



# The intellectual in Auschwitz: Between vulnerability and resistance: (In memory of Keith Tester)

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## Abstract

The significance of being an intellectual when taken prisoner and sent to a concentration camp by the Nazis is rarely discussed – instead, the importance of being either a Jew or a political prisoner (say, a German communist) is highlighted. By contrast, Jean Amery’s recollections of being tortured and sent to Auschwitz concentrate on his self-understanding as an intellectual. What difference does the identity and outlook as an intellectual make in the extreme circumstances found in Auschwitz? The paper discusses Amery’s views on this question, invoking that of others who have also addressed it, like Primo Levi and Theodor Adorno.

## Keywords

intellectuals, torture, resistance, dignity, Nazi ideology

## I

When a freshman in philosophy at the University of Oslo, one of my senior professors was known to have been sent, along with hundreds of other Norwegian students, to the German concentration camp Buchenwald during the war. Categorized as political prisoners, they endured conditions largely favorable to those suffered by, say, Jews sent to Auschwitz. They all survived.

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As far as I recall, the professor would rarely mention his wartime experiences. With one exception, though. Sometimes he would relate how, when prospects seemed particularly grim, he would recite to himself verses by Schiller, Goethe and Hölderlin, or by Norwegian poets. Given the reality of suffering and war surrounding him in the camp, why turn to poetry? What could it possibly offer in such circumstances?

I don't know how the old professor would have answered this question. What I assume, though, is that the contrast between the two worlds – that of the camp and that of poetry – is precisely what conferred a particular significance upon poetry, upon keeping up a bond with it, instead of giving it up. Giving up on the world of poetry, as envisioned by poetry, would mean to surrender to the insistence of the Nazis that *their* vision of reality as something eminently physical, such as in the form of the camp, is the only reality there is, the only one worth attending to. Confronted with the Nazi endeavor to define, dictate and exhaust reality, to render the world of their making and subject to their control the sole reality of everyone, friend or foe, the reciting of poetry became an act of defiance. If as a camp inmate one could not physically revolt, one could at least undertake a 'spiritual' act of resistance, an inner and private one at that, but a sign of resistance nonetheless. While forced to be compliant on the outside, one could try to sustain a spiritual inner life of sorts, one hidden from the Nazi masters yet of invaluable importance in the yearning to survive their reign, to remain in some minimal sense 'true to oneself' and one's pre-catastrophic values and ideals in a situation of suffering and death.

I mentioned that the professor had made a point of reciting German as well as Norwegian authors. Why? Presumably to protest against the Nazis' attempt to co-opt everything German, be it the poetry of Schiller or Hölderlin, so as to Nazify it, putting their ideological stamp on it and claiming symbolic in addition to physical dictatorship, expressing the totalitarian ambition to seize control of symbolic reality as well as the material one. To persist in holding the giants of German spiritual achievement in high regard, in the face of the Nazi effort at total appropriation, was an act of resistance: one showed the inner strength required to defy that effort, regardless of the crushing brutality that accompanied it. Another Germany – another German spirituality – than the Nazi one had once existed, and it would hopefully exist once again; and to help ensure that it could do so, there needed to be individuals willing and able to preserve it, to save it from being either spoiled or forgotten. In other words, one could at one and the same time fight Nazism and endeavor to save the 'best' of German spiritual heritage; one could do so regardless of whether one happened to be oneself German or non-German, say, Norwegian.

Yet there is a deeper layer to the importance of turning to poetry while a camp inmate than that bearing on ideological or political resistance. Having mental access to poetry, and being intent on keeping it intact, was a source of inner strength. It was not only a matter of ensuring that one's pre-camp identity not be harmed, let alone crushed. It was also a matter of avoiding that it be changed in a manner desired by the Nazis.

To appreciate the importance of the latter point, one must know that according to the Nazi *Weltanschauung*, Norwegians were considered as part of a 'superior' race: in terms of 'blood', the Norwegians were part of the Aryan family, being just as superior over against the 'sub-human' Jews as were so-called pure Germans. For this partly racial,

partly ideological reason (the two of course being inseparable in the Nazi case), Norwegians who considered the Germany led by Hitler as an enemy, and who accordingly put up a fight against the German presence in Norway, were regarded as simply mistaken. Sending Norwegians to a camp was a consequence of the acts of the individuals in question, hence a matter of punishment. By contrast, sending Jews to a camp was a matter of destiny, of seeing to it that every single member of the Jewish race receive the fate meant for him or her – death, as what follows from the racial laws, the laws of nature, whereby the convictions and actions of the individual Jew make no difference: their group identity, racially conceived, sealed their destiny as *‘lebensunwertes Leben’*.

This then is the context required for understanding what was at stake in the Norwegian student’s stubbornness in remaining loyal to his ‘original’, pre-camp-life self and in employing an allegiance to the spiritual world of poetry as a means of doing so. To the extent that political conviction – or more broadly, intellectual orientation – was a chief reason for him having been sent to the camp, holding fast to that orientation, not allowing it to be set aside or replaced by another orientation, say, a Nazi one, was proof of individual resistance; it *made sense* as precisely an act of resistance, not only to the individual himself and to his fellow inmates, but to the Nazis as well. And who knows – perhaps showing the Nazis that one did not give in to their efforts of ‘re-education’ would command a certain degree of respect.

## II

The case of Jean Amery is very different. Like my professor, he was a camp inmate, only the camp was Auschwitz and, eventually, Bergen-Belsen, not Buchenwald.

Amery also differs in his identity: his father was Jewish, his mother a Roman-Catholic Austrian. The circumstances of his arrest are related as follows by Amery himself in *At the Mind’s Limits* (henceforth AML): ‘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’ (AML: 24). Having been caught with fliers bearing the message ‘Death to the SS bandits and Gestapo henchmen’, he had ‘no illusions of any kind’ as to what would happen to him. And indeed, he was ‘routinely’ sent to the Belgian Gestapo center at Fort Breendonk to be tortured. He was thus paying the price he had every reason to expect would be the consequence of being caught as a member of the resistance.

