What May We Now Hope For?

Raymond Aron and the Decline of the West

Raymond Aron launched his academic career by writing a doctoral dissertation on the philosophy of history deemed to be so pessimistic that it prompted one of his readers to wonder if Aron was possessed by Satan. Freely admitting that his thinking on the future of the West was leavened by a substantial streak of pessimism, Aron nevertheless insisted that his thinking harbored a significant measure of optimism as well. "I do not want to surrender to discouragement," Aron once wrote. "The regimes for which I have argued, in which some would see only a camouflage for power, by its essence arbitrary and violent, are fragile and turbulent; but as long as they remain free, they will possess unsuspected resources."[1]

But what was it, exactly, that discouraged Aron? And just how did he propose that the West respond to the twin challenges of decadence and decline? As we will see, Aron's answers are not altogether clear. As he tried to gauge the decline of the West and what should be done about it, Aron frequently hesitated and hedged, leaving his readers wondering whether in the end all of his pronouncements on the cultural condition of the West added up to pessimism or optimism. Underneath Aron's restlessness and ambivalence, we argue, is a philosophy of history that allowed for few settled

[1] Raymond Aron, *Memoirs* (New York, 1990),

convictions. Fashioned during his graduate student years, Aron's philosophy of history was a bold effort to view history and historical knowledge in the round. Attempting to soften the contradictions that plague our efforts to know past experience, Aron articulated a theory of concept formation that pulled reason and historical necessity into the same loose orbit. By keeping reason and necessity tethered to one another, Aron was hoping to present a fuller, more accurate representation of historical reality, one that held the middle ground between an abstract idealism—a philosophy that stretches normative ideas beyond any prudent regard for the contingencies of existence—and a narrow realism, a philosophy that denies that general ideas should play any role in forming historical judgments. In doing so, however, Aron set in motion a method of reasoning that made it difficult for him to reach many firm conclusions. Our purpose here is to make at least some of his hesitations on cultural decline intelligible by linking them to his method of inquiry. Only then will we be able to reckon with what Aron would have us now hope for.

Philosophy of History

Aron's pessimism was shaped by his youthful encounter with National Socialism. His brush with Nazism so badly jolted Aron's Kantian sensibilities that it undid not only his pacifism but much of his socialism as well. Although he never entirely disavowed his leftism ("A Jewish intellectual of goodwill who chooses the career of letters…can hardly do anything but will himself, feel himself, to be on the left"), Aron did renounce the soft, sentimental moralism that fed it.[2] In Germany, Aron explained, "I had passed a threshold in my political education—an education that will last as long as I do. I understood politics as such, irreducible to morality…National Socialism had taught me the power of irrational forces; Max Weber had taught me the responsibility of each individual, not so much with respect to intentions as to the consequences of his choice."[3]

Transforming these sentiments into a working philosophy of history, Aron broke rather dramatically, but not completely, with the scientific pretensions of his mentor, Léon Brunschvicq and the

[2] Aron, *Memoirs*, 34.
[3] Aron, *Memoirs*, 53.

Ecole Normale Supérieure—indeed from the whole of French philosophy at the time. During the early part of the twentieth century philosophy and the social sciences in France were guided almost wholly by a secular faith in science. Brunschvicq, for example, Aron's great patron, identified human progress with scientific progress, a view that prompted Aron to write, "Brunschvicq is our contemporary, but he is the contemporary of Einstein, not Hitler."[4] The practical upshot of what many in Aron's generation took to be an overly simple scientism was an unshakeable belief in the inevitability in human progress, a belief that Aron and his fellow *normaliens* found naïve to the point of shocking.

In breaking from the influence of his elders, Aron fashioned a philosophy of history that stressed the contingency of existence, a turn that greatly agitated the older generation. What his teachers found so unsettling about Aron's conceptual universe was how little it promised. Concepts such as "objectivity," "progress," and "reason" were nothing more than theoretical possibilities to Aron, ideals that in themselves did nothing to dispel the specter of tragedy of history or, conversely, to insure the progress of civilization. Aron never ruled out the possibility that civilization could progress; he simply insisted that, given human freedom and the contingency of existence, there was no way to know that it *would.*

Because his theory of knowledge pulled the rug out from under the feet of those who stood on the conviction that history offers a guarantee of human progress, Aron was rebuked time and again for his nihilism. During his dissertation defense, Aron had to contend with a committee that was openly hostile, offended as it was by the melancholy overtones of Aron's approach to history and historical knowledge. In fact, one member of the committee, Paul Fauconnet, concluded his interrogation of Aron with these words: "I conclude with an act of charity, faith and hope: charity by repeating to you my admiration and my sympathy; faith in the ideas that you condemn; hope that the students will not follow you." For his part, Aron later recalled that he was not possessed by the devil but was instead "experiencing in advance the world that my judges did not see coming."[5]

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[4] Raymond Aron, "La Philosophie de Léon Brunschvicq," *La France Libre* 44 (1944): 118.
[5] Aron, *Memoirs*, 76, 90.

