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Resurrecting a neglected theorist: the philosophical foundations of Raymond Aron's theory of international relations*

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Raymond Aron is a neglected theorist, at least if we understand by 'neglected' a theorist whose theory no longer engenders critical scholarly debate. More often than not, students of international politics either ignore Aron altogether or wrongly subsume him under the rubric of classical Realist.[1] Aron's *Peace and War* is probably 'more quoted than read' today, and it is doubtful whether more than a handful of students seriously study this monumental work at all.[2]

Part of the reason why Aron is neglected today is that many theorists are critical of or dissatisfied with the character of his theorizing. Theorists like Oran Young, for example, argue that despite Aron's classical approach to international politics, *Peace and War* is a 'clear-cut failure' in terms of the 'criteria of theory'.[3] Theorists like David Thomson, while more sympathetic to Aron's efforts, wonder whether it is possible to formulate 'more daring generalisations' based upon Aron's 'extremely cautious', almost 'disappointing' conclusions.[4] But what many theorists fail to realize or to appreciate is that Aron's understanding of theory emerged from and is grounded upon a trenchant philosophical investigation of history and historical understanding, an investigation that Aron presents most systematically in his *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*.[5] If we are going to understand the character of Aron's theorizing, we must first understand the *Introduction* itself: indeed, the dearth of scholarly literature on the relationship between Aron's philosophy of history and his theory of international relations makes it imperative to do so if we

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[1] This is not to deny points of agreement between Aron and theorists like Carr and Morgenthau, but merely to indicate that many scholars fail to articulate and to take into consideration the numerous fundamental differences between Aron and other classical Realists.

[2] J. Hall, *Diagnoses of Our Time: Six Views on Our Social Condition* (London, 1981), p. 164.

[3] O. Young, 'Aron and the Whale: A Jonah in Theory', in K. Knorr and J. Rosenau (eds.), *Contending Approaches to International Politics* (Princeton, 1969), p. 143.

[4] D. Thomson, 'The Three Worlds of Raymond Aron', *International Affairs*, 39:1 (1963), pp. 53–5. See also U. Luterbacher, 'The Frustrated Commentator: An Evaluation of the Work of Raymond Aron', *International Studies Quarterly*, 29:4 (1985), pp. 39–49; and K. Waltz, 'Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory', *Journal of International Affairs*, 44:1 (1990), pp. 21–37.

[5] R. Aron, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History: An Essay on the Limits of Historical Objectivity*, tr. G. Irwin (Boston, MA, 1961). Where possible, all references to Aron's work will be to the English translations. In general, I have followed these translations, although I have sometimes altered them to make them more strictly literal.

are ever to see why Aron has been mistakenly neglected and how a return to his works would significantly contribute to current theoretical debates.[6]

That Aron placed great importance on his philosophy of history and its concomitant implications for theory is indisputable. Aron considered that his 'postwar works constitute a logical, if not necessary, continuation of the basic question raised in the *Introduction à la philosophie de l'histoire*'.[7] This basic question was: What are the characteristics and limitations of valid historical knowledge? The answer to this question was of more than scholarly interest to Aron; it animated his entire adult life. For the issues raised in the *Introduction* concerned the dialectical relationship of history and politics; how individuals, hoping to understand themselves through understanding the past, could nevertheless live and act and justify their decisions in the world.[8]

That other scholars have recognized the importance of Aron's philosophy of history is clear. Franciszek Draus notes that there is a clear philosophical unity to Aron's prodigious writings, namely to address the problem of '*historical intelligibility*. The understanding of history was the task that determined the character and content of all of Aron's investigations, just as it determined the directions of Aron's career.'[9] Robert Colquhoun observes that the *Introduction* 'established the theoretical and methodological foundations for all his subsequent writings', an observation echoed by Miriam Bernheim Conant, the essays in whose collection of Aron's writings, *Politics and History*, 'were chosen to offer an introduction to Aron's own philosophy of history, a theme that is central to all of his concerns'.[10]

Nevertheless, even for those theorists who might agree that Aron has been unfairly neglected, the question can be raised what a philosophy of history has to do with international relations theory. While all theorists recognize the necessity of some sort of empirical study to confirm the claims of their theory, most probably imagine that such confirmation is achieved merely by reading the relevant diplomatic documents and looking up the salient 'facts' in history books.[11] Aron, however, opposed this naive understanding of history, arguing in the *Introduction* that there was no single, correct system of interpretation or historical perspective which could objectively explain the past. Aron's philosophy of history, therefore, challenges the opinion that the social sciences can (or should strive to) achieve the same sort of accuracy and validity as the natural sciences. Thus, a careful study of the *Intro-*

[6] Another reason why Aron's theoretical writings (e.g., the *Introduction* and *Peace and War*) are generally ignored is that they have, as P. Hassner points out, 'a somewhat strained and static character from which, precisely, his historical works [e.g., *The Century of Total War*] escaped altogether'. See P. Hassner, 'Raymond Aron and the History of the Twentieth Century', *International Studies Quarterly*, 29:4 (1985), pp. 29–30. It is as if Aron is being rather un-Aronian when he seeks to bring theoretical clarity to a field like international relations, and it is perhaps for this reason that many theorists have found his theoretical works difficult and, ultimately, of little use. I am thankful to Daniel Mahoney for pointing out to me the importance of Hassner's observation.

[7] R. Aron, 'Introduction', in M. Conant (ed.), *Politics and History: Selected Essays by Raymond Aron* (New York, 1978), p. xix.

[8] R. Aron, *Memoirs: Fifty Years of Political Reflection*, tr. G. Holoch (New York, 1990), pp. 36–47.

[9] F. Draus, 'Introduction', in F. Draus (ed.), *History, Truth, Liberty: Selected Writings of Raymond Aron* (Chicago, 1985), p. 22. In this article, all emphases in quotations are contained in the original.

[10] R. Colquhoun, *Raymond Aron: The Philosopher in History, 1905–1955* (London, 1986), p. 3; and M. Conant, 'Preface', *Politics and History* (see n.7 above), p. xii.

[11] See A. Toynbee, 'The Philosophy and Morphology of History', in J.-C. Casanova, E. Shils and M. Sperber (eds.), *Mélanges en l'honneur de Raymond Aron: science et conscience de la société*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1971), pp. 22–4.

duction will not only bring into critical focus the intimate relationship between a philosophy of history and a theory of international relations but it will also reveal how Aron, who acknowledged both the possibility and necessity of theory, constructed one that conformed to the parameters circumscribed by the conclusions of the *Introduction*.

The purpose of this essay, then, is to articulate Aron's philosophy of history and to show how this philosophy informed and influenced his understanding of the character of international relations theory. In the first part of the essay, I will briefly relate the relevant arguments and conclusions of the *Introduction*. Second, I will discuss three broad implications of the *Introduction* on Aron's understanding of the theoretical enterprise. Although this section will be concerned primarily with theorizing, I will also discuss, where appropriate, some of the substantive elements of Aron's theory. In the third part of the essay I will argue that by returning to Aron, we will be in a better position to discuss and to respond to the post-positivist critique of social science. And lastly, I will discuss in the conclusion the problem of relativism in his work.

History, historians, and historical knowledge

The *Introduction* can accurately be described as the second volume of a two-volume set, the first being *La Philosophie critique de l'histoire*.[12] In *La Philosophie critique*, Aron examines the critical philosophies of history of Dilthey, Rickert, Simmel, and Max Weber. After analyzing and comparing all four systems, Aron contends that none of the authors categorically demonstrated how the historical sciences could be universally valid for all peoples and at all times, and that the 'method employed and the concepts used vary with the philosophies to which the historians adhere'.[13] Nevertheless, Aron praises Weber above the other three authors, for only Weber redirected his inquiry away from the transcendental conditions of historical objectivity *per se* to the limitations of this objectivity.

But while Aron thought that Weber asked the right question, Aron was not satisfied with Weber's answer, and the *Introduction* is Aron's attempt to articulate more precisely the character and limitations of historical objectivity. Now it is important to see that by 'objectivity' Aron does not have in mind 'anything approaching the proof of facts and the criticism of texts'. Rather, Aron makes clear at the outset that:

> Objectivity does not mean impartiality, but universality. At a certain stage of our experimental knowledge, a physical law compels universal recognition. Can the same validity, at a certain stage of scholarship, be attributed to an historical reconstruction? [14]

[12] R. Aron, *La Philosophie critique de l'histoire: essai sur une théorie allemande de l'histoire* (Paris, 1987). Aron submitted *La Philosophie critique* as his *thèse complémentaire*, the *Introduction* being his *thèse principale*. For a brief summary of *La Philosophie critique*, see Colquhoun, *Raymond Aron*, pp. 119–29, and F. Draus, 'La Dialectique de la liberté dans la pensée de Raymond Aron', *Revue européenne des sciences sociales*, 21(65) (1983), pp. 143–59. The more serious student will also want to read Aron's first discussion of the German writers who so influenced his thinking, namely, *German Sociology*, tr. M. Bottomore and T. Bottomore (New York, 1964).

[13] Aron, *La Philosophie critique*, p. 307.

[14] Aron, *Introduction*, p. 9.