Amery’s arrest, then, had something in common with the arrest of the Norwegian students discussed above: they were arrested – en masse, in the hundreds – for refusing to comply with the Nazification of higher education that the Germans, in alignment with the Quisling government, was undertaking at the time. The shared feature is that of partaking in an act *meant* as resistance, and not merely interpreted as such by the Germans. Being sent to Buchenwald in the one case, to torture in the other, are both cases of experiencing punishment – predictably so – as a result of one’s action.

But here similarities end. According to the Wikipedia entry on Jean Amery, ‘when it was established that there was no information to be extracted from him, he was “demoted” from political prisoner to Jew, and shipped to Auschwitz’. His being moved

from the one place to the other seems to involve his identity changing from that of a member of the resistance (hence, a political prisoner) to that of being a Jew (hence, a member of the 'sub-human' race doomed to die). In the former case, as we saw above, individual acts, based on conviction, make a difference, to all parties involved; in the latter case, everything to do with the individual *qua* individual is denied any significance, effectively effaced.

It is remarkable that – lest I have missed something – Amery does not thematize the change of identity just mentioned, enormously important as it was, given his situation. To be more accurate, what he does not tell us is whether his Jewishness played a role for the Germans who tortured him, or whether their sole focus was on his actions as a political opponent.

In his essay 'Torture' in *At the Mind's Limits*, Amery describes the torturer like this:

He has control over the other's scream of pain and death; he is master over flesh and spirit, life and death. In this way, torture becomes the total inversion of the social world, in which we can live only if we grant our fellow man life, ease his suffering, bridle the desire of our ego to expand. But in the world of torture man exists only by ruining the other person who stands before him. (AML: 35)

Having set out the way in which the torturer seeks to effect 'the total inversion of the social world' of which the victim is – or used to be – a member, the world which renders life meaningful, actions predictable, thus sustaining the conditions for having a basic ontological trust in the world, Amery goes on to make an observation that speaks directly to my above discussion of the importance of the victim's engaging (if only *in foro interno*) with an intellectual world:

A slight pressure by the tool-wielding hand is enough to turn the other – along with his head, in which are perhaps stored Kant and Hegel, and all nine symphonies, and *The World as Will and Representation* [Schopenhauer] – into a shrilly squealing piglet at slaughter. When it has happened and the torturer has expanded into the body of his fellow men and extinguished what was his spirit, he himself can then smoke a cigarette or sit down to breakfast or, if he has the desire, have a look at *The World as Will and Representation*. (AML: 35)

I take Amery's point to be that in torture, the entire intellectual world that the victim is committed to, even – in some cases – to the point of being at the core of his sense of identity and self-worth, is being nullified: whatever importance that world used to have no longer obtains. In other words, the destruction brought about by the violence and infliction of pain and suffering that torture is all about is not limited to a physical or bodily dimension, to ensuring that the victim be broken in that respect – i.e. is made unable to put up a fight, to strike back. Rather, the deeper and more enduring destruction brought about in torture is of a more subtle since symbolic kind: ensuring that the victim be broken spiritually, not only physically. Not the capacity for bodily movement, for physical strength, is what is most importantly to be destroyed, but the freedom of movement of the mind, the way the mind and the peculiar world it partakes in and helps sustain marks itself as independent, as affirming that the victim possesses something all his own, out of reach of the otherwise all-powerful torturer. This being so, any sign that

the mind of the victim is still, to some extent, intact, still within the power of the victim himself to command, as a source for independent thoughts, a will of his own, will be considered absolutely intolerable by the torturer, showing that the pain inflicted thus far, however devastating, amounts to a failure: what must be made to break completely is still not fully broken.

Is breaking the victim as a bearer of mind, a spiritual creature, really the declared and ultimate goal of torture, or is it rather its consequence, what it effects more or less completely in the individual case, without the torturer necessarily paying attention to it?

Presumably the answer will differ from case to case. However, as far as Amery's experience of torture is concerned, I think the answer is anything but equivocal: for him, the very essence of torture consists in reducing a person 'entirely to a body' (AML: 36), thereby confirming, significantly, the Nazis' claim that their ideologically sought-out victims were really sub-human, less-than-human creatures, that is to say, devoid of the features that would manifest and so prove their worthiness of life, their entitlement to respect or right and everything inducing dignity and inviolability. As so many survivors and analysts alike have pointed out – including Primo Levi and Hannah Arendt – what the Nazis endeavored was nothing less than that the victims *themselves* give up on their humanity, on their claims to be treated as co-humans, as bearers of inviolability, and as lovable (worthy of being loved), as Jay Bernstein adds (2015: 265 ff.). In Arendt's terms, there is first the destruction of the juridical person (i.e. the Nuremberg Laws); followed by the murder of the moral person in man; followed finally by the destruction of unique identity, the spontaneity through which a person can call an action 'mine', expressing his subjective will and freedom (see Arendt, 1951: 447 ff.). In the 'reduction of the many to the one' that this three-stage sequence of destruction is meant to bring about, the prisoners' reduction to mere bodies would precede their actual death, meaning that *their spiritual death* – their ceasing to be spiritual beings, to aspire to partaking of the life of the mind – *would precede their physical one*.

