Raymond Aron & the power of ideas

by Roger Kimball

Occasioned by the reissue of Aron’s Opium of the Intellectuals.

It is our choice of good or evil that determines our character, not our opinion about good or evil.
—Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics

Despotism has so often been established in the name of liberty that experience should warn us to judge parties by their practices rather than their preachings.
Santayana’s alarming thought that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” has at least as much relevance to the world of ideas as to the world of action. This is one reason that re-reading is just as important as reading. Time has a way of blunting the keenness of truth, muting its claim on our attention. The admonition we heeded yesterday we forget today: no emergency intervened to keep its lessons fresh. Human nature is a constant. The temptations and errors it faces do not change. But because circumstances are always shifting, truths need constantly to be restated if they are to maintain the grip, the purchase of truth. Re-reading is one of our richest sources of restatement. Putting us back in touch with what we once knew, what we still half-remember, re-reading can restore us to misplaced convictions, revitalize insights that have fallen fallow. Re-reading reminds us that nothing seems more vital than old truths rediscovered: as with friends, our intimacy is deepened by previous acquaintance.

The obstacles to re-reading are many. Sloth plays a part, of course, as does simple busyness—that curiously modern bane that mistakes movement for progress. There is also the prosaic matter of availability: how many important works are rendered hors de combat because they are out of print? There are libraries, yes, but books available only in libraries generally play a diminished role in the contemporary cultural conversation. Which brings me to Raymond Aron’s masterpiece, The Opium of the Intellectuals.

I would guess that almost everyone reading this essay knows something about that book. Many will have read, or at least read in, it. First published in France in 1955, at the height of the Cold War, L’Opium des intellectuels was an immediate sensation. It caused something of a sensation in the United States, too, when an English translation was published in 1957. Writing in The New York Times, the historian Crane Brinton spoke for many when he said that the book was “a kind of running commentary on the Western world today.” Aron’s subject is the bewitchment—the moral and intellectual disordering—that comes with adherence to certain ideologies. Why is it, he wondered, that certain intellectuals are “merciless toward the failings of the democracies but ready to tolerate the worst crimes as long as they are committed in the name of the proper doctrines”? Aron’s title is an inversion of Marx’s contemptuous remark that religion is “the opium of the people.” He quotes Simone Weil’s sly reversal as an epigraph: “Marxism is undoubtedly a religion, in the lowest sense of the word. . . . [I]t has been continually used . . . as an opiate for the people.” In fact—and fortunately—Weil got it only partly right. Marxism and kindred forms of thought never really became the people’s narcotic. But they certainly became—and in essentials they still are—the drug of choice for the group that Aron anatomized: the intellectuals.
The Opium of the Intellectuals is a seminal book of the twentieth century, an indispensable contribution to that most patient and underrated of literatures, the literature of intellectual disabusement. Unaccountably the book has been out of print for many years. It is therefore welcome news indeed that Transaction Publishers has just brought out a new edition of Opium, especially since the new edition has the added attractions of an introduction by the political philosopher Harvey C. Mansfield and, as an appendix, “Fanaticism, Prudence, and Faith,” the long response to his critics that Aron published in 1956. As Professor Mansfield notes, The Opium of the Intellectuals was a “leading document” of the Cold War, a conflict that was conducted as much with words as with arms, but that does not mean it is primarily a book “about the past.” The deformations that Aron analyzed are still very much with us, even if the figures that represent them have changed. Which is one way of saying The Opium of the Intellectuals is a book that profits as much by re-reading as by being read.

Aron, who died in 1983 in his late seventies, is a half-forgotten colossus of twentieth-century intellectual life. Part philosopher, part sociologist, part journalist, he was above all a spokesman for that rarest form of idealism, the idealism of common sense. He was, Allan Bloom wrote shortly after Aron’s death, “the man who for fifty years . . . had been right about the political alternatives actually available to us. . . . [H]e was right about Hitler, right about Stalin, and right that our Western regimes, with all their flaws, are the best and only hope of mankind.” He was, Bloom concluded, “the kind of man necessary to democracy but almost impossible in it; one who both educates public opinion and is truly wise and learned.” Over the course of his career, Aron occupied various exalted academic posts—at the Sorbonne, the Ecole pratique des haute études, the Collège de France—but he was never merely an academic. He wrote some forty books—on history, on the conduct of war, on the cultural and political prospects of France—and was an indefatigable political commentator, some three decades for Figaro and then, at the end of his life, for L’Express. (He also wrote for La France Libre during the war.)

