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Force Inside Identity

Self and Other in Améry's "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew"

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In a statement too strong even to summarize his own views, Jean-Paul Sartre famously declares in "Existentialism is a Humanism" that "man is nothing other than what he makes of himself."¹ It is bad faith, according to him, to attribute what I am to my family, culture, condition, etc., because through awareness of what I am and have been, I can determine whether what I am will continue into the future. Human being, as a result, is nothing but what he or she has chosen or decided.

In "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," Jean Améry rejects that view. He explicitly rejects the idea that "I am what I am for myself and in myself, and nothing else."² In doing so, he is one of a group of Jewish thinkers, including Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, who reject Sartre's ideas about Jewish identity and identity more generally, ideas expressed particularly in *Reflections on the Jewish Question* but amplified by views expressed in "Existentialism is a Humanism" and *Being and Nothingness*. Those in the group go out of their way to express their gratitude to Sartre for writing on "the Jewish question" after the war--Sartre who wrote because he saw no mention of the 77,000 Jews in France who were deported and murdered by the Nazis.

At the same time, each contests Sartre's view of Jewish identity. Levinas rejects Sartre's modern strategy of severing the relation human beings have with the past and his idea that human beings are nothing but what they choose or decide. For Levinas, we should in part be oriented toward an immemorial past in which we were benefited by another even before we knew it--a past in which we were chosen by another rather than being a chooser. Derrida, by contrast, focuses disagreement on Sartre's idea of authenticity. Sartre critiques some Jews who are in denial of their Jewishness for being inauthentic. Derrida rejects the very idea of authenticity--the idea that there is some pure or self-contained identity, here

Jewish identity, that is not already what it is by taking in what it is not, by taking in influences and characteristics from the cultural surroundings.

Améry's critique is different. It is the goal of this essay to outline his critique while discussing in general the relation of self and other according to him in "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew." For Améry in the essay, Sartre is wrong on two counts. First, he is wrong that anyone is simply what he or she makes of him or herself. As much as Améry is in general excited by Sartre's idea of freedom, in "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," Améry believes being a Jew is not simply a matter of choice. He was made a Jew, on his own account, by a certain type of necessity over which his thoughts, preferences and actions have no power.

Secondly, Améry rejects Sartre's way of describing that necessity. According to Sartre in *Reflections*, "it is the anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew."³ Jews do not have a concrete bond of solidarity through having the same history or fatherland--Jews, according to Sartre in the essay, do not have a history--nor do they share a community of interests or beliefs.⁴ Instead, the "the sole tie that binds them is the hostility and disdain of the societies which surround them."⁵ Only "the hostile consciousness of others" brings them together as Jews.⁶ Améry accepts this idea, but declares Sartre unaware, in *Reflections*, of the element of extreme force involved: "in his short phenomenological sketch Sartre could not describe the total, crushing force of antisemitism."⁷

Améry's critique, which will be delineated further in what follows, is similar to that of another thinker influenced by Sartre on freedom and dignity, Frantz Fanon. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon agrees with Sartre that the self is determined to an extent by how another sees one--"the look" of the other, as Sartre calls it. However, Fanon believes Sartre errs in application of the idea because he does not see that, in the case of black people, the other is not simply any other but is a master. The other gives a person their self-consciousness, but in the case of black consciousness the other is a master:

Though Sartre's speculations on the existence of "the Other" remain correct (insofar as, we may recall, *Being and Nothingness* describes an alienated consciousness), their application to a black consciousness proves fallacious because the white man is not only "the Other," but also the master, whether real or imaginary.⁸

The point for each thinker is that Sartre, in developing his idea of freedom, does not take into consideration the role of violent physical force on one's actions. It is one thing, one might say, to reflect at leisure on one's past, make it for oneself, and then both recognize it and determine that it shall or shall not continue into the future. It is another thing entirely to deny or ironize some of your past when the causes and consequences of that past

or of selecting that identity include violence and death. There's an element of force in identity, we might describe Améry as saying in a claim that shares something with the views of postmoderns such as Derrida and Foucault, and sometimes that force is an overwhelming one--the force of a master, to use Fanon's term, that is, of someone who has you in his complete control. We will return to Améry's discussion of this idea in what follows.

Levinas is right to see Sartre as like the moderns in his severing of our relation to the past. Like Descartes rejecting what preceded by engaging in doubt of views that cannot meet the challenge of clarity and distinctness to current reason, Sartre believes we can engage in a process of negating prior views and conditions. I am for myself. I can reflect on what I have been. Then I can decide whether to let what I have been continue on into the future. I can, in that sense, sever my relation to the past.

Sartre's view is more complicated, however. For, to be authentic, I must not only accept my freedom as just described but I must also accept my past--my past, my condition, my family, passions, etc. It is inauthenticity or bad faith both not to accept my freedom and also not to accept what I have been, where *acceptance* does not mean approval but recognition--recognition of what I have been and am. Still, for Sartre, though we have a certain facticity, we are not simply what we are the way a thing simply is what it is. An inkwell's being, for example, simply continues. My being, on the other hand, is (or is not) continued: "it is necessary that we *make ourselves* what we are," Sartre says, and "our mode of being is having the obligation to be what we are."⁹ Despite our facticity, what we are is not a given, it is something we do, and we must continue to do it if we are to continue to be what we are.