In order to answer this question, Aron uses a 'phenomenological method', describing the process whereby any person comes to understand some part of human history. 'We never separate science from reality, since, in any case, man's consciousness of the past is one of the essential characteristics of history itself.'[15]

Aron concentrates on two essential characteristics of historical knowledge, the first being the *object* of this kind of knowledge (namely human beings). Using the philosophical system of Antoine-Augustin Cournot as an example, Aron discusses the different meanings of 'order' and 'chance' in the natural and historical sciences. Cournot argued that although chance events take place in nature, these events always take place within a larger, ordered system. The effects of random natural events are always 'cancelled out' in the long run, and the task of the natural scientist is to show how these chance events can be 'reconciled' with the overarching order or stability of the system as a whole. Similarly, the challenge for historians is to 'make intelligible the chaos which at first is presented' to them, to rise above the innumerable and seemingly random historical events in order to articulate the implicit order.[16] Now Aron does not disagree with Cournot's attempt to find some kind of order in human history; but he does challenge Cournot's view that the consequences of random historical events are 'cancelled out' in the long run. What Aron's discussion highlights is the fundamental difference between the '*achievement of an evolution*' (in nature) and a 'system of *development*' (in human history): while the natural scientist explores a deterministic system in which natural events are but manifestations of the theoretical laws that describe that system, the historian explores a non-deterministic system in which the concepts of 'order' and 'chance' are ultimately after-the-fact descriptions of a particular historical development.[17]

The differences between natural and human history can also be seen in the wholly different ways the study of each kind of history is made possible. Aron notes that the fossils the palaeontologist studies are randomly left and preserved, whereas peoples and civilizations purposefully construct monuments and record documents that are intended to outlive their creators. Furthermore, fossils only refer the scientist to what was once living matter, whereas a human document or monument refers the historian to a human mind—a creator—something that can be understood by other human beings without the aid of mathematical equations and physio-chemical laws. While these differences between natural and human history would probably be admitted by most people, Aron advances the argument one step further. Given the fact that 'the human past extends into the present in an entirely different manner from the past of nature', one must also wonder to what degree the method of inquiry of an authentic social science should be (or can be) modelled upon that employed in the natural sciences.[18]

For Aron, human history cannot be defined according to a general theory of history, because human history is not limited 'to the observation that there exists a

[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., p. 21.
[17] Ibid., p. 16. According to Aron (p. 43), the problem for a thinker like Cournot, and to a certain extent for Marx as well, is that 'he was ready to despair of the etiology of history unless he arrived at the conclusion that the final state would somehow or other be produced. Events were to permeate, retard, or accelerate, but not to divert, the [historical] evolution.' For Aron, however, 'the concept of history is not essentially tied in with the hypothesis of a total order. The decisive thing is the consciousness of the past and the desire to define oneself according to it.'
[18] Ibid., p. 31.

scientific discipline or the fact that human societies change and succeed each other'.[19] Human history is not a 'chronicle' of specific events, nor is historical knowledge a 'simple accumulation of facts'.[20] Aron notes that historians seek to do at least four things beyond the mere accumulation of facts. First, they attempt to understand the people(s) they are investigating, as well as how they themselves compare with those in the past; second, they want to know how and why the unique events in the past happened; third, they seek to reconstitute the array of facts into an ordered ensemble; and finally, they attempt to discover and to compare the processes of change within and from one historical ensemble to another. Each of these elements can be traced back to much deeper questions that only human beings ask about their own past.

> The first [element], ultimately, goes back to the mystery of human identity and human diversity; the second, to the mystery of the event, i.e, the intersection between necessity and accident; the third seeks the origin and consistency of the *ensemble* (period, civilization); the last is concerned with change in the double sense of direction and of meaning.[21]

Human beings are interested in their past in a way that differs from their interest in natural history, for human beings come to understand, to transform, and to develop themselves through confronting the history of which they are inextricably a part. The reality of human history cannot be separated from knowledge of that reality, since self-conscious reflection on the past initiates and constitutes the uniqueness of human history.[22]

Having explored some of the differences between natural and human history, Aron then focuses on the *past* character of historical knowledge. He begins by distinguishing between understanding and explanation. Understanding 'attempts to show a relation immanent in reality', or more generally, a person understands something 'when *knowledge shows a meaning which, immanent to the reality, has been or could have been thought by those who lived or realized it*'.[23] Explanation, by contrast, reveals 'a unique succession within a regular framework' in the natural world.[24] 'We understand Kepler's laws, but we explain nature. Man understands himself and he understands what he has created.'[25] Although Aron admits that he does not develop a theory of understanding and explanation in the *Introduction*, it is readily apparent why he makes this distinction. Since natural phenomena do not act by deliberate choice, scientists can try to achieve a unique coincidence between their explanatory principle and the regular behaviour of the phenomena. Because every individual, however, is a complex being whose decisions and actions have multiple sources and implications, there exists a plurality of possible meanings (or levels of intelligibility) immanent in human history.

Aron then proceeds to articulate a three-fold relationship between living experience and historical knowledge, the first part of which is knowledge of self. The difficulty in attaining knowledge of oneself involves surmounting the dialectic

[19] Ibid., p. 35.
[20] R. Aron, 'Evidence and Inference in History', in D. Lerner (ed.), *Evidence and Inference: The Hayden Colloquium on Scientific Concept and Method* (Chicago, 1959), p. 21.
[21] Ibid., p. 24.
[22] Aron, *Introduction*, pp. 32–9, 43–4, 82.
[23] Ibid., pp. 45–7.
[24] R. Aron, 'Three Forms of Historical Intelligibility', in Conant (ed.), *Politics and History*, p. 47.
[25] Aron, *Introduction*, p. 45.

between *knowing* oneself (through memory and intellectual images) and *being* oneself (that immediate and global intuition of one's sensations). Aron notes that if individuals were somehow able to bring forth completely some part of their past to 'present consciousness, this miracle of resurrection would make knowledge, in the proper sense, useless. We should again *be* the same self that we had been.'[26] Thus, knowledge of self is caught between the Scylla of hoping to resurrect the past completely with the aid of a perfect memory (making knowledge in the strict sense useless) and the Charybdis of realizing that most memories are incomplete and often distorted (making knowledge of self fragmentary and perhaps inaccurate).

Aron reaches similar conclusions when he discusses knowledge of others and of what he terms '*l'esprit objectif*', the totality of '*collective representations* . . . for all the ways of thinking and acting which are characteristic of a society'.[27] Although understanding another person is predicated upon some sort of similarity between the persons involved, this does not at all imply that a person ever has direct access to another's consciousness. Rather, Aron claims that a person is able to understand another because the latter '*has become an object for the observer*'. As a person always objectifies another's words and actions in order to draw meaning from them, there will always remain 'essential uncertainties' as to the intentions of this other person.[28] As for *l'esprit objectif*, Aron argues that all individuals are shaped by the *esprit objectif* to which they belong. Even if certain historians wished to rid themselves completely of all the preconceptions and biases of their own *esprit objectif* in order to describe another or even their own, they are confronted with the fact that any *esprit objectif* is 'multiple, incoherent, without definite unity or certain limits', containing perhaps not '*one* but *several* meanings, depending on individuals or epochs'.[29]

What Aron's analysis highlights is that whether it concerns knowledge of self or of others, there is an insuperable gulf between living experience and retrospective knowledge of that experience once it is part of 'history'. This disjunction between experience and knowledge means that it is ultimately impossible to comprehend in all of its rich complexities even a small part of human history: not only are historical 'facts' virtually infinite in number, but it is impossible to retrieve completely the experienced meaning of the past event.[30] Historical knowledge is always a conceptual reconstruction of some part of the past and never a complete resurrection of it to present consciousness, or, more generally, historical knowledge is 'the *retrospective grasp of a human development*'.[31]

[26] Ibid., p. 51.
[27] Ibid., p. 73.
[28] Ibid., pp. 62–7.
[29] Ibid., pp. 74–6.
[30] Using the example of a battle, Aron notes that this entity, as 'reconstituted by the historian, has never been lived by anybody'. The battle cannot be considered as an 'elementary fact' since it is 'effectively constituted of a multiplicity of acts, gestures, thoughts, of the individual combatants and their leaders': it is the historian who organizes this multiplicity into an ordered whole. Of course, what is true of a battle is equally true for such concepts as the Middle Ages or Renaissance, where the spatial–temporal boundaries are more complex and indistinct. See R. Aron, 'The Philosophy of History', in M. Farber (ed.), *Philosophic Thought in France and the United States: Essays Representing the Major Trends in Contemporary French and American Philosophy* (Albany, NY, 1968), pp. 310–11.
[31] Aron, *Introduction*, p. 79.

