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Raymond Aron and the
morality of realism

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Abstract

The realism school of thought in international relations is often accused of presenting politics as an autonomous sphere which does or should exclude ethical considerations, and of providing a tragic vision of politics which precludes any belief in progress. These accusations are particularly misplaced when applied to Raymond Aron, a leading classical realist whose insights are rarely investigated in the discipline. The article challenges the perception of Aron as a 'mainstream' classical realist and emphasises the distinctiveness of his formulation of realism by focusing on his views on ethics, politics and progress. It demonstrates that Aron promotes a 'morality of wisdom' which gives a central place to the defence of values alongside considerations of power. He also provides a definition of survival which stresses the importance of shared values for the existence of political communities, and consequently the need to uphold them even though ethical perfection cannot be achieved in the political sphere. Aron's ideas are finally underpinned by Kantian elements. Advocating not so much faith in a determined future, but rather hope sustained by reason, his realism provides a middle ground between moralism and cynicism. Aron therefore provides a very distinctive European version of realism which demonstrates the richness of realist arguments upon morality, politics and progress.

Raymond Aron and the morality of realism

MURIELLE COZETTE*

INTRODUCTION

Amidst the numerous criticisms addressed to realism, one of the most enduring ones concerns its stance on the relationship between morality and politics. Put simply, realism is not regarded as an appropriate guide to statescraft because it fails to recognise the intrinsic ethical dimension of political actions. Hans Morgenthau famously proclaimed the autonomy of the political sphere; approaching it with moral concepts is thus intellectually misguided as it does not recognise what is specific to politics, namely the centrality of the struggle for power.¹ For a realist, not only is it intellectually inappropriate to apply moral judgements to political actions; it is also very dangerous. Such a stance often led the United States to engage in moral crusades which by definition cannot be won, and were most detrimental to its national interests. Realists therefore argue that moral considerations should never determine foreign policy, and advocate a prudent stance that only takes into account power considerations. It ensures that ideological conflicts are avoided, and that a balance of power which regulates states relations can effectively be implemented and maintained.

This explains why the accusation of cynicism, or crude Machiavellism, is often levelled against realism: as it seems to radically exclude moral judgements from the study of international politics, anything becomes justifiable if undertaken for state survival or the pursuit of its interests.² The admonition not to take moral considerations into account when making political decisions is also regarded as signalling a fundamental confusion

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¹ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1973), pp. 10–11.

² John Coffey, *Political Realism in American Political Thought* (London: Associated Press, 1977), p. 77.

between moralism, against which realism is right to warn, and morality, the exclusion of which realism fails to convincingly argue for.³ Such exclusion accounts for another important accusation which realism has to face: that of providing a nihilistic vision of politics which precludes any idea of progress. By presenting international politics as a realm characterised by the recurrence of power struggles, realism does not offer any tangible reason for hope in a better future. However justified realists may be in warning against moral crusades, they are ultimately incapable of providing what is essential to political action, namely a true political vision, or a reason to act.⁴

The perception of realism as an approach which thinks of politics as an amoral or immoral sphere does not adequately capture what some major realist scholars actually argue. In recent years, scholars have focused on Morgenthau's formulation of realism and have successfully demonstrated that it is certainly not to be equated with crude power politics, as it is characterised by a complex reflection upon the relationship between morality and politics.⁵ Such undertakings are most welcome, as they challenge a simplistic picture of realism which is still too often conveyed in the international relations literature. They do, however, only focus on 'American' realists, and ignore the distinctive contribution of major European realist scholars. They thus perpetuate, albeit unwillingly, an impoverished understanding of what realism stands for.

The accusations of amoralism and nihilism are indeed particularly misplaced when applied to Raymond Aron, a leading classical realist whose ideas are rarely investigated in the discipline. This lack of interest essentially stems from the perception of Aron as a 'mainstream' classical realist, whose main merit is to have reformulated some key realist tenets for

³ Marshall Cohen, 'Moral Skepticism and International Relations', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 13(4) 1984, pp. 299–346; Jack Donnelly, 'Twentieth Century Realists', in Terry Nardin and David Mapel (eds), *Traditions of International Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 85–111.

⁴ Stanley Hoffmann, 'The Political Ethics of International Relations', in Joel Rosenthal (ed.), *Ethics and International Affairs: A Reader* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1999), pp. 28–49, at p. 47.

⁵ Michael Williams, *The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); William Scheuerman, 'Was Morgenthau a Realist? Revisiting Scientific Man Vs. Power Politics', *Constellations*, 14(4) 2007, pp. 506–30.

a French audience.⁶ However valuable such a task may have been at the time that *Peace and War Among Nations* was first published in 1962, it obviously falls short of providing an original or distinctive account of international politics, which explains why Aron is indeed rarely credited with originality in the field.⁷ Such perception does not do justice to Aron's claims, which do provide a highly distinctive formulation of realism. This distinctiveness is particularly obvious when it comes to the relationship between morality and politics. Aron retains the importance of power struggles and anarchy, but nonetheless gives a place to the promotion and defence of values, and entertains a notion of progress. Attempting to overcome the Weberian opposition between ethics of conviction and ethics of responsibility, Aron promotes a 'morality of wisdom' which combines a genuine concern for moral values with an awareness of the permanent risk of war. He also provides a definition of survival which emphasises the importance of shared values for the existence of political communities, and consequently the need to uphold them even though ethical perfection cannot be achieved in the political sphere. Finally, Aron's ideas are underpinned by Kantian elements. Advocating not so much faith in a determined future, but rather hope sustained by reason, Aron's realism does not lapse into nihilism or relativism. It provides a middle ground between moralism and cynicism, as Aron refused both. Rediscovering Aron's insights testifies to the richness of the realist tradition, and to the variety of the arguments it encompasses on the issues of morality, politics and progress, something which is rarely conveyed in the analysis of the school, whether provided by other theoretical approaches or by realists themselves.

⁶ Laus Gerd Giesen, 'France and Other French-Speaking Countries (1945–1994)', in Knud Erik Jorgensen and Tonny Brems Kundsén (eds), *International Relations in Europe: Traditional Perspectives and Destinations* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 3; Urs Luterbacher, 'The Frustrated Commentator: An Evaluation of the Work of Raymond Aron', *International Studies Quarterly*, 29(1) 1985, pp. 39–49, at p. 39.

⁷ A. J. R. Groom, 'The World Beyond: The European Dimension', in A. J. R. Groom and Margot Light (eds), *Contemporary International Relations: A Guide to Theory* (London: Pinter, 1994), p. 223; Ronald J. Yalem, 'The Theory of International Relations of Raymond Aron', *International Relations*, 3(11) 1971, pp. 913–27, at p. 926; Jonathan Haslam, *No Virtue Like Necessity: Realist Thought in International Relations Since Machiavelli* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 211; Oran Young, 'Aron and the Whale: A Jonah in Theory', in Klaus Knorr and James Rosenau (eds), *Contending Approaches to International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 127–43, at p. 130.

This paper is structured around what Aron terms the ‘antinomies’ of political life. The first is the ‘Machiavellian problem’, which asks whether politics is necessarily evil. Second, the ‘Kantian problem’ wonders whether it is possible to go beyond a state-centric system characterised by the risk of war.⁸ Aron’s views on both encapsulate his position about the relations between politics and morality, and his ideas concerning history and its possible meaning.

IS FOREIGN POLICY EVIL? ARON ON THE MACHIAVELLIAN ANTINOMY

A mainstream realist?

At first glance, Aron’s views on morality and politics appear strikingly close to those advanced by other classical realists, and especially by Morgenthau. In other words, there is certainly some room for perceiving Aron as being a ‘mainstream’ realist. The similarities between Aron and Morgenthau derive from Aron’s definition of international relations as anarchic. With no supreme authority to regulate their relations, states can and will use force. Stemming from the permanent risk of war, Aron, like Morgenthau, seems to espouse a strict Clausewitzian conception of international politics. If, following Clausewitz, one conceives of war as a ‘duel on a larger scale’, the person who chooses, out of moral principles, to abstain from certain actions will very likely lose: there is no guarantee that the adversary will respect the same ‘rules’ of conduct. This is why Clausewitz asserts that it is pointless to try to introduce moral limitations in war: not so much because it is not, *per se*, desirable, but because it goes against the nature of war as an act of violence. In a similar vein, starting from the assumption that politics is a struggle for power, Morgenthau assumes that morality cannot be applied to states’ relations, because of the nature of politics: ‘A foreign policy guided by moral abstractions, without consideration of the national interest, is bound to fail: for it accepts a standard of action alien to the nature of the action itself’.⁹ As states interact in an anarchical environment, there is no means to ensure that all states will obey the same code of conduct. Consequently, it is suicidal for

⁸ Raymond Aron, *Paix et Guerre Entre les Nations* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1962), p. 565.