Although showered with honors at the end of his life, Aron never enjoyed the dazzling celebrity that came the way of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and, especially, of Sartre, his classmates at the Ecole normale supérieure. In part, that was because of his intellectual style, which lacked braggadocio. He also lacked the appetite for celebrity, which is another way of saying he did not prize “brilliance” over truth. He certainly did not lack ability. By many measures, Aron was the most accomplished of his peers, in breadth as well as solidity of knowledge. He took first place at the agrégation in that most distinguished class, and it is a nice detail that Sartre humbly presented Aron with a copy of Being and Nothingness

Why is it, he wondered, that certain intellectuals are “merciless toward the failings of the democracies but ready to tolerate the worst crimes as long as they are committed in the name of the proper doctrines”?
as an “ontological introduction” to Aron’s earlier book on the philosophy of history.

From the 1950s through the early 1970s, Aron was regularly calumniated by the radical Left—by his erstwhile friends Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, for starters, but also by their many epigoni and intellectual heirs. In 1963, for example, Susan Sontag dismissed Aron as “a man deranged by German philosophy belatedly converting to Anglo-Saxon empiricism and common sense under the name of ‘Mediterranean’ virtue.” In fact, it would be difficult to find anyone at once more knowledgeable about and less “deranged” by German philosophy than Raymond Aron. His was a sober and penetrating intelligence, sufficiently curious to take on Hegel, sufficiently robust to escape uncorrupted by the encounter.

The fact that Aron was hated by the Left does not mean that he was a partisan of the Right. On the contrary, he always to some extent considered himself a man of the Left, but (in later years anyway) it was the pre-Marxist Left of high liberalism. (Bloom aptly subtitled his essay on Aron “The Last of the Liberals.”) Aron’s criticism of the Left was not a repudiation but an extension of his liberalism. As the sociologist Edward Shils noted in an affectionate memoir of his friend, Aron moved from being a declared socialist in his youth to becoming “the most persistent, the most severe, and the most learned critic of Marxism and of the socialist—or more precisely Communist—order of society” in the twentieth century. (Shils, like Aron, was one of a tiny number of sociologists who did honor to the name of his profession.)

Again, this shift tokened not a repudiation of youthful ideals but a maturing recognition that ideals worth cherishing are those that can be fulfilled without destroying what they profess to exalt. In this context, Shils spoke of Aron’s “discriminating devotion to the ideals of the Enlightenment.” The ideals in question prominently featured faith in the power of reason; Aron’s discrimination showed itself in his recognition that reason’s power is always limited. That is to say, if Aron was a faithful child of the Enlightenment—its secularism, its humanism, its opposition of reason to superstition—he also in many respects remained a faithful grandchild of the traditional society that many Enlightenment thinkers professed to despise. Enlightened thinking tends to be superficial thinking because its critical armory is deployed against every faith except its faith in the power of reason. Aron avoided the besetting liability of the Enlightenment by subjecting its ideals to the same scrutiny it reserved for its adversaries. “In defending the freedom of religious teaching,” he wrote, “the unbeliever defends his own freedom.” Aron’s generosity of spirit was a coefficient of his recognition that reality was complex, knowledge limited, and action essential. Aron, Shils wrote, “very early came to know the sterile vanity of moral denunciations and lofty proclamations, of demands for perfection and of the assessment of existing situations according to the standard of perfection.” As Aron himself wrote in *Opium*, “every known regime is blameworthy if one relates it to an abstract ideal of equality or liberty.”

The leitmotif of Aron’s career was responsibility. Not the whining metaphysical or “ontological”
responsibility that Sartre was always going on about—the anguished “responsibility of the for-itself” burdened by groundless freedom—but the exercise of that prosaic, but indispensable, virtue: prudence. Aron understood that political wisdom rests in the ability to choose the better course of action even when the best course is unavailable—which is always. “The last word,” he insisted, “is never said and one must not judge one’s adversaries as if one’s own cause were identified with absolute truth.”

It is worth noting that among Aron’s favorite terms of commendation were “prosaic” and its cognates, while he consistently used “poetry” and its cognates pejoratively. In his Memoirs (1983), Aron wrote that in The Opium of the Intellectuals he attempted “to bring the poetry of ideology down to the level of the prose of reality.” What Aron called the “Myth of the Revolution” (like the “Myth of the Left” and the “Myth of the Proletariat”) is so seductive precisely because of its “poetical” charm: it induces the illusion that “all things are possible,” that everything—age-old institutions, the structure of society, even human nature itself—can be utterly transformed in the fiery crucible of revolutionary activity. Combined with the doctrine of historical inevitability—a monstrous idea that Marx took over from Hegel—the Myth of the Revolution is a prescription for totalitarian tyranny. What does the liquidation of the Kulaks matter in the face of the necessary unfolding of the dialectic? Like its chemical counterpart, the first effect of the opium of the intellectuals is unbounded exhilaration. Only later does the stupefaction become evident.

