

Phenomenological Themes in Aron's Philosophy of History

Dimitris Apostolopoulos

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Abstract: Aron's writings are lauded for their contributions to liberal political theory, international relations, and sociology. I argue that his early thought also offers phenomenological considerations for a relativist view of historical meaning, whose important role in the text's argument has been suppressed by received interpretations. Drawing a direct link between introspective, intersubjective, and historical understanding, Aron argues that the 'objectification' of intentions necessarily transforms their meaning. This impedes an objective account of historical subjects' lived experience. Some of the *Introduction's* appraisals of historical understanding rely on Aron's phenomenological observations, and indicate that the intentionality of historical understanding circumscribes claims to historical objectivity. These results highlight the broader implications of largely overlooked phenomenological commitments in Aron's thought, offer a fresh interpretation of the *Introduction*, and suggest that the standard account of Aron's relation to the phenomenological movement should be reconsidered.

Keywords: Aron, phenomenology, history, intentionality, intersubjectivity

1. Introduction

Infamously, Raymond Aron's *Introduction à la philosophie de l'histoire* (1938) contends that "there is no *historical reality*," that "Historical reality, because it is human, is *ambiguous* [équivoque] and *inexhaustible* [inépuisable]" (I 147/IPH 118), and that any historical "perspective . . . is essentially relative" (I 389/IPH 308).¹ Aron's criticism of positivism and fatalism in historiography, his proximity to methodologies of understanding (*Verstehen*) popularized by German sociological and historical research, and proto-existentialist account of *le choix* and *la décision*, are standardly identified as key motivations for these conclusions.²

¹ Citations to Aron's *Introduction* refer by abbreviated title to the page numbers of the 1991 French edition, followed by those of the English translation. Citations to all other texts by Aron refer to page numbers. All translations of Aron are my own.

² For Aron's anti-positivism and interest in *Verstehen* see Iain Stewart, "Existentialist Manifesto," and Paul Ricoeur *Time and Narrative*, 1:97. For existentialist tenets see Gaston Fessard, *La philosophie historique*, 103–4; Nicolas Baverez, *Life and Works*, 4; and Thomas Flynn, *Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason*, 4.

While these tenets carry many of the *Introduction*'s arguments, the text also offers phenomenological reasons to endorse relativism about the historical past. This paper contends that phenomenological arguments for the limits of self- and other-understanding are a fundamental and hitherto overlooked motivation for the *Introduction*'s contention that the past is not meaningful 'in itself,' or independently of a human perspective.

Attending to Aron's engagement with phenomenology clarifies the *Introduction*'s claim to employ a 'phenomenological' methodology, and sheds light on some of its more puzzling claims about historical objectivity. It also reveals that the standard account of Aron's relation to the phenomenological movement is inadequate. Aron is typically viewed as a thoroughfare (but not a purveyor) of phenomenology in the French philosophical scene of the 1930s. The phenomenological tenor of his early work has also been suppressed by an emphasis on his contributions to liberal political theory, international relations, or sociology.³ But these hermeneutical frameworks do not do justice to the *Introduction*'s positive use of phenomenological themes, concepts, and methods, and overlook their role in Aron's philosophy of history. Doubtless, Aron is a transmitter of German phenomenology and sociology to France. But in light of his philosophical predecessors, he also appropriates and selectively deploys existing phenomenological resources when articulating his account of the relation between everyday and historical experience.

After reviewing the *Introduction*'s aims and sketching its main lines of reception, I call attention to evaluations of historical objectivity that point beyond the conceptual boundaries of received interpretations (section 2). Evidence suggests that the conscious structure of self- and other-directed experience offers independent reasons for a relativist stance toward the past. The process of 'objectification,' which is at work in everyday experience and historical research, is of particular importance. Before considering how Aron interprets this term, I identify the

³ See, e.g. Kerry Whiteside, "Perspectivism and Historical Objectivity," 136; Stewart, "Sartre, Aron, and Anti-Positivism," 45; Stewart "Existentialist Manifesto," 227; Oliver Schmitt, *Raymond Aron and International Relations*; Robert Colquhoun, *The Sociologist in Society*; Alan Schrift, *Twentieth-Century French Philosophy*, 40–42; and Franciszek Draus, "Raymond Aron et la politique," 1200–2.

conceptual contours of his understanding of and approach to phenomenology, and situate it in terms of the early reception of phenomenology in France (section 3). For Aron, historians study the intentional states motivating historical actors. An objective rendition of the past presupposes the ability to faithfully capture (or ‘objectify’) agents’ intentions. Aron’s interpretation of objectification in introspective (section 4) and intersubjective experience (section 5) motivates deep reservations about the prospects of certain and secure access to subjective intentions. While judgments about others require objectifying acts, they inevitably transform the intentional content of others’ experiences, estranging observers from their original qualitative character. As I show, at key junctures of the *Introduction*, Aron marshalls these considerations when articulating hesitations about historical objectivity, namely, about the possibility of universally valid accounts of historical agents’ intentions (section 6). For him, the intentionality of historical understanding mirrors that of intersubjective experience. Transformations in intentional content inevitably inhibit access to historical actors’ intentions, rendering an objective account of history unattainable. I conclude with a brief review of the implications of these results (section 7).

2. Possible Motivations for Historical Relativism

Even sympathetic readers have struggled to reconcile the *Introduction*’s multiple lines of argument.⁴ Aron argues against the plausibility of “universally valid” accounts of historical events, that is, quasi-scientific explanations of how the past ‘really was’ (*I* 10/*IPH* 10). A mitigated historical relativism, on which the meaning of history takes shape in contemporary research, better reflects the object and practice of historical inquiry.⁵ Three motivations for this conclusion are typically identified.

⁴ Henri Marrou, who would defend the *Introduction*’s anti-positivist line, concluded that the text is “bound to discourage the well intentioned” (Colquhoun, *The Philosopher in History*, 148–49). Still, it received high praise from the likes of Henri Bergson and Jean Cavaillès (Colquhoun, *The Philosopher in History*, 146).

⁵ As Flynn notes, Aron qualifies his historical relativism (*Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason*, 4–5). *La philosophie critique de l’histoire* contends that instead of securing the universally valid grounds of historical objectivity, the philosophy of history must instead explore its likely limits (*PCH* 293–94).

2.1. *The Critique of Positivism*

Aron rejects the positivist strain in French historiography, whose proponents argue that historical inquiry can achieve a degree of objectivity characteristic of natural science.⁶ For Aron, positivist views of “objectivity” and “universality” are of a piece (*I 9/IPH 9*). On such views, a science is objective if its findings are “universally accepted,” that is, if they hold without exception. Accordingly, positivist philosophy of history takes direction from the paradigm of causal explanation, which retains a uniform structure across explanatory contexts.

For Aron, the object of historical inquiry is unlike that of the sciences. Historians study the “*ensemble of lived experience* [l’ensemble vécu]” (*I 40/IPH 33*), namely, events, objects, or data as they were encountered in historical actors’ “concrete consciousness” (*I 13/IPH 12*). This is to say that historians study agents’ intentions. Intentions are meaningful entities that come before the mind (*I 78/ IPH 62*).⁷ They have an “irreducibly specific character,” obtain here and now, and are constituted by what agents see, hear, and feel in the present (*I 45/IPH 37*). These features suggest that intentions are not subject to the universal generalizations characteristic of (positivist) causal explanation, and cannot in principle approximate the degree of objectivity in natural science. (I will return Aron’s view of intention below.)

This entails that in the philosophy of history, categories like ‘necessity,’ ‘totality,’ or ‘universality’ must be replaced by ‘contingency,’ ‘possibility,’ or ‘probability.’⁸ *La philosophie critique de l’histoire* argues that because causal explanations misconstrue the objects of historical study, historians should make merely provisional and not law-like inferences (Weber’s influence

⁶ Charles-Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos’s *Introduction aux études historiques* is a locus classicus for this view. Marrou stressed this point in his review of the *Introduction* (“Tristesse de l’historien,” 18–19). See also Sylvie Mesure, “De l’antipositivisme,” 472–73; Stewart, “Sartre, Aron, and Anti-Positivism,” 42–46; and Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:97.

⁷ Aron, “Max Weber and Modern Social Science,” 43n1.

⁸ Similar considerations are invoked to reject historical ‘rationalism’ and historicism (*I 12–13/IPH 12*). While non-positivist, historicism leads to a fatalistic, law-like view of historical development, which extirpates individual action (*I 377/IPH 298*). By subjecting historical development to all-encompassing progress, accounts like Wilhem Dilthey’s reduce historical meaning to fixed categories.

is particularly important here).⁹ The former better correspond to the variegated objects of historical inquiry (*PCH* 246, 95). On these grounds, the limits of causal explanation also demarcate the limits of historical objectivity (264).

2.2. *Understanding vs. Explanation*

In addition to his reading of Weber, Aron's study of Dilthey and German historiography motivated the conclusion that historical inquiry must substitute reductive explanation for a methodology of *Verstehen* or 'understanding' (*la compréhension*).¹⁰ For Aron, "understanding [*la compréhension*] is at bottom the decisive problem, one could even say the singular problem, of the logic of history" (*PCH* 178). Understanding is a "correlative" of meaning (*du sens*). It is a non-reductive mode of inquiry that interprets the meanings encountered in conscious life (*I* 59/*IPH* 47). For Aron, 'meaning' broadly refers to "any ideal content, any object of intentionality," that is, to any significant content that comes before the mind. For him, "causal explication always assumes understanding" (*I* 112/*IPH* 91). Any attempt at explanation remains a conscious, subjective effort to grasp or account for some meaningful relation, object, or event.

Understanding is not a psychological endeavor, concerned with deep-lying psychic drives. It does not deduce intentional meanings from 'objective' or mind-independent data (see section 3). Instead, it articulates the conscious flow of experience as it is lived in the first person. Historical understanding attempts to account for a "*meaning which, immanent to the real* [au réel], *has or could have been thought by those who experienced* [vécue] *or realized it*" (*I* 59/*IPH* 47). That intentions could have been otherwise, and do not carry the mark of necessity, renders them "unintelligible" to causal explanation, and indeed to any extra-subjective account. From a causal perspective, the objects of *la compréhension* are "unpredictable" (*imprévisible*) (*I* 405–

⁹ See Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:98, on a probability that "exists in our minds, not in things." For Aron's reading of Max Weber, see *Time and Narrative*, 1:183–91 and Colquhoun, *The Philosopher in History*, 124–29.

¹⁰ See Fessard, *La philosophie historique*, 378, for more on *la compréhension* in Aron's first two theses. Aron holds that Dilthey's historicism is untenable, but that the philosophy of history can benefit from his insights into *Verstehen* (Aron considers Karl Jaspers and Eduard Spranger's versions but engages most with Dilthey) (*I* 57–58/*IPH* 45–46).