Historians who wish to articulate a particular historical reconstruction must first develop or choose a system of interpretation in order to orient their research and determine the value and meaning of their findings. Although such a system of interpretation will make it possible to bring forth a particular historical reconstruction or understanding, that system will also have inherent limitations, if only because that system, by definition, will circumscribe the very activity of historians, depending on the goals they pursue and the relationships they hope to establish. As historians determine their own interpretive framework, there necessarily exists a plurality of systems of interpretation. Systems of interpretation are not at all 'inscribed' in the monuments or documents historians study, for these documents or monuments contain a multiplicity of possible meanings, none of which has any a priori privilege over any other.[32] Only in the natural sciences, where the 'truth of a scientific proposition is, under any conditions, independent of its origins', can there be a universally valid method to test the explanatory power of a hypothesis.[33]

The 'fundamental idea' which emerges from this discussion is the '*dissolution of the object*', that there is no prefabricated historical totality that science 'simply has to reproduce faithfully. The historical reality, because it is human, is *ambiguous* and *inexhaustible*.'[34] But it is essential to realize that Aron's conclusion thus far results from the distinction between historians and what they investigate: an entirely new subjective principle is revealed when it is understood that although the 'historian and historical individual differ', they also 'belong to the same whole'.[35] All historians have a more-or-less well-defined and unique perspective on the past, by which is meant that everything from the particular questions they ask to their presuppositions and biases is often shaped by their understanding of and reference to the present. An historian is somewhat like a 'prophet after the event', putting '*history into perspective*' for those living in the present but with their eyes towards the future.[36] For Aron, the plurality of systems of interpretation and perspectives are simply two sides of the same coin or, more precisely, two complementary aspects of

[32] Ibid., pp. 89–93, 97–101; and 'Evidence and Inference', p. 46.

[33] Aron, *Introduction*, p. 92. It is important to keep in mind that while Aron holds that there are considerable differences between the physical and historical sciences, there are also some fundamental similarities. 'In a strict sense, all the sciences spring from a certain manner of interrogating the real and this manner of interrogation is inspired or justified by a certain conception of the structure of reality. It is thus in the case of the physico-mathematical sciences, which were originally bound up with a certain philosophy of nature, even though the success of these sciences has led, gradually, to the forgetting of this philosophy.' In fact, it is the very success of the natural sciences that has allowed them 'to make abstraction of the implicit philosophy and elaborate the principles and methods of the effective science, according to the results obtained, as though no philosophy were implicated'. See Aron, 'Philosophy of History', p. 302.

[34] Aron, *Introduction*, p. 118.

[35] Ibid., p. 120.

[36] Ibid., p. 132. Although Aron believes that historians' epochs and social environments influence their research, he does not claim that their research is simply the product of these influences. See R. Aron, 'The Concepts of "Class Truth" and "National Truth" in the Social Sciences', in *Science and Freedom: Congress for Cultural Freedom* (London, 1955), pp. 156–70, and 'Max Weber and Modern Social Science', in Draus (ed.), *History, Truth, Liberty*, pp. 344–6. As K. Whiteside in 'Perspectivism and Historical Objectivity: Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Covert Debate with Raymond Aron', *History and Theory*, 25:2 (1986), p. 136, puts it: 'The historian's perspective-setting . . . is the result of a dialectic between an individual's vision and his historical-cultural context.' For an account of this very 'dialectic' in Aron's own political thought before and immediately after the Second World War, see S. Campbell, 'Raymond Aron During the Interwar Period: From Leftist Pacifism to a Critique of the Left', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 86:1 (1987), pp. 57–68, and 'Raymond Aron: The Making of a Cold Warrior', *The Historian*, 51:4 (1989), pp. 551–73.

human beings who, with a given historical perspective and interpretive system, seek to understand their own past. Therefore, while Aron's claim that human beings are 'both the subject and the object of historical knowledge' may appear superficial and even platitudinous, one must keep in mind the implications of this statement for the study of human history, and *a fortiori* for international relations theory.[37] Historical facts that have not been selected, ordered, and interpreted within a larger context would be truly uninteresting to human beings if indeed they were even intelligible at all.[38]

But if there are a plurality of perspectives and systems of interpretation, does it make any sense to speak of historical causality? And if so, what are the characteristics and limitations of these causal relations? Characteristically, Aron begins this inquiry by articulating the critical difference between human history and the natural sciences: whereas experiments can be repeated indefinitely in the laboratory, the historical event happens but once, and will not occur again. Following Max Weber, Aron maintains that every '*historian, to explain what did happen, asks himself what might have happened*'.[39] Historians must determine the most likely cause(s) of an historical event by constructing hypothetical causal developments, weighing and assessing a cause's probable influence on the event itself. Aron sees that such a procedure will give historians '*objective possibilities*', possibilities that conceptually express a more or less favourable condition for the development of the event in question.[40] As historians must inevitably conduct their causal investigations in a circular fashion (i.e., by articulating objective possibilities through an examination of the event and then analyzing these possibilities with reference to the event from which they were drawn), they can only speak about 'adequate' but not 'necessary' causes. Some degree of inference is always required in order to understand the cause(s) of an historical event, for historical understanding 'implies the retrospective grasp of what was *possible* at the moment of decision but *did not happen*'.[41]

Although Aron realizes that the above schema is the logical restatement of the 'spontaneous practice of the *man in the street*', the implications of this schema for historical research must be kept in mind.[42] In the first place, order and chance are concepts that do not have any 'absolute value' in history but are relative to the particular nexus of causes that the historian has found fit to reconstruct. As new questions can always be asked about a particular sequence of events, no objective method or universal set of propositions can be articulated in advance that would dictate precisely which kinds of causes historians should examine; their relative importance and the relationship between them; or even at what level historians should conduct their investigations. In the second place, Aron emphasizes that

[37] R. Aron, 'The Philosophy of History', in Conant (ed.), *Politics and History*, p. 5.
[38] In this respect, Aron has articulated what might be described as the social science equivalent of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. Historians are doomed to influence their investigations because they will always have a particular perspective and system of interpretation. 'History never completely overcomes this relativity, because life experiences constitute the material of the science, and because facts, to the extent that they transcend individuals, exist not in themselves, but by and for consciousness. History considers an object which not only has passed (if it is an event), not only has disappeared (if it is a natural or human condition), but which attains existence only in minds, and changes with them.' See Aron, *Introduction*, p. 289.
[39] Ibid., p. 160.
[40] Ibid., p. 161.
[41] Aron, 'Three Forms', p. 50.
[42] Aron, *Introduction*, p. 160.

historians must always remember that any causal inquiry begins with facts and situations that have already been accomplished but which could have been different. Although there may appear '*valid* reasons which afterwards confer an apparent necessity upon the effective outcome', to deprive the past of its once uncertain and future character—its lost unpredictability—is to substitute for what was once a vibrant, human world the laboratory of the natural scientist. In other words, historians and social scientists who forget that the supposed 'inevitability' of an historical event is always attributed to that event after it has happened are liable to fall prey to the '*illusion of fatality*', an illusion that 'contradicts [their own] contemporary *impression of contingency*'.[43]

Aron comes to nearly the same conclusions when he discusses sociological causality, which he defines as the attempt to establish 'general relationships between historical facts'.[44] Aron notes that because sociological concepts are constructed by sociologists themselves, no set of concepts can claim any a priori precedence over any other set. Furthermore, sociologists must realize that any one concept can never be completely isolated and/or distinguished from other important concepts. In this respect, sociological causality is caught in a conflict between 'the *necessity of classification* and the *impossibility of isolation*', and it is the result of this conflict that makes sociological causality (like historical causality) partial and probable rather than necessary.[45]

One important conclusion Aron draws from these arguments is that it is both misguided and fruitless to speak of unilinear causality. Using the Marxist's claim that the forces of production are the '*primary* or *exclusive* or *predominant* factor in history', Aron gives an implicit critique of any theoretical system that deprives the past of its once contingent character; eliminates completely the effects of chance and the actions of individuals in history; or translates history into a predetermined evolution.

> Indeed, how can the proposition, that the profits of production *determine* society as a whole, be proved? . . . How can we give a meaning to the expression '*in the last analysis*'? How prove that it is always the situation which is the *authentic cause* of an event, and that this situation itself is the effect of the method of production? . . . With reference to which term is this predominance to be estimated? Will one talk of a predominance which would be present in all societies, would appear in all historical phenomena? Such a conception, assuming that it was not self-contradictory, would call for unlimited demonstration extending over universal history.[46]

Although Aron concludes that there is '*no prime mover of the historical process*', this does not at all imply that causal analysis is alien to historical (or theoretical) investigations.[47] In the first place, the human mind is often able to discover an intrinsic intelligibility between an inferred cause of an historical event and its effect, and this intelligibility, while it does not carry with it the necessity found in the

[43] Ibid., p. 178.
[44] Ibid., p. 187.
[45] Ibid., p. 262. According to Aron (p. 225), statistical analysis cannot overcome the limitations associated with relativity and probability: not only is some sort of interpretation required to translate the numbers found in statistical columns into causal relations, but it is often the case that some statistics do not fit neatly into any recognizable category.
[46] Ibid., pp. 246–9.
[47] Ibid., p. 254.

natural sciences, is not opposed to the contingent nature of human history.[48] In the second place, even if human beings are considered 'contingent', 'individual', and 'free' such that it is impossible to determine laws comparable to those in the natural sciences, Aron notes, along with Max Weber, that the typical free act is 'the reasonable one', and it is precisely this sort of activity that is 'most likely to recur in so far as the situation to which it corresponds may be repeated'.[49] Thus, it is not the case that the limitations of historical causality make causal inquiry alien to the social sciences, but rather that the '*limits of causality account for the limits of objectivity*'.[50] In sum, what Aron demonstrates in the *Introduction* is that the quest for objectivity in the social sciences is compromised by two distinct principles: on the one hand, historians' understandings of the past are inextricably linked both to their historical perspectives and to their systems of interpretation; and on the other hand, historians' attempts to demonstrate causal relations can at best be partial and probabilistic.[51] While Aron may not be 'hostile to the methods of a more positivistic social science', the *Introduction* establishes that 'even rigorous empirical methods fail to achieve the sort of objectivity expected in the natural sciences'.[52] In no case can historians or theorists 'boast' that they have presented the 'definitive version' of the past.[53]

History and the theoretical enterprise

In this section, I will discuss three broad implications of the *Introduction* for Aron's understanding of the theoretical enterprise: first, for the character of international relations theory; second, for the importance of using the method of historical sociology; and third, for the dangers of using theory to make predictions and to dictate a doctrine of action.