### III

The point I just made is borne out again and again in the title essay in Amery's book. 'The reality of the camp', Amery never tires of telling us, 'triumphed effortlessly over death and over the entire complex of the so-called ultimate questions.' Indeed, here 'the mind came up against its limits' (AML: 18). Amery's description is worth quoting in full:

To reach out beyond concrete reality with words became before our very eyes a game that was not only worthless and an impermissible luxury but also mocking and evil. Hourly, the physical world delivered proof that its insufferableness could be coped with only through means inherent in that world. In other words: nowhere else in the world did reality have as much effective power as in the camp, nowhere else was reality so real. In no other place did the attempt to transcend it prove so hopeless and so shoddy. [...] Where the philosophic declarations still meant something they appeared trivial, and where they were not trivial they no longer meant anything. (AML: 19)

It follows that, as expressed by a practicing Jew Amery met in Auschwitz, 'here your intelligence and your education are worthless' (AML: 14). In his discussion Amery does allow for a certain differentiation: believers and committed communists did manage to 'transcend themselves' and to project themselves into the future; both Christians and Marxists 'stood open, wide open onto a world that was not the world of Auschwitz' (AML: 14). But with these two exceptions, the intellect according to Amery 'was of no help, or of little help. It abandoned us. It constantly vanished from sight whenever those questions were involved that were once called the "ultimate" questions' (AML: 15). Amery's overall claim is unambiguous, and it is meant to apply to the majority of intellectuals, understood as a person 'who lives within what is a spiritual frame of reference in the widest sense', a person who believes in 'the reality of the world of the mind' (AML: 2, 8): for all such persons, their trying, in some sense and to some extent, to remain intellectuals, to retain a relationship with the world of the mind, considered as a real and a meaningful – or meaning-sustaining – world, proved of no worth, no help whatever. On the contrary, 'the intellectual faced death defenselessly' (AML: 17), more so than any other type of victim.

But why, more precisely, is it that being an intellectual is so one-sidedly and inescapably a disadvantage according to Amery?

To answer this question, we need to appreciate how strongly Amery puts his claim: the point is not simply that being an intellectual was not of any help; it made things worse, being an independent source of vulnerability, of helplessness in the face of violence-driven destruction in general and of torture in particular, a vulnerability not found in the non-intellectual victim.

Amery is eager to explain what is at stake here in no uncertain terms. 'Not only', he reiterates, 'was rational-analytic thinking in the camp, and particularly in Auschwitz, of no help, but it led straight into a tragic dialectic of self-destruction' (AML: 10). He offers the following explanation:

First of all, the intellectual did not so easily acknowledge the unimaginable conditions as a given fact as did the non-intellectual. Long practice in questioning the phenomena of everyday reality prevented him from simply adjusting to the realities of the camp; between these stood in all-too-sharp a contrast to everything that he had regarded until then as possible and humanly acceptable. As a free man he always associated with people who were open to humane and reasonable argumentation, and he absolutely did not want to comprehend what now truly was not at all complicated: namely, that in regard to him, the prisoner, the SS was deploying a logic of destruction that in itself operated just as consistently as the logic of preservation did in the outside world. (AML: 10)

Many people would perhaps assume that being an intellectual in the encounter with Nazi brutality, with violence and everything physical gaining the upper hand, would grant the prisoner a ballast of resistance, of a counter-force, if you will, precisely on the grounds of the profound way in which the intellectual's world contrasts with the Nazi world as depicted by Amery. On such a view, the intellectual, as opposed to his non-intellectual fellow prisoners, would have an *alternative* frame of reference, of what is truly important in life, to fall back upon, implying that one's very identity as intellectual,

with the values, ideas and ideals going with it, would *give the lie* to the Nazi version of reality, falsifying its insistence to be the only reality possible, the only one truly real and valid.

True, Amery does allow that the intellectual prisoner in Auschwitz would typically start out thinking that his partaking in a spiritual world, one deeply at odds with the Nazi *Weltanschauung* and its anti-intellectualism, would be an asset to him in the camp; an asset in providing him with access to an alternative framework for understanding and assessing things – ultimately, what makes life worth living, existence worth pursuing – that not only differed from his Nazi guards but from the other prisoners as well. What Amery grants, that is, is the intellectual's conviction that even if all others adjust to the new circumstances and give up on any alternative, anti-Nazi framework for thinking and acting, he – emphatically – will not. He will be the odd one out, finding comfort and support in staying assured that 'another world is possible': an anti-Nazi world, the kind of world that preceded the current triumph of Nazism and that will one day succeed it and again become the predominant reality. He will take it upon himself to be adamant that his non-ceasing allegiance to such a world is a matter of the greatest importance: only as long as there are individuals who have the inner strength to keep alive the flame of that anti-Nazi world does that world stand a chance of becoming real. To abandon it would therefore be no mere personal matter, no purely private defeat; it would make a difference on a much higher plane, jeopardizing the prospects of a humane world for everybody, the world the Nazis are hell-bent to destroy, spiritually no less than physically.

Yet it is precisely this sort of 'rejection of the SS logic', that is, the notion of a 'revolt turned inward' insofar as it is made impossible as turned outward, that is doomed to failure given the circumstances of the camp. 'After a certain time', Amery assures us, 'there inevitably appeared something that was more than mere resignation and that we may designate as an acceptance not only of the SS logic but also the SS system of values' (AML: 11). Once again, 'the intellectual prisoner had it harder than the unintellectual. For the latter there had never been a universal humane logic, rather only a consistent system of self-preservation' (AML: 11). For such a person, clearly taken by Amery to constitute the large majority of prisoners, the logic that the camp imposed on them 'was merely the step-by-step intensification of economic logic, and one opposed this intensification with a useful mixture of resignation and the readiness to defend oneself' (AML: 11). By contrast, the intellectual, who was forced to realize that what may not be, according to his lofty ideals and high hopes for humanity, very well could be, indeed was the paramount reality imposing itself on him around the clock and accompanying his every move, had nothing to fall back upon after this realization set in. There was now nothing to prevent a state of affairs where the 'absolute intellectual tolerance and the methodical doubting' that he qua intellectual had so thoroughly internalized 'became factors in his autodestruction' – the conclusion being that 'Yes, the SS could carry on just as it did: there are no natural rights, and moral categories come and go just like the fashions' (AML: 11).

