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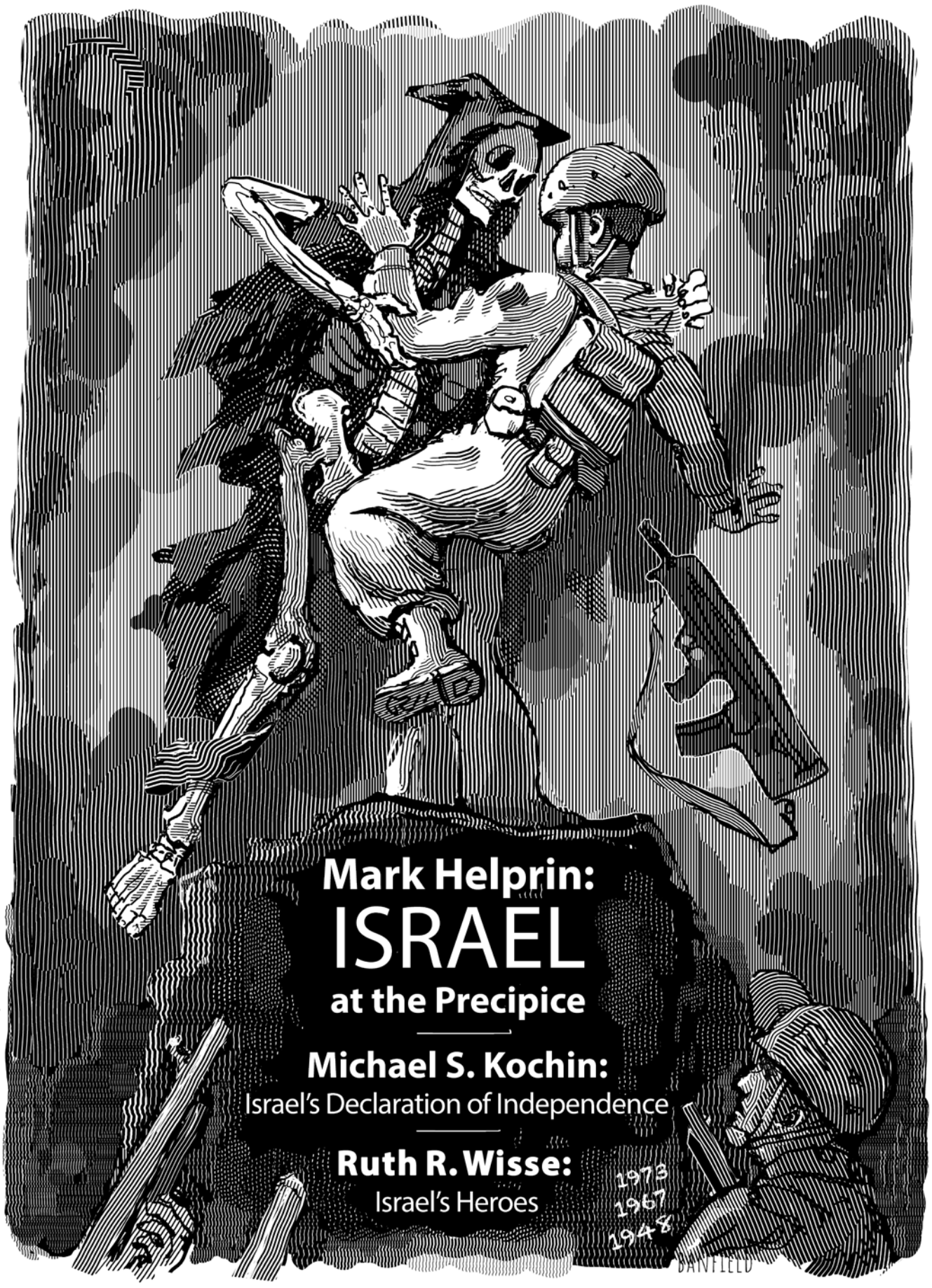

