cause and effect in favor of adventure."²³ The romantic imagination "hungers for the thrilling and the marvelous and

²² *Ibid.*, 267.

²³ Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 4.

is, in short, incurably melodramatic."²⁴ Babbitt largely relied on Aristotle for his definition of "classical." The essence of the classical spirit, he wrote, is an "insistence on restraint and proportion" which is "representative of human nature."²⁵ "Aristotle recognizes," he wrote,

that man is the creature of two laws: he has an ordinary or natural self of impulse and desire and a human self that is known practically as a power of control over impulse and desire. If man is to become human he must not let impulse and desire run wild, but must oppose to everything excessive in his ordinary self, whether in thought or deed or emotion, the law of measure.²⁶

The classical imagination seeks not "to imitate things as they are, but as they ought to be."²⁷ Babbitt grounded the classical imagination, therefore, in human experience of right order, with reference to which it is possible to recognize other states for what they are. A classic imagination allows for passions and dreams only insofar as they conform to human nature and respect its right order as indicated more by the experiential than the ideal.

*Babbitt's
classical
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To be fair, George Bailey, while exhibiting certain romantic characteristics, largely succeeds in controlling them throughout his life. When the seemingly insoluble crisis finally comes, however, he cannot resist the impulse toward self-pity and escape. Mary, by contrast, never waivers. The crisis spurs her to action because she knows that no amount of wishful thinking or agonized regret can avert it. Capra juxtaposed the differences in their imaginations in two critical scenes.

Early in the film we watch as the young George saves his little brother Harry's life by diving in and pulling him from an icy pond. As a result, George loses hearing in his left ear. Months later, the industrious George appears for work as a soda jerk in a drug store. Stopping at a cigar lighter, he closes his eyes, crosses his fingers, and wishes for "a million dollars" before igniting the flame to an exclamation of "hot dog!" The flame means the wish has come "true," and George's delight in something patently untrue betrays an inclination, however innocent, toward the idyllic.

²⁴ Ibid., 5.

²⁵ Ibid., 16.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 17.

George proceeds to regale the then Mary Hatch with exotic tales of his future as an explorer:

GEORGE

You don't like coconuts! Say, brainless, don't you know where coconuts come from? Lookit here—from Tahiti—Fiji Islands, the Coral Sea!

He pulls a magazine from his pocket and shows it to her.

MARY

A new magazine! I never saw it before.

GEORGE

Of course you never. Only us explorers can get it. I've been nominated for membership in the National Geographic Society.

He leans down to finish scooping out the ice cream, his deaf ear toward her. She leans over, speaking softly.

CLOSE SHOT—Mary, whispering.

MARY

Is this the ear you can't hear on? George Bailey, I'll love you till the day I die.

GEORGE

Oblivious to Mary's whisper—I'm going out exploring some day, you watch. And I'm going to have a couple of harems, and maybe three or four wives. Wait and see.²⁸

The exchange frames two young romantic imaginations inspired by opposed inclinations. Not yet in his teens, George already dreams of a life of adventure and intrigue marked by exploration of faraway places and the status that comes from membership in that exclusive academy of adventure seekers. The life he pines for bears no resemblance to anything he knows in Bedford Falls, at the Building & Loan, or in the Bailey family. Moreover, it's a "wonderful" dream in the Babbittian sense of the word, as improbable as it is fantastic. These are the musings of an adolescent mind, but they distill, if latently, into a less benign force as George matures.

The young Mary reveals a romantic imagination of her own, but it is one rooted in the George Bailey of Bedford Falls, the

²⁸ Final Script, 119.

brave, industrious, gregarious George Bailey whom she knows from personal experience. Her wish falls within Babbitt's definition of romantic only because it comes from the imagination of an adolescent. The grounding of her attraction to George, however, comes closer to the classical definition. While escape to some unknown ideal appeals to George's imagination, a life-long connection to what she knows most appeals to Mary's.