Amery substantiates his grim assessment of the intellectual's predicament in Auschwitz by drawing attention to the relationship between intellectuals and power: 'More than his unintellectual mates in the camp, the intellectual in the camp was lamed

by his historically and sociologically explicable deeper respect for power; in fact, the intellectual always and everywhere has been totally under the sway of power'. To be sure, Amery acknowledges, the intellectual is accustomed to doubt power intellectually, 'to subject it to his critical analysis', and yet – this being the point – 'in the same intellectual process to capitulate to it'. Why? Amery's answer is that 'the capitulation became entirely unavoidable when there was no visible opposition to the hostile force' (AML: 12). Being a prisoner in a camp like Auschwitz meant that one always and everywhere was confronted with the undeniable and insuperable reality that was the power structure of the SS state, the reality of which no act of thinking, no engagement with abstract ideas in one's inner mind, and hence no 'spiritual' protest or denial could possibly change; insofar as this Nazi-designed and Nazi-controlled reality became reality *tout court* it became inescapable in every sense, spiritually no less than physically, as far as the mind is concerned no less than the body. As such, this reality 'seemed reasonable', claims Amery, adding that 'no matter what his thinking may have been on the outside, in this sense here the intellectual became a Hegelian: in the metallic brilliance of its totality the SS state appeared as a state in which the idea was becoming reality' (AML: 12).

Having looked at the main features in Amery's analysis of the predicament of intellectuals in the Nazi concentration camps, it is time to examine how well it holds up.

#### IV

We recall that for Amery the essence of torture lies in the torturer's endeavor to 'reduce a person entirely to a body', to see to it that 'the fellow man is transformed into flesh', thereby 'nullifying' the social world as well as the spiritual one. To put it in philosophical terms, the torturer seeks to realize his own total sovereignty, his complete control over his victims, by ensuring that what starts out as an ideological claim – the intellect counts for nothing, flesh counts for everything – be made into empirical reality: at the end of the day, when the killing of the targeted opponents of the Nazi vision is completed, there is nothing in the resulting 'real world' that would possibly falsify the claim about flesh and physical strength being supreme, spirit being null and void.

We also saw that it was incumbent on the Nazi perpetrators to see to it that the individual victim be spiritually broken before dying physically: the moment of death, indeed *dying as such*, would then be void of any 'metaphysical' – religious, philosophical – import; it would be devoid of any 'meaning' in the pre-Nazi sense of attesting to the spiritual nature of the human beings being killed. Denying any trace of meaning to the death of their victims was a way of showing them, even proving to them, that their life was – had been – equally meaningless, equally devoid of any transcendent and transcending import: having been brought to abandon the very notion of being a spiritual being, of being a creature holding spiritual values and ideas in a sense crucial to one's very identity, the Nazis hoped not only to show how meaningless was the life as well as death of the individual victim to himself, but also to all others – not only to the Nazis, but to fellow inmates as well.

So if we ask why it was so important for the Nazis to break their victims spiritually prior to their death, the answer – I suggest – has to do with the Nazi endeavor to impose conditions on their victims that would force them to be *indifferent to the difference*



*between life and death*: both would be equally devoid of meaning, not only of the sort that would make a difference for the individual himself, but also of meaning that would transcend – survive – the individual being killed. Nothing would be left from a life that had, before ending, been rendered completely meaningless.

But how can the Nazis be sure that this endeavor is successful? How can they know, in the individual case, whether or not the victim has given up on being a spiritual being, in addition to a purely physical one, endowed with a mind and not only with a body? How to gather the sought-for proof that the victim is broken spiritually before death sets in?

Well, by witnessing that the victim accepts his transformation into flesh – not only accepts that such a transformation is taking place, that his Nazi perpetrators are successful in bringing it about, but also accepts the transformation in the deeper sense of conceding that it is *right*, that it bespeaks the truth about his (the victim's) being: that in essence he is nothing but flesh and as such a completely non-metaphysical, non-spiritual being, one whose time on earth accordingly is completely without any 'higher' meaning whatsoever, any claim to which now appears ridiculous, a piece of sheer fantasy wholly lacking in reality orientation, indeed flatly *contradicted* by reality as it is.

## V

In the final essay in *At the Mind's Limits*, entitled 'On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew', Amery describes how it came to be that he became a Jew – because that is what he tells us happened: he *became* one, and his becoming a Jew wasn't up to him and of his making, wasn't to do with his own thoughts or actions at all. Quite the contrary: it was something that was totally a matter of *Fremdbestimmung*, of being made into something, defined as something – someone – from without, and so violating – or more precisely, cancelling, nullifying – his autonomy rather than following from and manifesting it.

'I must be a Jew and will be one', Amery tells us, 'with or without religion, within or outside a tradition, whether as Jean, Hans, or Yochanan' (AML: 84). Only in 1935, at the age of 23, did Amery realize that henceforth he was a Jew, would always be considered one, carrying consequences for his life and death that he was completely unable to influence. His Jewishness would forever mark his essence, notwithstanding it coming not from within but being imposed upon him from without, sealing his status and fate as an object as opposed to being, and being allowed to live as, a free and autonomous subject.

Why 1935, exactly? Because that was the year, the month, the day, 'when I was sitting over a newspaper in a Vienna coffeehouse and was studying the Nuremberg Laws, which had just been enacted across the border in Germany' (AML: 85). Immediately Amery understood that the Laws applied to him and in effect decided his fate. From this moment on, he writes, to be a Jew meant for him 'to be a dead man on leave, someone to be murdered'. The death threat included 'the methodic "degradation" of the Jews by the Nazis'; or put differently, 'the denial of human dignity sounded the death threat' (AML: 86).

The question to ask, given my above discussion, is this: what role, if any, did being an intellectual play in the Nazis' decision to murder every individual regarded as a Jew according to the Nuremberg Laws?