Let us begin by laying out the elements of which a theory is composed. First, every theory requires a definition of the class of phenomena being investigated, an attempt to make clear the 'horizons considered to be fundamental'.[54] Second, a theory contains an analytical framework, a framework that includes the elaboration of fundamental concepts (e.g., force and power, strategy and diplomacy) as well as systems and types of systems (the general patterns of relations established between political units capable of being implicated in a general war). And lastly, theory

[48] See R. Aron, 'On False Historical Consciousness', in Draus (ed.), *History, Truth, Liberty*, pp. 98–103.
[49] Aron, *Introduction*, pp. 256–7.
[50] Ibid., p. 264.
[51] Not even Weber's attempt to overcome this subjectivity—namely, to claim that while historians freely dictate the direction of their inquiry, the results of their inquiry are objectively determined—satisfied Aron. Weber had neither demonstrated that it was 'possible to distinguish in reality between question and answer' nor shown that 'the experienced meaning [of an historical event] could be rigorously grasped'. See R. Aron, 'Max Weber and Michael Polanyi', in *The Logic of Personal Knowledge: Essays Presented to Michael Polanyi on his Seventieth Birthday* (London, 1961), p. 102.
[52] Whiteside 'Perspectivism', p. 135.
[53] Aron, 'Introduction', in Conant (ed.), *Politics and History*, p. xxiii.
[54] R. Aron, 'Theory and Theories in International Relations: A Conceptual Analysis', in N. Palmer (ed.), *A Design for International Relations Research: Scope, Theory, Method, and Relevance* (Philadelphia, PA, 1970), p. 55.

suggests certain 'effect phenomena' or 'determined factors', those principal elements (e.g., factors of power, choice of objectives) and recurrent situations (e.g., the frequency and types of war and peace) of international politics for which sociological analysis seeks to discover the 'cause phenomena' or 'determinants'.[55]

Why Aron chooses to define theory in these terms can best be understood by first discussing his acute awareness of the necessity of theory. Aron's claim in the *Introduction* that there are multiple levels of historical intelligibility means that individuals must employ some sort of theoretical framework in order to understand international politics: without theory, an individual would be hopelessly lost in a morass of 'facts' and 'figures', without any adequate means of ordering and analyzing them.[56] For Aron, theory helps to accomplish perhaps simple but nonetheless invaluable tasks, such as bringing to light elements of international politics that are little known or difficult to discern; establishing a hierarchy among diverse international activities; and allowing different historical periods or problems to be compared.[57] Theory is for the individual seeking to understand international relations what a system of interpretation is for the historian, namely, the indispensable 'instruments of analysis' with which the 'implicit logic' of interstate relations can be understood. Without theory, the 'intelligible texture' of these relations would remain hidden or obscure.[58]

The *Introduction* not only makes clear the vital importance of theory, but also reveals why Aron's theoretical framework focuses on trying to *understand* these relations rather than attempting to *explain* them. Although Aron claims in the *Introduction* that it is ultimately impossible to resurrect in its entirety the meaning of an historical event, it is nevertheless critical that the theorist makes a concerted effort to comprehend the event as it was experienced by the historical actors themselves. Only such faithfulness to the historical context of an event makes it possible to disclose its possible meaning, or, more generally, only by constructing a theory that attempts to understand and even to incorporate the perspectives of political actors can a theorist arguably claim to be bringing forth one authentic interpretation of the event. To abandon the actors' perspectives and to seek the meaning of the event in principles or forces of which the actors themselves were wholly unaware risks distorting the event by ascribing to them mechanistic principles of behaviour. (Indeed, how could a theorist even confirm an interpretation of an event if none of the decision-makers were aware of or admitted that certain principles or forces influenced them?) It is for these reasons that Aron rejects any 'science that gives to the forms of behaviour it studies explanations *contrary* to or *divorced* from the meaning understood by the participants' themselves.[59]

[55] R. Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations*, tr. R. Howard and A. Fox (New York, 1966), pp. 17, 177–80.

[56] Aron saw that there was a real need for an adequate theoretical framework in international relations, a discipline which had hitherto (at least in France) been monopolized by diplomatic historians, many of whom were ill equipped both to discuss the implicit logic of interstate relations and to recognize the need of bringing to bear the insights and conclusions of other social sciences, such as economics and psychology. See R. Aron, 'Political Science in France', in *Contemporary Political Science: A Survey of Methods, Research, and Training* (Paris, 1950), p. 57.

[57] See R. Aron, 'A propos de la théorie politique', in R. Aron, *Études politiques* (Paris, 1972), pp. 160–6.

[58] Aron, *Peace and War*, preface.

[59] S. Hoffmann, *The State of War: Essays on the Theory and Practice of International Politics* (New York, 1965), p. 25; see also P. Manent, 'Raymond Aron éducateur', *Commentaire*, 8(28–9) (1985), p. 161.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Aron begins his theoretical analysis with a definition that captures what many philosophers, jurists, soldiers, and diplomats have recognized as the distinctive characteristic of international relations, namely the 'legitimacy or legality of the use of military force'.[60] This definition distinguishes Aron from many other theorists; for while most theorists acknowledge that international relations takes place in an anarchical system, Aron makes this the focal point of his analysis, unpacking and articulating its manifold implications and consequences.[61] Now although Aron argues that international relations takes place under the 'shadow of war', he emphasizes that this is neither an endorsement of Machiavellian politics nor a categorical affirmation of the inevitability of war.[62] Instead, this definition and the theoretical framework which follows from it sheds light on problems that Aron believes all theorists must sooner or later discuss, problems such as:

> the nature of the actors or of the units at a given moment, the stakes of the conflicts between units at different moments, the manner of conduct of the actors as a function of their domestic regime and of the structure of the system, and the like.[63]

Of course, Aron is aware that other definitions and approaches are possible, e.g., taking peace and cooperation as the essential feature of international relations or importing definitions and concepts from other social disciplines. But with reference to each of these alternatives, Aron would certainly ask how significant a theoretical definition and framework can be that either does not recognize the meaning of war and its impact on societies, or fails to see anything distinctive about international politics compared to other social phenomena. The perspective of historical actors is Aron's point of departure since only an understanding of this perspective can begin to reveal the meaning that human beings attribute to international relations.[64]

This focus on understanding leads Aron to emphasize the unit level of analysis in his analytical framework. For Aron, an organized political unit, whether it is the ancient *polis* or a modern state, is the most fundamental object of study; for it is precisely these units, as represented by diplomats and soldiers, that make the critical decisions concerning peace and war.[65] According to Aron, politics has an autonomy

[60] R. Aron, 'What is a Theory of International Relations?', *Journal of International Affairs*, 21:2 (1967), p. 190.

[61] See J. Hall, 'Raymond Aron's Sociology of States, or the Non-Relative Autonomy of Inter-State Behaviour', in M. Shaw (ed.), *War, State, and Society* (London, 1984), p. 73; and S. Hoffmann, 'Raymond Aron and the Theory of International Relations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 29:4 (1985), p. 14.

[62] Cf. Aron, *Peace and War*, pp. 339–66, and B. Kerkvliet, 'A Critique of Raymond Aron's Theory of War and Prescriptions', *International Studies Quarterly*, 12:4 (1968), pp. 424–5.

[63] Aron, 'Theory and Theories', p. 58.

[64] One question that can legitimately be raised today about Aron's point of departure is whether or not international relations can be so clearly separated from domestic politics. Aron is aware that his definition of international relations cannot categorically circumscribe or distinguish this type of relation from similar types of political relations in and between states, as well as that domestic factors influence the behaviour of states internationally. Nonetheless, despite the perhaps increasing interconnectedness between domestic and international politics, Aron's point of departure still seems to be exceedingly helpful (if not the most accurate) if only because of the lack of a monopoly of legitimate violence in the international system and the continuing presence and relevance of armed conflict. For a recent and quite thoughtful critique of this position, see H. Milner, 'The Assumption of Anarchy in International Relations Theory', *Review of International Studies*, 17:1 (1991), pp. 67–85. I am thankful to Stanley Hoffmann for pointing out this important question, which certainly deserves more attention than I can give it in this essay.

[65] Aron, *Peace and War*, pp. 4–8, 16, 24.

or 'rhyme and reason' of its own, and it cannot be reduced to economic or societal factors: while politics is doubtlessly influenced by economics or society, politics 'has its own laws of operation and development; and it, in its turn, influences [economics and society] since it is through politics that decisions aiming at achieving the objectives of the entire collectivity are taken'.[66] In trying to understand a unit's diplomatic-strategic behaviour, Aron pays particular attention to its regime, for different types of political organizations significantly influence who will hold political power, how leaders will exercise that power, and what foreign policy they will pursue.[67] Aron's emphasis on regimes, as Edward Kolodziej correctly surmises, 'confirmed his commitment to a study of international relations as the study of history', for the study of regimes (and politics generally) entails understanding the rich historical context that influences a unit's international behaviour.[68] This emphasis on the unit level of analysis can ultimately be traced back to Aron's comments in the *Introduction* concerning *l'esprit objectif* (which can loosely be translated here as the political unit in its historical, cultural, and political entirety) as that conceptual whole which decisively influences the behaviour of individuals.

