CHAPTER 13

Jean Améry: Suicide, the Refusal to Heal, and Humanistic Freedom

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13.1 The importance of Améry's *On Suicide*

On Suicide [*Hand an sich Legen. Diskurs über den Freitod* (1977)] is Améry's penultimate work. While there has recently been a renewed interest in Améry's defense of suicide, the essay collection is given comparably less serious philosophical contemplation than his work on resentment. I argue that his examination of *échec*, his challenge to the "logic of life", and his defense of suicide, represent a culmination of Améry's philosophical project. Améry's commitment to privileging autonomy and freedom over well-being is introduced in his writings on resentment and further exemplified in his defense of suicide. This conception of a radically free human subject who is able to reject coercion toward well-being even to the point of self-annihilation, in turn, illuminates the tensions in Améry's ambiguous relationship with Enlightenment thinking.

Améry wrote *On Suicide* after an unsuccessful suicide attempt and before his successful suicide in 1978. In the essays, he eschews attempts to

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examine the phenomenon through psychological or quantitative sociological methods and instead attempts to elucidate the lived phenomenon of suicide. This in turn positions suicide as both an assertion of individual freedom and as an act brings freedom. As such, discussions of suicide cannot be fully contained within the discourses of psychology and sociology or more generally within what he referred to as the domain of the "logic of life". The "logic of life" refers to a collection of often unexamined sociological, psychological, and biological pressures and inertias that encourage and coerce continued living and well-being (Améry 1999b).

On Suicide also represents the culmination of Améry's pessimism in his writing and philosophy.[1] His defense of suicide expands on the pessimism of *At the Mind's Limits* (1999a) and *On Aging* (1994). He continues to confront problematic "common sense" schemas that coerce well-being at the expense of human freedom. In these prior projects, Améry rejects what he views as clichéd platitudes such as "time will heal all wounds" and "forgive and forget". He also rejects the sentiment that aging is an unavoidable part of life that nonetheless brings wisdom and contentment. In contrast to what he defines as this common-sense view, Améry privileges the experiences that the logic of life marginalizes. This pessimism results in an ambiguous relationship with the future and temporality. Despite a commitment to progress, Améry fundamentally critiques the notion of time as a positive healing process and instead frames the passage of time in primarily negative and alienating terms.

Améry's defense of suicide builds on his defense of resentment and his refusal to accept healing and forgiveness in the aftermath of World War II. The ability to reject forgiveness is framed as the right and privilege of a free human subject. Améry acknowledges both that forgiveness may bring a sense of psychological healing for the victims of atrocities and that the passage of time will inevitably historicize the Holocaust. However, people can and ought to rebel against these natural processes and push against the forces of inertia that encourage healing. This key concept that people are not determined by the biological, sociological, and temporal inertias which naturally guide them toward healing and well-being provides a basis from which people can examine and ultimately reject the logic of life through committing suicide.

A serious examination of *On Suicide* highlights and elucidates several tensions within Améry's philosophy. Améry's defense of suicide exemplifies his ambiguous defense of the Enlightenment as well as his condemnation of what he saw as "anti-Enlightenment thinkers" such as Foucault

and members of the Frankfurt school. Améry criticized what he saw as the rejection of subjectivity and progress in postmodernism. However, Améry's defense of suicide and resentment also challenge what he defines as the "logic of life" and Enlightenment norms of well-being, flourishing, and the inevitability of the future. As such, Améry simultaneously defends a humanistic conception of the autonomist subject, while rejecting notions of that this subject must promote and extend their lives and well-being.

In *On Suicide* (1999b), Améry continues to frame himself as an existentialist and borrows heavily from Sartre's opus, while acknowledging his different conclusions from Sartre's existentialism. Améry places greater emphasis on the role of the body than Sartre. This is demonstrated both when discussing the phenomenon of torture and self-destruction (Améry 1999a, b). Améry also criticizes Sartre's political work, particularly his later work (Améry 1984c). However, he continues to recognize his debt to Sartrean radical freedom and free will (Améry 1984c). He utilizes the conception of Sartrean freedom to provide a conception of subjectivity that allows for individuals to challenge the inertia of the logic of life through suicide and challenge historical entropy through resentment. As such, *On Suicide* represents the culmination of Améry's project and reliance on a radically undetermined subject. For him, the notion that "everyone has to live" represents the ultimate example of social, biological, and physical pressure to continue living. It is only via an absolute and uniquely human freedom that people are not determined by this and are able to challenge the "natural" status quo and instead chose death.

13.2 Rejecting the Logic of Life and Embracing *Échec*

In *On Suicide* Améry focuses on the phenomenon of the person "before the leap". That is, Améry is interested in examining the individual parasuicidal subject on the precipice of suicide. He does not reject sociological studies of suicidology. However, for the suicidal person, these general population based and quantitative studies are "empty". He writes:

> Suicidology is right. Except that for suicides and potential suicides what it says is empty. For what it comes to for them is the total is the total and unmistakable singularity of their lived situation, their *situation vécue*. (Améry 1999b, p. 8)

As such, what is of value for Améry is a philosophical investigation of the lived experience of the suicide or the potential suicide on a personal and subjective level.