Mary's romance of rootedness and stability antithetical to George's romance of escape.

Capra brings George and Mary together again many years later, this time at her high school graduation dance. At the moment of their reunion they are awe-struck by one another, and dance the night away, oblivious of the events around them. While walking home from the dance, George and Mary pass the old Granville house, a decrepit wreck reputed to offer good luck by throwing a rock through what is left of its broken windows. Mary protests George's impulse to throw the rock, "Oh no, don't. I love that old house. Oh no, George, don't. It's full of romance that old place. I'd like to live in it."²⁹ The romance Mary perceives is one of stability and rootedness, of domesticity and a lived-in, close-at-hand history and is antithetical to the escapist romance that appeals to George. Her dream is to marry George Bailey and live in the old Granville house in the heart of Bedford Falls.

George's romantic imagination finds no appeal in the old house, and he successfully breaks some glass with his first stone. When Mary asks him what he wished for, George treats her to an exposition of his expansive vision:

Well, not just one wish. A whole hatful, Mary. I know what I'm going to do tomorrow and the next day and the next year and the year after that. I'm shaking the dust of this crummy little town off my feet and I'm going to see the world. Italy, Greece, the Parthenon, the Colosseum. Then I'm coming back here and go to college and see what they know . . . and then I'm going to build things. I'm gonna build air fields. I'm gonna build skyscrapers a hundred stories high. I'm gonna build bridges a mile long. . . .³⁰

While Mary's vision of the future is rooted in the reality of what she knows and has experienced, George's is flighty, grandiose, and abstract; his claim to have his life planned out betrays his detachment from reality and conjures the aphorism, "I had everything planned and then life happened."

²⁹ Ibid., 155-57.

³⁰ Ibid., 157.

Mary seals the contrast in style and substance by making a wish and throwing a rock of her own. When she breaks glass, George begs her to share her wish, to which she replies, “[i]f I told you it might not come true.”³¹ Even in wish-making, Mary exceeds George in practicality; she keeps hers secret so that it has a chance to come true. Mary’s affection for George and her wish for their future together never distort her perception of reality, nor do they open her imagination to delusions of grandeur, of unrealistic expectations that could only lead to bitterness and disappointment when unfulfilled. George, conversely, allows his romantic imagination to ferment in a part of his personality, preordaining its untimely intrusion into real life.

The differences in George’s and Mary’s imaginations explain the divergent manner in which the two approach the crisis. His lower, self-indulgent will overtakes his higher will under the influence of his romantic imagination. He loses faith in all that he has invested in and that has sustained him: himself, his family, his community, and, less obviously to George, his God. She acts in a calm, down-to-earth and determined manner, and her impulse to tap into that fund of goodwill, fraternity, and communal respect that they have built up over the years illustrates a profound understanding of the reality of her surroundings.

Imaginative differences explain George’s and Mary’s divergent responses to emergency.

VII. That which Obscures—Materialism and Escapism

Capra portrayed through Henry Potter many of the more disagreeable aspects of materialism. Played by famed actor Lionel Barrymore, Potter stands out as a caricature of the heartless arch-capitalist. He travels about in an ornate, horse-drawn carriage which resembles a hearse, prompting George’s guardian angel, Clarence, to mistake it for the transport of a “king.” The senior angel, Joseph, clarifies that Potter “is the richest and meanest man in the county.”³² Wheelchair-bound, a condition that makes Potter seem mechanical and therefore immune to human passions like charity and happiness, he barks terse orders at his ever-present slavish valet. Even the name “Potter” conveys this character’s departure from that which makes us human. The potter practices a proud if humble craft, using his hands to fashion something of

³¹ Ibid., 158.

³² Ibid., 116.

value and utility out of, quite literally, nothing. Henry Potter, conversely, uses his disproportionate wealth to bully and cajole partner and customer alike. No vestige of his craftsman lineage remains.

For Potter, there is a winner and loser in every transaction.