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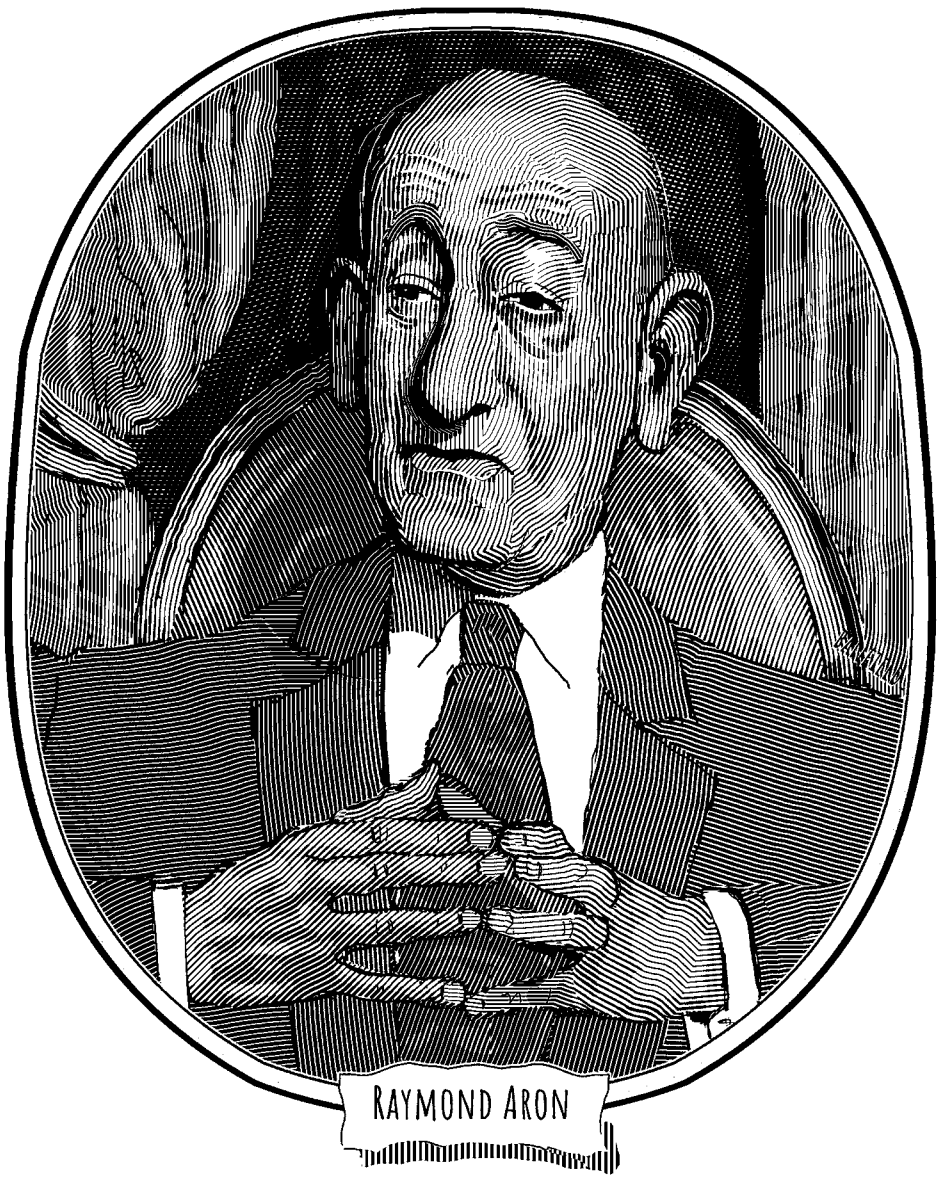
Essay by Daniel J. Mahoney

Facing the Monster of Fanaticism

Raymond Aron's classical sobriety.



In an address to inaugurate his new chair in the Sociology of Modern Civilization at the Collège de France in 1970, the French political philosopher Raymond Aron looked back at a life of reflection conducted amid the ferocious "political storms" of the 20th century. Citing the famed English philosopher of history Arnold Toynbee, Aron said that while studying and teaching in Germany between 1930 and 1933 he had come to feel "almost physically" that "history is again on the move." The experience of watching Germany fall into the abyss so swiftly, bewitched by an insane tyrant, shattered his faith in mankind's inevitable progress: "I ceased to believe that history automatically obeys the dictates of reason or the desires of men of good will." As the cultivated German people succumbed in a matter of years to raging political delirium, Aron "discovered the enemy that I as well do not tire of pursuing—totalitarianism."