6/IPH 319–20). The methodology of understanding does not yield a definitive account of a historical actor’s mental life. It offers an intelligible reconstruction subject to a range of possible interpretations, which suggests that an “absolute point of view” of the past is unattainable (*I* 123/IPH 99).¹¹

2.3. Proto-Existentialism

These tenets dovetail with Aron’s proto-existentialist philosophical anthropology. For Aron, subjects continuously engage in acts of “self-realization” (*I* 52/IPH 43). This is an enactment of freedom, a fundamental feature of subjectivity (*I* 433–37/IPH 343–47). Like subjective intentions, human freedom is “unpredictable” (*imprévisible*) (*I* 316/IPH 253). It does not unfold in a law-like fashion. The “mind [*l’esprit*] is a creative power and not a mere reflection of the world or an expression of irrational forces” (*I* 346/IPH 273–74). Existential freedom allows subjects to reimagine and reinterpret the meaning of experience.

As early as Marrou’s 1939 review, commentators have noted that proto-existentialist commitments motivate hesitations about historical objectivity.¹² For existential freedom also manifests itself in choices about the past. Subjects are ‘historical’ because they make a “decision” about the meaning of historical documents, events, or objects (*I* 416/IPH 329). Free choice allows us to “transcend” given historical meanings (“the real”), giving history a new sense (*I* 432/IPH 342).¹³ The relativity of historical meaning seems unavoidable: if subjects necessarily transcend and transform existing structures, “visions of the past must be as diverse as

¹¹ Bernard Groethuysen’s early review notes that Aron contrasts the “uncertainty” of the subjective domain to traditional accounts of objectivity (“Un philosophe,” 626).

¹² See Marrou, “Tristesse de l’historien,” 41, and Whiteside, “Perspectivism and Historical Objectivity,” 134. For a helpful contrast with Jean-Paul Sartre see Flynn, *Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason*, 6. Aron would later distance himself from existentialism, given its associations with the Marxist left (Schrift, *Twentieth-Century French Philosophy*, 89).

¹³ Jean-François Lyotard, for example, emphasizes Aron’s proximity to Heidegger’s account of Dasein’s historicity (*La phénoménologie*, 99–101).

human intentions” (*I 396/IPH 314*).¹⁴ Infamously, this interpretive license leads to a ‘dissolution of the object,’ or, to the view that there is no integral meaning to historical events or agents’ intentions (*I 147/IPH 118*).¹⁵ Once again, the meaning of history appears indefinite (*I 413–22/IPH 327–35*).

Many of the *Introduction*’s arguments operate within these conceptual parameters, and have justifiably attracted commentators’ attention. But the text also offers justifications for historical objectivity that do not avail themselves of these premises (see sections 6.2–3 below). In its final Section, after noting that historical inquiry is the “appropriation [*l’appropriation*] by the living mind [*de l’esprit vivant*]” of the “intelligible past,” Aron concludes that

history is like human existence, and knowledge [*la connaissance*], like self-knowledge and knowledge of others [*d’autrui*], takes direction from [*est orientée*] a decision while looking to the future, and only knows others [*les autres*] by relating them to the subject [*au sujet*]. . . . These distinctions are viable [*valables*] provided one adds that history always partakes of mind [*de l’esprit*] and existence [*de l’existence*], and is always objectified [*objectivée*] by and for the historian. (*I 355/IPH 281–2*)

This text recasts historical inquiry as an activity chiefly concerned with the study or ‘appropriation’ of historical actors’ mental lives. In light of the previous points, it makes three novel claims: (1) it draws an analogy between historical knowledge, self-knowledge, and knowledge of others; (2) it claims that historians’ decisions about the past can be clarified by the structure of the first-personal or subjective perspective; and (3) it identifies ‘objectification’ (*l’objectivation*) as a precondition of a subject-centric model of historical inquiry.

¹⁴ See Henri Gouhier, “Connaissance historique,” 263–64 on the importance of perspective for Aron’s view of history.

¹⁵ To temper relativist worries, this subtitle to the conclusion of Section II was removed from the second edition (see *Mesure*, “De l’antipositivisme,” 471).

These claims are not mere versions or corollaries of those above (see sections 2.1–3). They are certainly consistent: existential choice presupposes subjective activity of some sort; the methodology of understanding can, in principle, account for meanings encountered in a range of conscious experiences; and the limits of positivism pave the way for a focus on subjectivity or intersubjectivity. Still, this text adds something new. By framing choice in terms of conscious self- and other-directed experience, it shifts the explanatory burden from the personal commitments of an individual subject, to broader conditions of subjective and intersubjective experience. A failure of causal or positivist models is a mere precondition for this theoretical approach to the past. Perhaps most clearly, the concept of ‘objectification,’ which does not feature in standard explanations for Aron’s relativism, points beyond familiar accounts. While it surfaces in Weber, for example, Aron’s reliance on terms like *l’esprit* and *l’existence* departs from an epistemological or sociological focus. Instead, an emphasis on experience and subjectivity suggests the possibility of a phenomenological reading of historical *compréhension*. Before considering this, I will first clarify Aron’s understanding of phenomenology, and situate it in terms of the French reception of phenomenology prior to the *Introduction*.¹⁶

¹⁶ In what follows I continue to focus on the *Introduction* and refer to Aron’s contemporaneous or later texts when they further clarify its arguments or motivations. This focus reflects the fact that contemporaneous studies (e.g. of German sociology or historicism) often have a historico-critical focus, whereas the *Introduction* develops a positive interpretation of the problem of historical objectivity, which also makes use of some phenomenological insights. Further, Aron’s later writings on history do not deploy or develop the specific line taken in the *Introduction*, even if they are consistent with it (*DCH*, for example, often repeats many earlier conclusions). Aron nowhere repudiates the findings of his early work: on the contrary, he claimed that later writings on sociology and international relations attempt to make the *Introduction*’s conclusions more concrete, with reference to widened practical contexts (Colquhoun, *The Sociologist in Society*, 163–64). Subsequent lectures at the Collège de France (1973–74) find Aron returning to German philosophy of history (Johann Gustav Droysen, Dilthey, Weber) and discussing Alfred Schütz again, and the theme of historical consciousness is especially prominent in his critique of Sartre in *History and the Dialectic of Violence*. While the specific philosophical or phenomenological interests that inform his early philosophy of history are not explored again in the same level of detail, the fundamental problems that grow out of them continue to inform his later work.

3. Aron and Phenomenology

According to Simone de Beauvoir, Aron first introduced Edmund Husserl to her and Sartre *circa* 1932–33.¹⁷ Aron had just returned from Berlin, where he read phenomenology, sociology, and philosophy of history.¹⁸ After studying at the ENS with Alain (Émile Chartier) and Léon Brunschvicg, and completing military service (1928–30), Aron moved to Köln to begin a thesis on Mendelism and the philosophy of biology. He eventually abandoned the project and moved to Berlin in 1931.¹⁹ Beauvoir’s testimony has led commentators to identify Aron as a transmitter of German phenomenology to two of its important French proponents.²⁰ However, Aron’s engagement with the phenomenological tradition is more involved and of greater significance for his own thought. His early appraisal of the limits of historical objectivity makes positive use of phenomenological concepts and rests on a specific application of what he took to be phenomenological methodology. To better understand this, I will first outline Aron’s approach to phenomenology, and then consider it in light of some important tendencies in its French reception.

3.1. Aron’s Approach to Phenomenology

The *Introduction* defines phenomenology as “the use of reflection with a view to a total exploration of man and world, for, in the *transcendental ego*, separated by the *ἐποχή* [epoché]

¹⁷ See Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force de l’âge*, 112. Pierre Bertaux claims that Aron suggested Sartre study German phenomenology to develop his own ideas (Bertaux, “Amitiés normaliennes,” 15).

¹⁸ Colquhoun, *The Philosopher in History*, 53–54; see Baverez, “Life and Works,” 5; Reed Davis, “The Phenomenology of Raymond Aron”; Stewart “Existentialist Manifesto,” 223, 230n4; and Bernhard Waldenfels, *Phänomenologie in Frankreich*, 337.

¹⁹ Colquhoun, *The Philosopher in History*, 50–51. This prevented Aron from attending Georges Gurvitch’s 1928–30 lectures on German phenomenology (subsequently published as *Les tendances actuelles de la philosophie allemande* in 1930), and from attending Edmund Husserl’s 1929 Paris lectures (what would later become *Cartesian Meditations*).

²⁰ For Aron’s relation to French phenomenology see Canguilhem, “La problématique,” 21; Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement*, 484–85; Colquhoun, *The Philosopher in History*, 53–54; and Schrift, *Twentieth Century French Philosophy*, 22–23.

from all other existence, *essences* remain present” (*I 64/IPH 50*). This definition reflects a standard Husserlian approach, developed in *Ideas I* onwards. It paints phenomenology as a version of transcendental thought, insofar as phenomenology also explores the conditions for the possibility of conscious experience.²¹ To do so, it ‘brackets’ or suspends assumptions generated in the ‘natural attitude,’ and studies phenomenologically-reduced experience using reflective methods. In the transcendental attitude, phenomenology studies the essential or ‘pure’ structures of conscious experience.

This generic definition does not, however, track Aron’s own idiosyncratic approach to phenomenology. In his *Memoirs*, he claims that he was “less impressed by transcendental phenomenology or the *epoché* than by the method, the way of looking, of the phenomenologist. I meditated on History and on the immanence of meanings within human reality.”²² Aron’s approach was also informed by readings of Alfred Schütz and Max Scheler (whom he studied before Husserl and Heidegger).²³ After offering the definition above, Aron immediately signals that his own investigations are guided by a subset of its tenets. In particular, he is interested in the topic of ‘self-knowledge,’ which he claims is studied by phenomenology, and in reflection, which uses an “introspective” methodology (*I 64/IPH 50*). I return to this understanding of phenomenological method below.

Textual evidence demonstrates that Aron does not employ the *epoché* or adhere to a transcendental interpretation of phenomenology. The terms ‘human reality’ and ‘history’ signal that he will use phenomenology as a tool for understanding how subjects acquire self-knowledge and knowledge of the past within non-reduced or ‘natural’ experience. This is consistent with his claim that the “transcendental ego should be examined only to the extent that it appears as a condition for each person’s knowledge of his own individuality” (*I 65/IPH 50*). He is interested in grasping the life-course of specific individuals, rather than eidetic generalities. Elsewhere, he

²¹ See, e.g. Husserl, *Ideas I*, §§32–33 and *Cartesian Meditations*, §34, §44, §62.

²² Aron, *Memoirs*, 43.

²³ See Aron’s 1930 letter to Pierre Bertaux (Colquhoun, *The Philosopher in History*, 49–50).

is clear that “The subject is not the transcendental self, but the social and personal [individual]” (*I 376/IPH 297*).²⁴ This evaluation is also consistent with remarks about the *epoché*. With this conceptual tool, “we have not rejected but [rather] put into parentheses all existence-claims” (*I 75/IPH 59*). In practice, Aron is interested in suspending assumptions that prevent a proper grasp of lived processes of introspection or self-knowledge, but he does not think this necessarily excludes worldly existence-claims. The subject he seeks to understand, and which he claims phenomenology helps to detail, “contains within it all the meanings within which natural life unfolds.” This is not, however, a pure transcendental subject. For Aron’s purposes, ‘meaning’ (which I suggested above is understood along the lines of an intentional object) should be studied in light of personal, social, and historical conditions.²⁵

Aron’s remarks at his *soutenance* further clarify this approach. He explains how he defended the *Introduction*’s “central thesis” of the “relativity of historical knowledge”: “To establish it, I apply the phenomenological method to the subject that discovers history.”²⁶ Here, the term ‘phenomenological’ is used positively. While the details will become clearer below, three basic features of Aron’s positive view of phenomenology can be noted.