Aron's emphasis on understanding and on the unit level of analysis may at first glance seem at odds with his elaboration of international systems. Although Aron agrees à la Kenneth Waltz that the international system is anarchic and that the configuration of the relation of forces is an important variable in the system, Aron argues that these two factors alone are not enough to describe and to understand a system.[69] A theorist must also take into account the heterogeneity or homogeneity of the regimes of the great powers in any given system. For Aron, the relation of forces and the heterogeneity/homogeneity of the system are not 'two rigorously circumscribed variables, but two complementary aspects of any historical constellation', and while these two elements can be separated conceptually, they are both 'indispensable to the interpretation of diplomatic-strategic behaviour in any period'.[70] To concentrate, therefore, on the relation of forces alone is ultimately misguided: not only is it difficult to see how a theorist can empirically prove that the means of policy (relation of forces) decisively influences the choice of ends (stability or instability of the system), but it is also true historically that any relation of forces can lead to war or peace. As states can change their objectives and goals within a given system, then a system in which the relation of forces is known still remains too

[66] R. Aron, 'Les sociologues et les institutions représentatives', in Aron, *Études politiques*, p. 285. See also R. Aron, *Democracy and Totalitarianism: A Theory of Political Systems*, tr. V. Ionescu (Ann Arbor, MI, 1968), pp. 3–13; B. de Jouvenel, 'Raymond Aron et l'autonomie de l'ordre politique', in Casanova et al. (eds.), *Mélanges en l'honneur de Raymond Aron*, pp. 233–47; and D. Mahoney, *The Liberal Political Science of Raymond Aron: A Critical Introduction* (Lanham, MD, 1992), pp. 121–3, 137–47. For a discussion on whether or not this is Aron's final word on the subject, see F. Draus, 'Raymond Aron et la politique', *Revue française de science politique*, 34:6 (1984), pp. 1198–1210; and M. Merle, 'Le Dernier Message de Raymond Aron: système interétatique ou société internationale?', *Revue française de science politique*, 34:6 (1984), pp. 1181–97.

[67] Aron, *Peace and War*, pp. 279ff. Aron's emphasis on the regime is in many ways the obverse of his notion of the autonomy of politics. As politics cannot be reduced to and explained by economic concerns (even though such concerns influence politics), so is it impossible to explain a regime's foreign policy simply by reference to systemic constraints or national interest.

[68] E. Kolodziej, 'Raymond Aron: A Critical Retrospective and Prospective', *International Studies Quarterly*, 29:4 (1985), p. 8; see also G. Ionescu, 'Raymond Aron: A Modern Classicist', in A. de Crespigny and K. Minogue (eds.), *Contemporary Political Philosophers* (London, 1976), pp. 206–7.

[69] K. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA, 1979).

[70] Aron, *Peace and War*, p. 148.

'indeterminate' for laws to be discovered concerning its 'functioning or development'.[71] Thus, the difference between Aron's systemic analysis and that of someone like Waltz is that Aron does not believe in a 'theory of undetermined behaviour', one that divorces the unit's intentions from the forces it possesses.[72] Contrary to Waltz, Aron is more than willing to be 'reductionist' in his approach in order to remain close to the political texture of international behaviour.[73] Indeed, as Ronald Yalem indicates, it is precisely Aron's understanding of the close relationship between systemic and unit-level factors that allows him to highlight the similarities and differences between different historical systems.[74]

The final significant influence of the *Introduction* on Aron's understanding of theory is that it makes clear theory's limitations. In the first place, the fragmentary and partial character of historical understanding means that no theory can ever completely explain the totality of interstate relations. Aron is well aware that the 'very nature of the subject matter' of international relations, its inherent complexity as a human phenomenon, prevents it from being understood as a 'closed' system of knowledge.[75] In the second place, the *Introduction* demonstrates that the character of historical and sociological causality restricts the explanatory power of hypotheses generated from any theoretical framework. A probable (but not a necessary) causal relation is the best a theorist can hope to achieve; for lacking the type of confirmation available to the natural scientist through repeated experiments, the theorist has to be content with more or less 'direct and indirect confirmations' from the historical record.[76] Aron argues that any theorist who claims otherwise is probably basing this claim on a particular historical reconstruction rather than upon some philosophical truth. The conclusions of Aron's philosophy of history remain logically prior to any theoretical interpretation of history. Although theorists today may be more sensitive to theory's limitations than they were in the past, Aron helps us to pinpoint these limitations, thereby moderating our hopes of and disappointments with theory.[77]

[71] Ibid., p. 147. If anything, Aron (p. 95) sees that the homogeneity or heterogeneity of states has more influence on the system than vice versa. 'Therefore, the principal actors never have the sense of being subject to the system in the manner in which an average-size firm is subject to the laws of the market . . . In each period the principal actors have determined the system more than they have been determined by it. A change of regime within one of the chief powers suffices to change the style and sometimes the course of international relations.'

[72] S. Hoffmann, 'An American Social Science: International Relations', *Daedalus*, 106:3 (1977), p. 52.

[73] Cf. Waltz, *Theory*, pp. 43–9, and 'Realist Thought', pp. 29–37, with Aron, 'Theory and Theories', pp. 61–4.

[74] R. Yalem, 'The Theory of International Relations of Raymond Aron', *International Relations*, 3 (Nov. 1971), p. 919.

[75] Aron, 'What is a Theory', p. 196; *Peace and War*, pp. 7, 15, 17, 88–93.

[76] Aron, 'What is a Theory', p. 192.

[77] Aron notes that part of the reason why international relations theorists are often unwilling to accept the limitations of theory is that they have become enchanted with the success of economics. Aron, however, points out that this success depends by and large on the 'imaginary actor' *homo economicus*, that self-seeking being whose sole concern is to maximize profit. International relations, by contrast, does not have a *homo diplomaticus*, and this means that the more-or-less rigorous causal propositions generated in economics cannot be achieved in international relations. 'The *diplomaticus* of theory, who would have as his goal the maximization of resources, of actual forces, or of power, would not be an idealized portrait of the diplomats of all ages; he would be the caricatured simplification of certain diplomatic personages at certain periods.' See Aron, 'What is a Theory', p. 187, and *Peace and War*, p. 91. As the goals states seek are diverse, international relations theory is limited by this very diversity. For a thoughtful discussion of whether or not Aron is too pessimistic concerning the 'indeterminacy' of international politics—but a discussion that

These ideas suggest why Aron's understanding of theory is not 'thesis-driven'. Since diplomatic-strategic behaviour is essentially indeterminate, Aron did not want to devote *Peace and War* to an exploration of several partial hypotheses; instead, he developed what he thought was the proper analytical framework with which fruitful propositions could be generated. This has led some theorists to claim that Aron does not really have a 'theory' of international relations at all or, more generally, that Aron's 'theory' is for the most part only a conceptual framework.[78] Now Aron is aware of these objections, and he asks whether his analysis should be classified as a 'theory' or as a 'conceptualization'.

> It all depends on what we expect of a theory, of the model of a theory (in physics or in economics) to which we refer. Such a conceptual analysis seems to me to fulfil some of the functions that we can expect from a theory: it defines the essential features of a sub-system; it provides a list of the main variables; it suggests certain hypotheses about the operation of the sub-system, depending on whether it is bipolar or multipolar, homogeneous or heterogeneous.[79]

What we can say is that while Aron's theory is not a system of interconnected hypotheses, it does allow a theorist to enumerate the key elements of international relations—the effect phenomena—from which such hypotheses can be generated. It seems that Aron thought it more important to make certain that his analytical framework helped to elicit the right questions about international relations, that it allowed individuals to see the plurality of factors animating international politics.

The above discussion demonstrates how rich Aron's understanding of theory is. As the conclusions of the *Introduction* compelled Aron to reject the claim that a conclusive and comprehensive theory of international relations could be articulated, Aron developed a theoretical framework that respected these conclusions. Since Aron is highly cognizant of the multiple levels of intelligibility in history, his analytical framework is sensitive to history's fragmented and contextual character, and this means that it can be used to shed light on a broad range of historical periods and questions.[80] Granted, Aron's virtual dismissal of highly abstract, deductive analysis, as well as his penchant for arriving at context-specific, partial truths, means that his theory lacks the parsimony and apparent rigour of the so-called scientific approach; but it must also be asked whether this is not the hallmark of good social science.[81] Aron's theory provides a refuge for those individuals who are dissatisfied with theoretical explanations that at once are too far removed from the texture of political life and do not seem sensitive enough to capture the diverse historical factors influencing international politics.

The second broad implication of the *Introduction* for Aron's understanding of the theoretical enterprise is that it reveals the importance of using the method of

operates within Aron's own theoretical framework—see J.-B. Duroselle, '*Paix et guerre entre les nations*: la théorie des relations internationales selon Raymond Aron', *Revue française de science politique*, 12:4 (1962), pp. 963–79.