The lived situation of the suicidal person fundamentally challenges the logic of life and is marked by a deep sense of *échec*. The term *échec* is taken from the French word for failure as Améry claims the term aesthetically denotes failure's shattering nature. *Échec* is not a literal failure to achieve a specific goal. Rather, it refers to a more general inability to retain faith in the world. "*Échec* means something like a failure, a defeat […] Basically, one can live in *échec* but only in a disgraceful almost 'unnatural' way" (Améry 1999b, p. 41). Society compels individuals to move beyond and defeat their sense of *échec*. He states, "to be normal is to overcome *échec*, and society applauds the brave man who is not frightened". However, in the case of the suicidal person, this failure moves from an experience of *échec* in life and becomes an ***échec* of life** or a feeling of disgust in the world. Rather than overcome their failure, the suicidal person instead chooses to escape *échec* through rejecting the logic of life and life itself.

This *échec* can take many forms and affect many situations. Améry compares a litany of historical, contemporary, and fictional suicides to examine how *échec* can operate equally powerfully in both seemingly serious and trivial situations. He gives a supposedly trivial example of a woman who had "thrown herself out of a window 'because of her unhappy love for a radio lover'" (Améry 1999b, p. 6). This supposedly "foolish" suicide is contrasted to the less controversial case of Freud's euthanasia. Améry writes:

> [T]ake Sigmund Freud. The old man's cancer of the gums was in its final stage. The patient's mouth produced a pestilential odor so obnoxious that his favorite dog wouldn't go near him anymore. He said to his personal physician that everything was just torture and more torture and demanded the injection that would liberate him—which his old friend did not deny him. (Améry 1999b, p. 6)

In addition, Améry describes the fictitious Lt. Gustl who claims he will commit suicide as he feels that he disgraced the honor of his army uniform by failing to retaliate against a physically imposing baker who insulted him.[2] These examples serve to expand discourses on suicide beyond discussions about when suicide is acceptable or can be considered morally justifiable euthanasia.

Améry rejects any attempt to divide suicides into so-called acceptable suicides in the face of insurmountable physical pain, terminal illness, or certain torture, and "frivolous" suicides which are committed or attempted for supposedly spurious reasons. What unites these cases is that the suicidal or parasuicidal person finds continuing to exist intolerable. The person before the leap feels a deep sense of *échec* or failure in the world. This marks a sharp departure from ethical and political debates on the permissibility of suicide and euthanasia.

The fact that the suicidal person has lost this faith in the world means that they are no longer operating within the logic of life. The logic of life refers to everyday functioning of continued existence. For Améry the logic of life has a societal, biological, and even atomistic or quantum dimension.

> Anyone who wants to commit suicide is breaking out, out of the logic of life, as I've already indicated. This logic of life is given to us, the biologist knows it just as well as the behavioral scientist, and perhaps also the physicist, because recent works of theoretical physics seem to allow the conclusion that bios [the domain of life] and human beings are perhaps more than "chance hits" as Jacques Monod thought. The logic of life is prescribed for us, or "programmed" if you wish, in every daily reaction. (Améry 1999b, p. 13)

Rejecting or moving beyond the logic of life represents a rupture with the status quo and a fundamental challenge to the most basic norms of social and biological existence. The taboo of suicide is not merely socially imposed but is instead formed by the natural underpinning state of all life and matter. As previously discussed, Améry states that the "common sense" approach to life is that "everyone has to live". However, the potential suicide moves beyond this common sense dictum and questions "does one have to live?" before answering with a defiant "no". The lived situation of the suicidal person is one in which life is intolerable and voluntary death becomes a way of reclaiming one's dignity. This is exemplified in the supposedly absurd case of Lt. Gustl. Lt. Gustl disgraces his military code of honor when he is insulted by the physically imposing local baker. Gustl is unable to retaliate due to the baker's size. Furthermore, he cannot regain his sense of dignity through dueling as the baker does not have sufficient social standing. From this, he fears public humiliation and loses his sense of pride and dignity. For Gustl, it is irrelevant that his actions could be generally considered reasonable and easily sanctioned. Rather, his

supposed cowardice and then inability to reclaim his honor marked him with a deep sense of *échec*.

However, by rejecting the natural inertia of continued existence the suicidal or parasuicidal person exhibits their uniquely human capacity for genuine freedom and dignity. In this sense, Lt. Gustl can reclaim his sense of honor and autonomy through his affirmation that he will reject the logic of life and commit suicide, even if he does not ultimately act on his decision. Consequently, the suicidal person's defiant "no" to the necessity of continued existence and their rejection of the logic of life is an assertion of human autonomy.

When the act of suicide challenges the logic of life, the suicidal person moves into the "anti-logic of death". This logic is described as the following:

> The *logic of death* is not a logic in the usual sense, upholding reason alone, for it allows no conclusion other than just one, again and again and again: not is the same as not with which the statement of every logical (that is, analytic) judgement, already in itself containing no reality, loses its last tie to reality; that tie above all in which the equation of two categories of being that are symbolically recorded as in mathematics, or are rooted in everyday language, is now related to something that is nothing and is not—a pure negation and an accursed inconceivability. (Améry 1999b, p. 19)

Subsequently, the logic of life cannot be considered a logic in the traditional sense. Rather death is rooted in negation and violently rejects the physical and biological inertia that determines the logic of life. As such, suicide exists in a kind of anti-logic. For Améry, suicide is a unique situation as the parasuicidal person has remaining attachments to the logic of life while also reaching into the anti-logic of death.

Améry positions both the anti-logic of death and the suicidal person's ambiguous positioning between the logic of life and the anti-logic of death as disturbing. As the logic of life represents the everyday continuation of existence it is "natural" and in step with the continuation of the positive existence of a sensible universe.[3] Suicide's rupture with the logic of life is a confronting revolt against this natural logic.