I take it that the answer will be considered to be very simple: being an intellectual played no role whatsoever. Why? Because nonintellectual Jews would be killed just as effectively and unhesitatingly as intellectual ones, the peasant and the factory worker just as decisively as the professor, the doctor and the composer. To bring intellectuality – be it defined by leaning or ability, be it defined by education and profession, be it ‘to believe in the reality of the world of the mind’ (AML: 8) – into the picture as a ‘relevant’ criterion and defining mark for Jewishness would be to allow for an internal differentiation among the category of Jews as a whole, thus violating the biological essentialism Nazi race ideology adhered to – race understood generically, so as to render, from the moment they are born and regardless of the life they will come to lead, *all Jews alike* as far as their status as ‘sub-human’, as being ‘unworthy of life’, is concerned. The one Jew may be a peasant, the other a world-famous psychoanalyst, physicist, novelist and what-not: it makes no difference; the ideology couldn’t care less, be it in theory or in practice.

Consider now the following episode related by Amery: ‘A comrade [in Auschwitz] who had once been asked about his profession had foolishly told the truth that he was a Germanist, and that had provoked a murderous outburst of rage from an SS man’ (AML: 8). Why?

Amery does not say: he offers no explanation, no further reflection. He does not even tell us whether the comrade in question was a Jew or not. Perhaps it wouldn’t have made any difference: this person was in Auschwitz and he was not meant to survive.

Nevertheless, questions remain unasked. Not only are we not told why the SS man reacted by rage when being told that the prisoner before him was a Germanist – as though the SS man’s responding in this manner is obvious, self-explanatory. We are also not told why it was foolish of the prisoner to tell the truth about being a Germanist. The simple answer, of course, is that he ought to have known that saying so would enrage the SS man, predictably so, as the only possible response under the circumstances. But again, why?

The implicit message in Amery’s remark is that it was elementary among the prisoners that if one was an intellectual, one should endeavor to hide it, and if asked, deny it. Whence this significance? Why should being an intellectual be hidden or denied when Nazi ideology insists that being or not being an intellectual makes no difference – Jewishness being what does, being the sole – and as such sufficient – identity mark to impose the death sentence Amery experienced in his own case that day in the Vienna coffeehouse in September 1935? Wasn’t hiding or denying one’s *Jewishness*, and not one’s being an intellectual, the only thing worth paying attention to and being concerned about?

But perhaps there is something mistaken about the very juxtaposition between the two – being an intellectual, and being a Jew – that this approach is subscribing to. For it is not as if these are two items, or properties, or attributions, that have nothing to do with each other, that belong to different universes, in mutual indifference at that. Far from it. From the Nazi point of view, the former is associated with, conjoined with, the latter, being a part of what defines the latter and so (precisely) not to be separated from it. Intellectuality and Jewishness go – belong – together, forming two sides of the same coin, the same people and its allegedly distinct way of being in the world; a conjunction regarded – again according to the ideologized Nazi gaze – as deeper, as more essential,

than any differences obtaining between two concrete Jewish individuals – say, the peasant and the novelist.

Amery reminds his readers that ‘in Auschwitz, the isolated individual had to relinquish all of German culture, including Dürer and Reger, Gryphius and Trakl, to even the lowest SS man’ (AML: 8). This helps illustrate the situation the intellectual found himself in, corroborating Amery’s earlier contention that whatever intellectual background and baggage the individual who entered Auschwitz had, this part of him would prove of no use whatsoever; best then to give up on it, get rid of any trace of it, as quickly as possible.

This makes sense as a mechanism of adjustment, being part of what it took to survive (as long as possible) under the camp circumstances. But the fact that ‘believing in the reality of the world of the mind’ proved useless, and that such a world was rendered totally irrelevant to the situations one had to negotiate and handle as best as one could in the Auschwitz reality, only takes us so far. It does not answer the more fundamental question I have been zooming in on: Why is it that the Nazis so vehemently targeted everything to do with intellectuality in the first place? Why would disclosing your intellectuality make your situation as a prisoner *worse*? Why would the SS man be more furious in front of an intellectual prisoner than a nonintellectual one?

## VI

I suggest the answer has to do with envy – envy in a combination with power, with the issue of how power is distributed between the Nazi guard and the individual prisoner.

Envy, in my understanding here, relying on Melanie Klein’s psychoanalytic work (1988), is a largely unconscious desire to destroy what is considered (but not openly acknowledged as) good or valuable in the other, and as lacking in oneself, making for a most unwelcome, indeed intolerable contrast. Envy is more radical, and more dangerous, than other sources of aggression precisely in that it targets the good in the other: it seeks to destroy it, to make it be no more, *because* it is good. Since I am not this goodness – do not have it (in me), and never (trust that I) will – the other before me shall not be it and have it either. Thus put, the structure of envy is very primitive, psychologically speaking, and the sort of inter-personal relationships it dictates (if allowed to do so unchecked) very dangerous for the other in question.

In Auschwitz, ‘even the lowest SS man’ (says Amery) has the opportunity to do whatever he likes to his victims – including the intellectuals among them, who in most cases will have enjoyed a much higher status – along so many dimensions – than the SS man in their pre-Auschwitz lives. This being so, a crucial way of demonstrating power is to impress upon such prisoners that, from the moment of their entering the camp, nothing of what they are used to holding as distinct about themselves – who they are and their sources of self-respect – applies any longer. When the ‘lowest’ man can do whatever he wants, in terms of humiliation, in terms of violence, against the ‘highest’, intellectually speaking, envy is allowed a rare chance to raise its head and be paramount, no longer something to be hidden from view, a sense of shame, a proof of inferiority since a social taboo.

Envy is not a topic singled out for discussion in Amery's account. Yet I would claim its reality as a psychological force in the way in which the Nazi guards treated the intellectuals among their prisoners – the more conspicuously intellectual, the more so – is largely implied in his account. In their fragment 'Elements of Anti-Semitism', the last section in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer speak about 'the anger against all that is different', viewing such anger as an essential feature of anti-Semitism and Fascism alike. They observe that '[o]nly the abstract difference from the majority appears in racial ideology and class reality', adding that 'the content of the Fascist program is so meaningless that, as a substitute for something better, it can only be upheld by the desperate efforts of the deluded' (1979 [1947]: 208).