In the case of a homosexual who denies his facticity, specifically, who denies he is a homosexual, Sartre says, "a homosexual is not a homosexual as this table is a table or as this red-haired man is red-haired."¹⁰ There is a transcendent quality to such an identity-formation. It allows a homosexual room, erroneously, to deny that he is a homosexual. In another case, the case of a waiter who overidentifies with his role by thinking that being a waiter sums up what he is or can be, Sartre maintains that if the waiter is to be a waiter, he must keep being a waiter: waiter "is precisely this person *who I have to be* (if I am the waiter in question) and who I am not."¹¹ If I am to be a waiter, I must get up at 5 o'clock, I must sweep the floor, start the coffee, etc. These examples, from *Being and Nothingness*, are examples of inauthenticity, of denying one's facticity in the case of the homosexual, and of denying one's freedom or transcendence in the case of the waiter.

Sartre's position on the relation between self and other, then, has a certain complexity. We do not create our situation, our culture or our past but since what we are is what we have been doing and continue to be doing, we are in a sense free from our situation, culture, past, etc.--or, free within them. As the waiter can decide to stop being a waiter, and stop being a

waiter, by ceasing to do what a waiter does, so we have a free relation to our identity since we can acknowledge our identity and then if we wish stop doing activities that produce that identity so we do not continue to have it. In *Reflections*, Sartre refers to our facticity as our "situation" and says that we are free within the confines of a situation and he charges many Jews with the same deficiency as he charges the homosexual with in *Being and Nothingness*, namely, of not recognizing their situation--that is, to use common language, of being in denial about being Jewish and having specifically Jewish characteristics.

Another reason that Sartre's position on self is more complex than the claim that we are *nothing* but what we make of ourselves would suggest, is that, according to him, self-consciousness exists only insofar as we are seen by another and, as a result, then see ourselves. In the well-known passage on "the look," I am looking through a keyhole when I see someone looking at me. The result is that "I now exist for myself."¹² "I see myself because somebody else sees me."¹³ The self results, for him as, for example, for Hegel, from someone else's look or recognition. With the other's look, there is an "irruption of the self."¹⁴ I am not *simply* what I make of myself, then, since I only have a self as a result of the recognition of me by an other.

Despite these two counterexamples found in his own work--that I do not make my own facticity and that my self exists only because someone else sees me--Sartre's extreme version of his claim of human freedom, that I am nothing but what I make of myself, provides an important touchstone for thinking about Améry's views. Améry explicitly rejects Sartre's idea that I am simply what I make of myself, simply an in-itself and a-for-itself. He also rejects Sartre's way of conceiving me as made by another--or, more specifically, Sartre's way of conceiving the Jew as made by another, namely, that the antisemite makes the Jew. Améry agrees, but only so long as the characteristic of overwhelming force is added.

Once that is added, one could ask if I make myself at all, or if the Jew does. Yes, one could say, to the extent that one is capable in a focused way of resisting physical force, more specifically, "of punching a human face."¹⁵ If the element of extreme force makes us less our own author and less subject to the charge of inauthenticity if we deny or ironize our facticity, the possibility of focused physical resistance gives us back an element of dignity, as Sartre, Fanon and Améry all would agree. Sartre says in the introduction to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, "The native cures himself of colonial neurosis by thrusting out the settler through force of arms. When his rage boils over, he rediscovers his lost innocence and he comes to himself in that he himself creates his self."¹⁶ "The rebellion emancipates the rebel."¹⁷ In "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," Améry agrees with this claim.

Let us now see how Améry works his ideas about the relation of self and other out in "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew." Améry was born Hans Meyer in Vienna, Austria, in 1912 of a Jewish father and a Catholic mother. His father was killed in action in the first World War in 1916. Hans was raised by his mother first in Vienna and then in the spa town of Bad Ischl where they moved because Hans was sickly and it was thought that country air would be better for his health.

Améry describes his being a Jew as both an impossibility and a necessity. "I cannot be one," he says. "And yet must be one." He goes on: "The necessity and impossibility of being a Jew, that is what causes me indistinct pain."¹⁸ Typically, Jewish identity is considered an unusual identity category not based on origin but on an amalgam of (some or all of) religion, culture, language, family and nation. Améry does not see himself falling into any of these categories. Hence, being a Jew is, in that sense, impossible for him.

He overstates his case, it seems to me, when he says, "No one can become what he cannot find in his memories."¹⁹ It is not unusual, in the history of Jewish life, for someone to become a Jew even though they do not find being a Jew in their memories. Such a person chooses being a Jew and chooses, in a specific sense, to take on the history of the Jews as their own history. Such "Jews by choice," as the phrase is today, or "converts," in an older formulation, are not unusual. Some who make this change in a sense could be seen as having "being a Jew" in their memories, if they are ones who feel that what they were all along was a Jew but just not by that name and not by that explicit identification. Some might say, 'I feel I have been a Jew all along, but didn't know it.' Améry certainly is ruling that out in his own case. Others, though, who become Jewish do not feel it is what they have been all along but freely adopt being Jewish as a new identity which they wish to acquire because they find it attractive in some way--either culturally or religiously, either as a matter of practice, belief or language, or as a combination of some or all of these. Améry is also ruling this out in his own case. Why?

