

The Experience of Torture: Excerpts from Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits* (Retrospective Account, 1966)

Abstract

Jean Améry (born Hanns Chaim Mayer, 1912–1978) was an Austrian writer and the son of an Austrian Jewish father and Catholic mother. After the “Anschluss” in 1938, Améry and his Jewish wife fled to France and eventually Belgium. It was in Belgium that Améry joined the resistance movement and was arrested by German authorities for distributing dissident pamphlets. After his arrest, Améry was marked a “Jew” by his captors and deported to Auschwitz. He survived several camps and was liberated from Bergen-Belsen by the British Army in April 1945. Améry’s postwar writings on what it meant to be a Holocaust survivor, including his recounting of torture, imprisonment, and the deaths he witnessed in his years in Auschwitz became famous.

The excerpt below comes from his 1966 book, *At the Mind's Limit*, where he argues that torture was the core of the Third Reich and its tyranny. His work tries to describe the indescribable; for him, language has the inability to properly portray the experience of torture. Throughout his postwar career, Améry worked tirelessly to ensure that the experience of the Holocaust and its examination remained relevant. He refused to allow the Holocaust to become merely another event that occurred in the past. Jean Améry took his own life in 1978, two years after the publication of his book, *On Suicide*.

Source

In July 1943 I was arrested by the Gestapo. It was a matter of fliers. The group to which I belonged, a small German-speaking organization within the Belgian resistance movement, was spreading anti-Nazi propaganda among the members of the German occupation forces. We produced rather primitive agitation material, with which we imagined we could convince the German soldiers of the terrible madness of Hitler and his war. Today I know, or at least believe to know, that we were aiming our feeble message at deaf ears. I have much reason to assume that the soldiers in field-gray uniform who found our mimeographed papers in front of their barracks clicked their heels and passed them straight on to their superiors, who then, with the same official readiness, in turn notified the security agency. And so the latter rather quickly got onto our trail and raided us. One of the fliers that I was carrying at the time of my arrest bore the message, which was just as succinct as it was propagandistically ineffectual, “Death to the SS bandits and Gestapo hangmen!” Whoever was stopped with such material by the men in leather coats and with drawn pistols could have no illusions of any kind. I also did not allow myself any for a single moment. For, God knows, I regarded myself— wrongly, as I see today—as an old, hardened expert on the system, its men, and its methods.

[...]

Not much is said when someone who has never been beaten makes the ethical and pathetic statement that upon the first blow the prisoner loses his human dignity. I must confess that I don’t know exactly what that is: human dignity. One person thinks he loses it when he finds himself in circumstances that make it impossible for him to take a daily bath. Another believes he loses it when he must speak to an official in something other than his native language. In one instance human dignity is bound to a certain physical convenience, in the other to the right of free speech, in still another perhaps to the availability of erotic partners of the same sex. I don’t know if the person who is beaten by the police loses human dignity. Yet I am certain that with the very first blow that descends on him he loses something we will

perhaps temporarily call “trust in the world.” Trust in the world includes all sorts of things: the irrational and logically unjustifiable belief in absolute causality perhaps, or the likewise blind belief in the validity of the inductive inference. But more important as an element of trust in the world, and in our context what is solely relevant, is the certainty that by reason of written or unwritten social contracts the other person will spare me—more precisely stated, that he will respect my physical, and with it also my metaphysical, being. The boundaries of my body are also the boundaries of my self. My skin surface shields me against the external world. If I am to have trust, I must feel on it only what I *want* to feel.

At the first blow, however, this trust in the world breaks down. The other person, *opposite* whom I exist physically in the world and *with* whom I can exist only as long as he does not touch my skin surface as border, forces his own corporeality on me with the first blow. He is on me and thereby destroys me. It is like a rape, a sexual act without the consent of one of the two partners. Certainly, if there is even a minimal prospect of successful resistance, a mechanism is set in motion that enables me to rectify the border violation by the other person. For my part, I can expand in urgent self-defense, objectify my own corporeality, restore the trust in my continued existence. The social contract then has another text and other clauses: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. You can also regulate your life according to that. You *cannot* do it when it is the other one who knocks out the tooth, sinks the eye into a swollen mass, and you yourself suffer on your body the counter-man that your fellow man became. If no help can be expected, this physical overwhelming by the other then becomes an existential consummation of destruction altogether.

The expectation of help, the certainty of help, is indeed one of the fundamental experiences of human beings, and probably also of animals. This was quite convincingly presented decades ago by old Kropotkin, who spoke of “mutual aid in nature,” and by the modern animal behaviorist Lorenz. The expectation of help is as much a constitutional psychic element as is the struggle for existence. Just a moment, the mother says to her child who is moaning from pain, a hot-water bottle, a cup of tea is coming right away, we won’t let you suffer so! I’ll prescribe you a medicine, the doctor assures, it will help you. Even on the battlefield, the Red Cross ambulances find their way to the wounded man. In almost all situations in life where there is bodily injury there is also the expectation of help; the former is compensated by the latter. But with the first blow, from a policeman’s fist, against which there can be no defense and which no helping hand will ward off, a part of our life ends and it can never again be revived.

Source of English translation: Jean Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits: contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*. Translated by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980, pp. 24–29.

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