If, following this analysis, the supporters and enactors of Fascism are committed to deluding themselves, this delusion being at the core of what draws them to that ideology, the ability to see through that delusion and to expose it as such might be held to be the obvious antidote: what could be more helpful to those targeted by Fascism than being cleverer than its henchmen?

To be sure, we already know Amery's answer to this question: the first lesson to be learned among prisoners in Auschwitz is that trying to understand is of no use whatsoever – quite the contrary, searching for a meaning or for reasons – 'Why?' – will only make you more defenseless, since it will impede the quick adjustment to the camp reality that your (slight) chance of survival depends upon. Again, Adorno and Horkheimer supplement Amery, stating that 'One of the lessons which Hitler has taught us is that it is better not to be too clever. The Jews put forward all kinds of well-founded arguments to show that he could not come to power when his rise was clear for all to see' (1979: 209). Their verdict, formulated in exile in California in 1944, is harsh: 'The educated made it easy for the barbarians everywhere by being so stupid' (p. 209.).

However, the 'anger against all that is different' was more consistently and viciously directed against some markers of difference than others. In the case of Adorno, this is more clearly borne out in his autobiographical work *Minima Moralia* than in the reflections on anti-Semitism he co-authored with Horkheimer after having fled from Nazi Germany. The difference that was seized upon by his class comrades when Adorno was growing up in Frankfurt long before the takeover by the Nazis (Adorno was born in 1903) was not his Jewishness but his intellectuality, which we may presume was pronounced from an early age. Adorno offers the following recollection, put to paper in 1935:

... and it often seemed to my foolish terror as if the total State had been invented expressly against me, to inflict on me after all those things from which, in my childhood, in its primeval form, I had been temporarily been dispensed. The five patriots, who set upon a single schoolfellow, thrashed him, and, when he complained to the teacher, defamed him as a traitor to the class – are they not the same as those who tortured prisoners to refute claims by foreigners that prisoners were tortured? Those whose hallooing knew no end when the top boy blundered – did they not stand grinning and sheepish round the Jewish detainee, poking fun at his maladroit attempt to hang himself? They who could not put together a correct sentence but found all of mine too long? (Adorno, 2003: 77 ff.)

Adorno, who unlike Amery evaded the experience of torture and of life (death) in a camp, writes about the ‘inviolable [*unverbrüchliche*] isolation’ that for the intellectual is now ‘the only way of showing some measure of solidarity’ (Adorno, 2003: 39). It is noteworthy that he can say this as someone who was spared the experiences in question. We can only assume that the loneliness of the intellectual he speaks about, clearly based on his own life experience including the pre-war one as a Jew in Germany, would have been greatly amplified had he been sent to a camp as Amery was.

## VII

Commentators on Amery typically consider one specific passage as particularly instructive, namely Amery’s recollection of the moment when the prisoner foreman Juszek – ‘a Polish professional criminal of horrifying vigor’ – hit him on the face for a trifle:

In open revolt I struck Juszek in the face in turn. My human dignity lay in this punch to his jaw – and that it was in the end I, the physically much weaker man, who succumbed and was woefully thrashed, meant nothing to me. Painfully beaten, I was satisfied with myself. But not, as one might think, for reasons of courage and honor, but only because I had grasped well that there are situations in life in which our body is our entire self and our entire fate. I was my body and nothing else: in hunger, in the blow that I suffered, in the blow that I dealt. My body, debilitated and crusted with filth, was my calamity. My body, when it tensed to strike, was my physical and metaphysical dignity. In situations like mine, physical violence is the sole means for restoring a sense of disjointed personality. In the punch, I was myself – for myself and for my opponent. (AML: 90 ff.)

Jay M. Bernstein, whose book *Torture and Dignity* takes its chief inspiration from Amery’s work, has the following to say about the significance of this episode: ‘For Amery, hitting back represented a mechanism for asserting his fundamental worth in a manner consonant with the general notion of dignity’ (2015: 300). Amery’s self-assertion by way of returning his tormentor’s blow, Bernstein contends, ‘is an act of asserting his self-respect, his particular relation to self, in a manner that establishes that he expects to enjoin or demand or claim respect from another’. ‘If the human form’, Bernstein concludes, ‘all by itself, *summons* respect, hitting back *demands* it’ (p. 300). Amery’s claim that in the situation he found himself in while in Auschwitz, ‘physical violence is the sole means for restoring a disjointed personality’, is affirmed in Bernstein’s reading: ‘to survive morally, [Amery] would have to physically appeal his case against the society and the world that had condemned him’ (p. 300).

Consider what is at stake here. In an extreme situation like Auschwitz, Amery tells us, ‘our body is our entire self and our entire fate’; he ‘was his body and nothing else’ (AML: 90). This being so, we can understand why he felt that so much was involved in returning the punch dealt him by Juszek: returning it was the only way possible for him, left for him, to maintain and manifest his dignity in that situation. Nothing he could have said, or otherwise done, would have the same effect, would carry the same message. We may paraphrase the message as follows: if you thought that I am not a human being, that I am a passive animal, devoid of everything associated with human capacities and moral

features, let the punch I now give you in return for yours show you how wrong you are; in hitting back, I prove myself capable of doing something – being someone – you set out to deny me, thus proving the falsity and futility of your violence-driven endeavor.

Put philosophically, what Bernstein sees Amery to demonstrate is the notion made famous by Hegel, later to be developed by Marx, Sartre, and Honneth, namely that ‘it is through acts of self-respect that respect from the other is claimed; and what the other would respect, if the claim were recognized, would be the agent’s human dignity’ (Bernstein, 2015: 300).