⁹ Hans Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest: A Critical Examination of American Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982), p. 34.

any state to decide foreign policy according to moral considerations: there is no certainty that it will not be at a complete disadvantage if it does so.¹⁰

Aron seems to adopt the same logic: on an anarchical international scene, a state willing to obey absolute moral commands has no guarantee that others will reciprocate and will thus be critically disadvantaged. Efficiency must therefore guide statesmen: 'insofar as diplomatic-strategic conduct is governed by the risk of or the preparation for war, it obeys, and cannot help but obey, the logic of rivalry: it ignores—and must ignore—the Christian virtues insofar as they are opposed to the need of the competition'.¹¹ Here again, Aron's position echoes that of Morgenthau who famously opposed Christian virtues to political requirements: 'the natural inspiration proper to the political sphere—and there is no difference between domestic and international politics—contravene by definition the demands of Christian ethics'.¹² While Christian ethics command to 'love thy neighbour as thyself', success in politics requires to 'use thy neighbour as a means to the end of thy power', in complete contradiction to the Kantian categorical imperative.¹³

Recalling the Weberian opposition between ethics of conviction and ethics of responsibility, Aron argues that the latter is the only possible one in politics, and flays 'idealism' for advocating a foreign policy based on moral convictions. Idealism is idealistic because it refuses to recognise that any order is ultimately sustained by force.¹⁴ Violence has always been inherently part of inter-states relations. Aron then advocates accepting it, and regards its condemnation as politically naive. It is equally impossible to base one's foreign policy upon abstract moral principles: this misunderstands the conflicting character of politics and also constitutes a betrayal of the statesman's responsibility, which is first and foremost to the citizens of the state he must protect.¹⁵ This is why Aron argues it is

¹⁰ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 38.

¹¹ Aron, *Paix et Guerre Entre les Nations*, p. 567.

¹² Hans Morgenthau, *The Restoration of American Politics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1964), p. 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Aron, *Paix et Guerre Entre les Nations*, p. 569.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 568.

impossible to have a foreign policy *based* on human rights promotion. Like Morgenthau, he emphasises that such a policy can always end in moral crusades, which he denounces as dangerous.¹⁶ In the Cold War context, Aron also notes that such a policy is likely to be counterproductive. When the United States proclaims that the defence of human rights will be at the core of its foreign policy, it ‘destabilise[s] [its] allies rather than [its] enemies’.¹⁷ Aron concludes that it is impossible to follow the ‘logic of the moralist’ to its end. This explains why America is ‘condemned to hypocrisy’, as ‘the differentiation between crimes according to the political alignment of the guilty state forbids it from being faithful to its own morality’.¹⁸ The tension between, on the one hand, a claim to morality, and on the other hand, the use of dubious means which directly contradict such a claim, is precisely what the Machiavellian antinomy is about. The fact that Aron defines it as an antinomy is significant: it implies that it is inherent to the nature of politics, and therefore can never be fully overcome.

This is why assessing international politics in terms of whether it upholds human rights ‘is a way of avoiding commitment in [morally] doubtful struggles, and all political struggles are [morally] doubtful. It is never a struggle between good and evil, it is between the preferable and the detestable’.¹⁹ This clearly recalls Morgenthau’s views about politics as the choice between ‘the lesser evil’, and his definition of politics as a tragedy because of the impossibility to reconcile the two Weberian ethics. Realists are never indifferent to the tragedy of human rights violations, but argue that these can never be the basis of a decision to intervene in foreign policy.

Like Morgenthau, Aron warns that one does not do good foreign policy with good feelings. A statesman has the moral duty to follow an ethics of responsibility as he is in charge of collective survival. In this sense, Aron evokes the ‘necessity of national selfishness, which logically stems from what philosophers called the state of nature which prevails among states’.²⁰

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 572.

¹⁷ Raymond Aron, *Les Dernières Années du Siècle* (Paris: Julliard, 1984), p. 201.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

¹⁹ Nicolas Baverez, *Raymond Aron: Un Moraliste au Temps des Ideologies* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993), p. 423.

²⁰ Aron, *Paix et Guerre Entre les Nations*, p. 568.

If the statesman 'follows his heart without taking into account the consequences of his actions, [he] would fail his duty and would consequently be immoral'.²¹ The vocabulary used is strikingly similar to that of Morgenthau, who stressed the 'moral dignity' of the national interest against critics who accused him of promoting an amoral vision of politics. Even though Aron does not specifically refer to the 'moral dignity' of the national interest, he would not disagree with Morgenthau's phrasing. Even more fundamentally, not only do Morgenthau and Aron use a similar vocabulary, they also do so with the same *purpose*: to warn against idealists who too easily seize the moral high ground and dangerously disregard the imperatives of international politics. Against idealism, both Aron and Morgenthau remind us that politics is above all about choice, and that this choice is always morally painful: it does not involve a clear cut distinction between a 'right' and 'wrong' course of action. The moral duty to assist those persecuted by their own government gives way to the higher and equally moral duty to ensure the protection of one's state. The moralist who assesses politics according to absolute moral principles is thus mistaken: this does not correspond to the nature of politics, and is consequently of little help to those who practice it.

At first sight then, Aron's conclusions seem remarkably similar to Morgenthau's. International politics is presented as the art of the feasible. It is concerned with the survival of the state. Statesmen have a moral duty to adopt an ethics of responsibility in dealing with concrete political situations, which rarely involve a clear-cut distinction between a rightful and a wrongful course of action. A 'moralistic' approach is denounced as inappropriate and dangerous because of the risk of fanaticism, and because it ignores the conflicting elements inherent in the international sphere. However, this reading masks the fact that Aron's understanding of ethics of responsibility differs from Morgenthau's. Aron's understanding of ethics of responsibility rests upon what he calls the 'morality of wisdom', which attempts to overcome Max Weber's dilemma about the impossibility to choose between an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 620.

The ‘asocial society of states’: The Janus-faced nature of international politics

While Aron certainly recognises the elements of conflict inherent in the international sphere, he never asserts that politics was to be defined as being essentially a struggle for power. In fact, Aron attacks Morgenthau for making such a claim. Writing on the concept of politics, Aron identifies a central ‘antinomy’ which highlights its dual character, and which is encapsulated in language. In French, ‘politique’ not only refers to ‘policy’, meaning a particular ‘programme of action or the action itself’, but also to ‘politics’, the domain in which those programmes compete.²² These two meanings are intertwined, and reveal the ambiguous character of politics. It is obvious that there exist several competing programmes of actions and ideas: in this sense, politics as a domain contains an element of conflict between different conceptions of the world. However, politics also includes an element of common understanding transcending those differences: ‘if the policies, that is, the purposes of individuals or groups within a global collectivity, were rigorously contradictory, there would be conflict without any possibility for cooperation, and there would be no collectivity’.²³

International politics *qua* politics simultaneously contains elements of conflict and cooperation. It differs from domestic politics as there is no central authority—anarchy explains the conflicting side of international relations. Aside from this conflicting side, there is also a social element: while states may use force against one another, they also acknowledge that they belong to a common realm: ‘the central idea seems to me to be that of the encompassing, or so to speak total, and permanent character, of inter-state relations. States belong to the same universe, they never ignore each other’.²⁴ This mutual recognition of states, transcending the diversity of regimes and goals pursued, explains that international politics is not a sphere where anything goes. There are some restraints upon states’ actions: ‘actors—except in extreme cases—reciprocally acknowledge their humanity, even their common descent, and do not think that they can inflict

²² Raymond Aron, *Democratie et Totalitarisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 24.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Raymond Aron, *Sur Clausewitz* (Bruxelles: Complexe, 1987), p. 167.

any treatment upon each other'.²⁵ This however should not obscure the fact that international laws and moral norms do not have a force of their own; what counts as a norm is usually decided by force: 'force decides the issue in cases of conflict and constitutes the basis of what treaties might conform to as the norm'.²⁶

