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On Raymond Aron, passion, identity, and the intricate paths of intellectual filiation

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Abstract
In this discussion, I reflect on the intellectual kinship between Raymond Aron and other scholars. By parsing this heritage I explore his position as a member of my extended intellectual family. Divergences in our thought and scholarly orientation are analyzed. This article highlights the complex links forged between individual scholars in the chain of cultural development.

Keywords
anomie, Aron, Ben-David, Durkheim, identity, mentalism, Polanyi, Shils, Weber

In his *Autobiographical Notes*, Einstein recalls a moment of 'wonder' that he experienced at the age of twelve, during his first encounter with Euclidean geometry. 'Here,' he wrote of a 'little book' which presented it to him,

> … were assertions, as for example the intersection of the three altitudes of a triangle at one point, that – though by no means evident – could nevertheless be proved with such certainty that any doubt appeared to be out of the question. This lucidity and certainty made an indescribable impression on me.
>
> (Einstein, 1979: 9)

This moment decided his intellectual development.

I had a similar moment of wonder. When I was seventeen, my family (parents and two younger siblings) emigrated from the Soviet Union to Israel. This was not long before the Judgment Day War of 1973. I had finished high school in Russia and enrolled in the

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preparatory course at the Hebrew University as soon as this was possible, such a course being necessary since I knew neither English (the main language of publications I would have to read) nor Hebrew (which was the language of instruction). In Russia I saw myself as a poet, ready – and already on the way, as I thought – to take the world of Russian Literature by storm. Though going to a university was a given, I did not really know what I wanted to study – anything that would develop my aesthetic sensibility and allow me to write would do – and so I settled on the History of Art.

The English and Hebrew classes of my preparatory course left me with a sufficient amount of free time to explore the university, and several weeks into my second trimester, after the war was over, I wandered into a course, given in English for foreign students (who knew English) and titled 'Sociology.' It was the name, rather than the subject, that attracted me, because in the Soviet Union I only heard the word 'sociology' in conjunction with the adjective 'bourgeois,' and though I knew that it was something nefarious in the eyes of the authorities, I was completely innocent as to what it actually referred to. There is temptation in forbidden knowledge, and it was natural for me to want to take a peep.

I walked into a class on Durkheim and fell in love. My destiny was decided on the spot: it was – I realized – to become a sociologist. Whatever I understood with my very poor English, it was enough to open for me the intoxicating prospect of the *science* of humanity – the liberating, empowering, ennobling possibility of reliable and objective knowledge about ourselves, based on logic and empirical evidence, just like physics or biology, and value-free (growing up in the Soviet Union, I understood intuitively what was and what was not) – free, that is, from the encumbrance of dogma. I could say in Einstein's words, 'this lucidity and certainty made an indescribable impression on me.'

Then I went to the campus bookstore and spent my weekly allowance on two small Pelican volumes (foreign books were fearfully expensive): *Main Currents of Sociological Thought* by Raymond Aron. These two volumes were my introduction into sociological theory; they became my Scriptures: the gospel according to Raymond Aron. Through them I first learned of the thought of Comte, Pareto, and, most important, Max Weber. I read *The Protestant Ethic* and 'Science as a Vocation' in parallel with Aron's text and compared his reading to the reading of the man I chose in Jerusalem as my teacher, the eminent sociologist of science Joseph Ben-David.[1] I did not trust my own reading then and accepted gratefully the guidance I was provided. I was lucky that it was provided by two thinkers of great seriousness and intellectual integrity. Aron's two volumes also opened for me the possibility, which, with the memories of the Soviet Union still very much alive, was very exciting, of critical examination of Marx. I used them throughout my college years. Then, when I became Ben-David's teaching assistant in Classical Sociological Theory, they served as the basis for the first classes I taught. I took them to the United States. I have carried them with me for several decades until they basically fell apart in my hands. With them by my side I grew up.

Thus Aron was looking over my intellectual crib as I opened my mind's eyes to the world of thought which was to occupy a central part in my life. I was integrated into and appropriated his sociological family. Intellectual filiation is different from its natural counterpart. The mind is sexless, and only in the rarest of cases can one claim to have two intellectual parents, a father and a mother. I am not sure whether even one parent is

necessary; the generation of new minds appears to be a collective enterprise, and an extended family may be quite sufficient. In literary development, say the Russian Formalists, and I find the argument persuasive, the transmission of creativity among genres and forms of the art is never direct; it is not, metaphorically speaking, transmitted in a direct line from fathers to sons, but in the pattern of the knight's move in chess, from uncles to nephews (see Greenfeld, 2006a [1987], 2006b). Perhaps this applies to intellectual development in general. In any case, I did not have an intellectual parent. The starting point of the knight's move for me, as I realized when I was ready to make it, happened to be at the intersection of the projected mental paths of Durkheim and Weber, but I found this point thanks to Michael Polanyi's article in *Science*, 'Life's Irreducible Structure' (1968), in which I discovered the concept of 'emergent phenomena' and which made me understand the vast difference between possibility and probability. Incidentally, this article was given to me by my brother Michael, now a mathematician at Strathclyde University in Glasgow, then an undergraduate in biology at Tel-Aviv University (in some cases, the natural and the intellectual families overlap), and the reason he gave me this article was my suddenly acute interest in the nature of the phenomenon of life, spurred by a most provocative and influential universal Israeli philosopher, Yeshayahu Leibovich (I am using the Hebrew transliteration), whose course in Philosophy of Biology I was then taking. Later, this philosophical interest in biology, which never abated, naturally led me to Darwin, who also became an extremely important member of my intellectual lineage, the patriarch of the family, as a matter of fact. Later still, I was pleased to read in Aron's memoirs of his youthful philosophical interest in biology (Aron , 1990 [1983]: 38) – this confirmed to me, though no confirmation was needed, our intellectual kinship.