Together with the claim from his *Memoirs*, this remark indicates that for Aron phenomenology is above all a ‘method.’ The *Introduction* claims that “phenomenology” is a “descriptive” method (*I 10/IPH 9*).²⁷ This method describes meanings ‘immanent’ to consciousness. Most immediately, it does not engage in speculative or metaphysical conjectures, but studies meaning as it is experienced in the first-person (*I 376/IPH 297*). When describing meaning, phenomenology uses “reflective” or introspective strategies (*I 64/IPH 50*).

Introspection is reflective because it is a self-directed exploration of data immanent to first-

²⁴ Terms like ‘person’ or ‘individual’ bring Aron’s descriptions of the subject closer to those offered by Scheler (see note 64 below).

²⁵ Aron refers to the account of intersubjectivity in *Cartesian Meditations* when offering this evaluation of the *epoché*. However, he claims that the decisive “criterion permitting the distinction between the fictive and the real” is given by “the plurality of egos,” i.e. by intersubjective experience in natural life, rather than at the transcendental level (*I 75/IPH 59*).

²⁶ Fessard, *La philosophie historique*, 42.

²⁷ See *I 13/IPH 11*, and the claim that his method is more “phenomenological” than “logical,” i.e. constructive (*I 53/IPH 44*). See Husserl, *Ideas I*, §75.

personal experiences. For Aron, reflection is a non-reductive means of studying the qualitative character of intentions (meaning as it is lived). In this sense, reflective methods are consistent with the methodology of ‘understanding.’

Second, together with Aron’s account of meaning, this approach to phenomenological methodology entails that intentionality is a fundamental phenomenological theme.²⁸ Meaning is formed in the intentional relation between subject and object. Phenomenological methods, according to Aron, do not separate these two basic poles of intentional experience, and are therefore well-suited for grasping it. To grasp meaning, it is of utmost importance to not estrange “knowledge” from “reality,” or, to not separate subjective sense-making processes from their intended objects.²⁹ With respect to history, this entails that historical data cannot be understood unless their subjective conditions of production and reception are adequately studied. As will become clear, Aron observes a tight connection between reflection and history: philosophical “reflection [*la réflexion philosophique*] is itself a function of history.”³⁰ Historians employ non-reductive methods (for example, *la compréhension*) when studying the intentions of past agents; understanding others requires that we first understand how intentions are formed in us. Hence, introspection provides a plausible model for understanding intentional formations in other subjects.

Third, phenomenology describes intentionality or meaning as it is experienced by the “concrete” subject (*I 13/IPH 12*). This term refers to lived experience in its everyday, social, cultural, and historical setting. This approach reflects Aron’s special interest in history. Importantly, it is also consistent with his view about the relevant meanings that figure in historical study, with his non-transcendental approach to phenomenology, and with the *Introduction*’s broader goals. First, for Aron “the content of a perception,” “the act of consciousness in its immediacy,” or “the intentional object of such an act” are best grasped in

²⁸ See Husserl, *Ideas I*, §84.

²⁹ Waldenfels also notes that Aron’s interest in ‘phenomenological’ methods follows from the view that “historical reality” cannot be separated from “historical knowledge” and from the perspective from which the former is accessed (*Phänomenologie in Frankreich*, 338).

³⁰ Fessard, *La philosophie historique*, 43.

light of the contextual and particular conditions from which they emerge: each is a “concrete fact [*fait concret*]” and must be studied as such (*I* 49–51/*IPH* 41). Second, while transcendental phenomenology studies the pure structures of consciousness, at his *soutenance* Aron claimed that “the subject of historical knowledge is not a pure subject, a transcendental self, but a living man, a historical self, that aims to understand [*comprendre*] his past and his milieu.”³¹ Finally, a focus on concrete intentional life is consistent with the *Introduction*’s anti-positivist arguments, which “attempted to reestablish a sphere of validity to concrete man [*de l’homme concret*].”³² The latter is overlooked in the generalizations and reductions of empirical science, but also by transcendental approaches, which suspend the data of natural life but “surreptitiously” reintroduce the original “qualities of the object” in order to grasp it (*I* 53/*IPH* 44).

3.2. Theoretical Antecedents in Early French Phenomenology

For some readers, Aron’s concession that descriptions are non-reduced or impure, or that phenomenology need not engage in eidetic analysis, might place him too far beyond the boundaries of (Husserlian) phenomenology. Needless to say, it is unlikely that a definitive, non-controversial list of necessary and sufficient commitments for what makes a view phenomenological could be identified.³³ Aron is clearly aware that he sometimes departs from the letter of *Ideas* or *Cartesian Meditations*. Nevertheless, he explicitly identifies with the spirit of post-Husserlian phenomenology. What is more, his approach is consistent with important strains in its French reception. While I cannot explore this rich history here, Aron’s methodological orientation and his emphasis on concreteness as a definitive phenomenological

³¹ *La philosophie historique*, 42.

³² *La philosophie historique*, 43. See Marrou’s claim that Aron’s theory of history is “a concrete doctrine, oriented toward life” (“Tristesse de l’historien,” 41).

³³ This is true a fortiori in the French context, given the plural and sometimes heterodox readings of Husserl in France (see Waldenfels, *Phänomenologie in Frankreich*, 47).

theme are foregrounded by some important figures in the early French phenomenological scene.³⁴

After early articles by Victor Delbos and Léon Noël on Husserl's anti-psychologist arguments and his philosophy of logic (1910–11), the first major original work of phenomenology published in French was Jean Héring's *Phénoménologie et philosophie religieuse* (1925). This text quickly broadened the philosophical scope of phenomenology. Héring (who studied with Husserl in Göttingen and had contact with Alexandre Koyré) also argued against psychologism, motivated by interests in the philosophy of religion.³⁵ However, Héring's presentation of phenomenology takes account of a wider range of sources, including writings by Adolf Reinach and Scheler, and offers detailed accounts of phenomenological tenets like categorial intuition, description, and essences.

For Héring, phenomenology is not a systematic or “dogmatic” doctrine.³⁶ He stresses that phenomenology has not been received by its practitioners in a uniform manner. This is due in large part to its method: phenomenology is characterized by an “intuitionist method.”³⁷ To define ‘intuition,’ Héring takes his cue from Husserl's ‘principle of all principles’ (*Ideas* I §24), which identifies originary perception or intuitive givenness as an ultimate evidentiary ground. ‘Intuition’ refers to the “immediate givens” experienced by consciousness.³⁸ Phenomenology attempts to develop an adequate description of the intuitively-given structure of objects.³⁹ Against a narrow reading of ‘method,’ Héring concludes that “Phenomenology is not therefore a method properly speaking, insofar as its method varies with each new field of observation”; the goal of a clear presentation of intuition is “imposed by the nature of the object and not the exigencies of system.”⁴⁰ Héring stresses that this methodological orientation is open-ended and

³⁴ For background see *Phänomenologie in Frankreich* and Christian Dupont, *Phenomenology in French Philosophy*, 104–59.

³⁵ Jean Héring, *Phénoménologie et philosophie religieuse*, 92.

³⁶ *Phénoménologie et philosophie religieuse*, 35–36.

³⁷ *Phénoménologie et philosophie religieuse*, 36–37.

³⁸ *Phénoménologie et philosophie religieuse*, 45.

³⁹ *Phénoménologie et philosophie religieuse*, 48.

⁴⁰ *Phénoménologie et philosophie religieuse*, 43.

determined by the specific intentional objects it studies. At bottom, phenomenology is a rigorous accounting of the intuitive data encountered by consciousness, using descriptive methods. While phenomenological reflection is governed by intuitive data, this takes different forms.

Levinas, another important figure in the early French reception of phenomenology, also emphasizes the importance of intuition. In an early article, he defines phenomenology as the “intuitive study of intentionality.”⁴¹ More than Héring, arguably, Levinas stresses that Husserl seeks to understand “pure transcendental consciousness”; phenomenology is also an “eidetic descriptive science.”⁴² Still, Levinas holds that phenomenology’s “principal” concern is the “concrete study of different structures of the primitive phenomenon that is the ‘relation to an object’ [*rapport à l’objet*] or intentionality.”⁴³

Levinas’s 1930 dissertation on Husserl’s theory of intuition develops this line of interpretation. It defines phenomenology as “the study of consciousness through reflection,” and as “a purely descriptive study that attempts not to reduce anything and to respect the internal meaning of life.”⁴⁴ Under Heidegger’s influence (their acquaintance was made through Héring), Levinas defines ‘life’ as ‘concrete existence’: “The fundamental intuition of Husserlian philosophy consists of attributing absolute existence to concrete conscious life and transforming the very notion of conscious life. . . . we are going back to a more original phenomenon of existence.”⁴⁵ As Levinas reads the term, “Existence is but the mode in which consciousness reaches its objects or the role played by objects in the concrete life of consciousness.”⁴⁶ While Levinas pays greater attention to the transcendental or pure elements of Husserlian phenomenology, including the reduction, he locates the deeper philosophical import of Husserl’s thought in its ability to account for the specificity of concrete experience.⁴⁷ For him, “noetico-

⁴¹ Levinas, “Sur les *Ideen*,” 255.

⁴² “Sur les *Ideen*,” 247, 249.

⁴³ “Sur les *Ideen*,” 243; see also 263.

⁴⁴ Levinas, *Theory of Intuition*, 129.

⁴⁵ *Theory of Intuition*, 25.

⁴⁶ *Theory of Intuition*, 131–32.

⁴⁷ *Theory of Intuition*, 130, 143, 148.

noematic descriptions of the constitution of objects are the great task of phenomenology.”⁴⁸

Unlike Héring, however, Levinas thinks Husserl’s appeal to eidetic intuition threatens to “freeze” the specificity of constitution as it unfolds in concrete life, and to “transform it into something dead and immutable.”⁴⁹ While he thinks Husserl’s distinction between morphological or inexact and exact essences can furnish a response (*Ideas* I §74), he ultimately criticizes Husserl for assuming that intentionality is primarily “theoretical.”⁵⁰

These philosophical antecedents indicate that prior to the *Introduction*, the term ‘phenomenology’ was very much in the process of being negotiated and interpreted. Héring’s reading accords phenomenology a non-dogmatic methodological dexterity, and paints it as a philosophical orientation that above all attempts to respect the meaning of intuitive givens. As Héring and Levinas’s studies demonstrate, such a methodological sensitivity pairs with an interest in the concrete character of constitution, lived experience, and intentionality, which they suggest can be accomplished without pure transcendental analyses (both commentators take issue with Husserl’s transcendental idealism). This orientation was thought to be central to phenomenological philosophy. It is reflected in Aron’s non-transcendental, descriptive approach, in his focus on concrete intentional objectification, and in his assumption that descriptive methods can also be used to analyze historical data, provided the intentional structure of historical understanding is sufficiently clarified.