We know not how Potter amassed his fortune, but we do know that he does so at the expense of others. When a Depression-era bank run occurred in town, Potter took advantage of the panic to buy up shares in the bank at fifty cents on the dollar. For him, commerce is a zero-sum game; there is a winner and a loser in every transaction. Neither mutuality of interests nor moral considerations dilute the purity of Potter's rational economics. Capra implied that Potter owes his wealth more to clever speculation of this kind than to constructive work.

Potter's personal financial interests constitute the substance of his life, and his lack of social relations underscores his tendency to view other human beings as means to his end. Aside from the company of his silent, barely human valet, Potter is alone, voluntarily alienated from any human attachment. He has neither children nor family nor friends and treats his business associates with condescension and contempt. Material self-interest forms the entire context of his motivation to act, pitting him in direct opposition to the Baileys. Potter not only accuses Peter Bailey of "running a charity ward," he also responds to pleas for compassion for the children of the dispossessed mortgagees by saying, "they're not my children."³³

Great wealth alone guarantees neither freedom nor happiness.

Capra pointedly communicated the notion that assigning an inordinate value to money and material possessions can corrupt a life, and that amassing great wealth guarantees neither the freedom nor the happiness frequently ascribed to it. Despite his disproportionate wealth and power, Potter is not above dishonesty if it might be to his financial advantage. The infamous eight thousand dollars-gone-missing finds its way into Potter's possession when Uncle Billy mistakenly wraps the billfold in a newspaper and places it in Potter's lap. Potter keeps this devastating error to himself, fully cognizant of the consequences for the Building & Loan and the Bailey family. His determination to ruin the Building & Loan, long a nettlesome competitor of his bank, consciously extends to wishing the personal ruin of as many members of the Bailey family as possible.

³³ Ibid., 126.

Capra offered a more subtle exposition of the distorting effect of material wealth through the character of Sam Wainwright, George's lifelong friend. As the son of a wealthy local businessman and a wartime profiteer, Sam Wainwright, like Potter, "comes into" his money in some manner other than building something from nothing. His persistent use of a trademark donkey-ears "hee-haw" salutation further diminishes him in George's eyes, but he nevertheless retains his friend's consistent affinity and respect. What Sam knows of decency and loyalty he knows from George Bailey.

As their lives diverge from childhood, George's envy of Sam deepens, but never so manifestly that Sam detects resentment. Sam achieves what George only dreams of, an escape from the confines of Bedford Falls and the Building & Loan. In this portrayal of material wealth, money serves simply as the vehicle, the facilitator of George's unfulfilled dream to escape.

Capra accentuated the disparity between them in both material and spiritual wealth in a scene depicting a house-warming ceremony performed by George and Mary in the working-class development known as Bailey Park. The Baileys offer the new homeowners, the Martinis, bread, salt, and wine symbolic of sustenance, flavor, and joy. The Martinis receive the gesture with signs of the cross, tears, and embraces. Sam and his new wife observe the ceremony, but fail to grasp its profundity. Their large new car, jewels, and furs place them at too great a distance from the significance of a family buying its first home. After an awkward exchange of pleasantries, the Wainwrights proceed on the journey to their estate in Florida leaving George and Mary momentarily to ponder the differences between the Wainwrights and the Baileys. In that instant of unspoken material envy, Capra captured the temptation to substitute for what truly is good what appears or feels good.

VIII. That which Clarifies—Clarence and Pottersville

While attributing a specifically Christian outlook to Capra would probably overstate his artistic intent, the religious imagery and characters he used imbue *It's a Wonderful Life* with a moral order evocative of Christian principles. Capra placed God and faith at the center of this film because, as his own words imply,³⁴

³⁴ See discussion on pp. 119-20 above.

the tenet of Christian charity, loving your neighbor, gives life meaning and facilitates true happiness. Indeed, Capra's description of his motives for making the film resemble, perhaps unconsciously, the Beatitudes as delivered by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.³⁵

Life's meaning found in association with one's fellow man.