[78] H. Morgenthau, 'Review of *Peace and War*', *American Political Science Review*, 61:4 (1967), pp. 1110–12; and C. McClelland, 'Conceptualization, Not Theory', in Palmer (ed.), *Design for International Relations Research*, pp. 72–5.

[79] Aron, 'What is a Theory', pp. 193–4.

[80] Ibid., pp. 194–5.

[81] See, for example, H. Bull, 'International Theory: The Case for the Classical Approach', in Knorr and Rosenau (eds.), *Contending Approaches*, pp. 20–38; T. Strong, 'History and Choices: The Foundations of the Political Thought of Raymond Aron', *History and Theory*, 11:2 (1972), pp. 179–92; and M. Beloff, 'Historians and Others: On the Sense of History', *Encounter*, 54:2 (1980), pp. 61–6.

historical sociology. As the *Introduction* suggests, individuals seeking to understand social and historical phenomena must walk a tightrope between using general and abstract sociological concepts, on the one hand, and paying close attention to unique historical events, on the other. Historical sociology assists the individual in walking this tightrope by beginning with the claim (or observation) that before any theoretical framework can be elaborated, an individual must have some sort of understanding of the historical record.[82] For Aron, this means not only reading and studying a wide variety of sources, from diplomatic documents to philosophical treatises, but also being familiar with the most compelling and influential historical interpretations and perspectives. By making history the ineluctable source of theory, Aron wants to emphasize how important it is to begin as close as possible to historical phenomena as they are presented to the potential theorist and not as they are filtered through or subsumed under abstract systems and universal propositions. The overwhelming importance of history for Aron is evidenced by the fact that it is vividly present in all four parts of *Peace and War*.

> At the level of theory in the narrow sense, it [history] is the primary raw material, and the concepts and types defined by theory are drawn from the systematic comparative study of concrete data. At the second level [sociology], where hypotheses about material and moral causes are filtered through historical analysis, history is the touchstone. At the third level [history], it is an object of direct investigation. At the level of philosophy [praxeology], history is being judged.[83]

While this may all seem rather commonsensical, there seems to be a pervasive avoidance or even fear of giving history such an explicitly prominent role in international relations theory. Thus, while it is at first encouraging to read a theorist like Peter Katzenstein, who, in summarizing the proceedings of a workshop on international change, writes that many theorists recognize the 'importance of history and context-specific propositions', it is disconcerting to see that historical sociology is only mentioned in passing. Indeed, how serious can this renewed interest in history be when, on the one hand, Katzenstein claims that scholars 'must bring their own philosophy of history' to the important question of whether 'change or continuity is the dominant characteristic of international politics', while on the other hand, the theoretical understandings of history that he cites view history simply as 'a storehouse of facts' or as 'a sequence of irregular big bangs'?[84] While there may be

[82] Aron, *Introduction*, pp. 177–81. Of course, this claim raises the following question: if any historical investigation already assumes the possession of some sort of system of interpretation, how can an individual begin to make sense of the historical record without first articulating that system? Although Aron might answer this question by stating that an individual's initial interpretive framework is a product of education or of historians and leaders who have written about the past, the more important point is that as an individual begins to study history, there must be a corresponding effort to articulate a system of interpretation as it emerges from and is shaped by this study. Not surprisingly, then, the first thing that Aron does in *Peace and War* is to make as clear as possible the interpretative framework that emerged from his many years of historical research.

[83] Hoffmann, *State of War*, pp. 32–3.

[84] P. Katzenstein, 'International Relations Theory and the Analysis of Change', in E.-O. Czempiel and J. Rosenau (eds.), *Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges: Approaches to World Politics for the 1990s* (Lexington, MA, 1989), pp. 296–8. There are other indications that the renewed interest in history in no way comes close to Aron's philosophical interest, e.g., when Katzenstein (p. 299) observes that 'most of the theorists published in this book have made it a habit to read history' or again that 'theorists of international relations are also reading history because, let's face it, reading history is fun'. If these comments are indicative of the seriousness of this renewed interest in history, then Aron's comments about making history the touchstone of theory retain their force today.

some renewed interest in history, it is certainly not the kind of interest that would significantly inform and shape the very character of international relations theorizing itself. This is evidenced when Katzenstein writes that he does not 'see any reason why international relations theory should be called upon to answer questions in the philosophy of history'.[85] The issue is not whether international relations theory should inform a philosophy of history; the issue is that a philosophy of history must inform all authentic theoretical investigations.

While history supplies the raw material for theory, Aron knows that a theorist cannot remain on the level of history alone: sociological analysis must inform historical research. Aron argues that just as general theories which are not historically informed are liable to distort the event, so too is a strictly historical account—one that rejects using general relationships drawn across historical periods—likely to describe an event without really understanding it. Sociology gains its strength from helping to bring to the foreground certain variables or factors that an historian is likely to dismiss or to miss altogether by paying too close attention to the details of an event. By codifying these and other variables, sociology is able to draw up a 'list of questions to be answered by analysis of the diplomatic complex', giving the theorist the conceptual and analytical tools necessary to distinguish 'the essential from the subsidiary, and deep-lying trends from accidents' in and across historical periods. This method of codifying variables and analyzing their respective influence across different historical periods gives historical sociology its distinctive characteristic, namely 'comparative study'.[86] Through such comparative studies, historical sociology not only checks the historical veracity of general causal propositions and helps to prevent the oversimplification and distortion to which such explanations are prone, but also isolates and highlights those variables which may have given rise to a particular conflict or which influenced the pursuit of a certain foreign policy. Historical sociology is for Aron the only method that continually shuffles back and forth between the general (macroscopic or sociological analysis) and the particular (microscopic or historical studies), and the one that can lead to as full and as accurate an understanding of international politics as possible. By plunging sociological analysis back into history, Aron prevents his theoretical analysis from becoming too deterministic and abstract; and by stepping back from the historical landscape, Aron also avoids the mistake of claiming that international relations displays no recurrent patterns of behaviour. Although Aron offers no formula as to how to strike a balance between historical and sociological inquiry, the *Introduction* shows that each kind of inquiry implies and complements the other.[87]

Because of its emphasis on history and comparative studies, historical sociology often frames questions and addresses problems about international politics in the same way that diplomats do. In this respect, a theorist might be tempted to use such analysis to predict the future or to prescribe categorically a certain course of action. Aron, however, is emphatic in denying that theory should ever dictate a 'doctrine for action'.[88] These remarks help to introduce the third implication of the *Introduction*, namely that no theory of international relations can be, or should even strive to be,

[85] Ibid., p. 296.
[86] R. Aron, 'Conflict and War from the Viewpoint of Historical Sociology', in R. Aron, *The Nature of Conflict: Studies on the Sociological Aspects of International Relations* (Paris, 1957), pp. 190–8.
[87] See Aron, *Introduction*, pp. 187, 210, 213, 229, and 'Conflict and War', pp. 185–7.
[88] Aron, 'What is a Theory', p. 189.

operational, dictating 'to the [political] actor the decision or the strategy . . . that scientific knowledge urges him to take'.[89] The *Introduction* indicates the limitations of theory in this respect in at least two ways. In the first place, since Aron's philosophy of history emphasizes that human choice is an essential characteristic of the past—i.e., that the past could have been different—to claim that a theory can predict the future is to eliminate that element of free choice from the present and to instil into the future a false sense of determinism. In the second place, since every historical action takes place in some relative context—since every historical event, while it might resemble past events, is always in its totality a unique conjunction of historical forces—to use theory to prescribe a specific action is inevitably to risk applying an inappropriate theoretical framework to the present situation. Although the implications of these conclusions put Aron squarely at odds with those social scientists who believe that a 'science that is not operational is not a science', Aron is much more concerned with what might happen should theory attain such sovereignty in politics.[90] A diplomat is likely to become a prisoner of theory, unable either to understand the motivations of allies and enemies or to recognize creative solutions to crises. Thus, Aron never ceases to argue that the attempt to quantify international relations mathematically is alien to the uncertainties and contingent nature of history, the future, and above all politics: not only would mathematical analysis discourage the examination of variables that are notoriously difficult to quantify (e.g., ideology or glory), it would also tend to ignore the fact that in international relations the 'rules' of the game often change, the stakes involved in dispute are diverse, and the implications of decisions have long-lasting effects.[91] As John Hall points out, it was precisely because the United States employed and became trapped by a false theoretical understanding in the Vietnam War, treating the 'situation under the aegis of a strategic theory designed to deal with a superpower', that leaders failed to see the actual 'stakes' involved in the conflict and could not imagine how to respond to it effectively.[92]

Even if theoretical knowledge cannot eliminate the essential uncertainty found in political life, Aron is careful not to go to the other extreme and to claim that theoretical analysis is useless to diplomats—as long as they do not forget the uniqueness of their own situation, a situation from which theoretical analysis necessarily abstracts. For Aron knows that the question, ultimately, is not whether theoretical knowledge is going to be used by diplomats, but rather how it is going to be used. Aron urges diplomats to 'apply all of the abstract knowledge at [their] disposal to the unique situation as it exists at the moment, not in order to eliminate but to delineate and isolate the element of unpredictable uniqueness'.[93] Theoretical knowledge cannot categorically determine which values and ideals diplomats should pursue, but once those moral questions have been decided, theoretical analysis can help to highlight the key elements of an event and thereafter suggest the probable