Aron's theory of knowledge set in motion a dialectical logic powered by the polar energies of Max Weber and Edmund Husserl. Trying to understand just how knowledge of the past is possible, Aron observed that one can never completely resurrect even a fragment of the past. Underscoring the existence of an "unbridgeable gap" between the memory of a decision and the moment of a decision, Aron argued that the past can never be completely relived. "Even if every nuance of a past episode were somehow conveyed to our present consciousness," Aron maintained, "this miracle of resurrection would again make knowledge in the proper sense useless, for we would again be the same self we had been."[6]

Because one's own past cannot be relived, it must be reconstructed. In Aron's opinion, there are two ways in which one may reconstruct one's own past. The first is to rediscover the intentions (which Aron termed "motifs") which motivated an action, while the second is to retrace "states of consciousness" (which Aron termed "mobiles") in order to discover the psychological antecedents or the causes of those intentions. Both approaches are legitimate, Aron argued, but considered individually, each fails to account for a part of reality. The crucial point, however, is this: even when taken together, both dimensions are equally parts of a whole the totality of which exceeds the sum of its parts. Aron argued that in the end self-knowledge "attains neither the whole nor the unity—or at least our self is a constructed unity situated in infinity, like the unity of all objects." Thus, in taking stock of our past, "we perceive a series of inclinations which are ours: the self would be the fictive source of them" *(IPH*, 55). In the end, however, "the more we extend our inquiry, the closer we get to the totality without ever reaching it" (*IPH*, 56).

Because the essence of all things, including human beings, is located at a point situated in infinity, there is a "gap" or a "break" between the intentional and the psychological dimensions of behavior that guarantees the irreducibility of one to the other. There is at the same time, however, a marked degree of interaction between the two. All self-knowledge, Aron declared, implies a certain idea of oneself. "And this idea is animated by certain assertions of value. Even those who claim to discover

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[6] Raymond Aron, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History: An Essay on the Limits of Objectivity*, trans. George J. Irwin (Boston, 1961), 51. Hereafter Cited as *IPH.*

themselves passively choose themselves." In other words, "knowledge of self develops according to a dialectic: between an ever-incomplete discovery and a never triumphant decision, the individual defines himself by a double effort at lucidity and creation. Always menaced by Pharisaism or resignation, he can relax neither of the two tensions" (*IPH*, 57).

And here we reach the heart of the matter: by describing the knowledge of self as dialectical, Aron served notice that at the center of scientific knowledge of human action—which is simply a form of self-knowledge writ large—lies the problem of the hermeneutical circle: "One's idea of his past is dependent on the manner in which the past determines his present…but, in our consciousness, our past depends on our present." The upshot of this introspective exercise is the all knowledge is in some measure "tied in with the intention of the spectator" (*IPH*, 55).

Is this to say that all knowledge is subjective and hence relative? Not exactly. Here Aron injects a crucial caveat:

> This plurality of images, varying with the observer, will no doubt be admitted as evident *de facto* but paradoxical *de jure*. How can it be denied that there exists a reality and consequently a true idea of each person? And yet, we should like to uphold the paradox. We know the essential character of an individual no more than we understand the ultimate intention of an act (*IPH*, 68).

The structure and logic of self-knowledge are now complete. Aron presents the self as a unified whole within which two contrasting elements—the intentional and the psychological—emerge from a common, unknowable source. The relation between these two modes of human experience is ambiguous and complex: the will does not create itself *ex nihilo* but "emerges gradually from the process of experience which it is capable of influencing because it is the expression of it as well as the judge" (*IPH*, 57). Intentionality is at one and the same time conditioned by and independent of psychological or causal factors, a state of affairs which suggests that self-knowledge culminates in the discovery of a riddle or a paradox that reason can recognize but never resolve.

It is there, in the double impulse between autonomy and necessity, that we see the source of the restless ambivalence that marks so much of Aron's thinking. Although Aron never wavered in his insistence that reason must respect the constraints of necessity, he never squared that conviction with his

equally firm commitment to the autonomy of reason. For Aron, an act of historical understanding is never a strictly rational operation whereby reason "grasps" its objects in an impartial or mechanical way. By virtue of its inherent freedom, understanding is always a projective exercise that "shapes" the objects of experience in the process of knowing them. Although Aron emphasized the independent status of historical objects, his commitment to the Kantian notion of regulatory ideas suggests that these objects do not possess an actual or ontic existence but only a *believed* one. Although Aron was surely correct in maintaining that Marx's impersonal view of knowledge leads to a world without human beings, his own epistemology and philosophy of history runs the risk of leaving men and women without a world, an unhappy outcome that is particularly regrettable in a philosophy determined to give external necessity its due.

The Decline of the West

Aron's philosophy of history left two indelible impressions on his understanding of cultural decline. First, it affected the way he framed the problem. Aron saw the same two fundamental forces at work in cultural development as he did in history generally, namely, necessity and intentionality. In regards to his analysis of culture, he attempted to capture those dimensions by deploying the terms "decline" and "decadence." For Aron decline was an empirical concept, a fact of necessity "defined by the reduction in relative power of a state or a nation, or of the contribution of a collectivity to the great works of humanity" and could be calculated "by rigorous measurement." In his course at the Collège de France on the decline of Western civilization, for example, Aron explained that the weakening of twentieth century France had its origins in its declining nineteenth century birthrate, a brute fact of demography. England's decline was another case in point, although its decline was triggered not by corruption or a declining birthrate but by the "diffusion of the secrets of its preeminence."[7] Sooner or later, in other words, Great Britain "had to resign itself to a position less at odds with the size of its

[7] Aron, *Memoirs*, 418.

territory and population."[8] And the United States, too, suffered decline in the twentieth century, not necessarily through any fault of its own but simply because it was impossible sustain the economic, military and demographic preeminence it had enjoyed immediately after World War Two; the inevitable postwar recovery of Europe and the Soviet Union saw to that. In all of these examples, we see decline described as a quantitative phenomenon, one susceptible to empirical measurement.