Capra's God in the film is a personal one. He has dispatched His angels to attend personally to George Bailey's crisis, an interpretation consistent with Capra's thesis that meaning in life is found in association with your fellow man. We know, too, that the people of Bedford Falls are largely a religious people in the sense that they pray and give thanks to God when they need his help and when their prayers have been answered. We know, furthermore, through the similarities with the Book of Job, that even the most charitable among us may face devastating trials of faith, and that the path to overcome them runs, at least, parallel to the "way, the truth, and the life."³⁶

Responding to George's wish never to have been born, Clarence unveils a nightmare scene depicting the moral degradation of Bedford Falls and its inhabitants in George's absence. Without George present to assume moral and social leadership, the void left by his father Peter's death is filled by Henry Potter's self-interest and avarice to such a degree that the town assumes his name, Pottersville. The Building & Loan, once the institution upon which the working class pinned their hopes for a home of their own, recedes under Potter into insolvency, and is replaced by a neon-laden juke-joint called "Jitterbugs." In the eclipse of the Building & Loan appears the kind of images and inclinations that might arouse a person's lower will: the gin mills, pool halls, and "dance clubs" that offer little but a temporary distraction from reality. Pottersville exhibits all the self-indulgence and escapism of George's romantic imagination with none of its grandiosity. The working and paying and living and dying take place within the context of Hobbes's sensual calculus rather than the charitable and moral striving of reciprocal community. The inversion of virtue and vice is complete. Clarence reminds George: "Each man's life touches so many other lives, and when he isn't around he leaves an awful hole."³⁷

³⁵ Matthew 5-7, *The Holy Bible*, NT7-12.

³⁶ John 14:6, *The Holy Bible*, NT154.

³⁷ Final Script, 302.

Through the Pottersville scene and the divine intervention that made it possible, George Bailey realizes the value of what he has forsworn and discerns the broader meaning and influence of his actions. Perhaps most importantly, he resolves, indeed begs, a return to his life even though it means a return to scandal, ruin, and prison. His encounter with the divine has enabled him to recover his ethical will. He yearns no longer for freedom through escape, but rather accepts meaning through the ties that bind: as Peter Bailey's son, and Mary's husband; as the father of his children, the executive director of the Bailey Building & Loan, and a thousand other connections profound and casual. "Man realizes that immensity of his being," wrote Babbitt, "only in so far as he ceases to be the thrall of his own ego. This human breadth he achieves not by throwing off but by taking on limitations."³⁸ George accepts the meaning of these limitations even if its price is incarceration. He understands that what makes him George Bailey lies within these burdens, and they are what make him free.

*Human
breadth
achieved by
accepting
limitations.*

IX. Conclusion

The final act of *It's a Wonderful Life* is one of the most familiar and controversial in cinematic history. Through his realization of the true meaning of his life, George recovers his strength of will and character and races home brimming with appreciation for all those little things he had thoughtlessly ignored before: he hugs Bert the cop, bellows "Merry Christmas" to Bedford Falls and even Mr. Potter, and kisses the knob on the banister as it comes off, for the umpteenth time, in his hand. The fact that the bank examiner, sheriff, and reporters await him at home does not diminish his elation; his skin may still be on the line, but his soul has been saved.

While she cannot save her husband's soul, Mary has set about saving his skin, and when she returns home to find George embracing their children, she can only manage to utter, "George, it's a miracle. It's a miracle!" As the Bailey family gathers around the Christmas tree, they watch Uncle Billy empty a large basketful of money on a table. He is followed by a parade of friends, family, and townspeople each contributing to the pile. He then offers the most poignant words of the film:

³⁸ Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 393.