He went on: "In any form of fanaticism, even one inspired by idealism, I suspect a new incarnation of the monster." This one sentence contains the key to understanding Aron's approach to political matters. His great achievement was to uncover the complicity between nihilism and ideological fanaticism—misplaced idealism—in all their forms. In his voluminous writings on the history of political thought, the sociological tradition, international relations, "history-in-the making," and much more besides, Aron was always guided by a "faith without illusions," as he called it in *The Century of Total War* (released in French in 1951 and in English in 1954). An uncompromising critic of historical and sociological determinism, he defended the human element, the "margins of liberty" available to citizens and statesmen even in the most dramatic and tragic of circumstances. Near the end of his 1970 inaugural address (titled "On the Historical Condition of the Sociologist"), Aron identified with the bracing yet encouraging words of one of his most important inspirations, Alexis de Tocqueville: "Let us look forward to the future with that healthy fear that keeps us combative and on guard, and not that faint and idle terror that disheart-

ens and enervates." Though he remained clear-eyed, Aron never gave way to despair.

He delivered his final lecture at the Collège de France on April 4, 1978. This year it has been newly and faithfully translated into English by the young political theorist Samuel Garrett Zeitlin of Cambridge University, under the title *Liberty and Equality*. Taken together with the epilogue to Aron's *Memoirs* (1983), this slim volume can serve as his final intellectual testament. The tough-minded liberalism reflected in these pieces is inseparable from what, as early as 1939, he called his "democratic conservatism." He increasingly united both these elements of his thought in a classical sobriety that was in short supply in his day, and ours.

Though he is still a name to conjure with, Aron's complex legacy has been banalized in certain Western intellectual circles. He is often reduced to a proponent of an anti-totalitarian "Cold War liberalism" that has little to say about our present situation and needs. When he is brought into contemporary discussions, it is simply assumed that Aron, were he writing today, would uncritically defend "democracy" as it has been radically redefined by ruling elites. In these trimmed-and-tailored renderings, Aron is always a critic of authoritarian and totalitarian "fanaticism," but never a critic of the self-destructive tendencies inherent in late modernity and in a deeply corrupted, or radicalized, version of democracy itself. This is commonplace in many French journalistic presentations of Aron's thought.

No doubt, Aron would be disturbed by some currents of European populism, and by the rise of authoritarian (not totalitarian) regimes on the edge of Europe. But some of his more tepid academic partisans have forgotten Aron's powerful warnings about the "depoliticization" of Europe and the transformation of democracy into a pale simulacrum of itself. This is true even of such thoughtful and impressive admirers of Aron as Philippe Raynaud in France and Aurelian Craiutu in the United States, who tend to make Aron too much a centrist, a "moderate" in the contemporary sense of that term. That is exactly what has happened as the phrase "our democracy" has come to stand in for a snide elite consensus that is at once highly moralistic and wildly antinomian, contemptuous of political reasoning and completely alien to Aron's political outlook. Those who would enlist Aron for this project fail to appreciate sufficiently the gritty classical sobriety at the heart of his political judgment. This unflinching prudence made him much more than just an adherent of liberalism—even though he was undoubtedly a liberal of a particularly rare and noble kind.

Becoming Aron

In his lucid and substantial epilogue to the English-language edition of *Liberty and Equality*, Pierre Manent points out that Aron definitively broke with the spirit of the age after watching the deeply unnerving events of the 1930s. That spirit was reflected, Manent observes, in the "apolitical pacifism of Alain [the pseudonym of Émile-Auguste Chartier]" and "the idealist progressivism" of Léon Brunschvicg, two of Aron's early teachers and inspirations. Alain, in particular, counseled young people always to struggle against established authority. He articulated a conception of citizenship that was wholly "oppositional" and therefore profoundly irresponsible. Aron's progressivist and pacifist teachers proved powerless to understand, much less confront, the unholy mixture of unhinged militarism, racialist fanaticism, and amoral nihilism that submerged Germany in the 1930s. He would have to turn elsewhere for political wisdom.