These ruptures also highlight a key tension in Améry's philosophy in regards to the passage of time. There is a potential conflict between his support of progress and his reticence to frame the passage of time in positive terms. Améry repeatedly states that he believes in progress. In his

address after receiving the Hamburg Lessing Prize, he laments: "What sad aberration has brought us to the point where modern thinkers do not dare to employ concepts such as progress, humanization, and reason except within damning quotation marks?" (Améry 1984b, p. 135). He is highly critical of what he saw as popular poststructuralist, postmodernist, and Frankfurt School thinkers' critiques of the enlightenment. He dismissed these schools and characterized them as believing: "Progress? The frenzied obsession with production and profit of a bourgeoisie that has subjugated the proletarian and with him the earth" before strongly rejecting this suggestion (Améry 1984b, p. 135).

However, this belief in progress and the positive potential of continuing to move forward is tempered by an acknowledgment of and respect for the human potential to fight against the passage of time. This is performed both in the ultimately futile but autonomously chosen action to fight against historical entropy and the decision to reject life itself. This represents Améry's multifaceted but humanistic commitment to respect for autonomy. I will elaborate further on the discomforting nature of this action in my next sections.

13.3 Suicide, Autonomy, and Améry's Humanism

Améry focuses on the uniquely human aspect of suicide. In his essay, he goes beyond the statement that people ought to have the right to commit suicide. Rather, suicide is an action that brings human freedom. Améry quotes the suicidologist Jean Baechler who claims that "suicide is specifically and universally human" (1999b, p. 43). Améry argues that suicide is not reducible to a mistake or a symptom of mental illness. Rather it represents a freely chosen rejection of the natural inertia of continued existence.

Saying "no" to the logic of life represents a revolt and rebellion against the "natural" order and demonstrates that people are not determined by the logic of life. Committing suicide is an example of autonomous action as it is the most explicit exemplar of the capacity to act freely against a status quo or preexisting momentum. The uniquely human capacity to reject the logic of life relies on Améry's indebtedness to Sartre's notions of radical ontological freedom. However, crucially this subject remains a humanist subject in contrast to poststructuralism of counter-enlightenment thinking.

The suicidal person has a historical, sociological, biological, and even subatomic facticity which predisposes them to the inertia of the logic of

life. However, by virtue of human free will, they can reject being determined by this facticity and instead spontaneously act against it. As such, suicide is an action that is based in dignity and freedom. Améry's conception of suicide goes beyond the right to die to avoid pain and instead asserts suicide as an act of human freedom that can challenge both society and biology itself. He writes that the decision to kill oneself is a decision "not only made in freedom but also brings real freedom to us" (Améry 1999b, p. 132). This freedom does not come purely from the act of dying as society often condones "unnecessary" death such as dying in wars. What is unique about suicide is that death is freely chosen and embraced. It is through suicide's voluntary nature that Améry is able to retain his notion of a radically autonomous, humanist subject while simultaneously critiquing norms that coerce well-being.

Other holocaust writers such as Hannah Arendt and Primo Levi reach similar conclusions about autonomy and suicide from a different perspective. In the *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1967), Arendt examines the complete extinguishing of spontaneity in the concentration camps to the point where people were unable to even commit suicide.

> For to destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity, man's power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events […] In this context also belongs the astonishing rarity of suicides in the camps. Suicide occurred far more often before arrest and deportation that in the camp itself, which is of course partly explained by the fact that every attempt was made to prevent suicides which are, after all, spontaneous acts. (Arendt 1967, p. 455)[4]

Levi also writes about how Auschwitz prisoners were reduced to the status of animals and subsequently generally cut off from the human activity of suicide (Levi 2000). Writing about his hunger and exhaustion he states "I am not even alive enough to know how to kill myself" (Levi 2000, p. 121).[5] Both these writers demonstrate that the ability to resist and revolt is a key component of human freedom. The reduction of this capacity for freedom represents a severe injury to the human subject.

The freedom to kill oneself may be disturbing; however, the decision to "throw one's life away" represents a pure and overwhelming experience of freedom which ultimately negates the value of the logic of life. The ability to reject inertia and act in a spontaneous manner has value on an ontological, psychological, and moral-political level.

The assertion of the value of suicide builds on Améry's defense of the value of resentment. Améry steadfastly clings to his feelings of resentment toward the Germans after his liberation from Auschwitz. In his writing, he highlights how he fundamentally identifies himself as a victim and when he speaks of the atrocities of Nazi Germany he does so from this position. He explicitly dismisses Hannah Arendt's political polemics to instead focus on his personal anger and subjective experience as a victim. In *The Human Condition,* Arendt explores the restorative potential of forgiveness. She states:

> [W]ithout being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever. (Arendt 1958, p. 237)

This forgiveness is framed as being beneficial for both the victim and the perpetrator of the acts. The performance of forgiveness is what allows people to move beyond actions committed in the past in order to permit the future performance of pluralistic actions in the political sphere.

Améry in contrast wholeheartedly rejects the notion that people should be encouraged or pressured to forgive. He describes other Jewish intellectuals who "were trembling in the pathos of forgiveness and reconciliation", as distasteful (Améry 1999a, p. 64). For Améry, refusing to forgive and surrender to the healing process of time represents a free and autonomous action. The coercion of victims to engage in forgiveness or the pathologization of the refusal to forgive is a reprehensible act of victimization and dehumanization.