Aware of the Janus-faced nature of international politics which includes both a social and a conflicting element, Aron relies on Kantian terminology and defines the international system as an 'asocial society' where conflicting and cooperative elements are always present simultaneously: 'states form a society of a unique kind which imposes norms on its members and yet tolerates the recourse to armed force. As long as the international society will conserve this dual, and in a sense, contradictory, character, *the morality of international actions will also be equivocal*'.²⁷ This passage of *Peace and War* is pivotal: it posits the existence of a permanent tension between conflict and cooperation, between the rule of law and the use of violence, between anarchy and order, and between deontological and consequentialist ethics. This dialectic which lies at the core of international politics explains why Aron ultimately rejects both moralism *and* its opposite, a pure logic of power politics. Neither is adequate, as both mistakenly consider only one part of the political equation, sociability *or* conflict. Since 'the ambiguity of the international society prevents from following to its end a partial logic, either that of law, or that of force', Aron's project is to overcome this dichotomy which only presents two mutually exclusive attitudes, neither of which is an adequate ethical guide in matters political.²⁸

Against 'absolute Machiavellism'

Just as he rejects moralism, Aron refuses to adopt the opposite 'logic of force', which he calls 'absolute Machiavellism'. It involves three elements. First, it holds a pessimistic conception of human nature: men are radically imperfect and inclined to follow their instincts, 'from which stems a philosophy of historical evolution and a technique of power'. Second, it provides an 'experimental and rationalist method which,

²⁵ Aron, *Paix et Guerre Entre les Nations*, p. 567.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 595; emphasis added.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 596.

applied to the political domain, seems to lead to an aggressive amorality and to the exclusive consideration of power'. Third, it promotes 'the extolling of human will and of the values of action'.²⁹

Machiavellism holds that human passions are universal, and identical: all men lust for power and behave selfishly. While political philosophy was traditionally concerned with ethical considerations, Machiavellism promotes 'technical advice' which isolates politics as a specific sphere. It is this isolation which opens the door to a rationalisation of politics, conceived as the management of human passions.³⁰ Machiavellian techniques are concerned with the acquisition and conservation of power over men. As Aron notes, 'it suggests a manner to treat peoples which reduces them to the level of means, the end being the maintenance of power'.³¹ At the core of absolute Machiavellism lies the idea that any means is acceptable to reach the end. That Machiavellism justifies every action, even the most immoral ones, is therefore no coincidence: 'the immorality of the recommended means is directly, immediately deducted from the immorality of men'.³² The implications are far reaching: far from being a doctrine reserved for emergency situations, Machiavellism presents itself as a manual which guides the Prince's daily actions in the political realm. This is why Aron argues that:

The bad nature of men is not only used to justify this or that immoral means ... it imposes the general mode of political action, the necessity to act at the same time as a lion and as a fox, to combine ruse and violence, in other words, it provokes the extension of processes of war to the normal ... existence.³³

Politics is therefore turned into an autonomous sphere, rationalised and reduced to a set of technical requirements to manage men's passions: Machiavellism gives humanity over to 'the naturalism of a technique'.³⁴ It is noteworthy that Aron's argument on this particular point echoes that of critical approaches, concerned that realism in its Waltzian formulation turns

²⁹ Raymond Aron, *Memoires: 50 Ans de Reflexion Politique* (Paris: Julliard, 1993), p. 197.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

³² Raymond Aron, *L'Homme Contre les Tyrans* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 91.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Aron, *Memoires*, p. 75.

politics into a technical and rational realm, thereby excluding moral and ethical concerns.³⁵

Aron's reflections upon Machiavelli ultimately explain why he rejects a strict Weberian understanding of the ethics of responsibility: as it gives ethical pre-eminence to state survival, it can too easily turn into absolute Machiavellism. While for Weber, a choice among values is ultimately irrational, he nonetheless decided that his would be the defence of the German nation. This 'turns the nation into a God to whom everything is sacrificed'. Hence, 'if the nation's power, whatever its culture, whoever governs it, whatever means are employed, is the supreme value, in the name of what can one refuse what Weber would have rejected with horror?'.³⁶ The Nazi and Soviet regimes are presented as empirical case studies of what absolute Machiavellism leads to in practice. Aron rejects the deification of the state, the rationalisation of politics and its corollary, and the techniques of power which inevitably lead to massacre, as they rest upon a denial of the human side of politics.

THE AMBIGUOUS MORALITY OF WISDOM

The morality of wisdom: A third way in politics

Bearing in mind the dual character of politics, Aron proposes a 'morality of wisdom' as a middle ground between moralism and absolute Machiavellism. It attempts to combine ethics of responsibility and conviction:

The only morality that goes beyond the morality of struggle and the morality of law is what I would call the morality of wisdom, which tries not only to consider each case in its concrete particularities, but also not to ignore any argument of principle and opportunity, not to downplay either the balance of power, or the will of peoples. Because it is complex, the judgement of wisdom is never incontestable, and does not fully satisfy either the moralists, or the vulgar disciples of Machiavelli.

³⁵ Richard Ashley, 'The Poverty of Neo Realism', *International Organization*, 38(2) 1984, pp. 225–86; Robert Cox, 'Social Forces, States and World Orders', in Robert Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 204–50.

³⁶ Aron, *Memoires*, p. 253.

The realist who declares that man is a preying animal and invites him to behave accordingly ignores a part of human nature.³⁷

The morality of wisdom is presented as a third way between the two extremes previously analysed. It better corresponds to the dual nature of international politics, as it takes into account its social and asocial dimensions. Unlike moralism, it does not radically exclude force, nor does it judge politics according to some abstract ideals which bear no relevance to concrete situations. Unlike absolute Machiavellism, it does not disregard ethical concerns entirely.

Aron was well aware that such a position was open to criticism, in particular on the grounds that it is never 'incontestable'. The morality of wisdom is essentially casuistic: it is not, and cannot be about a general rule that is then applied to specific case studies. On the contrary, it stresses the particular characteristics of each political situation, and the necessity to strike a delicate balance between ethical and political concerns. In other words, the morality of wisdom emphasises the importance of statesmen's choices, which by definition remain specific to each unique historical situation they have to face. Aron does not argue that there is a universal set of moral rules that statesmen are bound to respect. Like Morgenthau, he readily recognises the plurality of moral universes in international politics. However, such recognition does not necessarily involve an exclusion of morality from the political sphere. On the contrary, Aron insists that statesmen must take into account the moral aspiration of peoples, even if this may not be the only element that influences their final decision. The national interest, because it is in some respect the emanation of the collective will of a people, also incorporates ethical and moral considerations which are not necessarily contradictory with other, more political ones. As Aron remarks, one does not necessarily ask of statesmen that they scrupulously respect the ten commandments: this may be impossible because of anarchy, and because of the heterogeneity of the international system. However, statesmen are not expected to violate all moral codes and norms to achieve state survival, and can legitimately include the promotion of moral values in the definition of the national interest.

³⁷ Aron, *Paix et Guerre Entre les Nations*, p. 596.

This position does not contradict the traditional realist assertion about the impossibility of having a foreign policy based upon or determined by human rights promotion: this would certainly end in moral crusades, and anarchy and the cultural diversity of the international system would prevent following an ethics of conviction to its end. The morality of wisdom accepts the constant tension inherent in political action which always combines values and practical considerations. Values can be part of foreign policy alongside other concerns, and even if statesmen should refrain from using force to impose democracy, nothing prevents them from including human rights promotion in their foreign policy. Doing so does not mean that statesmen 'misunderstand' the essence of politics. On the contrary, the promotion of values in politics shows an awareness of the intrinsic ethical dimension that lies at the core of politics as an eminently human activity. Aron thus usefully reminds us that human rights promotion need not necessarily end up in moral crusades: there is a middle ground between dropping human rights concerns entirely and zealously preaching their respect regardless of the political consequences this may have.