Of course, an interest in concreteness is prominent in pre- or non-phenomenological French thinkers like Bergson, Maurice Blondel, Jean Wahl, or Gabriel Marcel, and undoubtedly exercises an influence here.⁵¹ Together with the approach sketched above, this line of influence may partially explain why Scheler’s *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* was the first original phenomenological work translated into French (1928). However, a distinctively

⁴⁸ *Theory of Intuition*, 132.

⁴⁹ *Theory of Intuition*, 116.

⁵⁰ *Theory of Intuition*, 119. Husserl even comes out as an “intellectualist,” a charge occasionally repeated by Merleau-Ponty (*Theory of Intuition*, 94).

⁵¹ See Vincent Descombes’s claim that the “generation of 1930 . . . demanded, as it said, a ‘concrete philosophy’” (*Modern French Philosophy*, 16). See also Waldenfels on Gabriel Marcel’s “obsession with concrete experience,” which he claims anticipates later phenomenological developments (*Phänomenologie in Frankreich*, 26–27).

phenomenological development of this theme focuses on the intentional structure of the concrete apprehension of meaning. As we will see below, Aron's focus on objectification is consistent with this distinctive interest: he takes seriously the claim that descriptive analysis of the meaning of phenomena must attempt to grasp the specific qualitative and intuitive character of intentionality (versions of this view were defended by Héring and Levinas). Emerging from this intellectual context, it is not surprising that Aron's interests in sociology and history would draw him to the phenomenological approaches of Scheler and Schütz, which are arguably better suited for understanding the objects and intentional experiences that figure in historical research, and social or 'natural' life. In this light, Aron exhibits a tendency in French phenomenology identified by Waldenfels, which emphasizes the concrete nature of Husserl's call to return to the 'things themselves.'⁵² While that is not new, Aron's application of these themes to the topic of historical objectivity, and how he uses them to articulate his own position, has yet to be adequately appreciated. The groundwork for this is first developed in his account of self-knowledge, which I now turn to.

4. The Limits of Self-Knowledge

Early in the *Introduction*, Aron claims that a study of "elementary" modes of knowledge promises to disclose those of "global" historical understanding (*I 12/IPH 11*). "Self-knowledge" or introspection is an important elementary form of understanding. Below, I explore Aron's evaluation of its prospects. This account will show how Aron employs some of the assumptions above. Crucially, it will also anticipate challenges that intersubjective and historical understanding will confront (see sections 5–6).

⁵² *Phänomenologie in Frankreich*, 49.

4.1. Self-Awareness, Introspection, and Objectification

For Aron, the self is an agent, constituted by its activities and experiences (*I 71/IPH 55–56*). For the most part, agents do not reflect on experience. On the whole, pre-theoretical experience is transparent. Agents are most certain about themselves and their intentions in pre-reflective activity. In action, a “doer” knows her “act” in a “direct” and “total” manner: “*one knows what one does*” (*I 81/IPH 65*). For example, if we want to cut down a tree, we know just why we put an axe to its trunk. Actions follow intentions, and the latter (to fell the tree) can be unambiguously isolated given agents’ engagements in the world.

But agents can also probe the intentions guiding action through introspection (*I 64/IPH 50*). Introspection is a self-directed, reflective process, and a species of understanding (*la compréhension*). While he profits from Dilthey and Weber’s accounts of understanding, Aron’s view departs from theirs in important respects. Their traditional approaches are too “impersonal” (*I 352/IPH 278*). They are insufficiently sensitive to meaning as it is encountered in the first-personal perspective, and favor overly ‘objective’ methods when detailing intentional content.⁵³ By contrast, phenomenology (as Aron understands it) employs introspective, non-reductive and non-psychologicistic methods of reflective understanding (*I 64/IPH 50; I 54/IPH 44*). Contra Dilthey, intentions cannot be captured in exact categories.⁵⁴ Contra Weber, greater use of phenomenological methods is needed to understand them.⁵⁵

⁵³ See Groethuysen’s observation that Aron reproaches Dilthey for being insufficiently sensitive to the present (“Un philosophe,” 626–27).

⁵⁴ Despite his theoretical advancements, Dilthey’s emphasis on the ‘objective mind’ belies an attempt “to safeguard an exact philosophy” (*I 376/IPH 297*). Somewhat paradoxically, Aron marshalls Husserl’s *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft* to show the limits of Dilthey’s (objectivist) view of historical understanding. See *PCH 290* for the claim that historicism develops in opposition to Husserl. Waldenfels observes inconsistencies in this critique of Dilthey, given that Aron does not embrace the transcendental commitments that motivate Husserl’s position (*Phänomenologie in Frankreich*, 338–39).

⁵⁵ Embracing more reflective methods and the “phenomenology of Husserl,” Aron avers, “would have helped [Weber], in his analysis of understanding, to avoid oscillating between Jaspers’s ‘psychologism’ (at a time when the latter was writing his *Allgemeine Psychopathologie*) and the indirect paths of neo-Kantianism” (“Max Weber and Modern Social Science,” 338).

Aron takes reflection to be a free, attentive exploration of actions and the intentions guiding them. Reflective introspection is retrospective: it probes the intentions behind completed actions or experiences. Here, I become a “Historian of myself” (*I 66/IPH 52*). Unlike psychological inquiry, introspection does not separate intentions from one another (*I 57–58/IPH 45–46*). It is most successful when it coherently weaves multiple intentions, decisions, and events together, painting a holistic picture of a subject’s conscious life and their motivations at a particular time.⁵⁶ This even promises to proffer an ‘objective’ account of the self, namely, a definitive picture of the ensemble of intentions constitutive of a human life.

However, introspection encounters significant barriers: “The confusion of the subject-self [*le moi-sujet*] which is indeterminate and accompanies each moment of consciousness and the chosen fragments of the object-self [*moi-objet*] creates the illusion that one grasps one’s essence in oneself” (*I 72/IPH 57*).⁵⁷ While subjects may be pre-reflectively self-aware, this does not count as objective self-knowledge. Some clarification regarding Aron’s use of the term ‘knowledge’ (*la connaissance*, and sometimes *le savoir*) is needed here. First, Aron often uses *la connaissance (de soi)* and *la compréhension* interchangeably, in both self- and other-directed contexts (see for example *I 59/IPH 47*). Second, the term ‘knowledge’ (and by extension, ‘understanding’) is typically used in two ways. It is sometimes attributed to subjective awareness of the possible meaning of some object, event, or intention (*I 100–1/IPH 81*). Such states are fallible and subject to change. But it is also used to refer to a ‘full,’ ‘perfect,’ or infallible grasp of a meaning or intention (in more perspicuous moments, Aron makes the distinction clear, for example at *I 86/IPH 71*). Aron thinks the latter states cannot be attained. Still, we nevertheless attain some level of self-knowledge when we discover intentions through introspection. Third, Aron’s decision to qualify these states using terms like ‘imperfect’ or ‘full’ indicates that for him knowledge or understanding come in degrees: one attains a higher degree of knowledge when one is more proximate to the intentions, objects, or events in question, and in particular, to the

⁵⁶ This is also a feature of Dilthey’s account, but Aron does not think that it leads to psychological insights.

⁵⁷ See *DCH 68* for a later statement of this view.

qualitative character of lived intentions. For Aron, then, ‘knowledge’ is not used primarily as a success term. The highest degree of knowledge corresponds to certainty about subjective intentions. Aron does not provide a clear criterion that subjective awareness of intentions must meet to merit the name ‘knowledge,’ though it seems clear that indubitable or objective awareness of intentions qualifies as ‘objective’ knowledge or understanding. As will become clear below, his account of the limits of objective (or indubitable and universally valid) knowledge-claims assumes that lower degrees of knowledge or understanding are possible, though the latter do not meet the requirements of the former.

Aron’s existentialist philosophical anthropology seems to offer a straightforward explanation for why objective knowledge of the ‘essence’ of an individual’s intentions remains elusive, and even illusory, in introspection.⁵⁸ Recall that the self is a creative agent: “one determines oneself . . . by the idea one forms of oneself” (*I 65/IPH 50–51*). In introspection, “we can always possess ourselves because we can determine ourselves” (*I 72/IPH 57*). Free to interpret experience, one becomes what one “wants to be” (*I 73/IPH 58*). The meaning of the self is “not yet fixed,” even if we may continue to impute likely intentions to actions (*I 72/IPH 57*).⁵⁹

This shows that subjects can transfigure the meaning of experience, and details how this occurs. However, a deeper condition explains why introspective data are given such that our personal past is subject to existential transformation at all. The concept of ‘objectification,’ gestured to in section 2 above and in the previous paragraph, is of importance here. Objectification has been a fixture of phenomenological accounts of object-directedness since Husserl.⁶⁰ For him, any intentional experience (for example, perception, imagination, thought) is objectifying. Objectifying intentional processes support the meaningful givenness of objects, by forming sensations (‘matter’) into coherent, stable, and determine unities (the intentional correlates of perception, imagination, or thought). For example, perceptual acts objectify the blue

⁵⁸ See Fessard, *La philosophie historique*, 65–69.

⁵⁹ See *DCH 56* for the claim that the self is a “constructed unity, situated at infinity.”

⁶⁰ See Husserl, *Logical Investigations I*, Investigation 5, §40.

mass before me such that it appears as a ‘lake,’ rather than a confused medley of color sensations. Objectification helps us anticipate and complete the structure of intentional objects, even if we only ever access them from limited ‘profiles.’

Aron was familiar with and profited from reading Husserl, among other phenomenologists.⁶¹ Given the textual evidence, however, the claim that Husserl in particular exercises a decisive influence on Aron’s account of reflection (and by extension, intentional objectification) seems too strong.⁶² He associates his account of reflection with a generically phenomenological, descriptive approach, which includes but is not limited to a specifically Husserlian framework. On the whole, Aron’s discussion of these topics remains somewhat coarse grained. However, his abiding interest in how objectifying acts transform experience (especially the past), and if experience can be understood qua objectified, puts him closer to a set of concerns articulated by Scheler (and Schütz). Scheler argues that a subject or “person is . . . essentially never an ‘object’,” and that “any objectifying attitude . . . makes the person immediately transcendent.”⁶³ Aron agrees with Scheler, and worries that deliberate thematization or objectification is a barrier to accessing intentional content (Aron is less interested in other dimensions of objectification). But unlike Scheler, he denies that the alienatory and transformative effects of objectification can be overcome: “When man [*l’homme*] seeks to know himself, he immediately becomes an object, and therefore inaccessible in his entirety” (*I 71/IPH 56*; cf. *I 64/IPH 49*).⁶⁴ Two basic worries motivate this hesitation.

⁶¹ See Aron, “Max Weber and Modern Social Science,” 43n1 for remarks to this effect.

⁶² Davis does not develop his suggestion that Aron learned to meditate on history from Husserl. While it is true that Aron used Husserl “to soften the harsher features of Weber’s nominalism” (“The Phenomenology of Raymond Aron,” 402), evidence shows that his account of introspection is broadly phenomenological, not narrowly Husserlian (“The Phenomenology of Raymond Aron,” 404).

⁶³ Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics*, 390. See Schütz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, 21, who also explores this distinction.