Regarding religious belief, he does not share a "religious creed," that is, does not "believe in the God of Israel."²⁰ As for Jewish culture, he does not know much about it. "I know very little about Jewish culture," he says, presumably because of the death of his Jewish father and the fact that he was raised by his Catholic mother in the non-Jewish cultural surroundings of Bad Ischl.²¹ Concerning family, his memories are not of synagogues but of his "mother appealing to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph when a minor household misfortune occurred."²² As for linguistic identity, he did not hear Hebrew and, until the age of nineteen, did not even know of the existence of Yiddish.²³

Could he choose a Jewish identity? He does not think so. "I have the freedom to choose to be a Jew," he says, "and this freedom is my very personal and universally human privilege. That is what I am assured of. But do I really have it? I don't believe so."²⁴ Even if he educated himself in Jewish culture, emigrated to Israel, learned Hebrew and took on a Jewish name, he would still have the spontaneous memories of his childhood, of "a Christmas tree with gilded nuts," of "the white-stockinged youth who once took such pains to speak a local dialect."²⁵ "One can re-establish the link with a tradition that one has lost," Améry says, "but one cannot freely invent it for oneself, that is the problem."²⁶

Given that it is not particularly unusual for some to take on an identity that they do not have in their memories--to become Jews even though they were not Jews in any sense before--two possible interpretations of Améry's claim come to mind. First, we could charitably interpret Améry not to be denying this obvious fact but to be denying that it would be possible *for him*. On this interpretation, Améry's memories, feelings and dispositions are tied to his early experiences of identification with Catholic family traditions and the local customs of Bad Ischl to such an extent that any effort to take on a different identity, such as an identity as Yochanon on Mt. Carmel in Israel, would fail: "Since I was not a Jew, I am not one; and since I am not one, I won't be able to become one. A Yochanan on Mt. Carmel, haunted and spirited home by memories of Alpine valleys and folk rituals, would be even more inauthentic than was once the youth with his knee socks."²⁷

This calls to mind Schopenhauer's claim that a person can do what he wills but cannot will what he wills. I can, perhaps, do what I want but can I control my affective dispositions? It is much harder to change one's pattern of desires and emotions. Presumably this is Améry's point, in his own case, about being Jewish. Deeply affectively, Améry was not Jewish and could not change that. Any effort to do so would be superficial due to well-established dispositional patterns. Less charitably, however, Améry not only finds that such is true for himself but believes it is true for all others who make an effort to change their identity or identification later in life. After all, he says, "Because being Something, not as metaphysical essence, but as the simple summation of early experience, absolutely has priority. Everyone must be who he was in the first years of his life, even if later these were buried under. No one can become what he cannot find in his memories"²⁸ From these passages, it seems likely that the less charitable interpretation is preferable, namely, that according to Améry it is not possible *for anyone* to become a Jew if they do not have memories of being a Jew.

A digression from Améry's essay to biographical description of him may be helpful. According to Irène Heidelberger-Leonard, Améry identified heavily with the cultural milieu of the country area in which he was raised. Though more advanced than his teachers and friends in the cultural knowledge he brought to Bad Ischl from Vienna--by the age of eight, for

example, he had already read the complete works of Schiller--he admired and was moved by the rural sensibilities of his friends and teachers who were part of Bad Ischl's "'indigenous' countrified population."²⁹

The Meyers were set apart in the town by their urban and Jewish background. Heidelberger-Leonard describes a set of opposed characteristics which, I would point out, are not uncommonly associated with the distinction between liberals and conservatives through much of the twentieth century when liberalism is associated with universalism and cosmopolitanism and conservatism with the country and with particularistic attachments. The Meyers were Jews, not Christians; they were townsfolk not country people; they said 'ja' rather than 'jo'; they wore good rather than worn clothes; they spent time at cafés or spa assemblies rather than at the inn.³⁰ Similarly, the city friends Hans made among those who visited Bad Ischl in the summer from Vienna used pure vowels of educated speech rather than deep vowels of rural dialect; they wore lederhosen and did not have grazed knees; they "spoke properly" rather than using a "rustic dialect"; they had wealth and distinction rather than physical boldness.³¹

Much of the emotional expenditure of Hans's youth, Heidelberger-Leonard argues, was on synthesizing his attachment to both identities:

So here we have the roots of incipient schizophrenia, as a result of the boy's social background. There seemed no escape from it. Hans Mayer belonged equally to both worlds, and in the same way he ultimately belonged to neither.³²

In the winter, he identified with the winter pleasures of the country, wild sleigh rides with his country friends, mountain and forest walks, participation in the German Gymnastics Society, and romantic encounters with local country girls. In the summer, he connected to what he thought of as more cultured urban Jewish people and elegant higher love, for example, for the leading lady of the well-regarded Bad Ischl Spa Theatre. When he left Bad Ischl and became a student for a time in Gmunden, he encountered boys who had the synthesis for which he tried, according to Heidelberger-Leonard, the sons of local businessmen who were good at sports, rode bicycles, skied and also were distinguished and wealthy: "this was how the synthesis he longed for looked: these sons of local big businessmen and industrialists united in themselves distinction, wealth and a sense of belonging to the land."³³