This is exemplified by Aron's views on former US President Jimmy Carter's foreign policy. Carter's insistence upon human rights is regarded by Aron as positive in the long term: it did not amount to a crusade, and it succeeded in improving America's image around the world, which was not meant in a cynical way. It promoted the idea that human rights 'matter', and that 'the respect of persons constitutes a moral cause which transcends borders and *which is not subordinate to the calculations of power politics*'.³⁸ In the end, for Aron, Carter's diplomacy of human rights, if not devoid of flaws, does not amount to a crusade, but to a stance which combines political and ethical concerns, and which can positively influence states relations. This does not exclude concerns for state survival, and does not radically preclude giving these primacy when the situation demands it, but it does highlight the delicate balance that democracies have to strike in their foreign policy, which the morality of wisdom captures: 'a democracy cannot and must not ignore the internal regime of states it deals with; but it

³⁸ Raymond Aron, *Penser la Liberté, Penser la Démocratie* (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 2005), pp. 151–53, emphasis added.

cannot and should neither launch a moral crusade to spread its own institutions'.³⁹

Autonomy as primacy: The ethical dimension of politics

Aron does not simply argue that the morality of wisdom is better suited to the dual character of politics. He also asserts that it is the only morality that does justice to the meaning men ascribe to politics. Against a strict Machiavellian account of politics as a struggle for power, Aron emphasises that:

The great illusion of cynical thought, obsessed by the struggle for power, consists in disregarding another aspect of reality: the search for legitimate power, of an accepted authority, of the best regime. Men have never thought of politics as being exclusively defined by the struggle for power. The one who does not see the aspect 'struggle for power' is naive, the one who does not see anything but the aspect 'struggle for power' is a false realist'.⁴⁰

In other words, politics is not defined as a strictly utilitarian activity but always has, at its core, some ethical questions that men try to address. This means that politics is, in essence, a normative sphere, and to deny this is to present a truncated picture which is not particularly helpful to understand its nature.

Aron therefore attacks a certain kind of realism, and more specifically that promoted by Morgenthau, with the same arguments as Michael Walzer in *Just and Unjust Wars*. Walzer argues that contrary to the realist motto that all is fair in love and war, men always make moral judgements, including in times of war.⁴¹ If war is an extreme situation, it does not follow that anything goes to win it. Likewise, Aron asserts that 'men do not accept themselves as exclusively violent: moral judgements they have upon what is right and what is wrong partially determine their conduct'.⁴² Unlike Morgenthau, Aron does not posit some eternal characteristics of human nature from which 'objective laws' of politics can then be derived. He

³⁹ Aron, *Memoires*, p. 604.

⁴⁰ Aron, *Democratie et Totalitarisme*, p. 53.

⁴¹ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), pp. 3–20.

⁴² Aron, *Democratie et Totalitarisme*, p. 345.

simply states that one should analyse politics according to men's interpretation of what it is about, or stands for. In other words, what matters most is what men think politics is or should be. Men have always had ethical concerns in politics: to pretend that this is not the case 'ignores the profound meaning of ... interpretations, as if social reality could be authentically understood, abstracted from demands that citizens formulate towards their city'.⁴³ Aron therefore flayed 'pseudo' realists who present politics as being an immoral or amoral struggle, as they disregard the fact that men also aspire to peace, or at least to a reduction of violence among states which politics is supposed to achieve.⁴⁴ The demands that citizens formulate towards those governing are intrinsically ethical, as they concern 'good' or 'just' government, whatever the meaning of these terms may be for particular communities.

Morgenthau therefore misses the point when he considers all moral claims as a hypocritical smokescreen for power politics: the 'diplomatico-strategic conduct ... always tries to justify itself, thereby admitting the authority of values or rules'.⁴⁵ Aron therefore claims that the exclusion of moral concerns from the political sphere operated by Morgenthau stems from an exceedingly pessimistic understanding of what morality actually requires, and from a confusion between morality and moralism.⁴⁶ While Aron denounces moralism, he is also keen to stress that while there is certainly an asocial element in relations among states, 'it does not result that the leaders of great powers, condemned to cynicism, must aim at a maximum of power, without any concern for men and for morality. The interests of nations can sometimes be defined by the limitation, even the elimination of wars, by liberation rather than by enslavement of peoples'.⁴⁷ Far from affirming an autonomy of the political sphere which precludes moral judgement, Aron promotes a conception of politics which encompasses ethical concerns, and ultimately accuses US realists of being unrealistic for disregarding this dimension. The fact that statesmen always feel the need to justify their policies in moral terms signals the importance

⁴³ Raymond Aron, *Etudes Politiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 28.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 379.

⁴⁵ Aron, *Paix et Guerre Entre les Nations*, p. 712.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 765.

⁴⁷ Aron, *Etudes Politiques*, p. 461.

of the relationship between ethics and politics: politics has no autonomous sphere of its own, but on the contrary is subject to ethical norms and moral principles, and ‘recognises their authority’.⁴⁸

Indeed, this intrinsic link between morality and politics is ultimately explained as far from being divorced from morality, politics is one of the primary vectors through which morality can be realised:

morality ... is borne out of history. It is the very progress of our moral conceptions which leads us to severely judge states practices and to progressively transform them. It is within the concrete morality of communities that universal morality realises itself—imperfectly. And it is in and through politics that concrete moralities are realised.⁴⁹

Interestingly, this is strikingly similar to one of Morgenthau’s assertions that emphasises that politics is not to be conceived of as a permanent struggle for power, but is also a medium through which moral values can be implemented.⁵⁰ In other words, Morgenthau, like Aron, recognises a creative and progressive side to politics. However this is difficult to reconcile with Morgenthau’s central claim that politics, because it is essentially a struggle for power, is by definition immoral. Such a difficulty disappears with Aron because of his different definition of politics. Similarly, Aron, like Morgenthau, acknowledges the plurality of moral universes, but he never argues that states actually create morality, or may constitute its ultimate source and protection—something that Morgenthau was often accused of arguing, even though he rejected the charge. Politics at large, and not the state, is presented as a project which upholds the concrete moral values of a particular collective, and by doing so, participates in the never ending realisation of a universal morality that each community recognises through its specific, ‘cultural’ lenses.

Aron therefore does not object to arguments stressing the importance of moral concerns in the international sphere. This does not mean that moral norms exert an absolute restraint upon states’ actions: there will always be a gap between intentions and actions, because of the antinomies of political

⁴⁸ Aron, *Paix et Guerre Entre les Nations*, p. 712.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 764.

⁵⁰ Hans Morgenthau, *The Decline of Democratic Politics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1969), p. 106.

life. However, recognising these antinomies does not necessarily lead to a disregard of the importance of moral norms. In this sense, Aron argues that one 'has yet to find the true realism ... which does not ignore that the aspirations to values integrally belong to human reality, individual and collective'.⁵¹

Ultimately this explains why Aron's understanding of the 'autonomy' of the political sphere differs from Morgenthau's. For Aron, 'the autonomy of the political order only means that there are political phenomena, and that these are the most important ones'.⁵² This is why autonomy is to be understood as *primacy*: this does not mean that politics 'determine' other social relations, as this argument would be similar to that advanced by Marxists. For Aron, the primacy of politics has a 'human meaning':

For man, the political is more important than the economic, almost by definition, because the political concerns more directly the meaning of existence itself. Philosophers have always considered that human life is so to speak constituted by relations between people. To live humanely is to live with other men. The relations of men among themselves are the fundamental phenomenon of any community ... The organisation of authority directly concerns men's way of life more than any other aspect of society.⁵³

The primacy of politics therefore ultimately stems from Aron's assertion that politics influences more than any social sphere, whether men live 'humanely'. As politics shapes relations between men, and as 'these relations are the definition of human existence', they inevitably include ethical questions related to the best regime, or the good life.⁵⁴ This is not to argue that when approaching politics, one necessarily needs to define what the best regime is, or what value is superior to others. What is needed is an awareness of the impossibility of strictly divorcing politics from ethics. Acknowledging this intrinsic link does justice to the way men themselves think of politics. This is precisely what the morality of wisdom achieves.

⁵¹ Aron, *Etudes Politiques*, p. 471.

⁵² Bertrand De Jouvenel, 'Raymond Aron et l'Autonomie de l'Ordre Politique', in Jean Claude Casanova (ed.), *Societe et Conscience de la Societe: Melanges en l'Honneur de Raymond Aron* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1985), pp. 233-47, at p. 237.