That we were kin was demonstrated to me very poignantly in November 1983, when Aron died. Nobody was as aware of the intellectual kinship – of the vitality of links that tied the guardians of tradition, those *called* to be the transmitters of the sacred and the central – as Edward Shils. He truly felt that the same blood was coursing in their (our) veins, like in communicating vessels, and this life-blood united separate individuals on different continents and in different times into one unending life process. When any single individual's physical life came to its end, it stopped coursing for a moment, the collective heart missing a beat, but then quickened and the work went on. Shils introduced sociology to my teacher, Joseph Ben-David. Ben-David came to Palestine in 1940 (his parents and two younger brothers perished in Auschwitz) and, after several years of serving under the British Mandate authorities as a social worker, was sent by them to the London School of Economics – the only 'white' student in a diverse group of colonial subjects – to acquire formal education in the profession. Shils was teaching at the LSE at the time (he was in London during the war and his close friendship with Aron likely dates from that time). The relationship between Shils and Ben-David was very close and quite exclusive: like Ben-David for me, Shils was for him the only teacher, and Shils considered Ben-David (like, I dare to hope, Ben-David considered me) his best student. When, having finished my Ph.D. dissertation (in the Sociology of Art, of all subjects) in 1982, I arrived at the University of Chicago, it was understood that I was sent, like a mental package of sorts, by Ben-David to Shils, and Shils certainly was prepared to act *in loco* grand*parentis*. (In the first months, though teaching, I still found it very difficult to speak

English and often, in a lame excuse for subjecting him to my incoherent formulations, I declared, promisingly, that my written English was far superior to my spoken version. Shils always reacted very kindly, assuring me that he would be proud of speaking Russian as well as I spoke English. He was a lovely person.)

When I came to Chicago, Ben-David was already very ill. Three years later he was dying. I began teaching at Harvard and for a while had visa problems. Every couple of days I called Jerusalem, telling my dear teacher how much I wanted to be by his side and how I planned to come the moment this was possible. With a voice that became weaker every time, he would reply: 'Come soon.' In January 1986, my visa problems were finally resolved; I called Ben-David to tell him I was coming; 'He just died,' said his wife. I knew of no one else close to him with whom to share my grief, so I wrote to Shils. Within a week, he answered my one letter with five of his own, consoling me, writing about the connection between minds which are immune to physical destruction, reminiscing about Ben-David. We mutually adopted each other.

I had never met Raymond Aron and his name had never come up in conversations between Shils and me. When Aron died, I had already been in Chicago for a year. Shils and I had met and were walking to some engagement when he told me that he just learned the news of Aron's death. This was, clearly, a heavy blow for him. He talked movingly about his late friend, then about the generation of social thinkers to which both of them belonged. Only four of that generation, he said, still remained alive. At this he abruptly stopped, declared: 'This means that some work needs to be done,' wished me goodbye, and, leaving me standing, turned around and walked home. From then on, Raymond Aron meant more to me, or, rather, I felt much closer to him: I was continuing his work, after all, and we shared the same blood.

It was with Shils that I first started to read Weber seriously. This was impossible for me before because, after I left Russia, I had to start learning to read anew. Reading is an underestimated, relatively rare, and complicated skill. The technical ability to join letters together into familiar words and familiar words into sentences is really just a condition for reading, a mental activity dependent on the elemental brain capacities for combining perceptual stimuli from the environment into low-level coherent wholes. Beyond that, there are two abilities dependent on the faculties of the mind, rather than the brain: aesthetic and intellectual readings. The first of these is based on the appreciation for the *materiality* of language, as Merleau-Ponty would say, a sensitivity, to begin with, to its sound; focused on the surface characteristics of words, this can be called a 'surface reading.' Intellectual reading transcends the materiality and requires a profound, if implicit, appreciation of the symbolic nature of language. It is the ability to read meanings behind the words, revealed and hidden by them at the same time, a 'deep reading,' one might say. As I discovered in the course of three decades of university teaching, most students – the intellectual elite of their respective societies – do not have either of these skills; they treat language as a system of communication, similar to sign systems among animals, and have to be specifically taught to read before anything else can be accomplished with, and for, them. To me, apparently, the appreciation that words are vehicles of meaning came naturally. My mother is fond of telling the story of trying to teach me – then about three years old – to memorize a poem by Mayakovsky, which I shall freely translate as:

Tiny tot approached dad,
And inquired little lad
What is good and what is bad?