Did Amery really gain the respect of Juszek as a result of returning his punch? We don’t know, and never will. Amery doesn’t say, and Juszek cannot be consulted. But that is hardly the point. The point is that responding the way he did – physically – was of the greatest importance for Amery himself: he had proved to himself that he was a subject, not a mere passive object; that he was capable of protesting what was being done to him, regardless of his undeniable inferiority, of his being – physically – no match for his adversary Juszek. To stand up for himself as a human and moral subject is what the episode is first and foremost about, the question about whether Juszek or others witnessing his protest came to respect him as a result of it of merely secondary importance.

Turn now to another commentator on this central episode in Amery’s camp experience – not another philosopher, but another Auschwitz survivor: Primo Levi. This is what Levi has to say in his essay ‘The Intellectual in Auschwitz’:

I admire Amery’s change of heart, his courageous decision to leave the ivory tower and go down into the battlefield, but it was and still is beyond my reach. I admire it: but I must point out that this choice, protracted throughout his post-Auschwitz existence, led him to positions of such severity and intransigence as to make him incapable of finding joy in life, indeed of living. Those who ‘trade blows’ with the entire world achieve dignity but pay a very high price for it, because they are sure to be defeated. Amery’s suicide, which took place in Salzburg in 1978, like other suicides allows for a nebula of explanations, but, in hindsight, the episode of the defiance of the Pole offers one interpretation of it. (Levi, 1988 [1986]: 110)

Levi’s verdict is unusually harsh, even damning, and now that we know that he, like Amery before him, would also end his life by committing suicide (in 1987), it is easy to point out that as a rule one should beware of using a person’s philosophical outlook – say, concerning what it takes to maintain self-respect – to explain why he committed suicide.

But there is more at issue here than the personal difference between the two Auschwitz survivors that Levi underscores in stating that ‘I am not able, personally, to trade punches or return the blows’ (Levi, 1988 [1986]: 110), conveying that this is not an ability he regards as doing a real service to Amery – if anything, he views it as part of what brought him down. More important, though, is what Levi writes in his own Auschwitz memoir, *If This is a Man*, in the chapter entitled ‘The Canto of Ulysses’ (Levi, 1987 [1958]: 115–21). The episode in question is one where Levi, a chemist by profession (thus, incidentally, failing to qualify as an intellectual as defined by Amery, excluding as he does scientists and technicians), had a conversion with his fellow inmate

Jean Samuel. The subject? Dante's *Divine Comedy*. 'At that time', writes Levi, 'Dante did not interest him [Samuel]; I interested him by my naive and presumptuous effort to transmit Dante, my language and my confused scholastic reminiscences to him in the space of half an hour and with the soup poles on our shoulders' (Levi, 1988 [1986]: 112). The memories of his pre-Auschwitz existence, of the world as he knew it before the rise of Fascism, 'then and there had great value', Levi tells us. Why? Because 'they made it possible for me to re-establish a link with the past, saving it from oblivion and reinforcing my identity. They convinced me that my mind, though besieged by everyday necessities, had not ceased to function. They elevated me in my own eyes and those of my interlocutor'. What this experience throws into sharp relief for Levi, then, is what it means to be 'compelled to live in a world without books and what value the memory of books would assume in this world. For me, the Lager [camp] was this too' (p. 112). To highlight his point, and clearly begging to differ from Amery's analysis, Levi goes on to say that 'the Lager was a university; it taught us to look around and to measure men', commenting that this meant that his vision of the world 'was different from and complementary to that of my companion and antagonist Amery' (1988 [1986]: 114). 'The aims of life', Levi asserts in his final sentence, 'are the best defense against death; and not only in the Lager' (1988 [1986]: 120).

To be sure, the relationship between Amery and Levi – personally and philosophically – is a big topic in its own right, one that I cannot pursue here (see Vetlesen, 2006). The question I have been leading up to is this: How are we to understand what Bernstein, approvingly, identifies as the gist of Amery's lesson from the episode with Juszek – namely, that in a situation where 'our body is our entire self and our entire fate [...] physical violence is the sole means' for demonstrating self-respect, the body now being the person's 'physical and metaphysical dignity' (AML: 90 ff.)?

I agree with Bernstein that the body is absolutely essential in the inextricably connected senses of exhibiting dignity and of commanding – as the only adequate response – the other's respect of its integrity. Deliberate assaults on a human person's bodily integrity – its zone of intimacy, freedom of movement, its being *my* body, over which *I* decide – are direct threats against what is at the core of human dignity. That's why – to put the point negatively – such assaults are so important to the perpetrators: they prioritize performing them for the very reason that having one's bodily-based and bodily-expressed dignity respected by others is of the utmost importance to a person's ability to maintain self-respect. Showing no respect whatsoever for that bodily integrity is an efficient means of crushing the person's sense of dignity.

This is true. But there is more. Recall that a prime goal of the Nazis was to reduce their victims to bodies, to impose upon them conditions such that they – each and every one – gave up on being (even *aspiring* to being) anything but bodies, of being spiritual beings, namely subjects – agents – capable of transcendence as opposed to (mere) immanence, of engaging with a world of ideas, of things abstract, imagined and potential as opposed to what exists here and now, what is utterly real and concrete in a mundane and easily verified sense.

Bearing this Nazi ambition in mind, let us look anew at Amery's statement: 'I was my body and nothing else'; 'my body was my physical and metaphysical dignity'. This is the condition he finds himself in as a result of what the Nazis have done to him: there is only

the body and its all-too-real immanence, expressed in hunger and thirst, in pain and incapacitation. The bodily experience becomes tantamount to experience *tout court*, to what being-in-the-world is all about; it devours everything, allowing nothing else – nothing apart from or outside of the body – to be of any bearing.