⁶⁴ Scheler distinguishes between ‘person’ and ‘ego.’ While the former cannot be objectified, we can gain determinate knowledge of the latter. According to Aron, that the *Gesinnung* can be known is a basic precondition of responsibility for Scheler (*I 189–90/IPH 303*; see Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics*, 487). But Aron does not himself draw this distinction, nor does he recognize a deeper personal core beneath objects of introspection.

4.2. Objectification and Evidentiary Quality

The first worry concerns the qualitative character of objectified evidence. Subjects objectify their past whenever they reflect on past experiences. For Aron, this inevitably transforms and estranges us from their original qualitative character. Self-directed objectification institutes essential differences in kind between past and present states of consciousness. Aron invokes a personal example. He is “incapable of recovering the psychological atmosphere” associated with his motivations to study Marxism in 1930 (*I 66/IPH 51*). The intentional state associated with his decision to study Marxism (“decision”), and that examining it (“memory of the decision”), have a fundamentally distinct feeling. Even if one stipulates that their respective intentional objects are identical, introspection or recollection fail to fully recover the “sentimental halo that gives each moment of our existence its unique coloring” (*I 66/IPH 52*). The true qualitative character of an experience is best evidenced in action, or in experience itself (see section 4.1.). A “feeling recalled, if we attempt to relive it anew, . . . does not obtain in our present” (*I 67/IPH 52*). Subjects are “unable to trace” the particularity of an experience “in all its details,” and fail to recover the tenor of their past without significant semantic loss (*I 68/IPH 54*).⁶⁵ Qualitative uniqueness individuates the meaning of any experience, and introspective objectification is an imperfect means of attaining it.⁶⁶

For example, to describe the feeling of the wind hitting our face, we might reflect on the day’s environmental conditions, our bodily posture, mood, the intensity of the wind or the

⁶⁵ As with the examples considered in the previous section, the point here concerns the possibility of an exhaustive, ‘objective,’ or complete reconstruction of one’s personal past (and, by extension, of historical events). That this is out of reach does not prevent us from constructing plausible descriptions or accounts of past events or experiences, as Aron does in this case.

⁶⁶ This concern suggests a distance from Weber’s account of objectification (a plausible influence). Muse argues that Weber adopted some Husserlian views of rationality and evidence in his account of *Verstehen*, which can be read in a phenomenological vein (see Kenneth Muse, “Husserl and Weber,” 254; 257–59). For example, in *Soziologische Grundbegriffe* Weber claims that rational interpretation can attain a validity or exactness characteristic of mathematics, a position that suggests Husserl’s influence. Leaving aside its tenability as an interpretation of Husserl, this commitment (together with evidence considered below) suggests that Aron develops the concept of objectification in a somewhat different direction, emphasizing its qualitative, non-reductive dimensions, and their associated ambiguities. See Fessard, *La philosophie historique*, 62, for differences from Weber.

strength of the sun. These individual layers are analyzed so as to understand the experience in its totality. While subjects may grasp one or more of its elements, the introspective gaze disrupts the experience's integrated wholeness. The increased clarity of any particular layer sacrifices an exhaustive grasp of the whole. Our inability to reproduce the total affective atmosphere of the experience allows attention to any one of its elements to transform the others: in retrospect, and when comparing one part to another (but not to the original), the wind may seem more intense than it really was, our judgment of the day's warmth may change, and so on.

Of course, in introspection memories (for example, a doubt about the 'function of philosophy') may point to relevant *motifs* or "intentional objects of states of consciousness" that aid in understanding a particular decision or experience (*I 68/IPH 53*). Identifying possible unconscious psychological motivations (*mobiles* or "psychological antecedents") is also helpful for understanding human action (*I 68/IPH 54*). These categories, however, are post facto constructions, and present a "simplified" picture of pre-reflective self-awareness. Self-knowledge is limited by the inability to resuscitate the qualitative, "living rhythm of a consciousness successively directed at multiple projects, expected pleasures or half-seen inconveniences" (*I 68/IPH 54*). Of course, one may question the assumption that the qualitative uniqueness of experience is a guiding criterion for introspection, or that the meaning of experience is necessarily concrete or singular. Note, however, that Aron is concerned to distinguish probable or plausible accounts of the self from veritably objective ones. Given the "impassible gap" between present and past states of consciousness, the latter remain "inaccessible" in their original form (*I 66/IPH 52*).⁶⁷

4.3. Objectification and Intentional Stances

⁶⁷ See the later claim that introspection approaches a comprehensive grasp of the self "without ever reaching it" (*DCH 56*; see also 9n2, 49–57).

Objectification also shifts our intentional stance, inaugurating a new order of interpretive priority. This inhibits one's ability to track the qualitative transformations described above. Reflection is a temporal "sequel" to the past, but introspection reverses this dependence, by analytically decomposing and reordering past experience. In reflection, "our past [now] depends on our present" (*I 70/IPH 55; DCH 55*).

Aron formulates the problem succinctly: "if all retrospective knowledge is tied to the intention of an observer, how could it claim universal validity, unless it expressed the truth or the totality of a history, that of an individual or a group?" (*I 70/IPH 55*). Objectifying transformations are difficult to overcome given subjects' shift to an introspective intentional stance. Introspection intervenes in the flow of consciousness, adding new (self-directed) intentional content (*I 72/IPH 57*). Observers cannot track qualitative transformations because their new intentional stance colors subsequent experience. Evaluations of qualitative transformations take departure from an intentional basis (retrospective introspection) that is not itself impervious to modification, and which avails itself of transformed content. A comprehensive inventory of the 'totality' of an individual's past experiences and introspective activities, necessary for reliably tracking shifts in the meaning of the past or present, and for an 'objective' picture of the self, is unattainable within a first-personal, introspective stance (as we will see below, peer testimony offers no recourse). And were such a standard attainable, it would need supplementary confirmation of its own veracity, and so on, ad infinitum (*I 71/IPH 56*).

While it has been suggested that these phenomenological observations are "directed by an existential reflection," this evidence shows that an important line of argument in Aron's analysis of the limits of self-knowledge does not appeal to 'choice' or 'decision.'⁶⁸ Certainly, introspection and reflection are colored by one's self-image, personal goals, and so on, which can motivate conscious choices about how to interpret evidence. But these processes are not explanatorily ultimate, for they depend on deeper intentional structures that are not themselves

⁶⁸ Cf. Fessard, *La philosophie historique*, 65. See also the claim that "l'étude de la 'compréhension historique' est dominée par une visée existentielle" (*La philosophie historique*, 68–69).

shaped or informed by one's choices or self-image. Any choice takes direction from a specific and new observational intentional stance, which accesses semantically pliable, qualitatively transformed content, unreliably connected to past experience. The mode of introspective intentional givenness, operative prior to deliberate choice, grants subjects the possibility of inventing their past and constructing their self-image (*I 71/IPH 55*). The "incessantly renewed dialectic" between introspection and its objects allows us to refashion the self by freely "connecting past and present" (*I 74/IPH 59*), hitherto locked in the "solitude of instants" (*I 66/IPH 52*).⁶⁹

5. The Limits of Intersubjective Understanding

I have suggested that the phenomenologically-informed considerations discussed above directly motivate Aron's negative appraisal of the prospects of objective self-knowledge. I now want to show how his account of intersubjectivity builds on them. This connection has yet to be explored, but it is of direct consequence for his philosophy of history: "communication between consciousnesses [*des consciences*] is a condition of historical knowledge" (*I 76/IPH 60*; cf. *I 77/IPH 61*).

5.1. Concreteness

Aron begins from the observation that "Other consciousnesses are given to us, their existence is certain: how, and to what extent do we manage to grasp others' lived experiences?" (*I 76/IPH 60*). Awareness of others is non-inferential. At issue is how we form judgments about their

⁶⁹ In his interpretation of Aron's account of reflection, Stephen Launay notes the important link between introspective and historical consciousness, which I return to (*La pensée politique*, 12–13). However, it is right that Aron rejects psychological explanations of introspection and adopts the *motifs/mobiles* distinction from Schütz, he emphasizes the voluntaristic dimension of introspective understanding, on which "La conscience donne un sens au monde," while overlooking the deeper intentional processes that support active introspective reconstructions (*La pensée politique*, 14–15).

experiences. Contra Husserl, this question should not be approached through transcendental analyses (for example, acts of *Paarung*).⁷⁰ Like the descriptions above, Aron's account of intersubjectivity is not advanced "at the level of transcendental phenomenology, nor that of empirical psychology" (*I 76/IPH 59*). In addition to insights from sociological research, Aron's account reflects the influence of Scheler and Schütz, and the philosophical orientation discussed in section 3.⁷¹ These thinkers take a concrete approach to intersubjectivity, which presupposes the primordial existence and givenness of others.⁷² Following Schütz, Aron holds that bodily posture, gestures, movements, and so on, are meaningful or "intelligible" data.⁷³ Subjective "consciousness is not . . . separable from the body;" an intention is already "present in the gaze" (*I 77/IPH 62*). Like Scheler, Aron accepts that others are perceptually given as meaningful, concrete wholes.⁷⁴ Gestures and linguistic expressions support a global intuition of others with a definite meaning (*I 77/IPH 62*). A frown or a negative tone of voice, for example, indicate a disapproving intention, immediately accessible in perception.

However, Aron is more circumspect about intersubjective understanding. As in introspection, it is crucial to distinguish awareness from knowledge of others in the full sense.⁷⁵ Recall that the latter requires a transparent and unambiguous grasp of another subject's intention (or *motif*). This would entail shared or co-intentional experiences, in which subjects intend identical objects. Concrete intuitional contact certainly yields valuable information about others. Perceiving a frown makes us immediately aware that someone is upset. This is merely a limited understanding of others, however, for this evidence is defeasible: it only points toward possible

⁷⁰ See Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, §§42–62 (§61 criticizes Scheler's approach).

⁷¹ See Colquhoun, *The Philosopher in History*, 130, who notes this influence in passing. See Aron, "Note sur l'objet," 13–16 for an early review of Schütz.

Waldenfels discerns Schützian features in Aron's thought, including his distance from transcendental approaches (*Phänomenologie in Frankreich*, 338).

⁷² See, e.g. Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, and Schütz's arguments for an "implicit reference" to others (Schütz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, 21; 97–98).

⁷³ Schütz *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, 21.

⁷⁴ Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, 262–63.

⁷⁵ Launay observes a similar distinction between *savoir* and *intuition*, and notes difficulties associated with grasping the qualitative character of others' experiences, but intersubjective objectification is not a focus of his account (*La pensée politique*, 18).

intentions, and falls short of knowledge in the highest degree, namely, ‘objective’ intersubjective understanding (*I* 76–77/*IPH* 60–61).⁷⁶ Unlike for Scheler, sympathy (*Mitgefühl*) is a limit case (*I* 80–81/*IPH* 63–64).⁷⁷ More strongly than Schütz, objectifying the intentional lives of others inhibits all but attenuated claims to other-understanding.⁷⁸ Admittedly, Aron sets a high bar for unqualified intersubjective understanding, which may seem artificially stringent. To be clear, he does not deny that we enjoy pragmatic awareness of others (a lower degree of intentional awareness), or an ability to form justified conclusions about possible intentions. Rather, he denies that this secures transparent, indubitable, or objective intersubjective knowledge. While I cannot consider the merits of this view, I want to show that its motivations provide further evidence of Aron’s engagement with phenomenology, and importantly, why this is crucial for understanding his philosophy of history.