Memorization of poems was a classical pedagogical technique in Russia and, having read the lines, my mother would say: 'Now, Liyechka, you say this.' I would then tell her the contents of the passage in my own words: 'A little boy came to his papa and asked him: "Papa, what do people mean when they say something is "good"? and what does it mean when they say something is "bad"?' My mother would patiently correct me: 'No, no, repeat: "Tiny tot …,"' and I would, with equal patience, attempt to explain to her what, precisely, Mayakovsky wanted to convey. It was, apparently, absolutely clear to me, at the age of three, that what was really important was *the meaning* behind the words and not the specific words in which it was expressed, that there was no one-to-one correspondence between words and meanings; words were arbitrary and ambivalent, and only the context determined the meaning that they carried in any particular case. (I came to appreciate the materiality of language only later, by the age of nine, and then I began to write poetry.)

The appreciation of the symbolic nature of language requires a sufficient, in fact extensive, vocabulary. Faced, at the age of seventeen, with life in two languages that I did not know (I studied English at school, but foreign languages in the Soviet Union were very ill taught, and learning Hebrew, in particular, was a punishable crime), I had to focus on words as such. For a number of years, I surface-read in English, thought in Russian, and formulated my thoughts (orally and in papers) in Hebrew. This sensitized me to the inescapable inadequacy of translation: potentially, every language contained all the possible meanings, but there was always more to meanings than words. For this reason, in my college years at Hebrew University, I started learning French and German as well, hoping that my increased sensitivity to the differences between languages would somehow compensate for my lack of fluency. Later, I made it a rule to acquire at least a minimal feeling for the symbolic proclivities of the language of every culture I studied – an access to a culture without such a feeling seems to me impossible.

By the time I came to the United States, Russian already was not the only language whose materiality I could transcend. The regained skill of deep reading dramatically changed my relationship with sociological theory: I no longer needed mediators and could not (in the sense of being congenitally unable to) rely on secondary interpretations. That this was so first struck me during Shils's unforgettable 1982–1983 seminar on *Economy and Society*. I found myself in fundamental disagreement with his reading of Weber, realizing, somewhat to my surprise, that my own reading was very different.

I was, of course, a Weberian. All those through whom sociological theory was revealed to me – Raymond Aron, Joseph Ben-David, and Edward Shils – placed Weber far above the other 'founding fathers,' and, despite the *coup de foudre* that I experienced with Durkheim, I was in no position and had no reason to dispute this placement. Weber was wonderful and I heartily agreed with my elders' arguments as to why he was wonderful. His heart was in the right place: he was no Marxist. He rejected metaphysics: he was interested in society as an empirical reality and understood that the world in which human beings were marionettes, and the only agents 'social forces,' and which

obediently proceeded through historical stages of development which had nothing to do with actual history and were dictated by the requirements of the economy was pure fantasy. He insisted on attention to the individual, was sensitive to the complexity of social systems and historical contingency, believed that ideals were at least as important as interests, and his science was value-free. He was, clearly, our man in Imperial Germany. What more could one want?

For all three of my evangelists, social science (value-free social science) was inseparable from the universal values of Western civilization, the supreme expression of its best traditions and its shield against the inevitable countercurrents that betrayed these traditions. It had for them the meaning of the all-encompassing morality above political ideology, the emotional significance of a religious faith, and in the thought of Max Weber they saw the clearest formulation of its principles. Ben-David's political commitments were more focused than those of Aron and Shils: for him the central event of modern politics was the Holocaust; he dedicated himself to creating and making strong the Jewish state; objective, universally valid knowledge, which came only from science, he believed, was the surest foundation of strength. In doing social science he was serving his country; he was an Israeli patriot, and whatever else went on in Western civilization (whose powers often made life in Israel more difficult than it would have been otherwise and which, among other things, produced Nazism and counted anti-Semitism among its less admirable traditions) was of secondary importance for him. But though Aron and Shils were ardent national patriots too, France for Aron and the United States of America for Shils embodied Western civilization, and Western civilization, not France and the United States, was their *patrie celeste*. Shils wrote in his elegiac obituary of Aron:

> He was a Frenchman and a French patriot to the depth of his spirit. He was attached to France as a whole and positively. … He was also a citizen of Europe – not in the narrow sense of being in favor of the Common Market, but in the way in which it was once said of Georg Brandes that he was a 'good European.' Aron was practically as at home in Great Britain and in Germany as he was in France. He was as at home in the United States as he was in Germany and Great Britain. He was more than a 'good European'; he was a citizen of Western civilization.'
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> (Shils, 1997: 63)

As to Shils himself, he believed that he was called – *called* – to safeguard, develop, and transmit the Tradition, that he was its Vicar alongside that other Vicar, the Pope in Rome, and that, though sociology was younger than Catholicism, his service to the Tradition through it might nevertheless be quite sufficient to earn him a sainthood. Reading *Economy and Society* with Shils in 1982–1983, I began to understand that Max Weber appealed to me for completely different reasons.

It took me more than twenty years to understand fully what precisely I read in him and why I recognized in the mind of this depressive German scholar a kin spirit connected to mine directly: it was Weber's focus on the mind. The mind (of the individual actor, obviously) was the central subject of Weber's sociology – the ways in which material phenomena and ideas reflected and refracted in it, were interpreted by it, and interacted with it. I was able to summarize this only in 2004 (Greenfeld, 2005 [2004]). Weber, I vaguely sensed already in 1983, was moving towards what I from 2004 call sociological 'mentalism' – an approach based on the realization that humanity is an emergent

phenomenon, a reality *sui generis*, in the words of Durkheim, who was moving in the same direction. This approach was made possible by Darwin's theory of evolution and inconceivable before that, and was suggested to me first by Michael Polanyi's article 'Life's Irreducible Structure.' This had nothing to do with defending Western civilization; in fact, it meant an escape from one of the central and most venerable Western traditions. But it is significant that Polanyi, a natural scientist, was a close friend and collaborator of Shils and Aron and shared their moral/political perspective.