The phenomenon of cultural decline, however, is not exhausted by the facts of necessity. If decline refers to some sort of "power relationship," then decadence "implies value judgments or a schema of development" (*DDE*, xv). To Aron's way of thinking, decadence refers to an intentional reality, one that transcends the bare facts of development. In assessing cultural progress, Aron argued, we must recognize that the empirical facts of historical existence, especially those related to science and technology, determine very little. Is it not Machiavellian *virtù*, or "the capacity for collective action and historic vitality, that now, as always, remains the ultimate cause of the fortune of nations and of their rise and fall?" (*DDE*, xvii) The notion of decadence is certainly ill-defined, Aron conceded, but nevertheless it is a concept that "can clarify and enrich."[9]

Aron worried that the West was slowly surrendering to decadence by calling all authority—in the church, the university, business, "even the army"—into question. Thus the central question of decline and decadence for Aron: "Is Western Europe, rich, brilliant, and creative, at the same time afflicted by an irresistible movement of decadence?"[10] This was the question at the heart of his book *In Defense of Decadent Europe*, Aron's rather brooding treatise on culture and civilization. Having experienced the sclerosis of French politics during the interwar years, Aron knew firsthand the costs of political paralysis and had no desire to relive the experience: "We lived through the decadence of the 1930s and saw its distinctive characteristic: the incapacity of the collective to respond to an external threat, because it

[8] Raymond Aron, *In Defense of Decadent Europe*, trans. Stephen Cox (South Bend, 1979), xvi. Hereafter cited as *DDE*.
[9] Aron, *Memoirs*, 418.
[10] Aron, *Memoirs*, 415.

lacked internal unity."[11] The student riots of May, 1968, were another seminal moment for Aron; indeed, the "sixty-eighters" left him rather shaken, prompting him to wonder if the events of May did not in fact herald a moral crisis amounting to a crisis of civilization.[12]

Second, Aron's philosophy of history imposed rather tight limits on Aron's willingness to predict the future course of events. By insisting that human action was the product of a complex, never-ending interaction between motifs and mobiles, Aron was giving anthropological expression to the neo-Kantian insistence that theoretical thought cannot penetrate to the discovery of essential unity or what Kant termed "the thing itself," a premise that led Aron to dismiss any talk of a human "nature." So limited, theoretical thought discovers only opposites-in-relation, or pairs of polar opposites bound together by an unknowable substance. Consequently, because there is no human nature, there is no universal or self-evident end of human action. For that reason, Aron had little patience for theorists like Hans Morgenthau, who believed in the existence of objective political laws that had their origins in human nature. It also made him impatient with historians like Arnold Toynbee or Oswald Spengler, theorists of cultural decline who similarly tried to extract from history laws of development characteristic of civilizations.

But if Aron's reflections on culture do not offer much in the way of prediction, just what do they do? We may learn something here from his theory of international relations, which also offers very little in the way of prediction. In *Peace and War*, Aron explained, he was simply attempting to grasp "the meaning of diplomatic behavior, to trace its fundamental notions, to specify the variables that must be reviewed in order to understand any one constellation" of political power.[13] In other words, his theory of international relations simply attempted to make political action intelligible. And again, just as with his theory of international relations, so too with his reflections on cultural progress or decline does Aron present his readers with a series of scenarios that underscores the limits of our knowledge and the conditions of historical choice. In other words, Aron emphasized not the predictability but the *complexity*

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[11] Aron, *Memoirs*, 419.
[12] Raymond Aron, *The Elusive Revolution: Anatomy of a Student Revolt*, trans. Gordon Clough (New York, 1969), xv.
[13] Raymond Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Baker Fox (New York, 1966), 93.

of action. Aron, then, content to describe the originality of historical circumstances, does not put his reflections on culture and crisis in a broader theoretical perspective but simply comments on political, economic and cultural variables and their significance for leading European powers and the United States.

Much like Richard Lowenthal and Daniel Bell, Aron divided society into three modal orders: the economic, the political and the cultural. These three orders were arranged according to a sliding scale of indeterminacy. Economics, which is concerned with the production and distribution of material goods and services, is the social order located closest to the plane of necessity, while culture, which is concerned with the ideas that societies and civilizations have of themselves, is the most indeterminate of the three. In staking out the boundaries of Western decadence and decline, Aron began by reviewing the economic events of the latter half of the twentieth century. Of particular interest to Aron was the charge by Michel Debré and Jacques Rueff that the United States had contributed significantly to France's economic woes and even to the decline of civilization by abandoning the gold standard and overvaluing its currency. In Debré's tart phrase, the United States "had sacrificed gold to its lust for power" (*DDE*, 186). Aron doubted that that was the case, insisting that the evidence was equivocal here. America's behavior from 1965-71 probably bore much of the blame for the inflation of 1973, "but since of the fall of 1973 the system adopted by Washington in March of 1973 has served the world economy better than any other" (*DDE*, 192).