Mary did it, George! Mary did it! She told a few people you were in trouble and they scattered all over town collecting money. They didn't ask any questions—just said "If George is in trouble—count on me."³⁹

The bank examiner and reporters toss a few dollars in the basket, the sheriff tears up the warrant for George's arrest, and Sam Wainwright wires \$25,000 from Europe. George's brother, Harry, the newly minted Congressional Medal of Honor winner, then offers a toast dripping with *double entendre*: "To my big brother George, the richest man in town."⁴⁰

There are in fact two crises: one spiritual, one temporal. The first is resolved through divine intervention, the second through spousal intervention. Mary's classical imagination, attuned as it is to the real, allows her the clarity of vision to act effectively. Her rootedness orients her toward the community to which she and her family have contributed in their own way for years. The community, in turn, repays that contribution and completes the cycle of Christian charity with a rendition of "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing."

Elation of final scene stems from realization that true meaning is available to all.

The controversy arises when one considers the authenticity of this scene. Could such a pleasant and generous little town as Bedford Falls exist? Do we believe that the community would ignore the circumstances which precipitated the crisis? Is George Bailey so uniformly respected that no question would arise as to his probity? Has Capra, in his desire to portray the importance of charity, presented it only in idyllic form? Some critics might interpret the cascading elation depicted in the film's final scenes as a cheap appeal to modern man's flabby weakness for contrived, feel-good endings. Such an interpretation would fail to appreciate that the true source of elation lies not in George Bailey's miraculous salvation, but in the realization that true meaning in life lies within the humble grasp of each and every one of us.

Charges of superficial nostalgia and mawkish sentimentality will always dog *It's a Wonderful Life*; its near-universal appeal and intimate association with Christmas, its small-town setting and happy ending all, if taken at face value, obscure its deeper message. Appealing for assistance first and exclusively to the community of which you have been a part for decades may strike some

³⁹ Final Script, 319.

⁴⁰ Final Script, 322.

as anachronistic, but then that may betray their modern habituation to urban anonymity and lawyers, government agencies and self-appointed social crusaders more than it substantiates a claim of unreality. Capra cannot be faulted for preferring the human to the institutional, the customary to the legal, the natural to the artificial.

“Truly great works of art,” wrote Babbitt scholar Claes G. Ryn, “are open to all of what life may contain. This requires a will permitting contemplation of the more disturbing and painful dimensions of experience, as well as the potentialities for pleasure and happiness.”⁴¹ In *It’s a Wonderful Life*, Capra permitted contemplation of, among other things, accidental death, natural death, suicide, birth, bankruptcy, depression, poverty, vice, depravity, virtue, spirituality, God, skepticism, envy, materialism, indeed much of what any thoughtful person would list under the category of “the human condition.” While these myriad themes may at times fall into the shadow of some of the film’s more obvious symbols and associations, their artistic value, and that of the film in its entirety, is in no way diminished by their elusiveness. The manner in which the individuals who constitute the community of Bedford Falls manage these themes of life makes the ending more rather than less probable. They act in a fashion consistent with the commitments they have made spanning generations. If, as critics contend, a last-minute reprieve by God, family, and community constitutes an idyllic ending, then all those other “more disturbing and painful dimensions of experience” treated by Capra must, too, fall within the idyllic category. Precious little would qualify as real if *It’s a Wonderful Life* could be legitimately dismissed as simply idyllic.

Frank Capra responded to postwar disillusionment by illuminating in the film two fundamental points, one positive, one cautionary. What ultimately makes life meaningful, he contended, is life itself, lived and shared with others, divine and human. The greatest threat to this tenet is the loss of faith in those who vest it with meaning, a placing of self before the other, of avarice before charity, of some thing before Him. The contemporary moral imagination is much more susceptible to distractions from true meaning—to replacing moral striving with the pursuit of pleasure and

⁴¹ Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason*, 151-52.

avoidance of pain—than the moral imagination of Capra’s era. As a consequence, the ground for Capra’s invocation of God, family and community, his articulation of a reflexive and reciprocal ethical order would today seem inhospitable, yet its appeal remains as broad as ever. Only art which manages to convey resounding truths endures the test of time. Sixty years on, George Bailey’s moral journey continues to resonate.