After moving back to Vienna and spending time in the adult education circles of philosophy and literary criticism there, he began a process of self-critique of his attachments to country life, coming to see figures who inspired him--such as poets he liked due to his and their sense of closeness to the land--as "insidious reactionaries."³⁴ He increasingly saw connections between those whose country tendencies he admired and the

fascists, for example, when conflict broke out between the clerico-fascist Austrian militia and the Republican Defense Corps.

Améry wanted to validate and promote his 'winter' identity, the identity of attachment to land and forest, until he no longer felt that it was possible because such identity become heavily associated with fascism and, increasingly in his mind, superstition and irrationalism. He instead became more and more identified with philosophical positivism as a rationalist alternative to localism and superstition. We sometimes forget that positivism was not simply an intellectual position but in addition a politicized position taken as a rationalist alternative to right-wing localism, superstition and political ideology. The Vienna Circle "owed their anti-metaphysical stance, their materialistic understanding of history and their opposition to the rampant irrationalism of religion and politics entirely to the spirit of the Enlightenment."³⁵ Améry developed a new enthusiasm as a result: "Good order and clarity are the ideals, dark distances and unfathomable depths are repudiated."³⁶ He dismisses his "back-to-the-land forest darkness" as a rejection of rationality, turns to positivism, and rejects "the irrationalism of Austrian clerico-Fascism."³⁷

Supposing Heidelberger-Leonard's picture of Améry is accurate, Améry's inability to become a Jew in a concrete sense makes sense even more. The affective story of Améry's life that she outlines is one of identification with localism, closeness to the land and mysticism, and then of conflict, especially when fascism gained strength, between that identification and a newly assumed rationalist positivism. There is not much room in such a picture of Améry's psychological development as an Enlightenment-influenced universalist rationalist who rejects particularist tendencies and virtues for taking it upon himself to assume a new particularist identity, namely, a religious, cultural, familial or national identity as a Jew.

Going back now to the impossibility for Améry to be a Jew, we can conclude that his dispositions are so well-established that becoming a Jew in any concrete way is impossible for him. His life trajectory led him to identify first with particularist mysticism of the land and later, as a reaction to the first, with universalist and positivist rationalism. It is not surprising as a result that he does not find within himself concrete resources to take on a particularist Jewish identity. Whether it is true that all people who are not originally Jews cannot later take on Jewish identity, the fact that Améry cannot take on a concrete Jewish identity makes what he says about the necessity side of the impossibility-necessity paradox and more generally what he implies about the element of force in an identity, stand out with much greater clarity.

First, it clarifies one of Améry's disagreements with Sartre on identity. Améry deeply appreciated Sartre's concept of freedom. As an anti-fascist resister--first, against the Viennese fascists, then against the Nazis, then

against a Nazi captor when Améry was in Auschwitz--he identified with the idea of difficult choices that rest entirely with oneself: "Sartrean man...is a man who is constantly creating himself, and his essence is the result of his existence. He alone shoulders the responsibility. His reality consists in acting: he is nothing but the sum of what he has done; he is nothing but his life (*Preface to the Future*, p. 27)."³⁸

Nevertheless, in "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," Améry's view is different. In it, he does not think we are nothing but what we make of ourselves. In fact, to the extent that Améry expresses the idea quoted above that "Everyone must be who he was in the first years of his life," he is closer there to a Heideggerian position on thrownness than a Sartrean position according to which negation of one's past is possible. Améry explicitly rejects the view that "I am what I am for myself and in myself and nothing else."³⁹ He also rejects Sartre's idea that it is obligatory "to be who one is by becoming the person one should be and wants to be."⁴⁰ His past makes this impossible for him: "Everyone must be what he was in the first years of his life," as quoted above, "even if later these were buried under."⁴¹ There is not very much nothingness in the past for Améry at this point.

Second, it clarifies the meaning and implications of the paradoxical "necessity and impossibility" of being a Jew. Interpreters' views run a gamut on the question. Steven Schwarzschild, for example, thinks it is tragic that Améry could not find a way to identify concretely with his Jewishness but could only be a Jew insofar as he was made one by the antisemite. "Améry accepted Sartre's early, negative definition of the Jew," Schwarzschild says, "and, unlike Sartre himself, never went beyond it; this was Améry's tragedy."⁴² It is misleading, though, to say that Améry accepts only a negative definition of being a Jew. As we have seen, he accepts that there are Jews by belief, culture, language, national identity and so forth. He only says that *he* is not a Jew in those ways. That makes the element of force in his identity, his Jewish identity, stand out even more, because it contrasts so strongly with his lack of any kind of concrete identity or identification.