Overall, in Aron's opinion, the economic condition of the seventies was cause for concern (his chapter on economics is titled "No More Miracles") but not for panic. However unsettling the recessionary ripples that were reverberating through the West may have been, they certainly did not herald the revolutionary outbreak that Marx and Engels had predicted. The recessionary challenges of the seventies were simply "not as serious as were the troubles of the 1930s." If the economic contractions of the 1970s were a cause for concern, Aron argued, it was primarily for political reasons. "The Great Depression brought Hitler to power. Will the 1973 inflation, the 1975-76 recession, and the subsequent monetary disorder bring about the collapse of the democratic societies of Western Europe?" (*DDE*, 197)

The question was more important for Europeans than Americans. Not only were European economies less dynamic than the American economy and thus harder hit by the economic contractions of the seventies but the American revolutionary experiment in freedom was far more decisive for American politics than were similar European experiments. Surveying in some detail the political strength and standings of the several communist parties in Western Europe in the seventies, Aron was troubled by the strength of socialism in Europe and was somewhat at a loss to explain it. Concerns over inequality may perhaps play a role in the appeal of socialism to Europeans, Aron speculated, but concern over inequality does not account for the paradox noted by Alfred Sauvy. "In one generation," Aron quoted Sauvy as observing,

> the standard of living has more than doubled, giving rise to a startling contradiction: a) progress is the most rapid known to history, and will probably never be equaled; b) discontent is higher than ever, at almost all levels of society. This discontent has increased, stimulated by the professional groups whose function is to create discontent, and even more by the mass media, whose information is designed to gratify and win over the public (*DDE*, 214).

What to make of this? Here Aron hesitated: Could liberal democracies survive politically only by remaking themselves after the image of Swedish social democracy? Or does economic growth "contain within itself the promise not of a 'grumbling satisfaction'"—Aron's hope—"but of a 'devouring dissatisfaction' which yet again, will turn to socialism in its vain search for equality and community?" (*DDE*, 214) Thus one of the dangers that beset liberal democracy: as economies grow, so too do levels of education, which in turn increases the demand for non-manual labor. If there were fewer non-nationals working in European labor markets the price of labor would increase and relieve some of the pressure for non-manual labor. Unfortunately, given the pressure to create employment for all, "Western societies are tending to become societies of welfare and of income redistribution" (*DDE*, 219).

To Aron's way of thinking, economic and political issues frequently morphed into cultural ones; nevertheless, even though there is interaction between and among the three modalities of society, only "doctrinaire adherents to the theory of decadence generally tend to attribute the same fate to the polity and

its culture."[14] But the social force of culture is often decisive. "Of the three crises," Aron wrote, "economic, political and social, it is the third which ultimately governs the other two" (*DDE*, 224). Thus it was that in *Defense of Decadent Europe* Aron returned yet again to unravel the meaning of May, 1968, and to speculate on its cultural significance for French democracy and the West. "In 1968," Aron wrote, "the world was dumbfounded because the revolt had neither cause nor objectives." And make no mistake, Aron insisted, the events of May were indeed a revolt, bringing the de Gaulle government—even the whole of French democracy—almost to its knees. Although the student revolt revealed just how "unsturdy" the French university system was, it also revealed the potential strength of a New Left antagonistic not only to Marxism-Leninism "but likewise toward liberalism." In short, "the French demonstrated the social failure of economic success" (*DDE,* 227). Did this augur a crisis of civilization? Although Aron suggested as much in *The Elusive Revolution*, he had apparently changed his mind by the mid-seventies. "I do not feel that these young people—now that the 'lyrical exaltation of May 1968 is over—are condemning our society to death," Aron wrote, "not do they herald its collapse by their rebellion" (*DDE*, 231).

What, then, drove the revolt? In his earlier study, Aron dismissed the events of May, 1968, as "a pointless psychodrama." Although students had legitimate grievances against the university system, Aron also argued that there always exists among the young a fraction of the student population which, "being 'allergic' to work, refuses to be integrated into society" (*DDE,* 231). Society always fails to socialize a small percentage of its citizens, Aron noted, but the causes of this failure seem to be multiplying. One can point to the living conditions in the high rise apartment buildings of the Parisian ghettos, the abrupt transition from traditional to industrial society, and the decline of the family. Interestingly, Aron also pointed to "the lack of any sense of national direction" as a factor in the failure of the French to socialize a segment of its student population (*DDE,* 231).

For Aron, the collapse of authority drives cultural decline. Is not the loss of authority in fact "the real and only crisis of civilization?" (*DDE*, 231) The university had been shaken by such a crisis, but

[14] Aron, *Memoirs*, 420.

what of the other two great French institutions whose roots went back to the *ancien régime*, namely, the church and the army? Aron summarized the condition of these three institutions succinctly: "Vatican Council II, the student rebellions, and the soldiers' trade unions seemed to come together as a system, symbolizing, if not the collapse then at least the challenging of authority…" (*DDE*, 232) Indeed, it is rather astonishing to read Aron—who was an agnostic Jew—deliver this judgment on the Catholic Church: "Nowadays, even in matters of dogma, the Pope tolerates practically anything, for fear of creating or multiplying heresies." In the old days, Aron grumbled, the Pope proclaimed the truth "and that was that" (*DDE*, 232).