Unlike the revolutionary, the reformist acknowledges that genuine progress is contingent, piecemeal, and imperfect. The recalcitrance of reality—including the messy reality of human nature—guarantees that. “One is prosaic,” Aron noted, “the other poetic.” Equally, one is real, the other fantastical. In his Memoirs, Aron acknowledged that “I do in fact think that the organization of social life on this earth turns out, in the end, to be rather prosaic.” (One thinks of Walter Bagehot’s observation that “the essence of civilization . . . is dullness . . . an elaborate invention . . . for abolishing the fierce passions.”)

The subject of politics, Aristotle noted, is “the good life for man.” What constitutes the good life? Aron cannily reminds us that the more extravagant answers to this question are often the most malevolent: they promise everything; they tend to deliver misery and impoverishment. Hence his rejection of Communism:

Communism is a degraded version of the Western message. It retains its ambition to conquer nature, to improve the lot of the humble, but it sacrifices what was and must remain the heart and soul of the unending human adventure: freedom of enquiry, freedom of controversy, freedom of criticism, and the vote.

Such freedoms may seem pedestrian in comparison with the prospect of a classless society in which liberty reigns and inequality has been vanquished once and for all. But such an idea, he noted, is “no more than an illustration in a children’s picture book.”
To say that Aron was suspicious of the poetical is not to deny that his sober vision of human fulfillment exhibits a poetry of its own. Aron, one might say, was a poet of the realm of prose. Another way of putting this is to say that he was a champion of the real in the face of the blandishments of the ideal. The prospect of ideal—that is, total, complete—emancipation bewitches susceptible souls because “it contains in itself the poetry of the unknown, of the future, of the absolute.” The problem is that the poetry of the absolute is an inhuman poetry. As Aron drily observed, in real life ideal emancipation turns out to be “indistinguishable from the omnipotence of the State.”

For Aron, the issue was “not radical choice, but ambiguous compromise.” He continually came back to man as he is, not as he might be imagined: “At the risk of being accused of cynicism, I refuse to believe that any social order can be based on the virtue and disinterestedness of citizens.” Following Adam Smith and other classical liberals, Aron looked to the imperfections of man for the fuel to mitigate imperfection. Unlike the Marxist, the classical liberal regards men as “basically imperfect and resigns himself to a system where the good will be the result of countless actions and never the object of a conscious choice. In the last resort, he subscribes to the pessimism which sees politics as the art of creating the conditions in which the vices of men contribute to the good of the State.”

Aron readily acknowledged that this prosaic model lacks the grandeur of utopia.

Doubtless the free play of initiative, competition between buyers and sellers, would be unthinkable if human nature had not been sullied by the Fall. The individual would give of his best in the interests of others without hope of recompense, without concern for his own interests.

But that “if” issues an unredeemable promise. Aron’s twofold task was to remind us, first, that there is no human nature unsullied by the Fall and, second, to suggest, as does orthodox Christianity, that what prophets of the absolute decry as a disaster was in fact a “fortunate fall,” a condition of our humanity. The utopian is optimistic about man, pessimistic about particular men and women: “I think I know man,” Rousseau sadly wrote, “but as for men, I know them not.” The anti-utopian is pessimistic, or at least disabused, about man; this forgiving pessimism frees him to be optimistic about individuals.

In his foreword to *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, Aron noted that he directed his argument “not so much against the Communists as against the *communisants*,” against those fellow travelers for whom the West is always wrong and who believe that people can “be divided into two camps, one the incarnation of good and the other of evil, one belonging to the future and the other to the past, one standing for reason and the other for superstition.” Marxism is a primary allotrope of the opium of the intellectuals because its doctrine of historical inevitability insulates it from correction by anything so trivial as factual reality. When Merleau-Ponty assures us that in the modern world the proletariat
is the only form of “authentic intersubjectivity” or when he writes that Marxism “is not a philosophy of history, it is the philosophy of history, and to refuse to accept it is to blot out historical reason,” no argument will wean him from his folly. What he needs is intellectual detoxification, not refutation. It is the same with Sartre, who championed totalitarian regimes from the Soviet Union to Cuba but who exhibited an implacable hatred of America and liberal democracy. (“America is a mad dog,” he exclaimed in one effusion; it is “the cradle of a new Fascism.”) Sartre’s “Ethical radicalism,” Aron wrote, “combined with ignorance of social structures, predisposed him to verbal revolutionism. Hatred of the bourgeoisie makes him allergic to prosaic reforms.”