To demonstrate this, Améry engages with Nietzsche and psychological accounts of "concentration camp syndrome" (Améry 1999a, p. 64). He represents "Nietzsche as morally condemning resentment and modern psychology … [is] only able to view it as a disturbing conflict". Améry rejects this dismissal of resentment and attempts to philosophically elaborate on what it means to be a resenting victim. He states that "a forgiving and forgetting induced by society is immoral" (Améry 1999a, p. 60). He rails against the idea that he ought to be pressured or forced to forgive, from both a moral and psychological point of view. Rather, he extols the value of our ability to resist healing and hold on to our injuries.

Again, Améry's defense of resentment is both political and personal. In *Ethical Loneliness* (2012), Jill Stauffer highlights the importance of the

political situation in which Améry was writing. She highlights how, at the time of writing, the discipline of Holocaust scholarship was in its infancy.

> It was not widely known that there had been a concerted effort to eliminate a group of people from the earth … This puts Améry's struggle in a wider context: his resistance to forgiveness was in part a way to demand a wider recognition of the specific harms he had suffered, since no preexisting general term would capture adequately the horror of what he survived. (Stauffer 2012, p. 12)

Therefore, Améry wrote in a context where there was real political pressure to underplay the importance of the Holocaust and to engage in the political process of forgiveness; which often entailed Amnesty and desisting prosecutions due to statutes of limitations. Améry's sense of both resentment and *ressentiment* act as a political locus of resistance against this forced forgiveness and to call for, at least partial justice to be served against the purveyors of the Holocaust. When discussing the execution of his Auschwitz torturer, the SS-man Wajs, Améry writes:

> The experience of persecution was, at its very bottom, that of an extreme *loneliness* … When SS-man Wajs stood before the firing squad, he experienced the moral truth of his crimes. At that moment he was with *me*—and I was no longer alone with the shovel handle. I would like to believe that at the moment of his execution he wanted exactly as much as I do to turn back time, to undo what had been done. When they led him to the place of execution the antiman had again become a fellow man. (Améry 1999a, p. 72)

From this, the clinging to resentment functions politically as it stands as testament to the atrocities of the Third Reich and resists an unearned and forced forgetting.

Thomas Brudholm also engages with the political dimension of Améry's thought when discussing his use of the term resentment. Brudholm discusses how Améry's use of the term "resentments" encompasses the feeling of resentment, Nietzschean *ressentiment*, and the notion of a grudge (Brudholm 2010). These terms are multifaceted and often shift throughout Améry's writings. Brudholm argues that Améry attempts to rehabilitate a morally justifiable form of *ressentiment* which goes beyond Nietzsche's dismissal of the phenomenon. A dimension of Améry's *ressentiments* is the political ability of the resentful victim to stand as testament to the horrors of the Holocaust. Brudholm argues that Améry's

ressentiment is therefore partially focused on the attitudes of forgiveness which developed in the postwar period. However, these sentiments are not reducible to Martha Nussbaum's notions of anger in the face of evil nor a simple understanding of justified resentment. Rather, "Améry conceptualizes *ressentiment* as something 'monstrous'—a special kind indeed"; however, this monstrous *ressentiment* continues to be valuable (Brudholm 2010, p. 102).

This monstrous *ressentiment* refers to a tortured attachment to past injustices. However, despite the testimonial and ethical significance of *ressentiment*, Améry's defense goes beyond its capacity for restitution and change in the political sphere. Clinging to *ressentiment* also represents autonomy and dignity for the resentful victim. It is fundamentally important to acknowledge that, for Améry, the Holocaust can never be reversed nor can it adequately be made amends for. Améry continues to argue against the push for amnesties and broad-scale Arendtian forgiveness. However, he also acknowledges that any kind of complete justice or punishment for the Holocaust is both impossible and undesirable. Writing about the possibility of revenge against those responsible for the Holocaust, Améry claims:

> They cannot consist in a revenge dealt out in proportion to what was suffered. I cannot prove it, but I am certain that there is no victim who would even have considered hanging the man Bogner, of the Auschwitz trial, in the Bogner swing. Even less would any sane person among us ever venture the morally impossible thought that four to six million Germans be taken away to their death … It can be a matter neither of revenge of one side or of a problematic atonement [on the other]. (Améry 1999a, p. 81)

As such, the Holocaust can never be undone, avenged, or completely atoned for in the political sphere. This renders Améry's relationship with both the Holocaust and the passage of time complex and personal. His status as a resentful or ressentiment-ful victim cannot be ameliorated in a practical or moral sense or naturally by the passage of time. Resentment instead represents the victim's choice to resist the power of historical entropy and forgiveness in a way that allows them to assert their autonomy against the inertia of time.

Améry expands the importance of this ability in his prior essay *The Time of Rehabilitation* (1984d). In the essay, Améry examines the inevitable historicization of the Holocaust. He refers to this process as "historical

entropy". He argues that societal memories of atrocities dissipate and that eventually the outrage of Nazism cannot be felt as strongly as it was at the conclusion of World War II. While this process is unavoidable, Améry claims that historical entropy should not be encouraged and should be fought against as strongly as possible. This represents a defiance against nature and against healing. While this defiance may be futile, it remains a victim's prerogative and right to act in this manner.