5.2. Intersubjective Objectification

As in introspection, to intelligibly experience others, we must objectify their intentions: “one knows others’ experiences *objectified*” (*I* 86/*IPH* 69). In such cases, another “*consciousness has become an object for an observer*” (*I* 78/*IPH* 62). While retrospective explanation of others is comparable to introspection, they are not identical (*I* 82/*IPH* 65). Unlike introspection, intersubjective objectification is other-directed from the outset. In the latter, intuitive data (for example, perceptions of bodily gestures) are objectified prior to reflection (by contrast, introspection studies pre-reflective self-awareness).

⁷⁶ See Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, and *Formalism in Ethics*, 378, for the claim that a perceived body is a totality pointing to another ego’s intentional life.

⁷⁷ This holds a fortiori of emotional “contagion” or intentional identity. While Aron agrees with Scheler that intersubjective experience is prime (*The Nature of Sympathy*, 11), and that subjects share some experiences without conscious awareness, he holds that self and other are distinct at a deeper intentional level. Unlike for Scheler, we do not perceive our intentional states in others, as if looking into a mirror.

⁷⁸ In a discussion of an example uncannily similar to one Aron invokes (*I* 82/*IPH* 65), Schütz expresses optimism that we can experience ‘fellow-feeling,’ in this case, with a subject who intends to cut down a tree (*The Phenomenology of the Social World*, 114–15).

Despite these differences, familiar worries about the qualitative character of experience widen the existing gap between interpretive acts and their respective objects, and are strengthened by the structural character of other-directed intentional states. Intersubjective objectification unfolds exclusively in a third-personal intentional stance. Unlike in introspection, the intentions of a “foreign consciousness will never be authentically given,” namely, lived in the first-person (*I 78/IPH 62*). Of course, having perceived an angry grimace, one may justifiably conclude that the person before us might perform some anger-induced act (with the proviso that this judgment has a “high” risk of error) (*I 83/IPH 65*). While observers “approximate” another subject’s intention, attempted “acts of sympathy” never “exhaust” its meaning (*I 86/IPH 69; DCH 14*). An indignant or angry gesture may be performed for show, or to give the impression of genuine concern about some issue. Its associated intentional state may not be one of anger, but doubt, jealousy, or desire. Third-personal, intuitively motivated ascriptions of others’ mental states will fail to detect this. Doubtless, deliberate self-deception may produce similar discrepancies in introspection; but Aron (perhaps naïvely) thinks these cases are rarer, even if we are often confused about our own desires or intentions.

These modifications in intentional stances entail that intersubjective evidence is “qualitatively different” from its associated intentional states to a greater degree than in introspection (*I 80/IPH 63*).⁷⁹ Discrepancies between intentions (or acts) and their conditions of reception makes the divide between the “affective halo” of a subject’s anger, and third-personal reconstructions, more stark than that between our own memories and their associated experiences (*I 80/IPH 64*). The difference is one of degree: another subject’s mental life “is bereft of one of its dimensions” to a greater extent than in first- to third-personal introspective shifts (*I 78/IPH 62*). Even with a wider, “examined and corrected,” “developed [and] refined” set of evidence, the lives of others remain “partial and ambiguous,” and “rebel against conversion to

⁷⁹ A 1934 review of Schütz anticipates this position with the claim that while intellectualizing or objectifying acts are needed to acquaint ourselves with others, observation still encounters “incomparable data” (*des données incomparables*) that cannot be fully captured by observers (Aron, “Note sur l’objet,” 113–14). See Schütz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, 133, 128 for relevant discussion.

a logical form” (I 79/IPH 63). Conclusions about others’ intentional states are approximations that “do not avoid the plurality of reconstructions.” This applies to “a single act, a fortiori for a personality considered in totality,” and entails that “No one is revealed entirely to a single observer” (I 84/IPH 68). Additional evidence may support more a thorough picture of a particular *motif*, but “the totality of the person” (necessary for objective knowledge claims about others) remains ungraspable (I 80/IPH 63).

5.3. Peer Testimony? Concreteness, Noema, and Noesis

Unlike in introspection, peer testimony can correct and improve objectifying reconstructions, promising greater intersubjective intentional convergence. However, Aron forecloses on the possibility that convergence may reach identity or yield certainty about others: “Knowledge of others is often subject to the critique of self-knowledge. But there is no essential superiority of the latter” (I 83/IPH 66). To report on her mental life, a peer must objectify it (see section 4). Necessarily, peer reports are subject to earlier worries: if “everyone transfigures their past” (I 85/IPH 68), an “agent’s interpretation enjoys no privilege” (I 83/IPH 66).

Aron’s account of the relation between language and intuition further clarifies these hesitations. For him, intentional contents (‘ideas’) cannot be cleanly captured by linguistic descriptions: “The unity of a person . . . is perhaps given by a global intuition, but that intuition, untranslatable into words, does not yield genuine knowledge [*un savoir véritable*]” (I 83/IPH 67). Linguistic descriptions attempt to “*represent*” intentional content, like a sign (I 81/IPH 64). But intentions (including those associated with speech acts) are imperfectly captured in signs or representations. Aron expresses this point by invoking the phenomenological terms ‘*noesis*’ and ‘*noema*’: “concretely, the *noema* is never separable from the *noesis*, and the latter, in turn, from lived experience” (I 88/IPH 70).

Husserl’s account of the *noema* and *noesis* is too complex to do justice to here. These terms arise in his post-*Logical Investigations* account of intentionality. The ‘*noesis*’ refers to the

activity of intending something, or to the manner in which subjects are directed to an object. *Ideas I* characterizes *noeses* as mental acts of perceiving, remembering, judging, supposing, and so on. Husserl takes intentionality to be a meaning-giving subjective activity.⁸⁰ The ‘*noema*’ is likened to the “*perceived as perceived*,” the “*remembered as remembered*,” or the “*judged as judged*.”⁸¹ It refers to the objective correlate of intentional acts, which is understood as a meaningful phenomenon; the intentional object is also called a “noematic sense.”⁸² How one should best interpret the *noema* is a matter of lively scholarly debate, and the details cannot be explored here. Ultimately, Husserl argues that a shift in attitude is needed to grasp its complex structure. Intentional acts and objects are best studied in phenomenologically-reduced perception: noematic analysis does not study the object itself, for example, that actual, perceived tree over there, but the mode in which the tree is meaningfully given to and intended by consciousness, and the pure structures that sustain intentional directedness.⁸³ Transcendental analyses are nevertheless correlated with concrete intentional acts and their objects.

As the remark above indicates, Aron is mainly interested in this latter feature of intentionality. He aims to understand its practical character, and especially its intersubjective dimension. He does not rely on what Levinas calls Husserl’s ‘theoretical’ machinery (for example, the reduction) to detail the meaning of intentional acts and objects. Levinas’s dissertation on Husserl offers a formulation of *noesis-noema* relations similar to that found in Aron’s *Introduction*: “*noemata* . . . inseparable from the *noeses* from which they derive their meaning, make visible the role played in concrete life by such and such a category of object as it is revealed by the intrinsic meaning of life.”⁸⁴ Like Levinas, Aron accepts that the genuine meaning of intentional acts and their objects is ultimately located in the concrete, lived conditions that link them together. For these acts and their objects are nourished by natural life and furnished with meanings from everyday lived experience. Aron takes this to entail that the

⁸⁰ Husserl, *Ideas I*, §90.

⁸¹ *Ideas I*, §88.

⁸² *Ideas I*, §90.

⁸³ *Ideas I*, §97.

⁸⁴ Levinas, *Theory of Intuition*, 132.

meaning of linguistic and non-linguistic intentions obtains in the performance of the intentional acts themselves, that is, in *noeses* (for example, acts of expression or perception). Intentional meaning is indexed to the acts animating it, here and now; to separate the two transforms the former. This entails that peer testimony, which temporally succeeds an action or intention, is an imperfect, abstracted copy of the intentional complex it purportedly describes. This inhibits subsequent access to or re-performance of intentions in their original evidentness (in the first or third person), and by extension, limits the knowledge of others.

Aron does not explore the broader implications of this position (for example, for the possibility of universal judgments), or potential objections (for example, that language use seems to require that not all meaning be concrete). While that may be, the conclusion above is consistent with his interest in concrete intentional states (discussed in sections 3.1 and 5.1), and develops insights from his account of intersubjectivity. In doing so, it also puts pressure on the suggestion that he would support a modified, quasi-transcendental view of objectivity.⁸⁵

5.4. Intersubjective “Solitude”

One might worry that Aron’s claims that convergence of peer intentions in communication is “never total” means that for him subjects necessarily misunderstand one another, or that any level of other-understanding is ipso facto impossible (*I* 86/*IPH* 70). Aron does not go this far. His point is that non-trivial intentional differences block unqualified knowledge claims about

⁸⁵ See Mesure’s suggestion that historical relativity can be overcome by means of self-reflection (“De l’antipositivisme,” 475–76). In an intersubjective context, this promises to yield “un moment d’universalité qui est la condition transcendentale du possibilité de la prétention du jugement à l’objectivité. C’est à cet égard que le relativisme peut être surmonté” (“De l’antipositivisme,” 478). Refining accounts of the past with our peers can certainly disclose shared criteria with which to evaluate historical claims, and Aron does not foreclose on the possibility that intersubjective intentions may pragmatically converge. However, in the *Introduction*, his point is that complete intentional convergence is unattainable. Doubtless, he rejects an ‘anything goes’ view of historical relativism. Historians must “justify [a] retrospective transfiguration” (*I* 348/*IPH* 275). While intersubjective criticism can curtail arbitrariness, the limits of introspection and other-comprehension show reflection to be always concrete, and unable to approach a quasi-transcendental ground supporting extra-subjective knowledge claims. Even if reflection is critical and self-directed, “The subject is not the transcendental self, but a social and personal [individual]” (*I* 376/*IPH* 297). For criticisms of the transcendental see *I* 54/*IPH* 44, *I* 76/*IPH* 59, *I* 365/*IPH* 289.

others. These conditions license a generalized skepticism about robust and not merely degreed or imperfect levels of intersubjective understanding.⁸⁶ Consider that while Schütz holds that “the meaning I give to your experiences cannot be precisely the same as the meaning you give to them when you proceed to interpret them,” he concludes that subjects can “in principle” achieve ‘simultaneous coexistence’ even if their reconstructions of the meaning of one another’s experiences are not identical.⁸⁷ Aron accepts Schütz’s insight that another subject’s intention remains a limiting concept, and holds that intentional ascriptions may be pragmatically justified if they approximate others’ intentions but fall short of identity. Nevertheless, he does not accept that short of fully grasping the qualitative character and original meaning of lived intentions, claims to have genuinely understood others can be objectively justified:

Lived experience is enclosed [*enfermée*] within itself; a decision, constitutive of being for oneself, is inaccessible to others [*d’autrui*], but I discover my character and past like that of others. Solitude is as real [*réelle*] as exchanges, social spiritual community enriches them without perhaps retrieving [*arracher*] individuals from solitude. (*I 86/IPH 70; I 80/IPH 63*)

Daily life features successful exchanges with others, for example, when answering a coworker’s question, or placing an order at the market. These exchanges chiefly exhibit a pragmatic awareness of others, which enables the execution of everyday tasks with some degree of confidence about others’ mental states; for example, that a problem has been resolved, or a price agreed upon. This can be improved with repeated exposure, so that social life “tends toward communion.” At a deeper level, however, intersubjective experiences “also confirm that, strictly speaking, there is no fusion of consciousness” (*I 81/IPH 65*). Pragmatic awareness satisfies a

⁸⁶ For skeptical themes in Aron see Alain Boyer, “Le désir,” 52–53.