The venerable tradition that Darwin had transcended, thus reorienting the powerful minds of Durkheim and Weber, was the conception of the objective world as dual in its nature, as both material (enclosed in space, limited, destructible) and spiritual (unenclosed, unlimited, indestructible), which was a contradiction. Whether this ever-present duality was believed to result from two essentially heterogeneous elements (the combination of which made no sense) or from elements apparently heterogeneous but in fact reducible (in idealist or materialist fashion) one into another, did not affect the nature of this vision. The contradiction could not be logically resolved by definition. The fundamental vision of reality was, thus, transmitted unchanged by generations of thinkers in the West from the Greeks on. When, in the seventeenth century, empirical evidence was proclaimed the indispensable foundation for reliable knowledge, the modern science of physics, which focused on the material world, fit well with this philosophical conception and its development was unobstructed by the latter. But, remarkably, neither the science of (the cumulative pursuit of objective knowledge about) life, nor the science of humanity was able to develop, despite the rapid spread of social approbation of science in the Western world, and this was because the underlying philosophical imagination allowed only two logical possibilities for the conception of life and humanity: they had to be defined either as forms of material reality, which placed them within the jurisdiction of physics, or as forms of spiritual (and empirically inaccessible, because not spatial) reality, which removed them from the province of science altogether. Both possibilities were repeatedly tried but led nowhere, and so life and humanity, palpably real yet different from inanimate matter and from each other, lingered scientifically unapproachable and therefore unexplored.

In his theory of evolution through natural selection, Darwin postulated a general historical (time-dependent) law of life, which was independent of the emphatically spatial laws of physics without in the least contradicting them. He, therefore, defined life as an autonomous empirical reality, perfectly consistent with matter, and requiring no aid from transcendental, empirically inaccessible forces; established biology as a science separate from physics and focused on causality of a different nature; and made possible a totally new conception of the objective world. It could now be imagined as historically layered, with all layers autonomous but logically consistent with others, and some layers, improbable and, therefore, inconceivable before the fact, emergent at a later point out of the boundary conditions of older layers. Darwin did not make this revolutionary philosophical argument explicit (there was absolutely no need for that insofar as biology was concerned), but the very possibility of imagining life as an emergent phenomenon allowed mind and culture – the symbolic process on the individual and on the collective levels – also to be seen as the distinguishing characteristic of humanity that made humanity, like life, a reality *sui generis*. This, in turn, would make possible the progressive accumulation

of objective knowledge (like, first, in physics, and later in biology), therefore *science*, about humanity.

It was the prospect of such science that made me fall in love with sociology, when, freshly arrived from the Soviet Union and all new and innocent, I walked in on an exposition of Durkheim's thought. It was this science which beckoned to Durkheim and Weber, the possibility of which, clearly, both of them sensed, as they groped toward it blindly, feeling their way through modes of thinking and language as yet unprepared for this possibility. But it must be said that Durkheim perceived the implications of biology's new orientation for the study of humanity more clearly than Weber (it is wrong to interpret his repeated attempts to explain his project by analogies with biology as some sort of ontological 'organicism'), that he made the emergent nature of his subject more explicit (although the concept of emergence was not yet available), and that, as a result, he groped towards the science of the mind and culture more surely.

This leads me to the question how could Raymond Aron so underestimate Durkheim (as, incidentally, did Shils too)?[2] What was behind his 'allergy' to Durkheim's sociology? By the end of his life, Aron recognized that he was unjust and (in referring to it as 'allergy' – Aron, 1990 [1983]: 46) that his attitude to Durkheim was not rational, but – for this very reason – his attempt to rationally account for it failed and was a mere restatement. As I attempt to explain it in my turn, it seems to me that one reason for this lack of appreciation is that Aron was not actually interested in science and read Durkheim, as he read all the thinkers he called 'sociologists,' as a moral and political ideologue.

As Weber argued so trenchantly in his 'vocation lectures,'[3] there is a profound difference, a psychological chasm, between dedication to science and dedication to politics. People who are *called* and practice them as vocations are moved by different passions, they worship different gods. In our pervasively monotheistic (even if secular) world, one cannot worship two gods at once. This does not mean that a person whose calling is science cannot be interested in politics and *vice versa*; only that such interest in politics (or science) which is not one's calling would not be one's *true*, governing interest – it would be like all the rest of one's possibly numerous interests, in cooking, detective fiction, crosswords, or gardening: a hobby. Aron's passion was politics, not science. It was not my god whom my evangelist worshipped.