Sheng-mei Ma, at the other extreme, sees "necessity and impossibility" as about the general problem of mixed identity or mixed race. Referring to Améry's discussion of the Nuremberg Laws, in "The necessity and impossibility of being mixed-race in Asian American literature" Ma says, "The Nuremberg Laws constitute the inception of what Améry describes as 'The Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew', which I borrow to suggest, like Jews, the predicament of existence of the mixed race lodged between two cultures and two racial categories."⁴³ What is crucial to Améry's essay, however, is not mixed race or mixed identity itself. His own case is not simply one of two concrete or positive identities that coexist and cohabit in him, a Jewish identity and an Austrian one. He is not saying it is necessary that he be Jewish but also impossible because at the same time he must be

Austrian (and necessary that he be Austrian but also impossible because at the same time he must be Jewish). Instead, he is writing specifically about his own case as one of someone who is given an identity by others through force despite the fact that his own positive attachment to that identity is minimal or nonexistent. The effect of writing about his own case is to highlight the element of force involved in his identity. From that, I would say, he thinks we can extrapolate an element of force in all identities.

The topic of force comes up in Améry's consideration of Sartre's description, in *Reflections*, of the inauthentic Jew. Sartre begins with a definition of human being as "a being having freedom within the limits of a situation."⁴⁴ This is the familiar transcendence/facticity distinction. He defines authenticity, as in the other works, as accepting, and not denying, each of the two. It is, first, a "true and lucid consciousness of the situation" and accepting it in "pride or humiliation" or even in "horror and hate" and, second, "assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves."⁴⁵ The first is a clear awareness of one's facticity and acceptance of it whether one feels pride in it or humiliation, or whether one even feels much more negative about one's facticity--one's Jewishness--to the point of horror or hate. The second is to take on the responsibilities one's situation holds out for one even at great risk. Since Jews have no concrete bond of solidarity--no common interests or beliefs--and since the surrounding society is hostile, authentic action requires courage, the courage to face and act against hostility.

Inauthentic Jews do not face their situation. They take various "avenues of flight."⁴⁶ They are in denial. Sartre lists various generalized negative characteristics of Jews and, rather than disputing that the generalizations pertain to Jews, accepts that they do and explains them as being a result of a Jew's denial of the situation Jews are in. For example, discomfort with other Jews; rejection of the body; lack of tact; love of money.⁴⁷ It may seem odd at first look that Sartre lists and confirms stereotypically negative Jewish characteristics! But, it is no different than Beauvoir detailing various negative characteristics of women in her work of feminist theory, *The Second Sex*--that they are petty and frivolous, for example.⁴⁸ The reason for doing so is the need to accept one's negative aspects before one can change them for the better. The characteristics are not seen as natural to women by Beauvoir, but as results of their situation.

Similarly for Sartre, the listed Jewish characteristics are not seen as concretely Jewish but as a reaction to a bad situation. For example, money is prized by Jews because 'real property' is denied them along with ancient ties to land and wealth, while money is universal and can gain Jews entry into societies otherwise closed to them because they lack aristocratic background. Jewish lack of tact results not from something intrinsic to Jewishness but from a suspicion of any synthetic wholes, that is, of concrete social groups, since they are groups from which Jews are excluded (tact, in other words,

often is just the language of a group that is used to exclude those not in the group). Rejection of the body results not from any Jewish nature but from experiencing the body as betraying ~~them~~ **one** as a Jew while the mind is universal. Discomfort with other Jews because ~~he~~ **one** is trying to deemphasize Jewish characteristics and simply be a “human being” in order to be accepted while they are happy with their characteristics and as a result threaten ~~his~~ **ones** effort not to be Jewish.

The discomfort with other Jews is a form of projection, I would say, or even projective identification--where the identification is with particular negative Jewish characteristics one might have in oneself which are then projected onto other Jews and hated in them rather than in oneself. Projection keeps one from seeing ones own identity, seeing what is problematic about it, and dealing with the social situation that leads one to cultivate the problematic identity. Rather than seeing that you yourself have negative Jewish characteristics like love of money as a protective reaction to being socially excluded, attack the unpleasant love of money you see in another. It is easier to do that, than to recognize the social exclusion and isolation you are in and take the dangerous steps necessary to change the situation hostile others have put you in and are putting you in still today.

The examples show one sense in which “it is the anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew.”⁴⁹ One’s negative characteristics come not from a positive concrete identity but from a reaction to hostility from others. Instead of cleanly confronting and dealing with the hostile other, redirect the hostility to another Jew who makes you uncomfortable because he or she reminds you of the hostility you would rather ignore and deny because confronting it is risky.

Améry’s response to Sartre’s views on this is not simply to disagree with them but, as mentioned earlier, to point out the overwhelming force a Jew faces from the hostile, antisemitic society. A Jew is not like a child on the playground facing one bully in a larger group that does not bully and in general does not endorse bullying. Instead, Jews confront a whole society of hostility:

The degradation of the Jews was, I am convinced, identical with the death threat long before Auschwitz. In this regard Jean-Paul Sartre, already in 1946 in his book *Anti-Semite and Jew*, offered a few perceptions that are still valid today. There is no “Jewish problem,” he said, only a problem of antisemitism; the antisemite forced the Jew into a situation in which he permitted his enemy to stamp him with a self-image. Both points appear to me to be unassailable. But in his short phenomenological sketch Sartre could not describe the total, crushing force of antisemitism, a force that had brought the Jew to that point, quite aside from the fact that the great author

himself probably did not comprehend it in its entire overwhelming might."⁵⁰

The extensive quotation is useful for seeing what Améry's argument is. He agrees with Sartre that the antisemite forced the Jew into a certain situation and in that situation the Jew--particularly the inauthentic Jew--permitted his enemy to stamp him with a self-image. The inauthentic Jew lets the antisemitic other determine the Jew's own self-image and, in that sense, is unfree.