⁸⁷ Schütz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, 99. This rests on Schütz’s view that self-knowledge is “always in principle indubitable,” even if knowledge of others is “open to doubt” (*The Phenomenology of the Social World*, 107). Unlike for Aron, “everything I know about your conscious life is really based on my knowledge of my own lived experiences” (*The Phenomenology of the Social World*, 106). Even if this evidence provides us with mere “indications” (*Anzeichen*), it supports a generally reliable sketch of another subject’s intention (*The Phenomenology of the Social World*, 99, 21).

lower degree of understanding but falls short of a full disambiguation or grasp of intentional content. Others' intentions therefore remain "inaccessible" in their totality and retain some opacity. Despite practical success, a structural inability to grasp their unique qualitative character entails that non-pragmatic claims to other-understanding must be qualified, since we do "not experience what others are experiencing or have experienced." More strongly, "in their concrete totality," that is, with respect to the original character of their intentional experience, subjects are "eternally separated from one another" (*I 80/IPH 64*). The solipsistic or skeptical tenor of these claims is weakened by Aron's acceptance of our de facto meaningful experience of and communication with others (supported by imperfect and defeasible intuitive evidence), and the degreed knowledge claims it licenses. His reflections on historical understanding confirm that intersubjective intentional 'solitude' is the inverse of a regulative ideal of 'objective' other-understanding, which is nothing less than full intentional transparency.

6. The Intentionality of Historical Understanding

Aron's account of intersubjectivity relies on his phenomenological analyses of objectification. In similar fashion, his phenomenology of intersubjectivity, I will now show, directly informs his philosophy of history. While this link has been acknowledged, its importance for the *Introduction's* argument has not been adequately appreciated.⁸⁸ To be clear, Aron's delimitation of historical objectivity is also served by an existentialist philosophical anthropology, readings and criticisms of Hegel, Karl Marx, Weber, Georg Simmel, and Heinrich Rickert, and arguments against positivism, historicism, and fatalism. But these concerns have sometimes been

⁸⁸ Whiteside notes but does not explore the connection ("Perspectivism and Historical Objectivity," 135; see also Stewart, "Sartre, Aron, and Anti-Positivism," 53). For Launay, phenomenological considerations (self-reflection is his main focus) are of consequence for Aron's philosophy of history chiefly because through introspection, subjects can attribute a range of meanings to historical actors or events (*La pensée politique*, 20–22). Once again, the existential tenor of Aron's phenomenology is stressed to the detriment of his argument for the link between intentional objectification, intersubjectivity, and history.

assimilated (and even identified) with his phenomenological motivations.⁸⁹ The latter show that historical inquiry is a species of intersubjective experience, for it too studies others' intentions. Mutatis mutandis, pronouncements about past subjects will be constrained by the limits of intersubjective understanding. After identifying the link between intersubjectivity and history, I point to two important appraisals of historical relativity that are better understood in light of Aron's analyses of intersubjectivity.

6.1. Intersubjectivity and Historical Consciousness

Aron's remarks about "the consciousness [*la conscience*] of history" demonstrate that it is modelled after intersubjective understanding (*I 54/IPH 44*). Knowledge of the past "is derived from knowledge of self and others" (*I 66/IPH 51*). In historical inquiry, we understand "the other's world in and by means of [our] own," or starting from our standpoint. The presence "of the other [*l'autre*] . . . always reflects communication between two persons" (*I 133/IPH 107*). The primary "object" of historical interest is "the experience of others," which historians attempt to give "a sort of presence" (*I 101/IPH 82*).⁹⁰

This framework leads Aron to foreground his first extended "description" of historical *compréhension* with an example from a mundane instance of intersubjective perception, in which a police officer signals to us to obey some command (*I 126/IPH 101*). In this case, we immediately grasp a putative intention. But the example offers "the maximum of simplicity" because the "consciousness I understand is as anonymous as the gesture I perceived." Historical understanding is more complicated. Attempts to understand historical actors are instead "strictly intellectual," because historians avail themselves of meanings (or "ideas") given by the historical

⁸⁹ Fessard notes that historical consciousness is "Derived from self-consciousness and consciousness of others," but unlike the interpretation I propose, he claims that this is ultimately "an existential intention" (*une visée existentielle*) (*La philosophie historique*, 69). As I suggest below, this interpretation of Aron's account of introspective and intersubjective understanding address only some of its applications.

⁹⁰ For a later statement of this view see the following claim: "L'histoire est la reconstitution, pour et par les vivants, de la vie des morts" (*DCH 6*). Historical events, diplomatic notes, conversations, etc., are "faits d'expériences vécues par les consciences, de significations visées par elles" (*DCH 56*).

record, not by perceptual intuition. They also face distinct challenges: a spotty archival record can lead to an “insufficiency of information,” and unfamiliar points of reference may induce a “deficiency of imagination” (*I* 132–33/*IPH* 106–7). Often, these barriers cannot be overcome through supplementary intuitive evidence or peer testimony. Necessarily, “historical understanding broadens” to include the “conception of the world” in question, including background social, economic, religious, or environmental conditions (*I* 132/*IPH* 106).⁹¹

Despite these modifications, historical inquiry “presupposes the understanding of consciousnesses,” for the sake of ‘seizing’ “the intended goal” of an event or action (*I* 126/*IPH* 101–2). For example, a historian might probe Hindenburg or Mussolini’s sensitivity to socio-political pressures, tactical goals like a desire to avoid civil war, character traits like jealousy or fear, personal values, and so on (*I* 127–28/*IPH* 102). This evidence ultimately serves the goal of disambiguating these actors’ intentional lives (*I* 127/*IPH* 103). Categories like ‘partial’ or ‘total’ rational interpretation particularize the elements of intersubjective understanding considered in section 5, and helpfully demarcate inquiries geared toward different evidentiary bases (extra-subjective and subject-centered, respectively). For Aron, however, these divisions are less clear in practice, and remain subject to familiar strictures: “These abstract distinctions merely serve to order the spontaneous attempts of those who understand human actions, which is to say each one of us and the historian” (*I* 128/*IPH* 103). Like the cases above, historical understanding proceeds “by first assuming intentions.” These structural similarities suggest that historical understanding must also confront shifts in intentional stances, diminished vivacity of qualitative evidence, and the possibility of intersubjective ‘solitude’ (*I* 403/*IPH* 319). As I will now show, this hypothesis is borne out by important appraisals of historical objectivity in the *Introduction*.

⁹¹ This eventually yields an account of “objective spirit” or “collective representation,” i.e. the self-image, guiding assumptions, or worldview of a particular period (*I* 90/*IPH* 73). Like the intentions on which it rests, the “objective mind is multiple, incoherent, without a definite unity, nor certain limits” (*I* 94/*IPH* 76). See Launay, *La pensée politique*, 23.

6.2. “Two Minds Never Manage to Coincide”

The theoretical payoff of Aron’s phenomenological reflections figures clearly in the first extended summary of historical understanding offered in Section II, which surfaces in a discussion of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. At issue is the extent to which historians can access unfamiliar worlds:

The fact still remains that the way of thinking, isolated by him, did not exist for the primitive man as it does for the interpreter. Primitive man is *other* for civilized man. This relation governs the choice of concepts used. . . . This relativity seems to me fundamentally inevitable; it follows from [*elle se déduit*] the results obtained in the preceding section. As we said, the interpreter commits himself [*s’engage*] to the interpretation he proposes because ideas exist only by means of a mind [*esprit*], and because two minds [*esprits*] never manage to coincide. (*I* 132–33/*IPH* 107)

The details of Lévy-Bruhl’s view need not concern us.⁹² Aron agrees with Lévy-Bruhl that different historical periods have their own set of conceptual commitments. These differences would be of little consequence were it not also the case that they individuate intentional states, and that on Aron’s view, different historical “minds never manage to coincide.”

This text unambiguously identifies its methodological and argumentative antecedents: historical relativity is “inevitable” given the *Introduction*’s analyses of introspective and intersubjective understanding. This claim draws on tenets detailed in sections 4–5 above: namely, that ‘ideas’ or intentional contents exist “only by means of a mind,” and that intersubjective intentional convergence falls short of identity or co-intentionality. Note that the

⁹² Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s *La mentalité primitive* establishes a typology and developmental account of ‘primitive’ and ‘modern’ *mentalités*. For Lévy-Bruhl’s influence on phenomenology see Dermot Moran, “Husserl on Universalism,” 488–94.

first is not a new ontological claim.⁹³ Instead, it describes the mode of givenness of historical data. These data (agents' intentions) are given according to conditions whose characteristics "we have already indicated with regard to self-consciousness" (*I* 130/*IPH* 127). As the conclusion to Section II confirms, the objects in question are mind- or consciousness-dependent because the (intentional) sense of history must be objectified to be studied: "we have recognized, from the start, a kind of perception of others [*perception d'autrui*]. But this perception does not permit us to share a foreign life, it offers it to us objectified [*objectivée*]" (*I* 189/*IPH* 153). As is now clear, this precondition of historical inquiry estranges us from the original qualitative character of historical subjects' experiences, and offers no recourse for fully overcoming the limits of the observational intentional stance. Barriers to understanding past agents' intentions are strengthened by the thoroughly intersubjective character of historical understanding, whose structure blocks the possibility of shared or co-intentionality.

On these grounds, historical interpretation is no pure revival of the past and yields a merely probable reconstruction (*I* 127/*IPH* 101).⁹⁴ Crucially, this text also shows that these phenomenological tenets can be separated from, and are explanatorily prior to, existential commitment. Historians are free to (re)construct the past (to 'choose' or 'commit' themselves to an interpretation) given the intentional structure of historical understanding. In addition to transforming intentional content, historical observation leaves intentional transformations unchecked by direct access to historical subjects' mental lives: "Understanding implies an objectification [*objectivation*] of the psychological facts . . . and we have seen that understanding always commits [*s'engage*] the interpreter" (*I* 189/*IPH* 152). If the intentional object of historical study were identical to the content and qualitative character that its bearers encountered, interpretations would be analogously constrained.⁹⁵ Historians' interpretive license is authorized

⁹³ It is "illegitimate" to give an "ontological reality to conceptual distinctions" (*I* 189/*IPH* 152). Aron attributes this position to Scheler. The *Introduction*'s "description of temporal existence" does not translate into a specific ontological or metaphysical thesis (*I* 431/*IPH* 342).

⁹⁴ Cf. Husserl's *Crisis*, especially his remarks in the *Origin of Geometry* (*Crisis*, 349–51, 370–75, 378).