'Aron's life and thought,' writes Pierre Manent in the 'Foreword' to the 1998 Transaction edition of *Main Currents*,

> … are situated between two extremes: on the one hand, that of a science of history and of society which attempts to abolish freedom (this was Marxism's destiny) and, on the other, a 'creative' freedom which would reveal the hollowness of all so-called 'objective truth.' Nietzsche and his innumerable epigones occupy this second pole. It is fair to say that Aron's entire life and work were a battle against these two extremes.
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> (Manent, 1998: viii)

The central question that *Main Currents* specifically attempted to answer, tracing the road between Montesquieu and Weber (who, like Aron, attempted to find the middle path between these extremes and do justice to both values), was 'the question of the best balance between science and freedom,' which is still with us (Manent, 1998: x). I

wish I could say that Manent is misreading Aron, but his description appears to me to be correct. And this means that much of Aron's life and work was devoted to tilting at windmills. Tilting at windmills is a noble pursuit (far be it from me to denigrate the virtues of Don Quixote). I regret this, however, for the lucid mind of Raymond Aron deserved better use. Marxism is not science, and 'creative' freedom that reveals the hollowness of all 'objective truth' (if by this is meant objective knowledge) is not creative. Neither of them deserves keeping and the balance between them is not worth establishing. Science – as, for instance, presented by Weber in 'Science as a Vocation' – is not a form of moral or intellectual determinism, and does not in the least contradict human freedom and creativity. Defined sociologically, it is a patterned activity oriented to understanding (*under-standing* indeed, that is, causally explaining) empirical reality and achieving this goal by means of the logical formulation of hypotheses (so as to allow them to be contradicted and thus checked by empirical evidence) and confronting (or testing) them with empirical evidence for this purpose. This is what is called 'scientific method,' and in this respect science of history and of society, such as Weber practiced, is no different (and intrudes on human creativity no more than) physics or biology, the respective sciences of matter and of life. Marxist *theory* of history and society, as Aron showed so well, in distinction, is a muddle of logical contradictions, and therefore would be a very poor example of science, even if Marx wanted to understand history and society, rather than change them, and even if he took interest in empirical evidence, which he evidently did not.

As to creative freedom (as against more general freedom of the will, which the sociological mentalist approach of both Weber and Durkheim necessitates recognizing and analyzing as empirical reality, and which takes many forms, some of which are destructive, rather than creative, and some of which are creatively neutral), it is the freedom of the mind to contribute to the cultural process, or the symbolic process on the collective level, the collective movement of humanity (rather than simply participate in it, as all minds necessarily do, by right of their being minds). Not only it is not contradicted or in any way limited by science, and by science of history and society, in particular, but it finds in the science of history and society properly defined its fullest realization. All science releases the forces of intellectual creativity, the purest – in the sense of least sensory, least dependent on and constrained by the body – forces of the mind. Because of its inbuilt system of checks and balances (experience, prior knowledge, logic), it allows for constant self-correction, thus making superfluous, for the person for whom science is a calling, institutional, social norms, and allowing the mind to work unconstrained. The science of history and society, the science of man, as Durkheim called it, augments the sense of this freedom by *recognizing* that in science the mind works unconstrained, making creative freedom explicit, and the scientist fully conscious of being creatively free.

But one must be called to science to recognize that. One's governing passion must be curiosity about empirical reality *as it is*, and must be moved by the desire to understand it and derive supreme satisfaction from such understanding. The desire to change, or preserve, reality, to exert influence on it, should be secondary. This does not make the scientist a worse citizen (or parent or friend) than the politician, but the personal algebra of the scientist is different. Marc Bloch, Aron's compatriot and contemporary, was a martyr of the Resistance, but he spent his spare moments in hiding (spare, that is, from

his work for the Resistance) writing the great manifesto of the 'science of men in time' (Bloch, 1953: 27) – the science of history and society. *The Historian's Craft* was his will and testament, for his governing passion was to understand.

Science does not limit our freedom and ability to act. Moreover, it does not and cannot tell us 'how should we live and what should we do.' It is, by the very nature of the pursuit, value-free. It can causally explain our choices and decisions (and help us understand them retrospectively), but making and taking them forever remains our responsibility. (Just as Rousseau would wish it, one can say, tongue in cheek, that we are indeed forced to be free.) Science cannot deliver us of moral responsibility. The reason for the lasting appeal of Marxist pseudo-science (an appeal outlasting the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and impervious to logical reasoning) is precisely that it does so: it tells us authoritatively what is right and what is wrong. Aron disagreed with Marx's Manichean scheme, which denied creative ability to the individual and defined freedom as necessity, but he, too, wanted science that would tell us what to do. He wanted science that would acknowledge the right of the individual to choose but defend, and so dictate to the right-minded, his own, Aron's, choices.

In the period of the so-called 'stagnation' before Gorbachev, Soviet dissident intelligentsia looked to American intellectuals for support, but the clearest, if not the only, voice raised in defense of the freedoms it was denied spoke in French. 'Raymond Aron,' wrote Shils, was 'the most persistent, the most severe, and the most learned critic of Marxism and of the socialist – or more precisely communist – order of society of the [twentieth] century' (Shils, 1997: 55). Aron regarded Marxism, and the infatuation with it among Western intellectuals, who were as alienated from their liberal democratic societies as the Soviet dissidents were from their despotic one, as a danger to the free world. Making explicit the potential implications of this seductive doctrine, fighting its pernicious influence, was Aron's great cause. His disagreement with Marx cost him dearly. Had he joined the Left, like all the others, he would surely be, and be celebrated as, the most famous French intellectual of his time. Because he did not, he was denied the recognition he so clearly deserved, was isolated in French cultural circles, and deprived of much authority, admiration, and friendship that were his by right. It would not be surprising if he confessed in his *Memoirs* that Marx 'repelled' him. But it was Durkheim who did.