Aron blamed what he called "Tocqueville's Law" for the rage against authority, for the phenomenon of "paraded license and denounced repression." By what logic or ignorance of history, Aron wondered,

> do so many intellectuals denounce as repressive the societies that legalize abortion, that tolerate homosexual relationships, that give consideration to unions in the armed forces, that have, for the most part, abolished the death penalty, and that do not refuse freedom of speech to anyone, whether it be to speak in favor of pornography, or the Baader-Meinhof gang, or the wildest of possible extravagances? (*DDE*, 236-7)

What threatened Europe in the latter half of the twentieth century was not repression but license, a license Tocqueville sensed was at work in the collapse of the *ancien régime*. "The last surviving privileges are resented all the more bitterly," Aron wrote, "because of the elimination of others that were abolished" (*DDE*, 237). Nodding in the direction of Weber and his discussion of bureaucratic rationality, Aron also wondered if industrial society does not in fact generate its own peculiar pathologies the more rationalized authority becomes. As individuals become increasingly subject to an anonymous and depersonalized social discipline, they sense that they are being manipulated by forces they no longer control. Philosophers may regard social concepts like capitalism, imperialism and productivism as little more than crude abstractions but Aron believed that "the popular imagination needs these villains, it has to see them in the flesh. The notion of monopolists, the sight of string-pullers exploiting and manipulating the people gives shape and form to the anonymous oppressor" (*DDE*, 241).

In the end, Aron worried that Schumpeter may have been right: capitalist societies are undone not by their failures but by their success. Arguing that capitalist societies were initially governed by an ethos radically different from the one that they would eventually bring into being, Schumpeter believed that the selfishness sanctioned by capitalist societies would destroy itself. Neither the profit motive nor cost-benefit analysis, Schumpeter declared, instills in public officials the virtue or morality required by their office. Aron agreed. "Disinterestedness, self-sacrifice and public spiritedness," he wrote, "relying on nothing but a good conscience are all virtues which belong to a world of tradition. They seem alien to the motives of the typical agents of modern civilization, whether one thinks of the consumer's pursuit of enjoyment or the producer's Promethean ambitions" (*DDE*, 247). In other words, the time of the sophists, economists and calculators has come and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever.

Aron ended *In Defense of Decadent Europe* with this rather prophetic and unsettling observation. Deploring the rise of a political culture in which individuals expect everything from society and give nothing to it—"nothing, at any rate, which might deprive them of any pleasure and cost them any sacrifice"—Aron wrote that,

> For some years now, this contradiction has become symbolized by the falling birthrate in France, Western Europe and the United States. Nobody—or hardly anybody—has worried about the possible, if not probable, consequences of two of the ideas so warmly advocated by Giscard d'Estaing: legalization of abortion and the movement toward equal status and equal conditions for men women. Both these notions correspond to the aspirations of the majority. It remains to be seen whether, when births have been reduced to the desired number, there will be enough of them to replace the previous generation. Biology does not forbid it, and justice demands that there be legal and professional equality between the sexes, but how is equality to be prevented from bringing with it a gradual identity of roles? For the career woman, children are becoming a nuisance and a contretemps (*DDE*, 250).

The connection between the attempt to unionize the armed forces and a reproduction rate may be tenuous, Aron admitted, but both phenomena spring from the same cause, namely, "the hypertrophy of individualism in its utilitarian, selfish form." And a civilization of selfishness, Aron warned, "condemns itself to death when it loses interest in the future" (*DDE,* 250).

Foundations of Renewal

If some readers were somewhat disconcerted by the sight of France's leading apostle of industrialization struggling to ward off the onset of a blue Burkean funk, others found Aron's repeated attempts to cobble together a response to Western decline and decadence positively bewildering. General de Gaulle, for example, was quick to underscore Aron's many equivocations and reversals here. Acknowledging that he was keenly interested in what Aron had to say about France's national identity and role in the world, de Gaulle pointed out that he was nevertheless troubled by Aron's thoughts on the issue. "It seems to me," de Gaulle wrote to Aron, "that if you return to these topics so unceasingly and with such vivacity, it is perhaps because you yourself are not fully satisfied by your own position. After all, talk of 'Europe', the 'Atlantic Community', 'NATO', 'arms', etc. boils down to a single argument: yes or no—must France remain France? That was already the question at the time of the Resistance. You knew what my choice was and I knew that there will never be any rest for theologians."[15]

The contrast between de Gaulle and Aron here is instructive. Aron was, at least in the main, supportive of de Gaulle's domestic leadership and even joined his government for a time in the Ministry of Information under the direction of his good friend, André Malraux. Despite the existence of some personal distance between himself and de Gaulle, Aron believed that France was deeply indebted to de Gaulle's leadership. It was de Gaulle and de Gaulle alone, Aron once declared, "who preserved our freedoms and set himself between confusion in men's minds and chaos."[16] Nevertheless, Aron added, "I persist in hoping that France will someday be capable of governing herself, otherwise than by unconditional faith in a prince, even if one sometimes rejoices that the 'cunning of reason' could have made a worse choice of the prince."[17]

In this grudging tribute, we catch sight of what is fundamentally wrong with the sort of charismatic leadership at the heart of de Gaulle's understanding of grandeur—it disdains "ordinary

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[15] Cited in Robert Colquhoun, *Raymond Aron: The Sociologist in Society* (Beverly Hills, 1986), 400.
[16] Aron, *Memoirs*, 260.
[17] Raymond Aron, "The Fifth Republic: Letter from Paris," *Encounter* 11 (December, 1958), 12.