⁹⁵ The conditions under which historical data are given ("an immanence that does not guarantee objectivity") entail that commitment is a means of "overcoming the equivocity of existence," chiefly that pertaining to the intentionality of historical understanding (*I* 360/*IPH* 285–86).

by observers' ability to "reconstitute a system of preferences or conduct [*conduites*] without, for the most part, getting to feel the soul whose mental structure we have, so to speak, unfolded [*dégagé*]" (I 189/IPH 153). While it also features an "imperfect objectification" of intentional content, historical modes of other-"*appropriation*" are weaker than their variants, given the dearth of intuitive evidence and the unavailability of (defeasible) peer testimony.

As these remarks indicate, despite recognizing limits to objective accounts of the past, Aron does not dismiss the project or possibility of historical understanding as such. Objectification limits our grasp of others' intentions, but that does not prevent historical reconstructions from attaining a relative degree of probability, albeit one that falls short of 'objective' knowledge. Here too, the observation that understanding is degreed is helpful (section 4.1.). It informs Aron's inference that a justifiable but ultimately imperfect and defeasible form of historical understanding is within reach, but rules out the plausibility of accounts that presuppose putative identity of intentions between historical agents and contemporary researchers. Aron's account of the preconditions for historical understanding (a reliance on intersubjective understanding, and the perspective-dependent status of intentions) indicates that such an ideal is unattainable. The remarks in the next section, and in the final part of the *Introduction*, confirm that these tenets issue in a more guarded approach to historical understanding.⁹⁶

6.3. "A Mental Element is Never Enclosed in Itself"

⁹⁶ This observation, in light of the evidence considered above, suggests that Aron's claim that "there is no historical reality" might allow that 'historical reality' takes shape in the meaning-making activity of historical research. Aron's anti-realist inclinations, and his aversion to drawing metaphysical or ontological conclusions from conceptual distinctions, would lead him to deny that historical reality can be located outside of historical understanding as it unfolds in the present. But given his account, it seems plausible that he could accept that it is located within (inter-) subjective intentional experience, and in contemporary attempts to make sense of the intentions animating historical actors (with the proviso that the results of these processes are not subsequently defined in extra-subjective or realist terms). I thank a reviewer for encouraging me to address this.

Aron's analyses of intentional objectification also underlie Section IV's appraisal of historical objectivity, whose motivations lie "dispersed or implicit in the preceding pages" (*I 335/IPH 265*).⁹⁷ These remarks further clarify how phenomenological considerations intersect with arguments against causal or deterministic thinking. Having analyzed concepts like 'law,' 'event,' and 'chance' in Section III, Aron concludes that these approaches commit a 'retrospective' fallacy. They eliminate the "free," non causally-bound intentions needed to generate nomological explanations (*I 263–64/IPH 183–84*). Only if this ineliminable condition is ignored will historical events or decisions appear inevitable or extra-subjective. Positivism or causal thought may overcome an "initial" (*première*), basic kind of subjective dependence, by showing that extra-subjective entities (for example, cellular structure) retain an integrity across diverse perspectives (*I 288/IPH 363*). While correct, this claim remains an interpretation of how matter relates to matter, mind, and history. As such, it depends on conscious structures and "does not sever itself from the perceived world" (*I 364/IPH 288*).⁹⁸

Section IV makes this claim more precise. Despite different theoretical commitments, reductive sociological accounts, positivist historiography, and fatalistic historicism all overlook the implications of the intentional structure of historical inquiry. Two familiar results follow if we accept that the fundamental endeavor of historical research is the 'appropriation' of an "intellectual atom," or a core of once-lived meaning (*I 353/IPH 279*; see also *I 359–60/IPH 285*). (1) Any historical narrative will be perspective-dependent: a "mental [*spirituel*] element is never enclosed in itself, never fixed; it needs an act of re-creation to return to life, namely, to be thought again or felt by a mind [*sentí par un esprit*]" (*I 353/IPH 279*). (2) Claims about the past will be circumscribed by the limits of intersubjective understanding: like "all forms of understanding," historical inquiry is comparable to intersubjective communication (*I 354/IPH 280*).

⁹⁷ Fessard's interpretation of this section overlooks its dependence on earlier findings (*La philosophie historique*, 76–84).

⁹⁸ See *DCH* 10, 12 for later statements of this view.

Here too, Aron relies on the insight that first-personal, introspective, or “perceptual relativity” transfers to and impinges on historical research. He concludes that in history we encounter perceptual relativity in an aggravated form [*sous une forme aggravée*], namely, the partiality and reciprocity of lived experiences [*des expériences vécues*]; actor and spectator, soldier and general, necessarily have different (though supposedly identical) sets of perspectives. History never completely overcomes this relativity, because lived experiences [*les expériences vécues*] constitute the matter of science, and because facts, to the extent that they transcend individuals, lie not in themselves, but by and for consciousnesses [*par et pour les consciences*]. (I 364/IPH 289)

Two interrelated points are made here. Historical research turns up ample evidence of intersubjective disagreement (“partiality”). Differences of perspective (for example, between a soldier or commander’s interpretation of an order) mirror those of lived, contemporary experience, and are of consequence not only because they complicate intersubjective communication, but also because they limit historical knowledge. This is not due merely to the fact that multiple perspectives inhibit uniform historical narratives, but chiefly because of what these divergences reveal about the intentional structure operative in historical actors’ experiences (which also obtains in contemporary attempts to understand the past). The fundamental shortcoming of positivistic accounts is an inattentiveness to this deeper condition. Understanding the past requires the objectification of past experience. But objectifying acts are a double-edged sword: they yield valuable information about possible motivations, but given the consequences flowing from their retrospective intentional character, they also require that any historical reconstruction “comes into being only in minds [*dans les esprits*] and changes with them” (I 364/IPH 289).

As commentators have noted, the *Introduction*’s final section tempers this position. Aron avers that his consciousness-centric account can sustain reflective processes that dialectically

submit reconstructions of the past to criticism, which strengthens the plausibility of historical narratives. This partially blunts the edge of historical relativism, minimizes the seeming arbitrariness of historical narratives, and serves as a first defence against the claim that they are the mere whims of contemporaries (*I* 350/*IPH* 277). Still, he maintains that the relativity or intentional dependence first encountered in introspection persists in and circumscribes historical research: “One does not raise oneself from perceptual relativity [*la relativité perceptive*] to objective relations, transcendently relative; instead one reaches a historical relativity [*une relativité historique*]” (*I* 365/*IPH* 290).⁹⁹ Instead of embracing a historicized-transcendental approach, the limits of concrete historical intentionality are developed in a different philosophical direction.¹⁰⁰

7. Conclusion

Aron’s phenomenological analyses of self and other play a central and sustained role in the *Introduction*’s broader argument, and directly motivate the claim that historical meaning, like human consciousness, is “inexhaustible” (*inépuisable*) (*I* 354/*IPH* 280). To conclude, I would like to consider three implications issuing from these results.

(1) Most immediately, they secure the phenomenological dimension of Aron’s early work, especially the *Introduction*. Readers have struggled to square its claim to have employed “a descriptive, . . . or phenomenological method” with its discussion of the ‘objective’ mind, social and natural causality, human evolution, and so on (*I* 10/*IPH* 9). The interpretation on offer shows that and how the *Introduction* develops phenomenological observations about introspective and intersubjective experience and applies them to the study of history. Against the suggestion that “phenomenology . . . does not propose a philosophy of history,” this interpretation demonstrates

⁹⁹ See Mesure, who offers a broadly Kantian account (*Raymond Aron et la raison historique*, 8–9). Cf. Aron’s observation that the historian “does not merge with a transcendental self” (*I* 365/*IPH* 289).

¹⁰⁰ Aron’s interest in the “limits” of historical “reason” is arguably the most Kantian strain in his thought. But as the evidence above shows, he offers a non-Kantian solution to this problem (*I* 11/*IPH* 10; see also *PCH* 294). For differences from Kant see Boyer, “Le désir,” 51–52.

that Aron's reflections on history unfold at the level of lived meaning and do not presuppose "dogmatic" philosophical commitments.¹⁰¹ Despite its wide conceptual repertoire, the *Introduction* gradually probes the implications of the lived apprehension of historical meaning (*I* 10/*IPH* 9, *I* 59–60/*IPH* 47–48, *I* 126/*IPH* 100, *I* 188/*IPH* 152, *I* 385/*IPH* 280). The abiding focus on its contributions to sociology, incipient existentialism, and embryonic liberalism, have masked the text's phenomenological tenor and the extent to which it supports the structure and development of its various arguments, thereby obscuring an important stage in Aron's intellectual formation.

(2) By extension, these findings show that the standard account of Aron's relation to French phenomenology should be revised. Aron is not a mere transmitter of German phenomenology to Sartre and Beauvoir. He also makes positive use of phenomenological concepts, methods, and foci, in particular, concrete analyses of intentionality, intersubjectivity, and objectification, which he adapts and deploys to clarify issues in the philosophy of history. The *Introduction's* interpretation of the limits of historical objectivity departs from a reigning positivism, tackles topics unaddressed by methodologically sensitive historians like Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, and precedes more well-known French phenomenological reflections on history (for example, Sartre or Ricoeur's). Aron's phenomenological approach to history stands on its own, and justifies a more prominent place in the development of phenomenology in France, not one on its theoretical periphery.

(3) More broadly, these results also point to potentially promising lines of inquiry for phenomenological philosophy of history. The aims of this paper do not permit a thorough exploration of this issue, but Aron's theoretical framework and hybrid use of phenomenological resources opens up potentially new perspectives for understanding the basic assumption that consciousness is 'historical.' Aron's interpretation of this claim takes departure from concrete reflections on the intentional apprehension of historical meaning. For him, a theory of history "must not dissociate subject and object" (*I* 53/*IPH* 44). Aron's privileging of intentionality (and

¹⁰¹ Lyotard, *La phénoménologie*, 107.

related concepts that depend on it, like ‘choice’ or ‘reconstruction’) is unlike standard phenomenological approaches to history, which tend to focus on temporal experience (see for example those developed by Husserl or Heidegger), or those which detail historical consciousness by appeal to categories like narrative or memory. Unlike Heidegger’s reflections on everydayness, or Husserl’s transcendental a priori analyses, Aron sketches a direct connection between everyday intentional experience and its historical counterpart, which details how historical understanding replicates elements of perceptual, introspective, and intersubjective intentionality, and which is prior to the formulation of higher-order historical narratives or representations. Arguably, he draws a more immediate connection between intentionality and history, or present and past. One of his more suggestive philosophical contributions is to have shown how the latter might depend on the former. The *Introduction*’s focus on historians’ active inquiries into the past arguably limits the scope of its conclusions, but Aron’s steadfast attempts to showcase similarities between everyday and historical intentionality suggests the possibility of adapting his account to other modalities of historical experience (*I* 128/*IPH* 103; see also *I* 136/*IPH* 110). The theoretical merits of this reading of the tight relation between intuition, intersubjectivity, and history remain to be explored, but there is reason to believe that the philosophy of history could profit from an exploration of its virtues.¹⁰²

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Citations to Aron’s individual works use the following abbreviations:

- DCH *Dimensions de la conscience historique*
- I *Introduction à la philosophie de l’histoire*
- IPH *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*
- PCH *La philosophie critique de l’histoire*

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