To me this suggests that there was something deeply personal behind the puzzle that made Aron himself uncomfortable and that he tried, unsuccessfully, to resolve: 'Why was it that, in my contact with the Germans and particularly with Max Weber, I was drawn to sociology, while Émile Durkheim has repelled me?' (Aron, 1990 [1983]: 43). Something more is there than the misreading of the sociology of both Weber and Durkheim as moral and political philosophy, and liking the moral and political philosophy thus misread of the former while disliking that of the latter. Aron's own answer is indeed that he was angered by the political implications of some of Durkheim's statements, but the manner in which he approaches the question supports the impression that the ideological disagreement was a rationalization in the Freudian sense of a hidden motive, the discovery of which would have been painful for Aron.

While a young man of nineteen to twenty-three, at the École Normale Supérieure, he writes, where he read the major books by Durkheim,

> I was moved sometimes by Kant (even by Descartes), sometimes by Proust. … Then, I escaped from myself, from my doubts, from the judgment of others; I became identified with the understanding of the reason within me. At one point, in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, I rediscovered the difficulty of living, the slavery to which one is reduced by one's obsession with the judgment of others, the inevitability of disillusion.
>
> (Aron, 1990 [1983]: 44)

Young Aron was suffering, one may say, from mild *anomie*, unsure of who he was, what was his place in society, afraid to rely on himself alone in his search for his true self, and bridling at the suggestion that he might rely on the judgment of others. His was a typical modern experience, the experience of a man growing up in an open society, which does not assign its members to specific positions and does not prescribe their identities, but leaves them free to choose and fend for themselves, torn in different directions, burdened with individual responsibility for making the right choice – *dangling men*, as Bellow, who suffered from this burden well into his fifties, so well put it. It was Durkheim who diagnosed and explained this pervasive modern malaise. But, continues Aron,

> Kant or Proust, transcendental deduction or Mme Verdurin's salon, the categorical imperative or Charlus, intelligible character or Albertine. Compared to these two, neither *The Division of Labor*, nor *Suicide*, nor *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* touched my heart.
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> (Aron, 1990 [1983]: 44)

Still, one could say, surely being left indifferent is not a reason for being 'repelled.' And, in fact, this does not satisfy Aron as well. 'I am afraid,' he says,

> … once again, that I am embellishing. In addition to Kant and Proust, there was also politics. … Politics awakened my passions. … Durkheim's sociology did not affect me in my role as apprentice metaphysician, nor as a reader of Proust, eager to grasp the comedy and tragedy of man in society. Durkheim's formula: 'God *or* society,' shocked or angered me. The explanation of suicide by means of statistical correlation left me unsatisfied. Ethical teaching on the basis and in the name of society seemed to me a counterpart to Catholic teaching, and a fragile one for the simple reason that society did not constitute a coherent whole.
>
> (Aron, 1990 [1983]: 44)

A simple-minded reader could understand Durkheim's statement, breathtaking in its epistemological radicalism, that God was a collective representation, that is, a creation of man, the way we recognize the divine and immortal within ourselves, as the divinization of a particular polity *à la* Adam Müller. But Aron was the very opposite of the simple-minded reader. Other things being equal, this just was not possible. Thus, he continues, himself evidently frustrated with his inability to come to grips with the question:

> For some reason, Max Weber provoked my sometimes passionate interest, unlike Émile Durkheim. I was more open in 1931 and 1932 than I had been between 1924 and 1928. … Max Weber also objectified the lived reality of men in society, but he did so without 'reifying' them; he did not, as a matter of method, leave out of account the rationalizations that men give for their practices or their institutions.
>
> (Aron, 1990 [1983]: 43)

Helplessly, he adds in parentheses: '(In fact, Durkheim pays more attention to the motives or impulses of social actors than his methodology would suggest),' perhaps recognizing that there is not much difference between 'rationalizations' and 'collective representations,' and then goes on:

> What struck me in Weber was a vision of world history, his enlightening perspective on the originality of modern science, and his reflection on the historical and political condition of mankind.
>
> His studies of the great religions fascinated me; sociology understood in those terms preserved the best elements of its philosophical origins. … Perhaps Max Weber's sociology of religion is not so opposed to that of Durkheim as I thought a half-century ago. But … in 1932 and 1933, I glimpsed for the first time, in the constructions of the sociologist who was also a philosopher, my ethical dilemmas and my hopes.
>
> Durkheim had not helped me to philosophize in the light of sociology. A secular ethics as a replacement for a failing Catholic ethics – this was the civic mission that Durkheim had given himself – left me cold, to say the least. A disciplined man, with a strict morality, Kantian in his life and his writings, he compels respect. He was perhaps right in thinking that revolutions do not transform societies in depth and create more noise than good. During the 1930s, Marxism and the Soviet Union troubled me and National Socialism threatened France and Judaism throughout the world. Sociology that did not see revolutions in a tragic perspective floated in a space above our real conditions. Max Weber had misunderstood neither social systems nor the irreversible and fatal decisions taken by men of destiny. Thanks to his philosophical consciousness, he had linked awareness of history with that of the present, the sociologist and the man of action. Thanks to him, my future course, glimpsed on the banks of the Rhine, took shape.
>
> (Aron, 1990 [1983]: 45)