legalité" in favor of what Aron called "mysterious *legalité*."[18] And ordinary *legalité* lies at the foundation of what in Aron's opinion constitutes and authentically democratic regime. In Aron's words, "For peoples as well as individuals, liberty is not recognized by the more or less illusory consciousness that individuals have of it, but by the respect for the laws, which leads to respect of persons."[19] This is why classical liberal thought placed so much emphasis on the separation of powers; such a division, Aron observed, "is the rampart of legality par excellence, the obstacle that the prudence of the legislators must raise up against the arbitrary." In fact, political philosophers like Montesquieu believed that the separation of powers was not simply a check against "abuse and illegality" but was in fact "constitutive of liberty itself."[20] For Montesquieu (as well as Aron), liberty was defined above all else by "the reciprocal limitations of powers as a guarantee of legality" and this existed only in moderate, limited government.[21] Stripped of its great powers, great men and great doctrines, democratic society appeared to Aron exactly as it had to Tocqueville—a shallow, restless tumult devoid of brilliance or greatness. "Doomed to moderateness," to use Aron's phrase, democracy is by its nature subject to the law of mediocrity. This, however, was in Aron's opinion but a small price to pay for the matchless privilege of living in an open society devoted to tolerance and critical freedom. And if tolerance is born of doubt, Aron added, then "let us pray for the advent of the skeptics."[22]

This passage from *The Opium of the Intellectuals* dropped like a bombshell over the heads of the French intelligentsia. Indeed, the book as a whole, Aron recalled, created a furor in France. To the French intellectual Aron's defense of mediocrity and his call for skepticism signaled a crisis of faith and a loss of hope. Far better to live with passion, the Left believed, to commit oneself to the cause of the coming Revolution, than to accept the gradgrind realities of an industrial society. Far better, in other words, "to be wrong with Sartre than right with Aron."[23]

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[18] Aron, "The Fifth Republic," 10.
[19] Raymond Aron, *L'Homme contre les tyrans* (Paris, 1946), 264.
[20] Aron, *L'Homme contre les tyrans*, 264.
[21] Aron, *L'Homme contre les tyrans*, 269.
[22] Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals,* trans. Terence Kilmartin (London, 1957), 324.
[23] This was a rallying cry of the French left. See Aron, *Memoirs*, 236.

Although such criticism dogged Aron all of his life, he never wavered in his conviction that the politics of understanding was a politics of lowered expectations. Ever suspicious of those who spoke of wholesale social reconstruction ("those strange builders who begin by destroying"), Aron placed his confidence in the slow, hard work of negotiation and compromise. The refusal to be moved by the rhetoric of those who propose sweeping reform or dramatic changes, Aron insisted, "does not lead to insipid pragmatism or lessen the value of intellectual controversy. On the contrary, it encourages a return to rational discussion which, in any case, must be solved pragmatically, and lays bare the eternal and conflicting aspirations in the hearts of men and in the turmoil of history."[24] Aron conceded that, in comparison with those on the radical Left, or even in comparison with many "liberal Americans," he was indeed a pessimist: "I do not believe that it is an easy task to shape either human nature or human society."[25] Aron explained, however, that pessimists of his sort do in fact "seek constantly to improve society [but] in a piecemeal fashion. The only thing is that [we] have no global solution, whereas those with a reputation for optimism generally believe in a system that could never exist."[26]

To "moderate pessimists" such as Aron the only kind of regime compatible with such scaled-down expectations of history and human nature is a pluralist one, or one in which different and conflicting interests struggle peacefully for political, economic and social power. Although such a politics sought to protect and advance individual freedom, Aron was well aware that pluralism was not without its costs: "It maintains an atmosphere of discord and division in the body politic, it blurs the sense of communal responsibilities and jeopardizes internal peace and friendship." Nevertheless, "in spite of everything," pluralism must be promoted because it is "a means of limiting arbitrary power and ensuring a legal expression to discontent, and [stands] as a symbol of the lay impartiality of the State and the autonomy of the human mind."[27]

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[24] Raymond Aron, *Industrial Society: Three Essays on Ideology and Development* (New York, 1967), 169.
[25] Aron, *Industrial Society*, 159.
[26] Raymond Aron, *La Lutte des classes: Nouvelles leçons sur les societies industrielles (Paris, 1964), 55.*
[27] Aron, *Opium*, 322.

Have these piecemeal reforms added up to anything? Is humanity making any progress in its slow crawl toward the end of history? More to the point, can liberal democracy make any headway in rolling back the forces of decadence and decline?