[89] Aron, 'Theory and Theories', pp. 64–5.
[90] Aron, 'What is a Theory', p. 201.
[91] See Aron, *Peace and War*, pp. 767–87.
[92] Hall, *Diagnoses*, p. 173.
[93] Aron, 'Max Weber', in Draus (ed.), *History, Truth, Liberty*, p. 336; cf. Aron, *Introduction*, pp. 324–5, and 'Three Forms', pp. 54–7.

consequences of certain courses of action.[94] Aron suggests that theorists can become counsellors to diplomats but not their prophets, a recognition of the fact that while theory cannot predict or categorically determine certain actions, it can suggest decisions that are likely to be better or worse than others.[95] The theorist must constantly keep in mind the human element inherent in political phenomena; that individuals both make choices that could have been different and are continually being influenced by their historical reflections and environment. As Aron playfully surmises, 'if a modernist accuses a traditionalist of furnishing no operational theory, the latter will have no trouble in returning the compliment'.[96]

The 'third debate' and the relevance of Aron today

Having discussed some of the implications of Aron's philosophy of history for his understanding of the theoretical enterprise, we are now in a better position to see how his works can help to illuminate and to clarify the 'third debate' in international relations theory, i.e., the challenge being launched against the 'ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundations' of positivistic social science by so-called post-positivists.[97] The thesis of this part of the essay is simple. Aron is the prophet of the disappointment of positivism in its search for a cumulative behavioural science; and if we had paid more attention to Aron's work as a whole, either we would not be having this debate at all or, if we were, we would be in a better position to state precisely the problems with positivism and to answer questions being raised about its fundamental assumptions and operative principles.

According to Lapid, the reason there is a third debate at all is that positivism has failed to deliver on its 'promise for a cumulative behavioural science'. Despite the fact that the second debate between 'history' and 'science' was decided long ago in favour of 'science', neither school apparently challenged the epistemological foundations of positivism. Now although Lapid admits that 'post-positivism is not a unitary philosophical platform', he sees that post-positivism is challenging positivism on three broad fronts, the first of which is paradigmatism, or the heightened

[94] It is because political questions necessarily involve moral questions that Aron denies that a strictly scientific (i.e., value-free) study of politics is possible. Aron's understanding of the practical implications of theory strives to reach a 'middle ground between the radical Weberian distinction between moral choice and scientific demonstration on the one hand and the scientific demonstration of moral choice on the other hand'. Theory cannot determine moral choice, because of the element of uncertainty and unpredictability found in all forms of choice; but theory is not divorced from moral choice since all theoretical frameworks influence and are influenced by politics and morality. At best, theoretical analysis can inform and clarify political decisions. See R. Pierce, *Contemporary French Political Thought* (London, 1966), p. 240.

[95] Aron gives several examples of the kind of 'help' that theory can offer in the nuclear age. Since the destructive power of nuclear weapons is so great, it is necessary to have sufficient conventional forces to prevent an unwanted *fait accompli*. Or again, theory suggests that in a confrontation between two nuclear powers, a state should gradually demonstrate its resolve to the other state rather than give nuclear ultimatums; for the other state might think that such an ultimatum is a bluff, something that would be less likely to occur should a state give repeated manifestations of its political resolve. See Aron, 'What is a Theory', pp. 202–4.

[96] Aron, 'Theory and Theories', p. 66.

[97] Y. Lapid, 'The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in a Post-Positivist Era', *International Studies Quarterly*, 33:3 (1989), p. 236. Because Lapid summarizes and brings into critical focus the major themes of this debate, I will take the article as a touchstone in this section.

'concern with meta-scientific constructs which incorporate integral thematic components as a precondition of scientific intelligibility'. Paradigmatism argues that 'meta-scientific constructs come and go in complete packages', and that only these packages 'can qualify as proper units of development and appraisal in science'. The 'empirically corroborated law or generalization' can no longer stand alone as the fundamental unit of knowledge, but must be replaced (or supplemented) by a set of criteria including the theorist's own analytic and thematic assumptions.[98]

Clearly, Aron argued in a similar fashion nearly half a century ago. The generalizations resulting from causal analysis are not discrete units of knowledge divorced from a theorist's analytic and thematic premises; rather, such generalizations are inextricably embedded within and emerge from a specific system of interpretation and perspective, an understanding of which is essential for the fullest appreciation of a theorist's work. Moreover, not only is Aron able to tell us why the claims of paradigmatism are true for the social sciences in general, but he is also able to pinpoint why they are true for international relations theory in particular, namely, because of its eminently historical character. In this respect, competing paradigms in international relations could be evaluated and compared by examining the philosophy of history underlying a theorist's work, and Aron gives us an illustrative example of this kind of critical examination in his lifelong analysis of Marxism and Leninism. And finally, returning to Aron's work would also help to make clear that while the 'empirically corroborated law or generalization' cannot stand by itself as the fundamental unit of scientific knowledge, generalizations that respect the limits of sociological and historical causality are indispensable in the social sciences. Despite the partial and probable character of causal analysis, such generalizations are one essential way to bring forth the meaning of international politics.

The second challenge to positivism that Lapid discusses is perspectivism, or the increased attention being given to a theorist's presuppositions, assumptions, and premises. Perspectivism maintains that 'meaning and understanding are not intrinsic to the world but, on the contrary, are continuously constructed, defended, and challenged'. A theorist's 'guiding assumptions' are the source of theoretical knowledge as well as ignorance, and in this respect such assumptions 'may hinder *or* facilitate theoretical growth'.[99] Now while some of the claims of perspectivism are not unique to post-positivism, Aron clearly anticipates the thrust of these arguments: in fact, Aron shows himself to be one of the few theorists who try to live up to the demands of perspectivism by spelling out his own epistemological and theoretical premises in the *Introduction* and *Peace and War*. Nonetheless, Aron does not embrace the more radical claims of perspectivism, most notably the subordination of data to theory.[100] Although the precise relation between data and theory remains somewhat ambiguous in Aron's work, data are both the starting-point of theoretical inquiry (for there has to be something mysterious, unclear, or intriguing about the data that prompts and warrants theoretical investigation) and the terminus of it (for the theorist has to return to the data in order to see if theoretical analysis helped to clarify the original problem). There may be multiple levels of intelligibility in history, but history still remains the touchstone for articulating these different meanings. Thus, while Aron would admit that meaning

[98] Ibid., pp. 236–40.
[99] Ibid., pp. 241–2.
[100] Ibid., pp. 243, 246–7.

and understanding are in some sense constructed, they are not 'free' constructions in the sense that any theoretical understanding can be used to clarify a particular set of data: theory cannot impose itself on data any more than data can dictate a unique theoretical perspective.[101]

By focusing on the historical character of international relations, Aron helps us to see why paradigmatism and perspectivism are really two sides of the same coin. Historical knowledge always comes in complete packages, and included in any package are the theorist's underlying thematic assumptions. In this respect, an increase in the number of paradigms and perspectives will not make the study of international relations any more 'scientific', nor will the liberation of theory from data improve the quality of theory: international relations theory is not on par with the natural sciences not because positivism has led theorists astray but because of the very character of the subject matter.[102] Aron's work suggests that the absolutely worst response to the failure of positivism would be to jump on a speeding train heading in the other direction, for theorists are no more likely to find a theoretical El Dorado there than they would with a strictly positivistic orientation.[103] To understand the problems with positivism does not require abandoning it wholesale, for at the very least positivism correctly focuses on what is most important in the social sciences, namely phenomenal knowledge. Discussions over paradigms and perspectives are essential, but, at least for international relations theory *per se*, such discussions should lead to a better understanding of international politics.

The above remarks help us to see how Aron would respond to the third challenge facing positivism, namely, the movement towards methodological pluralism and relativism.[104] Now Aron would agree that there exists a certain degree of relativity in the initial stages of theorizing, for all theorists will begin their analysis based upon those aspects of international politics which they find most important to understand. In principle, there is no privileged path that a theorist can take, no question or investigation that can be excluded beforehand as a point of departure. Moreover, a theorist's conceptualizations *per se* cannot be proved either true or false, but only announce the initial stages in the development of a system of interpretation. For Aron, it is above all 'the aid that [the concept] gives, and the light that it throws on reality' that allows the theorist 'the possibility of evaluating the term's usefulness'.[105]

[101] We can note here in passing that the method of historical sociology tries to safeguard against both of these extremes by expressing the dialectical relationship between theory and data, i.e., the necessity of continually moving back and forth from data to theory and from theory to data. For an interesting description and discussion of the dialectical character of Aron's theory of international relations as a whole, see A. Piquemal, *Raymond Aron et l'ordre international* (Paris, 1978).

[102] See Lapid, 'Third Debate', pp. 240–1, 245–6; and K. Holsti, 'Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Which Are the Fairest Theories of All?', *International Studies Quarterly*, 33:3 (1989), pp. 257–8.

[103] Of course, this assumes that post-positivists are ultimately interested in increasing phenomenal knowledge about international politics. But as Thomas Biersteker suggests, some post-positivists (as well as positivists) have a decidedly social and political purpose to their work, and one would have to wonder whether these theorists are more interested in promoting a certain political programme or in adding to current research. If the former is true, then post-positivists may indeed find their theoretical El Dorado by using their theories to advance certain policy recommendations. See T. Biersteker, 'Critical Reflections on Post-Positivism in International Relations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 33:3 (1989), pp. 264–6. Cf. J. George, 'International Relations and the Search for Thinking Space: Another View of the Third Debate', *International Studies Quarterly*, 33:3 (1989), pp. 272–3; and Lapid, 'Third Debate', p. 247.