However, Améry maintains, the whole world denied a positive image of Jews. The whole world denied that Jews were worthy of love:

The Jew...subjugates himself, in his flight from the Jewish fate, to the power of his oppressor. But one must say in his favor that in the years of the Third Reich the Jew stood with his back to the wall, and it too was hostile. There was no way out. Because it was not only radical Nazis, officially certified by the party, who denied that we were worthy of being loved and thereby worthy of life. All of Germany--but what am I saying!--the whole world nodded its head in approval of the undertaking, even if here and there with a certain superficial regret."⁵¹

Améry makes a distinction between Jews who were self-haters prior to the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 and after. Those in the later group were forced and those in the earlier were not. Those in the later group succumbed to an objective social reality, the reality that the world sees us "as lazy, ugly, useless, and evil; in view of such universal agreement what sense does it still make to object and say that we *are* not that way!"⁵² Surrendering to virulent antisemitic images of Jews at that point was "the acknowledgment of a social reality."⁵³ Even in Auschwitz, Améry points out, the ethnic hierarchy of peoples, with Jews at the bottom, was accepted even by the prisoners themselves.

Améry's point here is that recognition of where Jews were in the social hierarchy imposed by force by the Germans is not the inauthenticity of denial of one's freedom, but the authenticity of recognizing one's situation. "The surrender of the Jews to the [virulently antisemitic] *Stürmer* image of themselves was nothing other than the acknowledgment of a social reality. To oppose it with a self-evaluation based on other standards at times had to appear ridiculous or mad."⁵⁴

Améry's point, then, is two-fold. First, that one ought to judge someone who succumbs to a negative self-image imposed on ~~one~~ ~~them~~ ~~self~~ by another differently when they do so in a situation of total or overwhelming force. If I take "lines of flight" to avoid overwhelming violence, I should be judged differently than one who does so in less painful circumstances. Here, Améry really is rejecting Sartre's idea that we are free under absolutely any

circumstances. His second point is that giving up on persuading others of a more positive self-image of yourself when you live in a total society and world that denies your self-worth is the authenticity of recognizing one's situation and not a form of denial.

The first point strikes me as being correct, that one who does not assert him or herself when the stakes are high should be judged differently than one who does not do so when the stakes are low. This point amounts to an important critique of Sartre's idea of freedom. Sartre thinks one is free in any circumstances. Améry does not go quite that far. The second point seems to me to finesse a certain issue. Améry is right, I think, that attempting to persuade others of your own positive self-image under conditions such as those he describes is a form of denial--denial of your situation and its harshness--but he leaves out the question of internalizing the negative self-image. Doing that is not recognizing your situation but capitulating to a false image. However, he could return to his first point to explain and excuse this to an extent, namely, the overwhelming force involved.

Returning to the paradox, what then is the necessity of being a Jew? It has to do with how one is regarded and treated by others. Améry knew that he was regarded as a Jew by others and never denied it. But, it didn't have great consequence for him. It began to have consequence, he says, when the Nuremberg Laws came out in 1935. These discriminatory laws already express a denial of dignity to Jews and, as such, are a death threat or a death sentence. With the Nuremberg Laws, Améry believed he was "a dead man on leave" (NI 86).

The Nuremberg Laws consisted in three parts: the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honour which made marriage and extramarital sex between Jews and Germans and the employment in Jewish households of German women under forty-five illegal; the Reich Citizenship Law which made only those with German or related blood eligible to be Reich citizens and classed all others as state subjects to be denied citizenship rights; and, a supplementary decree defining who was Jewish. With the Nuremberg Laws, Améry was a Jew because the laws categorized him as a Jew. With the laws, his being a Jew was a necessity, an externally imposed necessity with potential of great consequences--harm and death--over which Améry had no control. With the Nuremberg Laws, and other laws and actions, Améry was compelled to share the consequential fate of Jews and thus in that sense was a Jew. No matter how he did or did not identify himself, he was identified from without as a Jew and, based on that external identification, forced into the condition and experiences of Jews--significantly for him, of course, including his being sent to Auschwitz because he was Jewish."⁵⁵

The rhetorical power of Améry's essay, then, results from the fact that he is not simply someone with a mixed or double identity but from the fact

that he has a Jewish identity that is not at all a concrete one based on affective, national or religious ties, etc., but only an externally compelled or necessitated one in which he is categorized as a Jew and then made to experience the experiences of a Jew. The lack of concrete ties highlights the element of force in his identity, and in identity in general, since for him a forced Jewish identity is (almost) all that he has. I am what I am only in relation to how I am treated by others. I can only be something if I am treated as that something by others. Even more, I am, to an extent, that something if I am treated as that something by others.