What is pertinent from this is the value of choosing to cling to past injury; even if this is absurd. Améry highlights how the nature of linear time means that it is impossible to avoid the process of the historicization of the Holocaust. Similarly, Améry admits that his rejection of forgiveness and demand the irreversible be reversed are absurd. By clinging to resentment he rejects the "natural" account of time which privileges self-betterment and well-being to instead embrace a disordered time sense which is not future oriented (Ben-Shai 2010). However, it is this inevitability and absurdity of historical entropy that renders clinging to resentment and combating the inertia of time free, autonomous, and moral.

Améry dismisses forced forgiveness or overly permissive forgiveness by stating

> Whoever lazily and cheaply forgives, subjugates himself to the social and biological time-sense, which is also called the 'natural' one. Natural consciousness of time actually is rooted in the physiological process of wound-healing and became part of the social conception of reality. But precisely for this reason it is not only extramoral, but also *anti*moral in character. **Man has the right and privilege to declare himself to be in disagreement with every natural occurrence, including the biological healing that time brings about**. (Améry 1999a, p. 92, emphasis mine)

Therefore, despite the inherent absurdity of the refusal to forgive, pushing against the natural inertia of forgiveness and the natural conception of time is an autonomous action that in turn brings human dignity. It is this human capacity to push against the tendency toward sociological and natural healing which allows for ultimate freedom.

This rationale is then extended to view suicide as the ultimate example of the free choice to reject well-being. Just as it is necessary to move beyond discussions of so-called Concentration Camp Syndrome to properly understand resentment, it is necessary to avoid pathologization of the suicidal person. Like clinging to resentment, suicide represents a choice to operate pessimistically. As such, *On Suicide* represents an expansion and

culmination of Améry's defense of autonomy and the right to reject healing. By embracing resentment and suicide, Améry rejects the claim that certain seemingly negative phenomena are merely side effects that should be minimized as much as possible. Rather, he highlights how they can have value in their own right and in some situations ought to be sought.

13.4 Rejecting Condemnation and Pathologization

Throughout *On Suicide*, Améry argues against both secular and religious condemnations of suicide as immoral. However, he also rejects attempts to pathologize suicide as purely the result of diagnosable mental illness. Both these schemas demonize suicide and undermine its status as a valid and freely made choice. The former condemns suicide and undermines the right of a person to challenge the logic of life. The latter undermines the respect for the autonomy and capacity to freely make decisions of a person in the instance when they do challenge the logic of life. These rejections again demonstrate the measured nature of Améry's defense of Enlightenment thinking. Améry embraces an account of progress that criticizes unwarranted condemnation of free human actions while also rejecting conceptions of progress which privilege diagnosis and healing over autonomy.[6]

Suicide is presented a valid choice that should not be morally condemned. Améry's critique of the moral condemnation of suicide is built into his linguistic choices. He uses the term *Freitod*, or voluntary death, over the more commonly used term *Selbstmord* which literally translates as self-murder (Améry 1999b).[7] This phrasing highlights the importance Améry places on freedom as the phrase *Freitod* avoids the moralistic tones of *Selbstmord* while still highlighting the intentional nature of the act. Similarly, Améry repeatedly uses the phrase "to lay hands on oneself". This phrase highlights the free character of suicide while also placing the act suicide in the domain of one's own reasonable action.

By championing suicide as a freely chosen action, Améry is also highly critical of attempts to render the act of suicide as a symptom of a diagnosable mental disorder. He is especially critical in the cases in which there are no other diagnosable symptoms aside from an attempted or completed suicide.

Attempts to view suicide as a symptom of mental health reduce *échec* and disgust in the world to symptoms of an illness. He claims that "both phenomena… have been robbed of their dignity by the sciences of psychology

and psychiatry" (Améry 1999b, p. 56). He claims that sickness carries a stigma of disgrace and by rendering these phenomena as sicknesses psychiatry erases a dimension of human experience.

Viewing suicide as a symptom of mental illness destigmatizes the suicidal person as they are no longer considered blameworthy for their actions. However, this paradigm restigmatizes the suicidal person as mentally ill or mad. The suicidal person is no longer considered an autonomous agent and their prior autonomy is transferred to psychiatric doctors.

Lisa Lieberman highlights that after Améry's first suicide attempt he was reduced to the status of a thing. She highlights how his resuscitation and hospitalization robbed him of his freedom and how Améry described the process as the worst occurrence of his life (Lieberman 2003). She reluctantly admits that Améry's eventual successful suicide functioned as a statement of his self-ownership despite her discomfort over his coldness in the face of his voluntary death. However, this acceptance is difficult for her and pathologization and medicalization allow for depersonalization of the suicidal person and act as shields against the confronting nature of the act (Lieberman 2003). This depersonalizing tendency is mirrored in the history of discourses surrounding suicide. Lieberman highlights how Christian prohibitions against suicide, starting with St Augustine and extended by Thomas Aquinas, were loosened in the eighteenth century and were then supplanted by appeals to broad-scale sociological factors and mental health outcomes (Lieberman 2003). While these schemas remove blame from the suicidal person, they also remove the dignity associated with being an autonomous subject.

This stigmatization continues in contemporary times. The critical psychiatrist Thomas Szasz argues that societal and psychiatric understandings of suicide mask the phenomenon. He writes:

> We deny suicide by attributing its cause to nearly everything—from rock music to natural disasters and, above all else, to mental illness—except the subject's own decision. We are willing to *accuse* people and drugs and songs of causing suicide; we are willing to *excuse* suicide by blaming it on several of the causes listed and, above all, on mental illness; but we are not will to *accept* suicide as suicide. (Szasz 2002, pp. 22–23)

Like Améry, Szasz argues against this paradigm and views suicide as a phenomenon within its own right. I argue that Améry's writing provides this conception of suicide as a radical and freely chosen action.