For all of his pessimism, Aron could be remarkably sanguine about the future. "World opinion today," he wrote, "understands more clearly than before the facts of modern economic life and its potentialities for peace."[28] The possible causes of class conflict, for example, "now seem less important than the things that make for interdependence."[29] There is nothing profound or even new in this idea, Aron admitted; after all, liberal economists have been patiently explaining for more than a century how trade benefits all parties. What is new, however, is that convictions, "formerly held by only a few, are now spreading," thanks to recent knowledge and experience. In Germany, the price of defeat in World War II "has been, not poverty, as hither to, but prosperity."[30] World War II may have cost Europe as a whole its colonies, power and diplomatic prestige, but it "has achieved an unprecedented level of production and productivity." At the same time, "ideologies are also becoming discredited and tending to lose their emotional effectiveness." Economists have learned to control economic cycles with greater skill and, by so doing, have drained ideological invective of much of its force. In the West, Aron added, "and perhaps even in the Soviet Union, men no longer think of one regime as imperialist or exploiting, and another as being peaceful and just. All regimes are thought of as imperfect and none is immune from injustice, none I subject to the law of impoverishment."[31]

Given these trends, what may we now hope for? What, in other words, does continued progress against decadence and decline demand of human action? Those familiar with Aron's broadsides against utopian optimism will undoubtedly be caught short by his answer. "In tranquil times and happy epochs," he declared, "millennialism teaches us never to be satisfied with the results so far obtained."[32] Although "the promise may be all but destroyed" by the requirement of tranquility Aron placed on it, Roy Pierce

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[28] Raymond Aron, *The dawn of Universal History*, trans. Dorothy Pickles, (New York, 1961), 53.
[29] Aron, *Dawn of Universal History*, 54.
[30] Aron, *Dawn of Universal History*, 56.
[31] Aron, Dawn of Universal History, 56.
[32] Cited in Roy Pierce, *Contemporary French Political Thought* (London, 1966), 249.

has observed, this statement nevertheless signals a concession to millennialism that even Albert Camus, "the philosopher of revolt," might have been unwilling to grant.[33]

Indeed, for all of his forceful polemics against those "with a reputation for optimism," Aron frequently gave optimism rather wide berth. In encouraging his fellow citizens to stay the liberal democratic course during the postwar period, for example, he promised a rather heady payoff should they succeed in doing so. In the Old Continent, Aron wrote, "the scale of greatness remains that of the national states. Always of the second rank when compared to the colossus [of the United States and the USSR], France will recover a radiance and an influence of the first rank on the condition that, by its interior stability and its prosperity, it creates a political and spiritual center around which will gather the smaller nations."[34] This stirring, almost breathless description of the future—which immediately calls to mind Victor Duruy's ringing declaration that "France is the moral center of the world"[35]—is remarkable not just for what it expects from French foreign policy but for what it demands of French domestic politics as well. "A great nation," Aron declared, "lives and prospers only by the constant and mysterious inspiration of a great idea," or by what Aron elsewhere termed a "task" (*un projet*). "Does France still have a task? Aron asked in the immediate aftermath of World War II. "This is not only the decisive question," he added, "it is, one could say, the *only* question." France did indeed still have a task, and a rather lofty one at that: "The French idea," Aron maintained, "is to protect what is human at an hour when all conspire to deliver society to the inhumanity of enslaved masses and the pyramids of steel."[36]

In attempting to infuse French national politics with this rather bracing measure of moral concern, Aron clearly drew not from the precepts of classical French liberalism, a philosophy that accepts the permanence of the struggle for power, but from the tenets of French republicanism, a philosophy of public virtue and a self-sworn enemy of liberalism. In France, Tony Judt observed, it was fin-de-siècle republicanism that "first deployed to the full the idea that France *stood* for something, proselytizing an

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[33] Pierce, *Contemporary French Political Thought*, 249.
[34] Raymond Aron, *L'Age des empires et l'avenir de la France* (Paris, 1946), 47.
[35] Cited in Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French intellectuals 1944-56* (Berkeley, 1992), 239.
[36] Aron, *L'Age des empires*, 47.

idea of civic virtue and implicitly denying any potential or actual differences or divergences in the nation itself." If there was a goal to which this strain of republicanism aspired, Judt added, "it was thus the creation of 'Frenchness,' an identity whose self-ascribed moral superiority would compensate for the gloomier aspects of recent history."[37]

But how this kind of idealism comports with the sort of pluralism Aron hoped would take root in France is far from clear. What is clear, however, is that these two impulses are frequently at odds in Aron's own work. Spurring France on to become the "spiritual and political center" of Europe immediately after the war, Aron seemed to sour on the idea in the 1950s, when he wrote that "the longing for a purpose, for communion with the people, for something controlled by an idea and a will," is, quite frankly, "not for us."[38]

Aron's ambivalent pessimism manifested itself again when he became engaged in the "end of ideology" debate that gripped intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic at mid-century. Although the anti-ideologists (whose number included Daniel Bell, George Kennan, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., among others) formed no single school of thought, they generally agreed that social action should be governed not by ideological abstractions but by the more modest propositions of the social sciences. "Few serious minds," Daniel Bell had written, "believe any longer that one can set down 'blueprints' and through 'social engineering' bring about a utopia of social harmony." Given the dismal performance of totalitarian regimes, Bell added, "the ladder to the City of Heaven can no longer be a 'faith ladder' but an empirical one: a utopia has to specify *where* one wants to go, *how* to get there, the costs of the enterprise, and some realization of and justification for the determination of *who* is to pay."[39] The good society at work was thus a relatively unexciting and unimaginative affair. As Aron envisioned it, an open or non-ideological society was one in which citizens, aided by the findings of policy analysts, would come together to pass judgment on a multitude of partial and ad hoc policy proposals and decide

[37] Judt, *Past Imperfect*, 240.
[38] Aron, *Opium of the Intellectuals*, 323.
[39] Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Glencoe, 1960), 405.

on small but important matters such as the price of farm subsidies or the increase in wages for public employees.