It is this general point about identity, that it is externally produced through the regard and force of others, that presumably leads Améry to say "It is with this necessity, this impossibility, this oppression, this inability that I must deal here, and in doing so I can only hope, without certainty, that my individual story is exemplary enough also to reach those who neither are nor have to be Jews."⁵⁶ In other words, all identity is in good part produced by external force. He hopes his case--of lacking any other type of Jewish identity--will make that point clear as a general one applying to everyone. In part, anyway, we are what we are only because we are regarded as such by others who have and use physical force to back up their regard.

It is important, too, that the force is physical. The topic of physical force leads us into discussion of the last of Améry's responses to Sartre, namely, to Sartre's idea, mentioned above, that the one who resists creates himself and frees himself by doing so. One way Améry describes the necessity of being a Jew is that, with the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, Jews were degraded and therefore subject to being killed. When he read the laws, he heard a death threat or death sentence laid on them.

With the laws, he became different--an important point for understanding Améry's idea that identity comes in part from without through force. With the Nuremberg Laws, and their definition of him as a Jew and their degradation of Jews by denying them the right to marry Germans, have sex with them or employ young German women in their homes, who he was changed. He became "a quarry of Death."⁵⁷ He became a part of a class--a degraded class that, as such, could be killed. Those laws did not give him more of a concrete Jewish identity, however:

My features had not become more Mediterranean-Semitic, my frame of reference had not suddenly been filled by magic power with Hebrew allusions, the Christmas tree had not wondrously transformed itself into the seven-armed candelabra.⁵⁸

The change forced on him from without was not acquisition of more of a concrete identity as a Jew. To be a Jew, for him, was not to have any of those concrete identifications. The change was that he became someone permissible to kill: "To be a Jew, that meant for me, from this moment on, to be a dead man on leave, someone to be murdered."⁵⁹ The change, in other

words, was that he became a person classified societally as a Jew and, as such, a person who could be killed. The societally imposed categorization as a Jew and thus as someone who could be killed is what Améry is referring to when he speaks of “the necessity of being a Jew.”

The categorization was a degradation and the degradation, he suggests, was constant:

Daily, for years on end, we could read and hear that we were lazy, evil, ugly, capable only of misdeed, clever only to the extent that we pulled one over on others. We were incapable of founding a state; but also by no means suited to assimilate with our host nations. By their very presence, our bodies--hairy fat, and bow-legged--befouled public swimming pools, yes, even park benches. Our hideous faces, depraved and spoilt by protruding ears and hanging noses, were disgusting to our fellow men, fellow citizens of yesterday. We were not worthy of love and thus also not of life.⁶⁰

If degradation amounts in the end to the permissibility of deprivation of death, Améry argues, then dignity is the right to life. Moreover, the granting and denying of dignity are acts of social agreement. Jews are Jews *by social agreement* in the Nuremberg Laws that determine who does and who does not fit into the category of Jew. Jews are Jews *by social agreement* in the constant portrayal of them as degraded and unworthy of love for example in the virulently antisemitic tabloid, *Der Stürmer*. The social agreements that grant and deny dignity are not sentences that can be appealed “on the grounds of one’s self-understanding.”⁶¹ Instead, they are verdicts appealed only through physical resistance.

The appeals process has two parts--reflecting the two aspects of Sartrean authenticity, recognition of one’s facticity or situation, and then freely acting in the face of that recognition. Recognizing facticity in this case is facing and not denying “that the verdict of the social group is a given reality.”⁶² Facing it, without taking what Améry calls “intellectual flight” or turning on “defense mechanisms.”⁶³

He mentions three defense mechanisms: first, believing that the degradation has nothing to do with the *real* Germany, that is, that somewhere there is a *real* Germany that does not accept the degradation; second, thinking it is *only* Germany that is problematic, that is, not allowing your self to see that the problem spans the world; third, believing within my self that, as previously quoted, “I am what I am for myself and in myself, and nothing else,” that is, not recognizing that the verdict of the social group as to what you are is in fact reality.⁶⁴ Améry’s position is a striking combination of Sartre’s views and critique of them: of Sartrean authenticity as recognizing one’s situation and acting freely within it through physical resistance; of critique of Sartre since part of what I am is forced on me by others through social agreement to a categorization and degradation that

implies the permissibility of deadly physical force—contradicting Sartre’s idea, with which we began, that “man is nothing other than what he makes of himself.”⁶⁵

In the importance of the use of physical force, though, he is in agreement with Sartre and with Fanon (at least in this essay; later, Améry rejects this view). Since degradation is physical in its conclusion, achieving dignity is, too, Améry claims. What “was more crucial than the moral power to resist,” he asserts, was “to hit back.”⁶⁶ A degraded person can convince society of his dignity, according to Améry, by taking his fate on himself and rising in physical revolt against it. The revolt convinces society of the person’s dignity; that is, it eliminates the social agreement.