13.5 The Unsettling Duality of Suicide

While it is not as significant a focus as autonomy, Améry also briefly touches upon the unsettling duality of suicide. Positioning self-destruction as a chosen and autonomous act raises contradictions and tensions. The logic of life gives way to the anti-logic of death in which "logic and dialectic fail in tragicomic agreement" (Améry 1999b, p. 153). Voluntary death is a person acting as a subject in order to attack themselves as an object. It is a person acting in order to limit their capacity for action. Suicide reveals the "road to the open", in as much as it is a radically free action, but this road leads nowhere (Améry 1999b, p. 152). A person engaging in self-destructive behavior also presents as having an ambiguous relationship between the mind/ego and the body as self-destruction represents an action performed on the body to obliterate the ego. These tensions highlight disquieting dualities within self-destruction.

Améry argues that suicide is an example of a person "de-selfing their self themselves" (Améry 1999b). Améry suggests that this is a double contradiction. The first contradiction is centered on the fact that people live their lives and engage in their projects with the knowledge that they will die. However, suicide has a secondary element of contradiction. Suicide is *prima facie* voluntary. However, suicide simultaneously serves to annihilate the subject that performs the act and is a project that cuts its performer off from any potential for future action.

Améry's description of his torture by the Nazis provides a basis for this tension. Améry writes about the fundamental difference between the tortured and non-tortured person. After being arrested as part of the Belgian resistance, Améry was taken to a Nazi facility to be interrogated. He recalls awaiting his torture and attempting to imagine what he would experience. During his interrogation, he realizes "nothing [torture] happens as we imagine because there is a difference between phantasy and reality" (Améry 1999a, p. 25). This is because torture is inflicted on the lived body and consequently is always personal and can never be entirely rendered theoretical or imagined.

Améry begins to understand the true nature of torture as the interrogation begins. He realizes that his "ability to feel at-home-in-the-world is as much physical as epistemological" (Améry 1999a, p. 48). With the "first blow" from his torturer's fist strikes him, Améry loses his "trust in the world" (Améry 1999a). The person under torture is reduced to pain and flesh. They are reduced to a profane and obscene body. Furthermore, the

tortured person loses their sense of self and boundaries. Their body is no longer theirs but instead belongs to the torturer, who is rendered a sovereign. He describes this process saying

> I have not forgotten that there were moments when I felt a kind of wretched admiration for the agonizing sovereignty they exercised over me. For is not the one who can reduce a person so entirely to a body and a whimpering prey of death a God, or at least, a Demigod? (Améry 1999a, p. 25)

However, this relationship between the Godly torturer and the reduced-to-flesh tortured becomes contradictory when both the torturer and the tortured are the same person. In the case of torture, the sovereign torturer inflicts pain on the lived body and flesh of the tortured. However, the self-destructive person is both sovereign and flesh simultaneously. Torture happens *to* the victim. As flesh, the tortured victim does not consent or consciously act; the victim is acted upon by the torturer. This is why the reality of torture cannot be theoretical or imagined. Torture *is* and *exists* simpliciter in its performance (Améry 1999a). However, in the case of self-destruction, this dynamic is more complicated. The self-destructing person must exist as the wholly transcendent torturer and the tortured flesh. Améry writes in detail about the meticulous and sometimes painful methods chosen to commit suicide. He describes the careful planning involved in procuring sleeping pills or fashioning a noose, the technical difficulty of severing one's throat, as well as the extreme case of blacksmith who excruciatingly crushes his head in his vice despite the sound of his own skull shattering. In these cases, the suicidal person simultaneously occupies the *Being* simpliciter of experiencing pain and the higher order process of inflicting it. This results in the self-destructive person relating to themselves as both subject and Other.

This relation to the self is further both self-obsessed and depersonalizing. Suicide highlights tensions between the body and ego. Améry focuses on the fact that suicide is an act performed on the body in order to obliterate the ego and the subjective self. He borrows Sartrean terminology to explain this phenomenon. He claims that there is normally both a singularity and a duality between the body and the ego. Bodies exist "and they are part of the outside world" while our inner psychic life is not readily available to others (Améry 1999a, p. 63). However, the two aspects permeate each other in a complex and protean manner. Améry writes, "we are not aware of our bodies during everyday existence" (Améry 1999a, p. 63).

By this, he means that we do not think of our bodies as being-in-the-world and tangible objects for others. Instead, if we become aware of our bodies, it is generally from the ego-tinged perspective of how our bodies feel for us. However, in the case of suicide, the body must be destroyed, which entails being able to view the body as a tangible object. Again, this body as a tangible object is attacked by the ego as a *subject*. This, in turn, means the suicidal person has a "peculiar relationship to the manifestations of unity and duality" (Améry 1999b, p. 63). The blurring of these boundaries is unsettling.

Further elaborations on this ambiguous duality are beyond the scope of this chapter. However, these tensions highlight that within *On Suicide*, Améry demonstrates a complex and ambiguous conception of subjectivity and freedom that in turn allows for the freedom to destroy one's freedom.