⁵³ Aron, *Democratie et Totalitarisme*, p. 35.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Moral choice in politics

Realists are correct in emphasising prudence as a cardinal virtue in politics: this stems from the uncertainties inherent in anarchy. But Aron stresses that the kind of ‘prudence’ American realists tend to promote, resting as it does upon the autonomy of the political, can too easily lead to immorality: ‘prudence does not always command moderation, or a peace of compromise, or negotiations, or an indifference to the interior political regimes of allied and enemy states’.⁵⁵ The morality of wisdom, as it is not exclusively preoccupied with considerations of power, also takes into account ethical considerations, such as the nature of the regime one deals with. This stems from Aron’s assumption that there cannot be a strict separation between facts and values, between a scientific analysis of the international system and a normative and ethical judgement about some of its constitutive features. In other words, efficiency is not the ultimate criterion to assess political actions: ‘the judgement upon an external action is not separate from a judgement upon the political regime and the institutions of the state’.⁵⁶

This judgement lies at the core of the morality of wisdom and should be reflected in foreign policy. It is not only possible, but also necessary not to fall into absolute Machiavellism. Against the Weberian inexhaustible war of Gods, Aron argues that choosing between different political regimes is not entirely or ultimately as irrational as Weber thought it was. This is not to say that one knows what the best regime is or should be. Aron is aware that this is an open door to fanaticism and moral crusades. However, there is a significant difference between asserting that one does not know with certainty what the best regime is, and accepting any political power on the grounds that there does not seem to exist any absolute moral standards to judge it.⁵⁷ What is required, therefore, for prudence not to be blind, is a judgement upon political institutions and ideas that states promote. Such a judgement includes, but is not limited to, ethical considerations, coupled with a ‘rational’ analysis of the regimes. In other words, ‘one chooses according to multiple criteria: the efficiency of institutions, the freedom of

⁵⁵ Aron, *Paix et Guerre Entre les Nations*, p. 586.

⁵⁶ Raymond Aron, *Republique Imperiale: Les Etats Unis dans le Monde 1945–1972* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1973), p. 13.

⁵⁷ Aron, *Democratie et Totalitarisme*, p. 53.

persons, the equity of economic redistribution, and perhaps above all, the type of men that the regime creates'.⁵⁸

Aron therefore does not argue that it is impossible to choose one's regime instead of another. On the contrary, a careful empirical analysis of the political and economic aspects of the former Soviet Union and the US leads Aron to assert that the former is preferable to the latter. Aron did not engage with the truth of the Marxist philosophy of history: there is no certainty to be found in comparing the ultimate *goals* of the US and the Soviet Union: whether individual liberal freedom is morally superior to Marx's project of human liberation from the oppression of capitalism is, in the end, impossible to decide.⁵⁹ This is why Aron primarily undertook a 'technical' rather than a moral critique of the Soviet Union.⁶⁰ Comparing it with Western democracies, Aron concludes that '[the comparison] inevitably turns to the disadvantage of the Soviet Union, because it is more unequal and more tyrannical than bourgeois democracies. These do not necessarily come to constitute the absolute good against an absolute evil, they simply remain less oppressive regimes than Stalin's socialism'.⁶¹

It would, however, be simplistic to argue that Aron's choice in favour of liberal democracy is only based upon empirical analysis. Aron devoted so much time to carefully analysing the economic and political systems of the two superpowers because he felt his task was to debunk a typically French intellectual idealisation of the Soviet regime, while refusing to join a partisan debate. Such an undertaking, in his view, was best conducted by emphasising empirical facts which could convince communist sympathisers of the failure of the Soviet Union, beyond an ideological adherence to communism. Yet, underlying such an analysis, and guiding it, lies a profound commitment to individual liberty. Aron himself admits that he was animated by a 'democratic and liberal faith' when affirming the impossibility of abstracting political choice from moral concerns: 'one does not choose liberal democracy against the communist project simply because one judges that the market is more efficient than central planning'.⁶² The

⁵⁸ Aron, *Memoires*, p. 126; Aron, *Sur Clausewitz*, p. 148.

⁵⁹ Raymond Aron, *Polémiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), p. 71.

⁶⁰ Raymond Aron, *L'Opium des Intellectuels* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1955), p. 291.

⁶¹ Aron, *Polémiques*, p. 71.

⁶² Aron, *Memoires*, p. 125.

moral concern for how political regimes best uphold the humanity of man is therefore central, and directly relates to Aron's broad conception of politics: 'neither public order, nor the power of the state constitute the unique goal of politics. Man is also a moral being and the community is only human if it offers participation [to the collective political life] to all'.⁶³

Ultimately, Aron did not, in fact, succeed in overcoming Weber's dilemma about the ultimate irrationality of choosing among competing values: why choose human freedom as the ultimate value for which to fight? Aron himself acknowledged the problem and openly admitted he did not resolve the antinomy between the plurality of values and the need to choose among them. While one may argue that Aron's stance is not without flaws, what matters is that Aron openly advocates an ethical stance *in* politics, and constantly emphasises the necessity to commit oneself to the defence of some value—a stance not to be equated with a liberal crusading spirit as it never loses sight of the plurality of moral universes, or of the necessity to take the national interests of other states into account.

The dark side of the morality of wisdom: Moderate and absolute Machiavellism

The last point to investigate is the Machiavellian side of the morality of wisdom. As Aron argues, such a morality, because it espouses the ambiguities of political life, will itself be ambiguous. While giving a place to ethical concerns, it also takes into account the permanent risk of war. In this sense, international politics will always contain some elements of Machiavellism. If, when faced with an opponent who adopts strict Machiavellism, one refuses to use force, one endangers one's survival, especially when the international system includes totalitarian regimes that see conflict against democracies as inevitable. Liberal democracies will therefore have to adopt some elements of Machiavellism.

This is why Aron advocates a 'moderate Machiavellism' as opposed to 'absolute Machiavellism'. It is moderate as it accepts that force can and will be used—and with the use of force, it necessarily accepts having 'dirty hands' when the situation demands it:

The negation of Machiavellism does not necessarily entail the rejection of a just use of force. But the fact remains that the statesman must tend

⁶³ Aron, *L'Opium des Intellectuels*, p. 149.

to increase the power of the collectivity, at least as a subordinate end, and that at each moment, he can be led to decide which sacrifices he can consent to achieve this secondary but real necessity.⁶⁴

To condemn Machiavellism absolutely denies democracies the possibility of defending themselves. Underlying Aron's position is the assumption that the preservation of the state is itself a moral value. However, there is no absolute ethical pre-eminence given to state survival: it is presented as a 'secondary but necessary reality'. Because of its 'secondary' importance, state survival cannot be the ultimate value for which everything can be sacrificed. More fundamentally, Aron touches upon the just war tradition when he asserts that force should not be rejected absolutely, as it can be used to uphold a just cause. In other words, 'peace supposes not the negation but the appropriate use of power'.⁶⁵ As Pierre Hassner emphasises, what characterises Aron's approach to international politics is a 'wager' on politics, which 'does not refuse violence, but attempts to control it'.⁶⁶ A normative reflection upon the use of force alongside considerations of power is thus central from a realist perspective.

Aron's distinction between absolute and moderate Machiavellism is not, however, without flaws. Democracies face a permanent tension between, on the one hand, a desire to defend human rights, and on the other hand, the necessary requirements of international politics which can lead them to adopt some Machiavellian techniques in an anarchical environment. However, it is hard to discern how, in practice, the former should not always give way to the latter. Moderate Machiavellism is still, to some extent, Machiavellism—and there always remains a possibility that, in situations of emergency, it may turn into 'absolute Machiavellism'. Aron himself recognises that 'to save a nation, it is sometimes necessary to lose one's soul'.⁶⁷ That this distinction may collapse entirely in practice is even more likely when democracies face totalitarian regimes: as Aron remarks, 'Absolute Machiavellism inevitably wins over moderate Machiavellisms. In the game of cheating and brutality, totalitarian regimes will always be the

⁶⁴ Aron, *Memoires*, p. 394.

⁶⁵ Aron, *L'Homme Contre les Tyrans*, p. 115.

⁶⁶ Pierre Hassner, 'Introduction', in Raymond Aron, *Sur Clausewitz* (Bruxelles: Complexe, 1987), p. 10.

⁶⁷ Aron, *Memoires*, p. 431.

strongest'.⁶⁸ It becomes, therefore, hard to see, given that democratic statesmen have the duty to ensure the survival of their community, how they can avoid lapsing into absolute Machiavellism when faced with an adversary who adopts it. One goes back to the Clausewitzian conception of politics as a duel on a larger scale, where the state that adopts moral behaviour is necessarily disadvantaged in doing so.