Even in *The Opium of the Intellectuals,* which was widely regarded as something of a manifesto for the anti-ideology movement, Aron was nagged by doubts and anxieties over the pragmatic, non-ideological incrementalism that marks pluralist regimes. "The substitution of scientific thought for religious truth," he observed, "cannot but entail a spiritual crisis: it is difficult to be satisfied with a provisional truth, incontestable but limited, not guaranteed to console."[40] By the 1960s, Aron's idealism was in full voice. As Tracy Strong points out, Aron complained that many of those who rushed to embrace or tout the end of ideology did so to escape the responsibilities of action. "Under pretense of escaping from ideology," Strong observed, "such men have merely uncritically embraced the dominant one and called it reality."[41]

What exactly, then, should France do? In taking up this question, Aron began by noting that the twentieth century had dramatically altered the scale and conditions of greatness. Formerly, "greatness had never been separated from power." When a people and its leaders could impose their wills on their neighbors, Aron noted, they did so. However, he added, "this is the sort of grandeur that nations must renounce, especially those who do not have the means to rule." But this renunciation "permits the attainment of another greatness," a greatness which, in the industrial age, tends to devalorize the means of force and power.[42] Declaring that the "politics of force" is now beyond the means of France—even "a France governed by de Gaulle and armed with a few dozen anachronistic atomic bombs"—Aron announced a new vocation for France. "The grandeur that France can attain, especially in Africa," Aron argued, "will not be for the foreseeable future a grandeur of power but can only be a grandeur of peace, of influence, of culture."[43] Henceforth French grandeur would be measured "neither by the number of square kilometers over which the tricolor flies and neither by the number of *fellaghas* defeated each week

[40] Aron, *Opium*, 263.
[41] Tracy B. Strong, "History and Choices: The Foundations of the Political Thought of Raymond Aron," *History and Ideas: Studies in the Philosophy of History* 11 (1972), 191.
[42] Raymond Aron, "De la Politique de grandeur," *Preuves* 105 (Novembre, 1959), 10.
[43] Aron, "De la Politique," 11.

by the forces of order." Instead, French grandeur will be "a function of a double success: the modernization of the economy and the continuity of the culture." In fact, France will be great in the eyes of the rest of the world, Aron declared, "only to the degree that it accomplishes itself."[44]

With this statement, we are from the sort of grandeur that de Gaulle sought to cultivate, which sought to carve out an equal footing for France between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Aron seems here to be making the point that one finds meaning inly in what one makes of oneself and not how one lives in regard to others, a point that seems to align him closer to Sartre than de Gaulle. And this is why Aron was willing to accept a vastly more scaled down understanding of grandeur than de Gaulle. "We are under no illusions about the future," Aron once declared. "No spectacular or grandiose task opens up before us for the simple reason that neither conquest nor revolution is within the range of the possible."[45] Although Aron maintained democracy was capable of great moral accomplishment and thus capable of pushing back against the forces of decadence, he took equal pains to point out that moral progress was often slow and tortuously difficult. Reason "does aim at a certain universality," he declared, "but that universality is defined by the enlargement of consciousness through the criticism of itself and its institutions."[46] Knowing that self-criticism is hardly a natural human reflex, Aron recognized that democracy required a citizenry that could occasionally summon qualities that bordered on the heroic, while despairing at times over the seeming inability of some countries in the West—like France—to engage in the sort of discipline soul-searching necessary to self-governance. ("The final question of the historical destiny of France is always the same," Aron once glumly observed. "How shall a people who rationalize their dreams and conceal their disabilities arrive at a recognition of reality?")[47] For Aron, dreams and moral ambitions must always pass through the reality of constraining necessities: "To live

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[44] Aron, "De la Politique," 12.
[45] Aron, *L'Age des empires*, 20.
[46] Raymond Aron, "Max Weber and Michael Polanyi," *The Logic of Personal Knowledge: Essays Presented to Michael Polanyi on His Seventieth Birthday* (London, 1961), 105.
[47] Raymond Aron, *France Steadfast and Changing: The Fourth to the Fifth Republic,* trans. J. Irwin (Cambridge, 1960), 77.

and think historically is to recognize the servitude of our condition and work to enlarge, by action, the margin of our autonomy."[48]

This last sentence brings us to the nub of the problem for Aron. We believe that Aron's ambivalence about the appropriate response to moral decline reflects a deeper ambivalence over the nature and character of human freedom. On the one hand, in Aron's schema the demands of freedom imply that we must work "to enlarge the margin of our autonomy"—which is certainly what de Gaulle attempted to do—while on the other hand, freedom seems to reside for Aron, in Henry Kissinger's suggestive phrase, "in the inward recognition of limits." It is this conundrum, we submit, that accounts for Aron's restlessness.

In Aron's thought, we witness a heroic effort to keep the contradictions of the human condition pulled into a kind of reasonable synthesis. In assessing Aron's legacy, perhaps Pascal's standard is the most appropriate: "It is on thought that we must depend for our recovery," Pascal wrote, "not on space and time, which we could never fill. Let us then strive to think well; that is the basic principle of morality." In thinking well we strive for the truth. Despite the monstrous deformations of the truth wrought by twentieth century despotisms, Aron held fast to his lifelong conviction that "the truth is great and will prevail." It is in this light that Aron's work is best understood; it is for that effort that his work deserves to be remembered.

[48] Raymond Aron, *Le Grand Schisme* (Paris, 1948), 290.