I doubt that Weber would be pleased to be credited with shaping Aron's future course, though he probably agreed with his self-declared disciple's moral position. He, who stressed how many different passions can drive people's actions and warned against the danger of confusing them and worshipping one god under the name of another, would have regretted to be so deeply misunderstood. Where was the multitude of multidirected rationalizations in the vision of world history Aron ascribed to him, or value-free science in sociology that saw revolutions (or anything) in a tragic (or any evaluative) perspective? And wasn't Durkheim, a *normalien* like Aron, a sociologist who was also a philosopher? Didn't he spend his whole life arguing specifically with philosophers for the philosophically justifiable place of sociology, explicitly engaging the very central question of metaphysics?

Though he himself did not ask the specific political questions that interested Aron, Durkheim provided the answer to these questions by identifying the central, formative dynamics of modern society – *anomie*. For it is anomie, the cultural insufficiency of modernity, the inconsistency of messages (representations or rationalizations) with which the culture of the free, modern, 'organic' society bombards its hapless members, which is the root cause of social disaffection that leads to revolutions, and of the irreversible and fatal (can anything be more fatal than suicide?) decisions taken by men and women, of destiny or not. And, ironically, it was anomie that drew Aron to Weber to the point of, remember, 'sometimes passionate interest,' offering him refuge from

the consistent passion of repulsion obviously aroused by Durkheim, and thus helping to decide his future course.

I shall put this brutally. To me it appears evident that Weber attracted Aron, while Durkheim repelled him, because Weber was a German and Durkheim a French Jew. Moreover, like Aron, Durkheim was a Jew from Alsace who made history at the École Normale Supérieure. Aron's sympathy for him would have been expected, inevitably explained as tribal, and focus attention on Aron's own Jewishness. Aron shied from his Jewishness: as a Frenchman, he very much wanted to believe that only the religion of his ancestors, which he did not embrace, distinguished Jews from other Frenchmen, and that, therefore, he was not really a Jew. But, of course, he knew that, in the eyes of other Frenchmen, he was. This was the judgment of others, and his self they defined, that he wished to escape from, and this was why he wanted to identify with the pure reason within him. Anomie, the creature of freedom and choice, gnawed on his very identity.

It speaks well of France, a truly open society much, much earlier than almost any other, that one was given the choice to be or not to be Jewish in it. But it is difficult to be Jewish when such a choice exists. This is why, for instance, Jews in the United States have a higher risk of manic-depressive illness than other 'ethnic' groups, while in Israel such morbid risk is much lower than in the USA as a whole (Jamison and Goodwin, 1990: 161). One truly believes that one can escape this burdensome identity. But one cannot: in an open, egalitarian society, where all positions are open to competition and envy is widespread, more than in any other, people need someone to focus their envy on, and Jews, for historical reasons, are the obvious such focus. When one is mediocre or unsuccessful, the others are willing to disregard one's Jewishness, but when one is brilliant, successful, or outstanding in any other positive way, it will be always remembered and never forgiven.[4] This is a fact of life. It has a very simple psychological/sociological explanation.

Of course, it is better to be offered the choice than gassed (it is, I would say, fully understanding the kind of suffering that manic-depressive illness entails, better to suffer from manic depression than to be gassed) or pogrommed, but it is not better than not being offered the choice. In this sense, I was fortunate: for I never was. Growing up in an explicitly and virulently anti-Semitic society, which did not systematically exterminate its Jews and tortured them only psychologically, I knew that I was Jewish probably before I learned to speak, because, according to my elders, having barely learned to speak, I had already discoursed quite competently on my Jewish identity and its logical implications. I knew, therefore, that it was a difficult identity to have, I knew that it made me subject to discrimination, that to get half the reward for anything, I would have to be and to do twice as good as anyone. When I learned arithmetic, I prepared myself complacently to the life in which, to achieve whatever I would want to achieve, I would have to show four times the ability required. This did not bother me: this was a challenge and, as I saw from the examples of my parents, grandparents, and other relatives (there were very few Jews around me, besides my family), it was rather likely that I would meet it. I took pride in being Jewish and never left an anti-Semite unanswered. Most of them, I have been convinced since kindergarten, where I met my first specimen, were simply not very intelligent, and were confused and, on the whole, miserable people who needed to be re-educated.

Like Aron, I am an atheist: I was born into a family of intellectuals, atheist for several generations. But Russian anti-Semitism left me with no illusion that even a total unfamiliarity with Judaism could free one from being Jewish. As a result, I never experienced any inner conflict about my Jewish identity. I am grateful to the society in which I grew up for imposing this identity on me. It was good not to have the choice. Therefore, I do not judge Raymond Aron, who grew in free, open, wonderful France, for trying, probably unconsciously for himself, to escape his Jewishness: he was subject to psychological pressures, which prove unbearable for many and which I was spared. That he tried to escape it is clear from his attitude to the blatantly, openly anti-Semitic Germany of the 1930s and before. He admired, I would say, he loved, its 'culture' – the thought of German philosophers, the spirit of German universities, discussions among the students. He was aware of the anti-Semitism all around him during his stay (even if somehow he managed not to be aware of the anti-Semitism of so many German philosophers and of German universities) – he reports on this in the *Memoirs* – but, because he was blond and blue-eyed, and those around him were not aware that he was Jewish, it did not affect him. This love for the country in which almost everyone who was not Jewish hated or, at least, despised Jews, this not being angered, repelled (as he was by Durkheim, whose 'God is society' is so revealingly time and again likened to the Catholic ethics), or otherwise emotionally moved by, beyond finding ridiculous, openly anti-Semitic talk, were a sort of psychological self-trial, an ordeal to which he willingly submitted, to prove to himself that he was not Jewish.