Aware that the distinction may be blurred in practice, Aron nonetheless maintains its use. It lies in the means states use in dealing with other states and with their own population, which cannot really be separated from the ends they pursue. Some means, such as nuclear war or genocide, are absolutely ruled out. Absolute Machiavellism does not rule anything out, as it starts from the assumption of a radical immorality of politics, stemming from a radical immorality of men themselves. As Aron writes, 'Marxists are right to remind us that there is a dialectical solidarity between end and means, but communists, and even more non-communists, should realise that the quality of communist means judges the quality of the communist end'.⁶⁹ There is, therefore, an intrinsic relationship between means and ends, which is ethical in nature. While not denying that politics implies, at times, getting one's hands dirty, Aron argues that, as politics remains inescapably concerned with ethical judgements, there is a limit to what is morally acceptable in the pursuit of one's ends. The values upheld by a community precisely set those limits. When using immoral means, or when compromising itself too deeply with totalitarian regimes for the sake of the 'balance of power' for example, a community may well 'risk losing its soul, and also losing its life'.⁷⁰

Aron formulated the distinction between absolute and moderate Machiavellism during the Second World War. At the time, his most pressing concern was the survival of Western democracies. This exceptional historical situation explains why Aron could argue (though not without sadness), that in order to save one's life, one might lose one's soul by committing immoral acts (such as bombing German civilian targets, for example). However, Aron later carefully drew a distinction between the

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

⁶⁹ Raymond Aron and Roger Stéphane (eds), *Questions du Communisme* (Confluences, 1948), p. 20.

⁷⁰ Raymond Aron, *Essai sur la Condition Juive Contemporaine* (Paris: Fallois, 1989), p. 298.

cultural and physical survival of political communities. This relates to the intrinsic link he posits between a country's 'life' and its 'soul'. He singles out two meanings that can be given to survival. The first implies that 'individuals composing the community are not put to death (survival, in this first understanding, is to escape genocide)'.⁷¹ The second definition includes the preservation of a community's culture and identity, and goes beyond mere physical survival. Aron asserts that 'it is the willingness to achieve the second one that, more than once, condemned communities to physical death'.⁷² This is not to argue that the preservation of a specific identity will always take precedence over the goal of physical survival. Aron accepts that in some cases, societies preferred servitude to death. But it is truly nonsensical to assume that physical survival is the primary end in politics, without negating the very reason why nations do actually exist: a willingness to assert their specific identity compared to other nations composing the international system. When realists mention the 'national interest', it is implicitly understood that they deal with the interests of the state, the state itself representing a national community on the international scene. It therefore amounts to suicide, for any nation, to assert that physical survival will always be its preferred option, even at the cost of its cultural independence:

One gives priority to physical survival only by a moral decision. Such a decision, which can be legitimate in some cases, cannot be taken, in principle, without undermining the collective will without which a political community breaks up. A nation is often excusable to prefer life to liberty. If it were to proclaim in advance and forever this preference, it would be dead as a nation.⁷³

This emphasises the importance of cultural identity alongside state survival. State survival itself is a means to an end, the preservation of the nation and its cultural specificity which is reflected in its most cherished values. It is always possible that a community will give primacy to its survival, and will be willing to use immoral means to achieve this end. It remains possible to hope that it will not always do so. Ultimately, what the Aronian approach highlights is the impossibility of separating the moral

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

values held by a community and its existence as a community: radically disregarding the former will eventually impact upon the latter. What ensures the existence of a community as a community is the values it upholds: if it violates them too systematically, it ultimately endangers its very survival as a collective.

Even if one can accept that the distinction between moderate and absolute Machiavellism is not without flaws, one must keep in mind that it is underpinned by the morality of wisdom, and indeed exemplifies its ambiguities: politics is not a 'pure' struggle, but is rather defined as a 'doubtful' one where moral concerns, if they should always have a place, may also give way to political imperatives if the situation demands it. It does not preclude painful moral choices, and always implies striking a balance between competing moral concerns and political considerations. That such a balance sometimes tips towards Machiavellism may be inevitable. It is not argued, however, that this should always be the case, and when it does, Aron ultimately hopes that Machiavellism will be kept within bounds, as a community is ultimately based on shared moral values which, if jeopardised, can potentially lead to its disintegration.

THE KANTIAN DIMENSION OF THE ARONIAN APPROACH: HOPE VERSUS FAITH

'Active pessimism': Aron as a progressive

Aron's realism is not only distinctive because of the central importance given to the defence of values; it is also underpinned by a belief in progress alongside Kantian lines. Even though Aron downplayed his Kantian 'tendencies', they lie at the core of a fundamental antinomy he admits he 'never resolved', that 'between the historical diversity of values and of ways of lives on the one hand, and on the other hand, the vocation that I attribute, from time to time, to humanity. I do not renounce the unique destiny of the human race, neither do I renounce the plurality of cultures'.⁷⁴ While accepting the plurality of moral universes, Aron however does retain the idea of a unifying, universal *project* for humanity. This is at odds with the usual realist emphasis on the permanent characteristics of international politics, which by definition militate against change.

⁷⁴ Aron, *Memoires*, p. 526.

Reflecting on his historical experience in the 1930s, Aron writes that it 'inclined [him] towards active pessimism. One and for all, [he] ceased to believe that history obeys the imperatives of reason or good men's desires. [he] lost faith and [he] kept, not without some efforts, hope'.⁷⁵ Aron therefore does not deny a degree of pessimism, but this pessimism is qualified as 'active', and does not necessarily lead to despair. On the contrary, the 'active' dimension of Aron's pessimism is informed by a notion of hope, which Aron retained to the end of his life.⁷⁶

Refusing to give up hope does not mean, however, turning into a follower of a secular religion. In fact, Aron attempts to find a middle way between, on the one hand, an attitude which sees nothing but permanence in human history, and on the other hand, a pretence to detain its ultimate truth. He singles out two ideal types. The first, millenarism, 'confers to an objective, susceptible to be achieved within a specific time frame, an absolute value, or confuses a historical society, created or to be created, with the ideal societies which would accomplish human destiny'.⁷⁷ Marxism is the archetypal example of such an attitude. Its opposite is conservatism, which 'emphasises the permanence of an order, whether historical or eternal, and denies the possibility of a final regime which would overcome the contradictions of previous regimes'.⁷⁸ To some extent, realism as expressed by Morgenthau corresponds to this stance. Aron echoes E. H. Carr when he emphasises its limits: it remains essentially incapable to provide a reason to act.

Between these two attitudes, Aron defends a third one, 'progressive politics'. It 'refuses to exclusively assert either the end or the permanence of history, and admits that there are transformations, irregular but undefined, which lead towards an end situated at the horizon, itself justified by abstract principles'.⁷⁹ While not denying history a meaning, Aron refuses to assert that this meaning is fixed or necessary. While not dismissing the concept of progress, Aron equally refuses to adopt the Marxists' attitude, as they

⁷⁵ Raymond Aron, *De la Condition Historique du Sociologue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 21.

⁷⁶ Raymond Aron, *Le Spectateur Engage* (Paris: Press Pocket, 1990), p. 339.

⁷⁷ Aron, *Polémiques*, p. 178.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

pretend they know what human destiny actually is. He always denounced the dangers of secular religions, which lies in moral certainty, as they tend to present a particular project as *the* project of humanity. Aron, aware of the deeply historical condition of man, refrains from arguing in favour of a-historical projects.

Ultimately, Aron opposes two notions: faith, characteristic of all ‘secular religions’, and despair, which leads to giving up on any possibility of deciphering a meaning in history. In between these two notions, Aron inserts and promotes a third one: hope, sustained by Reason. Such an attitude is not defined as pessimistic: on the contrary, it rests upon the idea that there is an ‘end of history’, while refraining from defining it as do secular religions.

It is therefore clear that Aron cannot be accused of pessimism if one understands this term as referring to a belief that history cannot be about progress. This inevitably leads to the assertion that human history, and politics at large, is a tragedy, as Morgenthau argues. Aron does not necessarily dismiss the use of the word tragedy to depict international politics (that is, he accepts the term tragedy as a good *description* of a particular historical configuration, that of the Cold War and its nuclear equilibrium of terror). However, Aron ultimately refuses to define international politics as a whole as a tragedy, as this precludes any idea of Progress: ‘tragedy would be the last word only if a happy outcome was not even conceivable. I continue to believe a happy outcome [is] conceivable, well beyond the political horizon, the Idea of Reason’.⁸⁰

The Kantian side of the Aronian approach

The Kantian Idea of Reason underlies Aron’s views on international politics, and more specifically his views on the meaning of history. The end of history is conceived by Aron as relating not to individuals, but to humanity at large. As he writes, ‘the species can only evolve towards the full realisation of its potentialities in and through societies, capable of preserving the experience of previous generations, and therefore, to favour the ulterior accumulation of knowledge and power’.⁸¹ This comes directly from Kant. In his *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point*

⁸⁰ Aron, *Memoires*, p. 741.