In insulating its victims from reality, the opium of the intellectuals at the same time insulates them from the rebukes of contradiction. This has allowed for some peculiar intellectual hybrids. For example, the philosophies of Nietzsche and Marx are diametrically opposed: one celebrates the lonely genius, the other the collective, one looks for a new aristocracy of übermenschen, the other for the institution of the classless society. For any unintoxicated person, such differences are essential. But for intellectuals under the influence they count for naught. As Aron notes, the descendants of Marx and Nietzsche (and Hegel and Freud) come together by many paths. The existentialism of Sartre, the nihilism of Derrida or Foucault, all exhibit a similar intellectual incontinence. What unites them is not a coherent doctrine but a spirit of opposition to the established order, “the occupational disease,” Aron notes, “of the intellectuals.”

George Orwell famously remarked that there are some ideas so absurd that only an intellectual could believe them. The Opium of the Intellectuals provides a kind of Baedeker of the higher gullibility that Orwell disparaged, analyzing its attractions, describing its costs, mapping its chief roadways and pointing out some escape routes. Some readers, as Aron noted in “Fanaticism, Prudence, and Faith,” criticized the book for being “negative, for abounding in refutations without providing anything constructive.” An especially frequent charge was that the book celebrated “skepticism.” The last half-sentence of the book—“let us pray for the advent of the skeptics”—was routinely adduced as evidence.

In fact, as Aron argued, his critics mistook him. In the first place, by lifting his concluding clause out of context, they inverted the meaning of his conclusion. “The man who no longer expects miraculous changes either from a revolution or from an economic plan,” Aron wrote,
If they can abolish fanaticism, let us pray for the advent of the skeptics.

The primary target of Aron’s polemic was fanaticism. But he also recognized that the defeat of fanaticism often leads to a contrary spiritual sickness, indifference. Both are expressions of the ultimate enemy, nihilism. Skepticism, Aron wrote, is useful or harmful depending on which is more to be feared at the moment: fanaticism or apathy. The intervening faculty that orients us appropriately is practical wisdom, prudence, “the god” (Aron quotes Burke) “of this lower world.” In other words, skepticism for Aron is not the end but a means. “Skepticism,” he wrote,

is perhaps for the addict an indispensable phase of withdrawal; it is not, however, the cure. The addict is cured only on the day when he is capable of faith without illusion.

It is also worth noting that the skepticism Aron advocated is not a wholly negative attitude. As T. S. Eliot pointed out in Notes Towards the Definition of Culture (1948), skepticism is not necessarily destructive. On the contrary, skepticism is first of all

the habit of examining evidence and the capacity for delayed decision. Skepticism is a highly civilized trait, though, when it declines into pyrrhonism, it is one of which civilizations can die.
Where skepticism is strength, pyrrhonism is weakness: for we need not only the strength to defer a decision, but the strength to make one.

Aron would have agreed with Eliot. And he might have pointed out that critics who complained of his being insufficiently “constructive” overlooked the distinctly positive effects that simply telling the truth can have. Hegel was preeminently a constructive thinker; he was also a deeply misguided one. The demand for a “constructive program,” for “positive results,” etc., often turns out to be a demand for illusion and bewitchment. Aron preferred the more homely satisfactions of common reality.

Aron’s indictment of intellectual intoxication is not the same thing as an indictment of intellectuals. He was not anti-intellectual or contemptuous of ideas. This was not simply because he was an intellectual himself; he clearly discerned the immense power, for good or ill, that ideas can have. “Intellectuals suffer from their inability to alter the course of events,” he noted. “But they underestimate their influence. In a long term sense, politicians are the disciples of scholars or writers.” In an essay called “On Capitalism and the Democratic Idea” (1973), Irving Kristol underscored this Aronian point:

For two centuries, the very important people who managed the affairs of this society could not believe in the importance of ideas—until one day they were shocked to discover that their children, having been captured and shaped by certain ideas, were either rebelling against their authority or seceding from their society. The truth is that ideas are all-important. The massive and seemingly solid institutions of any society—the economic institutions, the political institutions, the religious
institutions—are always at the mercy of the ideas in the heads of the people who populate these institutions. The leverage of ideas is so immense that a slight change in the intellectual climate can and will—perhaps slowly but nevertheless inexorably—twist a familiar institution into an unrecognizable shape.

It was part of Aron’s purpose in *The Opium of the Intellectuals* to alert us to this sobering truth. It is sad to reflect that, nearly fifty years on, many important people in our society continue to dismiss ideas as negligible plaything.

1. *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, by Raymond Aron, with an introduction by Harvey C. Mansfield and a foreword by Daniel J. Mahoney and Brian C. Anderson; Transaction, 358 pages, $29.95 paper. *Opium* is the sixth of Aron’s works to be republished by Transaction; eventually, the editors tell us, the “Aron series” will include all of his major works.

Roger Kimball is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest book is *The Fortunes of Permanence: Culture and Anarchy in an Age of Amnesia* (St. Augustine’s Press).

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 19 Number 9, on page 4

Copyright © 2019 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com