The crucial point is this: when Amery hits back against Juszek, he demonstrates that *the reduction of him to body*, to perceiving himself as nothing but body, has taken place, successfully so from the Nazi tormentor's point of view. 'Physical violence' used to be the prerogative of the Nazis – their primary principle and value, as it were – against which Amery wanted to wage a battle when he decided to join the resistance, setting out to do so by way of words, not violence. But now he finds himself in a situation where that kind of resistance has proven futile, has become evidence of a misguided idealism, of lofty ideas and ideals, to which intellectuals like himself are typically prone. Experience has taught him, the hard way, to see through the latter as an illusion, as completely useless given his circumstances; indeed as a source of making his situation worse, as compared with that of his nonintellectual fellow prisoners.

The 'transcendence' I have spoken of to highlight the mode of being-in-the-world characteristic of intellectuals is equivalent to what Elaine Scarry designates as 'having a world' in her famous account of torture in *The Body in Pain*. Scarry shows that only when the body is taken care of, when its functions are intact and its basic biological needs met, and the body operates within secure surroundings, can consciousness interact with all the senses and address the outside world; only then can the person have, and constantly reengage with, a world full of mental content. This outward orientation, presupposed in as well as a hallmark of human intentionality and agency, of being 'thrown into the world', and projecting oneself toward a future with so many projects (to invoke Heidegger and Sartre), is radically undermined in the event of torture in particular and of intense physical pain in general. This is how pain effects the shrinking, draining and eventually closing down of the world out there, including everything that is abstract in the sense of being not-present, not-at-hand, of being counterfactual or (merely) possible. Pain, that is, causes the body to turn in towards the person, even if, in the way in which torture is being inflicted, the bodily functions – the ability to move, hunger, thirst, defecation, the sensory apparatus – are twisted outwards, in a perverse enlargement, distortion and transformation of their distinctive nature under normal conditions. The aim of the torturer is to *make the victim's body his worst enemy*: to turn the victim's body into the most effective tool in the infliction of pain, in the absolutization *as* a body quite simply, and thereby in the loss – the annihilation – of the person's world, of his very ability to 'have' a world outside himself, outside the body and pointing beyond it. The body becomes absolutely present – effectively, the *only* thing present, the only reality that matters – *because* it is being destroyed, because the destruction of it is so painful that the pain forces the person to abandon all other mental content, all other objects of his attention and sensory ability. Torture demonstrates that physical pain possesses the power to annihilate a person's world, self and voice, the person's distinct psyche and spirituality in their entirety (see Scarry, 1985: 57 ff.; Vetlesen, 2009: 20 ff.).

The question is this: When Amery identifies himself as being his 'body and nothing else', does he thereby (implicitly) accept the Nazi depiction of him as being only a body, nothing spiritual; as defined and exhaustively definable purely by reference to



immanence, thus barring transcendence from him, and him from transcendence? To put it more sharply: If the 'sole means' for resisting what his Nazi tormentors aim to do to him consists in being reduced to, and duly reacting as, that very kind of being – a body and nothing else – how can one speak of resistance? Is it not a case of the opposite, of exhibiting and so confirming the success of the Nazi endeavor, aiming at the victim's transformation in said sense?

An obvious response to this, on behalf of Amery's perspective, is that his hitting back is in itself a negation of the attempt to deny him status as an agent and to compel him to be(come) a mere object, passive and impotent in the event of his own destruction. In hitting back, Amery asserts himself as *someone*, not a nobody or a nothing; a subject with a will all his own, as distinct from an object incapable of responding as a matter of choosing to do so, and choosing how to.

Is that a convincing answer? I don't think so.

Let me make my point by asking: What would be the sort of act that the Nazi guards would perceive as showing they have failed in their attempt to transform their victims from spiritual beings to mere bodies, from subjects to objects? Would it be that of Amery hitting back at Juszek, or that of Levi having a conversation with his fellow prisoner Jean Samuel about Dante? Of Levi who was able to think, and afterwards write, that 'I would give today's soup to know how to connect "the like of any day" to the last lines [in Dante's work]' (1987 [1958]: 120)?

I think it would be the latter. As for the former, I think the Nazi guards would see it as proof that they had succeeded: that this particular victim had been successfully compelled to accept that the level on which everything of importance takes place is that of the body, of being in the role of one party or the other in the trading of blows, whereby physical violence is regarded, and respected, as the paramount reality of all concerned alike and as defining everything of importance – life and death – in their relationships.

This point recalls Keith Tester's way of distinguishing between the hand (i.e. the body) and the face in his *The Inhuman Condition*. On the one hand, 'the telling of the man through the face is a categorical telling of presence, of reciprocity and [...] of responsibility'; hence the face commands ethical authority in the sense argued by Emmanuel Levinas. On the other hand – making for the contrast – the body-linked and body-prioritizing understanding of human beings as *animal laborans* (following Arendt, 1958) 'stresses the practical possibilities of the hand and the body over and above the purely categorical [ethical] statements which are made by the face' (1995: 100). As Tester explains, '*Animal laborans* means that the being which is registered by and signified in the face is likely to be accorded much less significance than the doing that is carried out by the hand.' The ethical implication, argues Tester, is to do with the fact that 'the authority of the face is exactly something which has to be overcome if *animal laborans* is to reign triumphant' (p. 100).

So the victim's quasi 'acceptance' that the level on which everything of importance takes place is that of the body has the unfortunate consequence of being perceived by his or her tormentor as a sign of giving up on the human value of being a spiritual being in addition to a merely bodily, meaning physical, one. What Tester helps us see is that giving such primacy to how humans relate qua bodies – be it by way of dealing each other blows – risks cancelling the appeal emanating from the face, that is to say, from

recognizing the other qua face addressing one. And when the face signifies ethically, as Levinas insisted, it does so qua exposing the person's humanity qua soul, qua spiritual being. To hold that there is no such thing – therefore, no such quality to respect, to safeguard and protect in the other – seems to me to capture the essence of what the Nazis hoped to achieve.

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