Aron's predicament was, sadly, the predicament of Karl Marx, with obvious modifications which resulted from experiencing it in interwar France, rather than in mid-nineteenth-century Prussia, and his attempt to escape the part of his identity, on which the world around him insisted, is not much different from the one Marx undertook in his remarkable essay 'On the Jewish Question.' There is a *logical* connection among this pathetic ethnic *auto-da-fé*, the essay written immediately after it, 'Introduction to the Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right' (in which Marx opposed Germany – the universal nation, with the 'joyful historical mission' to liberate 'the *whole* man' – to the wicked West, that is, morally 'degenerate' France and Britain), and the immediately following *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (which substituted proletariat for Germany and Capital for France and Britain and thus contained *in nuce* the Marxist doctrine). The *Manuscripts* could not be written without the 'Introduction,' and the 'Introduction' without the 'Essay on the Jewish Question.' The denial of his Jewish identity was a necessary condition for the development of Marx's thought and therefore lies at the very root of his social theory. The fact that Aron, such a careful and thorough critic of the latter, paid no attention to this (and was not repelled by the vulgarity of Marx's anti-Semitism) adds to my conviction that profound, and deeply hidden, emotional commitments prevented him from seeing what was so plainly visible.[5]

On the whole, Aron was oblivious to the political significance of identity, in general, and of national identity, specifically. Though nationalism was so obviously the dominant ideology of the formative decades of his life through the 1940s (the Cold War made it less obvious without decreasing its political significance), in this case, he, like Marx, considered ideology only apparently important, but in fact concealing the really important, basic, so to speak, factors. These issues, which he disregarded, became the focus of my work.

And yet, in the study of identity and nationalism, too, I have proofs of the deep connection between us. When I arrived in Chicago, I learned that Aron had a daughter, Dominique Schnapper, by reading the English translation of her book on Jewish identity (Schnapper, 1983 [1980]). Later, after the fruitful disagreement with Shils over the interpretation of Weber led me to the studies of nationalism, I learned that this daughter (whom I deeply respect and consider a friend) was the most important French scholar writing on it.

In the intricate and criss-crossing chains of cultural developments, thinkers represent individual links. I am glad to be a link in the chain in which Aron is also one. I am indebted to him for telling me his story about sociological thought, for introducing me at the very beginning of my intellectual path to several great minds, and in particular to Max Weber, who became so important for me, for keeping my interest always and for provoking my disagreement and inspiring me to think deeply about crucial issues about which I might not have thought otherwise. I never studied with Raymond Aron, never once met him, and never focused on his work. It would be impossible to deduce the place of this great European intellectual in my life and the significance of his thought for me from my curriculum vitae. Whatever his name, occasionally mentioned in it (my affiliation with the Centre Raymond Aron in Paris, membership – together with several other contributors to this volume – in the Raymond Aron Society, and an essay I wrote on his *Main Currents in the Sociological Thought*), may suggest does not reflect this. Yet he was present at the very moment of my birth as an intellectual and then at several crucial moments, forever inscribed in my memory, of my intellectual development. He was a dear friend of, and influenced, some of my dearest friends. I cannot think about them, as I cannot think about Weber and Durkheim, without also thinking of him. And though I initially reacted with surprise to Peter Baehr's invitation to contribute to this Special Issue an essay on what Raymond Aron means to me as a thinker and on how he fits into my life, the more I thought about the assignment, the more natural it appeared to me and I am grateful for being asked to write it.

Raymond Aron has been a member of my extended intellectual family.

Notes

1. Joseph Ben-David (1920–1986) is considered, together with Robert K. Merton, to have founded the sub- discipline of the sociology of science. His best known works include the two seminal and still relevant books, *The Scientist's Role in Society* (1984 [1972]) and *Centers of Learning* (1992 [1978]).
2. For an extended discussion of Aron's treatment of Durkheim and Weber, see Greenfeld (2007); on Shils see '*Praxis Pietatis*: A Tribute to Edward Shils' in Nationalism and the Mind, op. cit. (originally published in The American Sociologist, Winter 1996.
3. 'Science as a Vocation' and 'Politics as a Vocation.'
4. See the parable of the horse and the stag in Einstein (1938).
5. I have published an essay on this aspect of Marx's thought in *Survey: A Journal of East and West Studies*, the journal published by Leopold Labedz, a friend of Aron and Shils, at the London School of Economics (Greenfeld, 1985). Before it was published, I presented it as a talk at Harvard's Russian Research Center and remember being struck by the shocking, traumatic impression my literal reading of Marx produced on certain members of the audience. Middle-aged Harvard professors stormed out of the room, theatrically banging doors. The very possibility that Marx might have meant what he actually said (and that, therefore, they willfully disregarded what he said) was profoundly distressing to them.

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