Books discussed in this essay:

Liberty and Equality, by Raymond Aron, translated by Samuel G. Zeitlin. Princeton University Press, 120 pages, $19.95

Memoirs: Fifty Years of Political Reflection, by Raymond Aron, translated by George Holoch. Holmes & Meier, 510 pages, $49.95 (cloth), $24 (paper)

The Opium of the Intellectuals, by Raymond Aron. Routledge, 358 pages, $200 (cloth), $64.95 (paper)

Politics and History, by Raymond Aron, translated and edited by Miriam Bernheim Conant. Routledge, 308 pages, $170 (cloth), $59.95 (paper)

Raymond Aron and His Dialogues in the Age of Ideologies, by Nathan Orlando. Peter Lang, 338 pages, $114.95

In this context, Aron discovered the political sociology of Max Weber almost as a revelation. Weber's tragic realism was informed by what Manent calls "relentless curiosity," a keen desire to "penetrate the most different spiritual universes." Weber's deep and abiding intellectual honesty kept him from embracing either historical or sociological determinism, despite the fashionable appeal of each. He understood the permanently tragic and dramatic dimensions of the human condition, and he felt deeply for the spiritually forlorn men produced by late modernity. Much later, in the 1950s, Aron would adamantly reject "what was immoderate or imprudent in the Weberian manner of carrying oppositions to their paroxysm, and sometimes of seeing contradictions, where a more sober spirit or a more serene heart would have discerned compatibilities or at least tensions that could be mastered." Eventually, Aron came to recognize and fully disavow the "Nietzschean nihilism" that had helped inspire and inform Weber's thought. But in his early flight from the clinical and reductive idealism of his first mentors, Aron was moved by Weber's arguments that science *qua* science was at a loss to *evaluate* moral and political phenomena as they are.

Ultimately, though, Weber was so concerned to deny political knowledge to science that he ended up denying the possibility of true knowledge in the political sphere altogether. He reduced moral and political choice to moral anarchy, darkly portraying disputes between conflicting regimes, parties, and ideologies as an "inexpiable war of the gods" in which one's own god may turn out to be a demon. Aron saw that Weber's "axiological neutrality"—his refusal to judge between opposing political and ideological approaches or even admit the possibility of right judgment between them—could never undergird or even encourage reasonable choice. He therefore criticized both Weber and Jean-Paul Sartre for their willful refusal to acknowledge the capacity of reason to discern the primordial distinctions between truth and falsehood, good and evil, without which humanity cannot find its place in the world. Considering this development in Aron's thought, Manent rightly argues that if Weber "was the declared hero of Aron's first maturity, Aristotle silently accompanied his social and political inquiry once it had effectively begun."

Indeed, after meeting Aron for the first time in Paris in 1949, Eric Voegelin wrote to his friend Alfred Schütz that Aron combined great learning with a rare capacity for incisive but ultimately humane political judgment. This aptitude was informed by Aron's reading of "the political Aristotle," as well as of Tocqueville and Machiavelli. In the 1950s, Aron would continue to develop a rich and capacious classical understanding of reason's power to join together thought and action,

science and politics, without conflating or collapsing them. He arrived at this clarity in part through a sympathetic and critical engagement with the work of Voegelin and Leo Strauss (Aron played a major role in the early 1950s in promoting the French publication of *Natural Right and History*). He thus became a pronounced critic of both false realists *and* soft idealists, embodying at last the *juste milieu* or the righteous mean between two extremes.

Between Scylla and Charybdis

Aron also gave no quarter to intellectual apologists for murderous fanaticism. These regrettably proliferated in France from the early years of the Cold War (when Stalinists dominated the French intellectual scene) to the "revolutionary carnival" of May 1968, when the exotic new socialist "paradises" of Havana and Beijing attracted admiration among Western observers even as these descended into blood-soaked mayhem. As the liberal critic John Leonard justly remarked at the time, Aron was "the only adult"—the only truly sober observer at the pathetic revolutionary saturnalia heralded by pseudo-intellectuals and petty ideologues around the world. His steely moderation helped him navigate between a false realism that reduced everything to the ruthless "struggle for power," and a misplaced idealism that fell readily for fantastical dreams of a world made completely new. With his profound *mesure* in both mind and soul, Aron was in important respects Aristotle's *spoudaios*, the "mature" or "serious" man who embodies both the intellectual and moral virtues.

For him, true realism meant acknowledging that "the search for legitimate power, for recognized authority, for the *best* regime" was itself part of human and political reality. Against those who ignored the complexity of the human world and the limits integral to human existence, the liberal Aron affirmed two profoundly conservative truths: the essential permanence of human nature, and the indispensable distinction between authority and authoritarianism. In "Democratic and Totalitarian States," an address delivered when he was 34 to the French Philosophical Society, Aron offered what Manent calls in the same epilogue a "luminous political analysis, trenchant, sober to the point of asperity." The 1939 speech brilliantly exposed the mixture of passivity, pacifism, and democratic sentimentality that had led European politicians and intellectuals astray throughout the course of the 1930s.