13.6 The Relationship Between Suicide and Améry's Measured Defense of the Enlightenment

I argue that Améry's defense of suicide epitomizes Améry's protean relationship with the general Enlightenment project. It shows an embrace of the notion of progress in as much as progress represents a further respect for a complex humanistic subject and their freely made decisions. However, he can reject the "guardians of the Enlightenment" who attempt to limit human subjectivity in the name of healing and well-being.

This same reasoning lies behind Améry's suspicion of medicalization of suicide and resentment while also rejecting his contemporary anti-psychiatrists. Améry defends what he sees as rationally chosen action. As such, he simultaneously critiques what he sees as the threat of both Enlightenment-inspired pathologization from schemas which do not view the decision to reject healing as valid and postmodern conceptions which do not embrace the idea of the human subject.

Throughout his popular publishing, Améry openly defended the thinking of the Enlightenment. He writes:

> And still, I profess loyalty to enlightenment, specifically to the *classical* enlightenment—as a *philosohpia perennis* that contains all of its own correctives, so that it is an idle game dialectically to dissect it. I stand up for analytical reason and its language, which is logic […] I believe that even today, as in the days of the Encyclopedists, knowledge leads to recognition and recognition to morality. And I maintain that it was not the Enlightenment

> that failed, as we have been assured ever since the first wave of the romantic counter-Enlightenment, **but rather those who were appointed its guardians**. (Améry 1984b, p. 136, emphasis mine)

For Améry, critique is embedded within the ideals of Enlightenment rationality. As such, he can defend what he sees as the positive development of bourgeois humanism while still challenging the supremacy of psychiatric discourse.[8]

However, there remains a contradiction between Améry's defense of humanism and his defense of suicide and refusing to heal. Embedded in Enlightenment rationality is a schema that privileges healing, well-being, and flourishing. Popular discourses in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries moved away from notions of original sin and positioned people as naturally acting toward their own well-being. This well-being in some cases allowed for euthanasia in the face of illness or pain. However, this conception of well-being also implies a natural avoidance of pain as well as voluntary death which is not the consequence of illness or the greater good. While Améry defends the greater focus on human rationality—he lies in tension with how actions that were deemed as failures in rationality were dealt with and movements toward pathologization.

Améry's arguments reassert and surpass David Hume's defense of suicide.[9] In his 1777 essay, Hume attempts to provide a defense of suicide that will restore mankind to their "natural liberty"—that is, allow people their natural determination over their life and when to end it (Hume 2007). He first argues that suicide is not a dereliction of duty one has toward either others or God. He preempts this argument with the claim "men are entrusted to their own judgment and discretion in the various shocks of matter, and may employ every faculty, with which they are endowed, in order to provide for their ease, happiness, or preservation" (Hume 2007, p. 185). Similarly for Améry suicide, or failure to heal after trauma, is not a culpable moral sin or a dereliction of duty.

However, Hume does not allow for the possibility that a person in possession of their rational faculties would ever commit suicide for so-called frivolous reasons. He asserts that humans have a natural horror of death and therefore would not "throw one's life away if it was worth keeping" (Hume 2007, p. 185). In contrast, Améry views supposedly frivolous suicides as emblematic of the power of disgust in the world and the human capacity to reject the logic of life. Furthermore, Améry goes beyond Hume to state that suicide is not merely a capacity and right of the autonomous

person, but it is an action that *brings* autonomy and freedom in itself. As a result, Améry expresses a conception of autonomy and freedom that allows for a far greater degree of self-destruction than even the most permissive of Enlightenment thought.

Similarly, Améry praises the "sanity of Cartesianism" over the "sophisticated twaddle" of Deleuze and Guattari (Améry 1984c). However, he lies in tension with Descartes' conjecture that humans have a natural capacity to avoid mental discomfort, physical pain, and death. Descartes associates the feeling of pain with the experience of sadness (Descartes 1985). He positions pain as a God-given homeostatic mechanism to prevent injury to the body. He writes, "Nature teaches me nothing more explicitly, however, than that I have a body which is hurt when I feel pain, which needs food or drink when I experience hunger or thirst, and so on" (Descartes 1985, p. 142). This fundamentally conflicts with a conscious desire to reject healing and reject the logic of life.

Consequently, Améry's defense of the Enlightenment is complex and he does not explicitly acknowledge many of the tensions that are implicit within his defense of suicide. He is in conflict with one of the major revolutions in Enlightenment thinking—the notion that humans psychologically have a tendency toward well-being, and that a deviation from this tendency is symptomatic of madness or correctable ignorance. Améry offers a radical expansion of the Enlightenment project in which the humanistic respect for autonomy trumps all other values including well-being. This is exemplified in the respect for the pain of resentment as well as the decision to "throw one's life away" in the case of suicide. However, these critiques and rejections are always framed within a search for truth and based upon an understanding of a humanistic subject.

13.7 Améry's Rejection of "Anti-intellectualism"

Despite the complex relationship Améry displayed with the Enlightenment, he unambiguously dismisses what he viewed as the anti-intellectualism of contemporary anti-Enlightenment thinkers. Améry dismisses the schools of Critical Theory, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and what he viewed as the latter corruption of Sartre's existentialism. While these schools of thought critique oppressive norms of compulsory well-being, they also critique the notion of the autonomous subject that Améry champions and promotes as a necessary condition for challenging the logic of life. I will limit my discussion to his rejection of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Foucault.