⁸¹ Aron, *Penser la Liberté*, p. 1659.

of View, Kant makes it clear that if there is progress, it is not at the individual level that one must expect it. Rather, one should look to humanity as a species, and takes a long-term view of its history.⁸²

This is almost exactly how Aron describes the idea of an end of history: '[it] is an idea of Reason, it characterises not the individual man but the collective effort of men in groups throughout time. It is the "project" of humanity, insofar as it thinks of itself as reasonable'.⁸³ The belief in reason is what sustains Aron's faith in progress against all odds. It is not equated with the preaching of abstract ideals as the definitive end of human history; nor is it to be understood as presenting existing regimes or societies as constituting this end. These are precisely the two errors that Aron guards against: 'One conceives the radical solution of the problem of the common life, whether or not one thinks its realisation is possible. But there is a permanent temptation to substitute to the concept of resolved contradictions either an abstract formula—equality, fraternity—or a particular and prosaic reality'.⁸⁴

For Aron, the Kantian Idea of Reason avoids these two pitfalls, as it does not subsume human destiny under one single direction, nor does it suggest that contingent historical realities represent the final accomplishment of history. In other words, such a notion allows retaining hope, while not succumbing to the temptation to think that one does detain the supreme truth about history. This hope rests upon the idea that progress is possible, but that it will not, and cannot, be linear, or teleological. In fact, such progress is essentially dialectic:

Some problems are set down in a permanent manner in all societies. Each society gives a certain answer to that problem; man, an essentially unsatisfied being, sees the imperfections of the existing solution and reacts by reforms, revolt or revolution, to the point when he gives another solution to the same problem, a solution which will also be imperfect, but which can, in this or that respect, mark a progression. The possibility of a definitive solution is not excluded, at least as an intellectual hypothesis. One can conceive the conciliation of all these

⁸² Emmanuel Kant, *Idee d'une Histoire Universelle d'un Point de Vue Cosmopolitique* (Paris: Bordas, 1988), p. 11.

⁸³ Aron, *L'Opium des Intellectuels*, p. 220.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

exigencies, if one keeps in mind that, up to now, there has only been imperfect conciliations in historical reality.⁸⁵

The awareness that all existing answers to perennial political problems are by definition imperfect is an antidote to ideological fanaticism: communism does not constitute the total and final solution to human history, which will remain dialectic. It also prevents Aron from claiming that liberal democracy is the end of history as Francis Fukuyama famously did. It is therefore the exact reverse of messianism of any kind, as it teaches *ideological* scepticism, which does not amount to a moral or philosophical scepticism.⁸⁶ This stance is by definition critical of all existing regimes, as none are devoid of flaws, but it does not lead to a posture of resignation. It maintains that progress is indeed possible in history, albeit not a radical one which would suppress once and for all the antinomies of political life: this remains an intellectual ideal which can indeed spur action, although the actual, concrete historical results will always, by definition, fall short.. It is in this sense that Aron's pessimism is indeed active. It does not rest content with existing political institutions, but maintains that political problems cannot find an all encompassing solution, which is why all revolutions purporting to solve them once and for all are doomed: only a 'fragmentary' progression is possible.⁸⁷

In sum, Aron presents the Idea of Reason as a regulative ideal, as a Kantian horizon: something always to be striven for, even if never achieved. Writing against Jean-Paul Sartre who advocated a revolution to radically transform the existing order, Aron asserts that 'the good society in Kantian terms is only an Idea of Reason: it has a regulative use'.⁸⁸ Animated not simply by a faith in human reason, but also by the belief that men can use reason to achieve their humanity, the Kantian regulative idea of reason therefore does not necessarily prescribe a given course of action. In fact, it can be used as a yardstick with which one can assess the existing political order and its institutions: 'the end of history is not a concrete event, soon to come, defined by the socialisation of the means of production or by the seizing of power by the communist party: it is an idea of Reason, in the

⁸⁵ Raymond Aron, *Les Societes Modernes* (Paris: PUF, 2006), p. 806.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 400.

⁸⁷ Aron, *Penser la Liberté*, p. 1019.

⁸⁸ Aron, *Essai sur la Condition Juive Contemporaine*, p. 223.

Kantian sense of the term, susceptible to be used as a criterion'.⁸⁹ On this, Aron appears strikingly close to cosmopolitan scholars like Charles Beitz.⁹⁰ Importantly, such an idea is always underpinned by a philosophical worldview, and in particular, by a certain conception of men:

Formally, this idea does not allow determining what one must want, politically or historically, just like Kantian maxims do not dictate to the individual what he must do. The Kantian idea of a kingdom of the ends only serves to judge different regimes and to measure their imperfection. It only makes sense in relation to a philosophic conception of a unity of the species, and consequently, of a possible unity of human history.⁹¹

If Aron adopts the Kantian regulative idea of a possible unity of humanity through reason, he does not, however, accept Kant's postulates without caveats.

History is what men make of it: Against Kant's hidden plan of nature

First, while upholding the belief that humanity has a destiny, Aron refrains from asserting what such a destiny will look like. On the contrary, for Aron, such a belief leaves the door open to a plurality of possible futures, including disastrous ones. For Kant, 'one can consider the history of the human species as a whole as the execution of a hidden plan of nature'.⁹² Each generation, building upon the experience of others, will gradually learn and understand that nature calls humanity to implement the rule of law, which conforms to reason. This process will not be straightforward: set backs and errors are inevitable. But humanity as a whole will eventually realise the hidden plan of nature, even though it will need war to accept its wisdom.

By contrast, Aron does not believe that humanity will *necessarily* realise its rational destiny. While retaining a faith in reason, he nonetheless includes a degree of pessimism which reflects his historical experience, and 'modernity' at large. This is particularly visible in Aron's views about technical and material 'progress'. While it cannot be denied that there have

⁸⁹ Aron, *Polémiques*, p. 192.

⁹⁰ Charles Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

⁹¹ Aron, *Polémiques*, p. 193.

⁹² Kant, *Idee d'une Histoire Universelle*, p. 22.

been enormous technical advances and a significant increase of material wealth in developed countries in the twentieth century, these do not guarantee global justice, the end of inequalities or the disappearance of nationalisms. Likewise, the obvious increase in transnational relations, the globalisation of exchanges and the progress of communication leads Aron to assert that ‘for the first time, humanity experiences a unique and same history’.⁹³ This however should not be taken as exemplifying the imminent demise of the inter-state system, and the unification of mankind under a common and new sovereignty. As Aron notes, ‘humanity, united under a single sovereignty, would have no enemy—unless it finds some on another planet—which constitutes a mutation *of* history and not a mutation *in* history’.⁹⁴ In other words, these trends do not *necessarily* signal the advent of a united humanity or of perpetual peace.

Aron openly relies on Kant’s terminology when he describes the asocial international society, asserting that states ‘do not want to submit to a master and do not know how to submit to a common law’.⁹⁵ But while Kant claims that this dilemma will be resolved by nature which will eventually force men to implement a system conducive to perpetual peace whether they like it or not, Aron does not express the same faith in a higher power or a happy ending. Debating the argument that men do not suffer in vain, and that there is some kind of retribution in the future, Aron abruptly asserts: ‘even formulated by Kant, this argument leaves me perfectly cold. Nothing has ever been promised to us. There is no reason for the world to be just’.⁹⁶ Against Kant, Aron rejects the idea that history has a necessary end: there is no hidden plan of nature, and human destiny remains uncertain:

I do not know what the future of humankind will be, but I know that we do not know this. And those who pretend to know are forgers. It is acceptable to hope for a future which conforms with human aspirations, but not present our hope as a certainty, and least of all to trust the laws of history or the action of one party (or one class) to accomplish it.⁹⁷

⁹³ Aron, *Penser la Liberté*, p. 1653.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1663.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Aron, *Essai sur la Condition Juive Contemporaine*, p. 208.

⁹⁷ Aron, *Les Societes Modernes*, p. 395.