But Améry gives a second reason for the importance of physicality, namely, that in some situations “our body is our entire self,” specifically, in hunger, suffering and dealing blows.⁶⁷ Améry resisted the Viennese fascists and the Nazis. In Auschwitz, he struck a vigorous and violent guard who hit Jews under his control in the face for minor offenses. Améry struck the guard in the face in return and by doing so restored his dignity:

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 disjointed personality. In the punch, I was myself—for myself and for my opponent.”⁶⁸

He goes on to write, “I gave concrete social form to my dignity by punching a human face”⁶⁹

We can conclude, then, that Jean Améry, despite being heavily influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre’s idea of freedom, is closer to postmodern thought in his belief that what I am is forced on me by the social agreement of others on a way of categorizing me that is effectuated through physical force. Constant degradation through vicious categorization is a death sentence because it deprives me of socially agreed upon worth or dignity. I can attain dignity again, according to Améry, but only through a process of physical resistance, in part because degradation permits and leads to the use of physical force against me and must be met by force in turn, and in part because the use of physical force against me reduces me to a body and a body is only capable of physical resistance. At the same time, resistance requires the Sartrean authenticity of recognizing my situation for what it is. A Jew needed to see that the degradation to which he or she was subject was total, both in Germany and in the larger world, and that it was sustained by massive force, to take the needed step of resistance. The element of force in identity stands out for Améry because, in his own case, it is impossible for him to be a Jew in the concrete senses of religious belief, cultural or national identification, familial tradition, and so forth, due to the specific ways in which his early experiences shaped who he was. Because for him it was impossible in a concrete sense to be a Jew, the element of necessity in being a

Jew is highlighted. One is a Jew not simply by making oneself a Jew for Améry, but by being subjected to degrading societal categorization and the accompanying use of overwhelming physical force. What Améry learned, then, through his own experience and reflection on it, is that no matter what types of concrete identification there may be, there is force inside every identity including one's identity as a Jew.

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 22.

² Jean Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," in *At the Mind's Limit: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 90.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, George J. Becker, trans. (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), 69.

⁴ Sartre rejects this view later in his life. See Jean-Paul Sartre and Benny Lévy, *Hope Now: The 1980 Interviews*, Adrian Van Den Hoven, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 100-104.

⁵ Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 91.

⁶ Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 92.

⁷ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 86.

⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 117, n. 24.

⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 101.

¹⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 107.

¹¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 102.

¹² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 349.

¹³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 349.

¹⁴ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 349.

¹⁵ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 91.

¹⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 21.

¹⁷ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 21.

¹⁸ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 21.

¹⁹ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 84.

²⁰ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 83.

²¹ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 83.

- ²² Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 83.
- ²³ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 83.
- ²⁴ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 83.
- ²⁵ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 83, 84.
- ²⁶ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 84.
- ²⁷ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 84.
- ²⁸ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 84.
- ²⁹ Irène Heidelberger-Leonard, *The Philosopher of Auschwitz: Jean Améry and Living with the Holocaust* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 11.
- ³⁰ Heidelberger-Leonard, *The Philosopher of Auschwitz*, 11.
- ³¹ Heidelberger-Leonard, *The Philosopher of Auschwitz*, 12.
- ³² Heidelberger-Leonard, *The Philosopher of Auschwitz*, 12.
- ³³ Heidelberger-Leonard, *The Philosopher of Auschwitz*, 14.
- ³⁴ Heidelberger-Leonard, *The Philosopher of Auschwitz*, 20.
- ³⁵ Heidelberger-Leonard, *The Philosopher of Auschwitz*, 21.
- ³⁶ Heidelberger-Leonard, *The Philosopher of Auschwitz*, 21.
- ³⁷ Heidelberger-Leonard, *The Philosopher of Auschwitz*, 22.
- ³⁸ Heidelberger-Leonard, *The Philosopher of Auschwitz*, 117.
- ³⁹ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 90.
- ⁴⁰ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 84.
- ⁴¹ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 84.
- ⁴² Steven Schwarzschild, *The Pursuit of the Ideal: Jewish Writings of Steven Schwarzschild*, Menachem Kellner, ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 325, n. 68.
- ⁴³ Sheng-mei Ma, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being Mixed-Race in Asian American Literature," in *Reconstructing Hybridity: Post-Colonial Studies in Transition*, ed. Joel Kuortti and Jopi Nyman (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 164.
- ⁴⁴ Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 90.
- ⁴⁵ Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 90.
- ⁴⁶ Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 93.
- ⁴⁷ Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 103-114.
- ⁴⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 643.
- ⁴⁹ Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 69.
- ⁵⁰ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 86.

- ⁵¹ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 86-87.
- ⁵² Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 87.
- ⁵³ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 87.
- ⁵⁴ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 87.
- ⁵⁵ Heidelberger-Leonard, *The Philosopher of Auschwitz*, 61.
- ⁵⁶ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 82-83.
- ⁵⁷ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 85.
- ⁵⁸ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 85.
- ⁵⁹ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 86.
- ⁶⁰ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 86
- ⁶¹ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 89.
- ⁶² Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 89
- ⁶³ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 90.
- ⁶⁴ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 90.
- ⁶⁵ Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," 22.
- ⁶⁶ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 90.
- ⁶⁷ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 90-91.
- ⁶⁸ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 91.
- ⁶⁹ Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," 91.