In that memorable address, Aron called for his compatriots to recover "a minimum of faith or communal will"—a basic measure of what Machiavelli called *virtù*—"without falling into Machiavellianism pure and simple." He argued that true liberals must be "democratic conservatives," defending both old verities and precious liberties against totalitarians. He excoriated the "false idea" that "the administration of things" can ever replace "the government of persons." If "one wants to administer all things, one is obliged, at the same time, to govern all persons." Most importantly, he insisted that unless democracies could recover and cultivate the full range of moral and civic virtues, they would lose their souls and ultimately perish.

For Aron, the necessary defense of liberal civilization was inseparable from the unapologetic defense of values, virtues, laws, and limits that predate and transcend the "autonomy" of the individual. He affirmed that autonomy only in a high-minded Kantian sense, such that personal liberty goes hand in hand with respect for the moral law. This is a truth Aron never forgot. It became particularly urgent in the final 15 years of his life after May 1968, when a facile antinomianism became increasingly ascendent in French and Western culture.

> We must either seek freedom wisely, within the limits of reason, or lawlessly, under the imperium of an anarchic hedonism.

In this way, Aron fought a two-front war against both fanaticism and civic passivity. As he wrote in one of his most discerning essays, "Fanaticism, Prudence, and Faith" (1956), he was reacting against the "extreme individualism" of the existentialists who eschewed fundamental moral truths, "denying any permanence to human nature, [and] oscillat[ing] between a lawless voluntarism," moral or civic, "and a [historicist] doctrinairism based on myths." The essay was a vigorous defense of his earlier book, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (1955), in which he had disputed the "myths" of the Revolution (French, Soviet, and beyond), the Left, and the Proletariat. This skepticism toward self-serving elite narratives was confused by some detractors with skepticism toward all ideals per se. But in fact Aron's fire was trained narrowly on false *ideology*, peddled by sophistical fellow-travelers who shamelessly applauded murderous left-wing totalitarian regimes. Among them were "progressivist" Christians, who admired leaders and movements that persecuted, imprisoned, and even murdered their co-religionists. Aron expertly revealed how the ironclad certainties of the new fanatics had only been able to take hold in the void left by ancient truths, which had been forgotten or rejected.

The Faith of the Philosopher

In the epilogue to his *Memoirs*, Aron acknowledged that "in a certain sense" he had remained "a man of the Enlightenment." But he refused to dismiss "the dogmas of the churches" as "superstition." Because he was not "a believer of any church," he left "the space of transcendental faith empty," refusing all projects of human self-deification. The faith he adhered to, the "faith of the philosopher," was marked by "doubt" but not by a dogmatic and reckless effort to "negate" transcendental religion and the moral law. He therefore refused to infer from the diversity of human customs and beliefs that no absolute truths about spiritual matters could possibly be known. In fact, he wrote, "good and evil are [not] reversed from one society to another": "Honesty, frankness, generosity, gentleness, and friendship do not change signs from one century to the next, from one continent to the other, or by crossing borders."

As a young man, to be sure, Aron had been prone to go too far in identifying "social values" with "moral virtues." By the last decades of his life, however, he was undertaking to "strengthen the foundations of scientific truth and human universalism." Though a Jew by birth and a qualified agnostic by belief, his attitudes were profoundly shaped by his countless Catholic friends and students. He did not hesitate to remark: "I often sympathize with the Catholics, loyal to their faith, who demonstrate a total freedom of thought in all profane matters. The horror of secular religions makes me feel some sympathy for transcendent religions."

Aron thus defended "authentic faith," or "faith without illusions," against dehumanizing and tyrannical "schemes and models, ideologies and utopias." It was the existentialists and the progressive Christians, the Stalinist and Maoist apologists with no faith in the reality of the soul, who blindly discarded prudence, "the god of this lower world" (as Edmund Burke had so memorably put it in a

passage Aron loved to quote). Aron ended his 1956 apologia with a rhetorical question: "Is it, then, so difficult to see that I have less against fanaticism than I have against nihilism, which is its ultimate origin?" This is precisely what those so-called Aronians who are inclined to accommodate the Zeitgeist, however "moderately," finally fail to appreciate.