[104] Lapid, 'Third Debate', pp. 243–4.

[105] Aron, 'Theory and Theories', pp. 57–8, and 'What is a Theory', pp. 196–7.

Thus, Aron would agree with post-positivists that there is no a priori criterion by which a theory can be judged true or false; rather, the validity of a theory will be determined by how well it can clarify the particular material that initially prompted theoretical inquiry. But Aron would take issue with post-positivists by asking whether all theories are equally significant, or if some do not address more important questions than others. In other words, Aron argues that a careful reading of the historical record reveals that the defining characteristic of international politics is that it is concerned with issues of war and peace: can post-positivists return to the historical record and justify the significance of their theories in the same way? In this respect, one way to evaluate post-positivist theories (at least those that claim to be highly significant) is to see how well they help to understand 'traditional' issues such as the initiation of a specific war or a crisis situation.[106] The challenge to post-positivists, therefore, would be either to demonstrate to what extent their theories illuminate these events or to argue that such events were not or are no longer significant.

While the above remarks reveal how Aron anticipates and would have responded to the post-positivist critique of the social sciences, there is another reason why Aron's work can and should be studied by those in the mêlée of this debate. For if post-positivists (and others) are ultimately dissatisfied with modelling international relations theory after economics and want to move towards the model of sociology, then what better theorist than Aron to look to as a forerunner of this kind of approach?[107] Aron is one of a handful of theorists who, along with the post-positivists, want to reveal the broad range of questions and issues that theoretical analysis can address and who refuse to oversimplify the complexities of international politics. But like the positivists, Aron does not want theoretical pluralism for its own sake, but instead wants theories to increase phenomenal knowledge, especially the kind of knowledge that illuminates the most important questions about international politics, namely, those concerning peace and war. In either case, it is difficult to see how positivists or post-positivists can ignore Aron's work.

Relativism and the search for standards

Even for those theorists who would agree that Aron's work could clarify and inform critical discussions about positivism and post-positivism, the question can be asked whether or not the conclusions of the *Introduction* lead insuperably to relativism. Kerry Whiteside poignantly reveals this difficulty.

> [A] troubling ambiguity clouds this entire work: it is never clear how Aron could defend *any* sort of historical knowledge. He denies that he is a skeptic. He admits, for example, that there are 'partial historical laws' and 'partial necessities'; there are 'permanent conditions of collective life.' But the same acid used to dissolve the massive systems of Hegel, Comte, and Marx must certainly also eat away Aron's fragile assertions.[108]

[106] See Biersteker, 'Critical Reflections', p. 266.
[107] Lapid, 'Third Debate', pp. 249–50.
[108] Whiteside, 'Perspectivism', p. 137.

Aron was not unaware of this problem. Writing about the *Introduction* many years later, he observed that:

> Because of peremptory formulas (for example, the *dissolution of the object*) and the lack of adequate distinctions among the various kinds of uncertainty or interpretation, the book gave the impression of a historical relativism bordering on skepticism. By now I thought quite differently. I pointed out the dogmatic scientism of vulgar Marxism and insisted on the plurality of historical interpretations not to open the way to the arbitrariness of grandiose visions but to take into account the plurality of modes of intelligibility.[109]

In order to see that Aron wants to guard against relativism, it is essential to recall the critical distinction made at the beginning of the *Introduction* between objectivity as a universally valid historical method and objectivity as the accurate reporting of historical documents and events. No matter what system of interpretation or perspective an historian employs, that system must conform to this second definition of objectivity: that millions of people died during World War I is a fact to which every historian must assent; it is an entirely different matter to understand why such a conflagration erupted in the first place. Thus, Aron wants to argue that some facts, as for example the 'standard of living of various classes', can be '*objectively* assessed' and that this assessment can 'determine the outcome of some debates'.[110]

Nevertheless, while Aron wants to maintain that certain facts can be objectively grasped, it still remains true that all facts must be interpreted if they are to be intelligible.

> If the historian limited himself to fixing the visible event (John Lackland went that way), the latter would, in effect, be free of the uncertainty bound up with knowledge of the psychic, but by the same token it would be stripped of all intrinsic intelligibility; material data would be observed, the unity of which would be arbitrarily constructed by the judgement of the historian. Such is not the case: the fact is not merely the physical arrival of John Lackland at a certain place; it is also his intention in going there, or more precisely, it is the act of going from one place to another.[111]

Thus, a 'troubling ambiguity' does exist in Aron's work: how is a theorist supposed to disentangle a fact from an interpretation of it, or more generally, how is a theorist supposed to evaluate two rival interpretations of the same fact? Aron's efforts to clarify and even to overcome this problem, such as by advocating a continuous exchange of ideas between scholars, taking into consideration diverse aspects of a problem, and warning against the arbitrary selection of facts, definitions, and key concepts, are ultimately insufficient, if only because there still remains no objective standard that can be used to judge between two rival interpretations, the advocates of which are both claiming that they have accomplished just what Aron advises.[112]

[109] Aron, 'Introduction', in Conant (ed.), *Politics, and History*, p. xxii. Daniel Mahoney in *Liberal Political Science*, pp. 1–16, indicates the ways in which Aron later changed his position on certain issues in the *Introduction*, most notably in his analysis of Weber and political choice.

[110] Aron, 'Introduction', in Conant (ed.), *Politics and History*, p. xxvi.

[111] Aron, *Introduction*, p. 111.

[112] See Aron, 'Concepts of "Class Truth" ', pp. 163–5; 'A propos de la théorie politique', pp. 165–70; and 'Science and Consciousness of Society', in Draus (ed.), *History, Truth, Liberty*, pp. 211–17. Clearly, much more can (and should) be said about Aron's efforts to overcome the problem of relativism, and the above remarks are only meant to begin such a discussion. Despite the appearance of relativism in the *Introduction*, Aron wants to emphasize first and foremost that absolute certainty cannot be attained in historical investigations because of the limits of human

Although the following remarks are not an attempt to skirt this important problem, it is possible to speculate why Aron did not spend more time trying to articulate some standard by which competing theories could be evaluated. Aron felt that it was vitally important to save the integrity of historical analysis from the tyranny of philosophical systems like those of Hegel and Marx.[113] By claiming to have a trans-historical perspective, these thinkers were able to proclaim their conception of the truth to the exclusion of all others. Far from intending to lead the historical sciences into anarchy or relativism, Aron's phenomenological analysis attempted to define just what sort of historical interpretations and reconstructions were commensurate with history itself, freeing historical analysis from the absolutism of such systems. In the absence of an 'all-encompassing, totalizing social science', historians still had the possibility and even the duty to discover and to reflect upon the meaning of their own past.[114] Of course, Aron's attempts to 'open up' historical analysis to rival interpretations would naturally lead him to emphasize the relativity and subjectivity of all interpretations rather than to specify standards by which such interpretations might be evaluated.

A second question has to do with the significance of Aron's findings. Even if theorists acknowledged that everything that Aron said is true, how much difference would that make when they began to marshal empirical evidence in support of their theory? Granted, Aron's analysis and findings might have a great deal of significance when they are used to question the presuppositions and methods of highly obtuse and abstract theoretical frameworks; but for those theorists who conduct their research in a 'commonsensical' fashion by going to history books and looking up the salient facts and figures, would the 'margin of error' between their interpretation and the experienced meaning of the event be any greater than that which even the most 'scientistic' social scientist would admit as inherent in research itself? While it is true that Aron does not and cannot specify this margin of error, he does claim that whatever the margin of error is, it comes from the very nature of history and theory and not from a mere lack of rigour in empirical investigations. In this respect, the significance of this objection depends upon whether theorists are going to focus their attention upon the fact that Aron cannot specify this margin of error (and thus dismiss the rest of his analysis) or are going to concentrate upon the analysis itself regardless of what that margin of error is. In the former case, Aron will certainly remain a neglected theorist. In the latter case, however, Aron's writings might be resurrected and re-examined, either to help theorists think anew about the character of social science itself or to ignite and illuminate critical debate concerning his and other theorists' philosophies of history and theories of international relations.

knowledge and understanding. Aron's ultimate position—his 'probabilistic determinism'—is a 'mean between the Marxist deification of the historical process and the existentialist proclamation of unlimited human freedom', a position that attempts to avoid both a strict determinism and a radical relativity. See Mahoney, *Liberal Political Science*, p. 111. Nonetheless, as Mahoney (pp. 19–25) himself admits, all historical interpretations remain tinged with a certain degree of relativism, even if Aron tries to limit the scope and severity in his later writings. Therefore, it is a question whether probabilistic determinism is sufficient to overcome the problem of relativism; it is still difficult to see the standard which would allow a theorist to separate a fact from an interpretation of it, or to judge between two different interpretations.

[113] This is true not only for systems like those of Marx and Hegel, but also for systems like that of Spengler, systems that deny that there is any order or progress in history. See S. Mesure, *Raymond Aron et la raison historique* (Paris, 1984), pp. 59–80.

[114] Aron, 'Introduction', in Conant (ed.), *Politics and History*, p. xxiv.