Aron's Kantianism is therefore tempered by his core belief in human freedom: as men are free, it can never be automatically assumed that they will make the right choice. They always have the possibility to choose mass destruction or nuclear war. What remains is therefore hope, not faith. Tragedy is constantly looming because men are free. But precisely because they are both free and reasonable beings, one remains permitted to hope that they will demonstrate wisdom and gradually progress towards the achievement of a society which conforms to reason—without however asserting that such achievement is necessary or rationally inevitable.⁹⁸

Aron is therefore less categorical than Kant in his reflection upon human history. He accepts Kant's idea that reason can lead humanity to realise itself in history. He also retains Kant's notion of a regulative ideal, something that is always to be striven for, even if never achieved in one's lifetime. Aron rejects, however, a Kantian optimism regarding the inevitability of the realisation of this rational project. Promoting hope as opposed to faith, Aron ultimately upholds a belief in man's potential, without predicting what man's actual realisations will be. This in turn sheds light on how Aron modifies Kantian postulates. Kant is certain that men will eventually conform to nature's plans: as nature does nothing in vain, and as it endowed men with reason, they will ultimately develop it to the full and implement the rule of law. In other words, the meaning of human history is already decided 'from outside', by an external force against which men cannot compete. As Kant writes, nature leads men to realise their full potentialities and to implement perpetual peace 'whether they want it or not (*fate volentem ducunt, nolentem trahunt*)'.⁹⁹ By contrast, Aron asserts that 'the world has no meaning in itself; it has no external meaning; it can only have the meaning that we give it, that is, that of our will or of our project'.¹⁰⁰ The Aronian idea of reason constitutes an ideal which has no concrete definition, which does not foreclose different possibilities about human destiny, as men themselves give meaning to their own history: they cannot expect God, or nature, to rescue them. As free and reasonable beings, men make their own history.

⁹⁸ Raymond Aron, *Les Désillusions du Progrès: Essai sur la Dialectique de la Modernité* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1969), p. 251.

⁹⁹ Kant, *Idee d'une Histoire Universelle*, p. 71.

¹⁰⁰ Aron, *Essai sur la Condition Juive Contemporaine*, p. 228.

The Pascalian wager on reason: Realism against despair

Aron therefore does not follow Kant's optimism to its end, because he believed in human freedom, and was aware of the power of passions and interests. He does, however, retain hope in reason. There is one question remaining: what allows Aron to maintain this hope? On what grounds does it rest, and how does Aron justify it? In fact, Aron's belief in reason amounts to a wager, which is Pascalian in nature.

First, it is a wager by default: there is nothing else on which man can bet if he wants to hope the worst can be avoided. As Aron writes, 'in the nuclear age, if one does not bet on Reason, on what can one bet?'¹⁰¹ Reason alone is viewed by Aron as having a universal potential which can eventually lead men to realise their destiny. He refuses to adopt a religious logic, as he accepts, with Weber, that modernity creates a disenchanted world where the divine has lost its central place. The task of the moderns becomes to retain hope while not relying on the divine: 'If man manages to live without expecting anything from God, one doubts he lives without hope'.¹⁰² Reason is thus perceived by Aron as the only thing left on which to bet in order to avoid lapsing into nihilism.

While Aron's wager on reason can be defined as a wager by default, its underlying rationale is Pascalian.¹⁰³ Blaise Pascal's genius is to provide what he regards as an irrefutable argument as to why men should believe in God, and 'bet' on his existence. He presents this wager as the only reasonable option they have. First, the act of betting is not a matter of choice: as a man, one is 'embarked' on human destiny and fate. One must choose between believing in God or not. Likewise, for Aron, one must choose between believing that humanity has a destiny or not, between nihilism and hope.

Pascal provides a highly sophisticated argument about the pros and cons of wagering upon God's existence. In particular, he addresses the counter argument that betting on God is still 'betting too much', given that there is

¹⁰¹ Raymond Aron, *Penser la Guerre: Clausewitz. Tome II: L'Age Planetaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 174.

¹⁰² Raymond Aron, *L'Age des Empires et l'Avenir de la France* (Paris: Editions Defense de la France, 1945), p. 301.

¹⁰³ Bavarez, *Raymond Aron*, p. 145.

no certainty that God exists. However, Pascal reminds his reader that what he proposes is a wager, which by definition implies uncertainty: 'it is pointless to say that it is uncertain that one will win, and that it is certain that one hazards ... any player hazards with certainty to win with uncertainty. And he nonetheless hazards the finite to uncertainly win the future, which is not sinning against reason'.¹⁰⁴ Uncertainty thus remains at the very core of the wager, which does not necessarily mean that the wager itself is irrational. As any wager, it implies a belief in what lies ahead, without any certainty that this belief is actually true, or will be realised. This exactly matches Aron's argument on reason and the final destiny of man, and explains why he does not espouse all of Kant's conclusions, which leave little room for uncertainty.

Finally, Pascal argues: 'it is not certain that religion is [true]. But who will dare say that it is certainly possible that it is not? When one does work for tomorrow, and for the uncertain, one acts reasonably'.¹⁰⁵ The Pascalian logic therefore rests upon the idea that men are reasonable beings: betting on God, even if his existence is uncertain, is not irrational. Aron's wager on reason shares strong similarities with such a logic. Upholding a belief in reason as the horizon of human destiny is not irrational: while it remains to be realised, and even if some characteristics of human nature might well militate against it, it has not been proven wrong *yet*. It is here that the Pascalian dimension merges with the Kantian one, as Kant also adopts a similar logic, which is upheld by cosmopolitan thinkers.¹⁰⁶ Just as Beitz can argue that unless one can prove him wrong once and for all, it remains reasonable to act as if a cosmopolitan justice was indeed possible, Aron can argue that as one cannot know the future with certainty, as reasonable beings, it still makes sense to bet on reason, even if there is no guarantee that the wager will pay off. Most importantly, the wager is the only thing that separates a sense of the tragic coupled with an awareness that the worst, if always possible, is never certain, from nihilism.

Ultimately, the Aronian approach remains Kantian: it promotes the idea of reason as the horizon of political life. Refusing to lapse into either

¹⁰⁴ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* (Paris: Flammarion, 1976), p. 115.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

¹⁰⁶ Lucien Goldman, *Introduction a la Philosophie de Kant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 294; Peter Curtis, *Kant's Philosophy of Hope* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), pp. 130, 143.

nihilism or millenarism, Aron advocates progressivism, which is ultimately sustained by hope in man's ability to use reason. This does not dismiss what US realists stress: the power of passions and interests, the anarchic nature of the international system and the plurality of moral universes. It does however propose that these do not necessarily preclude a belief in a universal, unifying project for humanity. Such a belief combines an emphasis on human freedom, and hope in men as reasonable beings. It refrains from asserting what the future of humanity will look like, but it does assert it has one, which can only be realised by men themselves. As Aron emphasises:

The historic destiny, behind us, represents the crystallisation, forever fixed, of our acts. In front of us, it is never fixed. Not that our liberty is limitless: the heritage of the past, human passions and collective servitudes set up bounds. The limit of our liberty does not compel us to accept in advance a detestable order. There is no global fatality. The transcendence of the future gives man, throughout time, a reason to want and a guarantee that all things considered, hope will never perish.¹⁰⁷

CONCLUSION

While realism is traditionally considered as an approach that excludes ethical considerations from the study of international politics, such a view does not adequately capture the subtlety of the arguments advanced by some major realist proponents. This is particularly striking when investigating the claims of Aron. Far from presenting politics as an amoral sphere where anything goes, Aron argues that politics, because it is concerned with the search for legitimate government, is intrinsically an ethical activity. Aron's definition of the international system as an 'asocial society' of states stresses its dual nature which includes the use of force and ethical concerns. Aron logically rejects an absolute ethics of conviction, and also a strict Weberian ethics of responsibility. Both are inadequate in politics, as neither encompasses its complexity. Morality warns against a cynical approach to politics which would see nothing but a struggle for power, and also against a moralistic one which would be impervious to the political constraints statesmen need to take into account in an anarchic environment. It leads to advocating a 'moderate' Machiavellism which recognises the fundamental importance of values

¹⁰⁷ Aron, *L'Opium des Intellectuels*, p. 255.

for the survival of political communities, and which, while not precluding the use of force, nonetheless warns against the dangers of a radically immoral stance in foreign policy, especially for democratic societies.

Aron's formulation of realism also retains some distinctive Kantian elements which allows holding a belief in progress. Such a belief is not equated with certainty about which political regime is best, or which set of values should be universally adopted. On the contrary, Aron emphasises the plurality of moral universes in the international sphere. Aron's belief in reason as the ultimate horizon of political life in fact prevents him from endowing any particular ideology with an absolute moral quality that may lead to a launch of moral crusades in order to spread it globally. It does remind one of the dangers of secular religions of any kind, while maintaining that history has a meaning. It does not pretend to detain the ultimate truth about such meaning: men will ultimately have to create it. Realism nonetheless maintains that men can eventually realise their destiny as reasonable beings, but refrains from teaching how they will do so, presenting existing and imperfect institutions as the final achievement of humankind, and endowing secular religions with a saving power they will never possess.

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