Any account of Aron that mistakes his targeted skepticism for an attack on authentic faith and reason has misconstrued his deepest convictions as well as his remarkable solidity of soul. Aron embodied and defended Aristotelian and Burkean prudence as effectively as any serious political thinker of the 20th century. At the same time, he never allowed philosophical mania, literary politics, or ideological fantasies to unbalance his political judgment. In an intellectual milieu dominated by unmitigated anti-bourgeois spite, he never disdained the prosaic bourgeois virtues, or looked askance at the quiet grandeur of human life lived within the concrete range of possibilities for action available to man as he lives in the real world.

Final Judgments

Liberty and Equality serves as a succinct précis of Aron's thought in the final phase of his life. In it we find "the philosopher of liberties," as Yale University's Steven B. Smith has called him, expertly delineating the full range of "liberties" that constitute freedom as we "moderns" understand it. Aron's approach is phenomenological: rather than beginning with an apolitical abstraction such as "the state of nature," he starts from the experience of life as lived daily among men, and only then moves on to survey more completely the viable theories of liberty and civil society. He does full justice to the prosaic but indispensable bourgeois liberties such as security and property, which he sees as precious protections against arbitrary government and its assaults on the dignity of the private citizen. Against those who would dismiss personal and political liberties as merely "formal" liberties, rather than "real" ones, Aron suggests they are as real as any of the "social liberties" heralded by the Marxist Left. Those precious liberties "have become at a certain point part of our normal and evident manner of life to such an extent that it would be necessary for these liberties to be violated or eliminated in order for us to be cognizant of their eminent value." But that is exactly what happened under the totalitarian dominion of "really existing socialism" behind the Iron Curtain before 1989. Alas, we have failed to pass on that crucial insight to the younger generations. Here is one important reason for reading and teaching this text.

Nor did Aron deny that social liberties "are equally and to the same degree real liberties." He was convinced that "the power gap between those who hold authority and those who submit to authority" would endure as long as human nature did. This being so, efforts would always have to be made to "attenuate the abuses" that accompany the regime of modern liberty—or any political order, for that matter. Aron did not oppose the welfare state—the *État-providence*, as the French call it—in itself. But in his *Memoirs*, Aron confessed that he didn't really understand what abstract appeals to "social justice" meant or what good they did in the end. In *Liberty and Equality* he argues, as he did elsewhere, that trade unions can readily become abusive or repressive to those workers who do not want to belong to them. He did not hesitate to identify doctrinaire egalitarianism with tyranny, and he criticized a series of progressive French social theorists who conflated liberty with equality as if inequalities per se were "a violation of liberty." In Aron's view, the "total confusion between liberty and equality" invites a neglect of liberty through the misuse of state power at the service of coercive and leveling social, political, and economic projects. In the concluding words of a 1976 "Postface" to a new edition of *Essai sur les libertés* (originally published in 1965), Aron restated his "mature" position on these matters with impressive force and eloquence:

> Socialist societies have not realized the equality that they aimed at, but they have eliminated all the liberties, personal and political. Their example offers us a lesson: men have the same right to respect; but neither genetics nor society ever assures us the same right to respect; neither genetics or society ever assures everyone the same capacity to attain excellence or to rise to the first rank. Doctrinaire egalitarianism vainly tries hard to overcome nature, biological and social; it does not achieve equality but tyranny.

Indeed, Aron was one of the few political philosophers and social thinkers of his time to have completely mastered the corpus of Marx—much more so than *soi-disant* Marxists such as Sartre or Louis Althusser. Aron's unreciprocated outreach to Sartre, an erstwhile friend and classmate from their time as undergraduates at the École Normale Supérieure, demonstrates an enduring feature of his career: his unflagging determination to understand his opponents and engage them in discussion. His openness to respectful and fair-minded dialogue with friends and foes alike is the theme of a fine new scholarly book by the Benedictine College political scientist Nathan Orlando, *Raymond Aron and His Dialogues in the Age of Ideologies*. With impressive perspicacity and attention to the nuances of Aron's arguments, Orlando chronicles his friendly criticism of such towering figures as Friedrich Hayek and Charles de Gaulle, both of whom he admired even when he differed from them. He never failed in these sorts of efforts even when his interlocutor was someone still more hostile—such as Sartre, who responded to Aron's discerning criticism with a mixture of silence and scorn.

For the ever-embittered Sartre, all anti-Communists were "dogs." Yet Aron remained unflappable in his fairness and charity toward even the most bitter adversaries. As *Liberty and Equality* amply demonstrates, Aron treated even Marx fairly, indeed respectfully, without ever succumbing to his dogmatic atheism or the "messianism" that was the other side of his rigid scientism. By the end of his life, Aron had grown tired of Marxism in all its forms. He did not regret never having completed the authoritative book on Marx and Marxism he had long promised. In the concluding pages of his *Memoirs*, Aron acknowledges that as an economist Marx could be rich, subtle, and interesting. But he came to believe that he had "propagated false ideas," foremost among them "the arbitrary identification of profit with thieving and exploitation, the encouragement of heavy-handed nationalizations that flowed from that false assumption; the reduction of politics to something other than itself; the truly pernicious idea that Communism eliminates the category of 'the economic' and the dismal science itself." Aron's ultimate conclusion is at once equitable and thoroughly damning: "As an economist, Marx remains perhaps the richest, the most exciting of his time. As an economist-prophet, as a putative ancestor of Marxism-Leninism, he is an accursed sophist who bears some responsibility for the horrors of the twentieth century."

The Rule of Reason

The closing pages of *Liberty and Equality* are particularly rich and profoundly challenging to contemporary sensibilities. Aron takes aim at a new antinomianism that "detested power as such" and promoted "the total rejection of society." (Michel Foucault's philosophical sociology would be a classic example of such an anti-

authoritarian and morally nihilistic philosophy.) Manent remarks that this destructive impulse has largely been "socialized" in Western democratic societies, with civilizational self-loathing and contempt for authoritative institutions like the army, churches, and truly liberal universities becoming essential parts of a "politically correct" public philosophy that is sadly ubiquitous and increasingly obligatory throughout the democratic world. In the process, these institutions themselves have been transformed beyond recognition. This would have appalled Aron.

In the final sections of his lecture, Aron firmly rejects the reduction of liberty to a hedonistic calculus aimed at "the liberation of the desires" from civilized restraints. As a democratic conservative, he refuses to join the new antinomians in warring against "all the prohibitions and all the institutions which, in effect, limit the individual as a being of desire." He protests John Stuart Mill's dismissive rejection of customary morality and affirms the "reality principle," as Sigmund Freud called it, against "the liberation of eros," which he identifies with "the moral crisis of liberal democracies."

Aron laments the fact that democratic societies no longer have any real understanding of where "virtue is to be found." With Baron de Montesquieu and Immanuel Kant, he identifies "with a great philosophical tradition according to which authentic liberty is the mastery of reason or of the will over the passions." The truly free are not those who obey any "caprice," but those who identify political freedom with the conscientious governance of the self. For Aron, there is a crucial connection between civic spirit and moral virtue even if moral virtue is not reducible to public-spiritedness. With Kant, but not with vulgarized Kantianism, Aron identifies the good society with the predominance of "free and responsible men, guided by the commandments of reason." Aron thus openly laments the fact that "theories of democracy and theories of liberalism" no longer include "something like the definition of the virtuous citizen or the manner of life which could conform to the ideal of a free society." Here Aron's "liberal classicism," as Manent suggestively calls it, and his self-declared democratic conservatism, reach their noble apex.

In the most evocative passage of the book, Aron reaffirms the core premise of the liberal tradition that each individual ought to be able to find his or her own path in life. But he refuses to identify such "autonomy" with the right of each person to choose his or her own "conception of good and evil." The totalitarians of the 20th century, Communists and Nazis alike, had monstrously claimed that a "guiding party," a dominant race or class, can disregard the moral law and invent its own tablets of right and wrong. Aron adamantly resisted all such claims throughout his adult life. A liberalism that goes down that same path has left civilized liberty behind. Knowingly or unknowingly, it has succumbed to outright nihilism. Aron rejected this nihilistic path because it was wrong. But he also did so because a philosophy that eschewed moral and civic responsibility could never give "stability to democratic regimes." It would tear them apart, and not so slowly at that. Aron thus left us with a defining choice, a line in the sand: we must either seek freedom wisely, within the limits of reason, or lawlessly, under the imperium of an anarchic hedonism that will inevitably degrade society and the human soul. Aron's final legacy is to chart for us the nobler of these two paths—to point the way, as Nathan Orlando aptly puts it, "between despair and hubris." Such is Aron's classical sobriety, his enduring lesson in moral and political responsibility.

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