Améry was originally sympathetic to *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Even after ultimately disagreeing with its conclusion, he continued to hold it in charitably high esteem (Améry 1984d). Treitler (2011) highlights how Améry rejected the notion that the Enlightenment developed dangerous elements in an attempt to make people "safer" which ultimately lead to the horrors of totalitarianism. Rather, Améry asserts that the Holocaust was the ultimate betrayal of Enlightenment values. What is needed is a return to the humaneness of humanism (Treitler 2011). This, in turn, is exemplified in the case of the suicide. Despite structural issues in the pathologization of the suicidal person, what is needed is a greater respect for the subjective decisions of the suicidal person and a philosophical acceptance of the illogic of death not a wholesale rejection of Enlightenment values.

Despite his critiques of the medicalization of suicide, Améry is explicit in his rejection of Foucault's critiques of psychiatry. Améry writes "[f]or years, Foucault has been using high quality, idealistic zeal for what he saw as good, and which was often de facto good: for 'the madmen and the convicts'" (Améry 1978, online, translation mine). However, Améry entirely rejects Foucault's critique of the "episteme" of humanity. He claims that Foucault's assertions that the human subject is an oppressive artifact of Enlightenment thinking are unfounded and based on faith. Améry accuses Foucault of "mesmerizing" rather than debating and rendering rational argument, the cornerstone of academic endeavors, impossible (Améry 1978). This dogmatic rejection of reason, for Améry, seeps into Foucault's analysis of the oppressive regime of psychiatry. Améry states that Foucault's analysis of psychiatry is "bizarre and unfounded" with little evidence to its credit (Améry 1978). In *Enlightenment as Philosophia Perennis*, he writes:

> And what is one to say about the intentions of the anti-psychiatrists, for whom reason is nothing but bourgeois alienation of man, and who celebrate insanity as the free inner space of people who they claim are permanently manipulated by society? Subjectively, their intentions are good, that is certain; but objectively they are a menace to culture. (Améry 1984b, p. 138)

The statements demonstrate how Améry argues against placing the reasoned and autonomous decision to remain resentful or to kill oneself in the domain of psychiatry. He does not argue against the domain of psychiatry itself but rather its zealous overreach. Therefore, it is not necessary to critique the notions of madness and rationality or sanity. Rather, it is

necessary to develop a conception of rationality in which a sane person can be understood to freely choose to reject healing, well-being, and life.

These key differences between the thinkers are exemplified in their different approaches to suicide. In his essay *The Simplest of Pleasures* (Foucault 1996 [1979]), Foucault positions suicide as an aesthetic act of self-care. He provocatively writes:

> So let's see what there is to say in favor of suicide. Not so much in support of legalizing it or making it 'moral'. Too many people have already belabored these lofty things. Instead, let's say something against the shady affairs, humiliations, and hypocrisies that its detractors usually surround it with: hastily getting boxes of pills together, finding a solid, old-fashioned razor, or licking gun store windows and entering some place pretending to be on the verge of death. In my opinion a person should have the right not to be rushed, which is very bothersome. (Foucault 1996, p. 262)

Foucault's article was published after Améry's death and therefore it is speculative how he would have commented. However, the difference in attitude demonstrates the vast disagreements between the two defenses of suicide. For Améry, limits and deficiencies in Enlightenment thinking can be remedied by a greater commitment to humanism rather than a deconstruction of the human. Suicide functions as the ultimate example of this. The act should not be reduced to churlish hyperbole and, while there are aesthetic considerations of suicide, suicide cannot be reduced to a vanity project. Instead suicide functions as the ultimate example of a freely made human decision.

13.8 Conclusions

Améry philosophy contains ambiguous tensions and confronting challenges of taboos. Throughout his work, he demonstrated a commitment to rejecting what he saw as oppressive "common sense" schemas which coerced well-being over autonomy. In rejecting these schemas he defended the right and ability for autonomous subjects to freely choose to reject life and healing. It is from this position that he defends suicide not as a failure of rationality but as an exemplar of human freedom and spontaneity in contrast to the natural inertia of continued existence. In this chapter, I have argued for the philosophical importance of this position. Améry's views on suicide represent the continuation of his respect for autonomy even when confronted with the logic of life itself. There are deep ambiguities in Améry's defense

of suicide. These ambiguities mirror the tension between Améry's rejection of the healing nature of time and his belief in progress. Taking Améry's philosophical work on suicide seriously contextualizes these tensions and demonstrates his overall commitment to the value of human freedom.

Notes

1. This term is somewhat contentious. Améry had a fraught relationship with pessimism, hope, and historicity. I will examine how there is a tension between these aspects of Améry's writings in the second half of this chapter. I will also examine how these tensions can be best understood in light of Améry's conclusions about suicide.
2. Lt. Gustl does not ultimately commit suicide as he is released from his obligation and fears by the death of the baker. Relieved, Gustl regains his sense of dignity and is confident he will succeed in his afternoon duel. However, Améry continues to associate Gustl's former parasuicidal behavior with the loss of his sense of dignity and autonomy after compromising his military duties. As such, for most of the novel he represents an example of a parasuicidal person "before the leap" when he professes his decision to kill himself.
3. The coming of death is also natural for Améry. I will examine these tensions further in my subsequent section on tensions and dualities within suicide.
4. Améry was highly critical of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and what he saw as Arendt's condoning of oppressive forgiveness. However, there remain parallels between their conceptions of freedom and spontaneity.
5. This lament was both practical and psychological. For Levi resistance to the dehumanization of the camps through rituals such as cleaning oneself, friendship, and the potential for spontaneous action was what was crushed before a person was reduced to the status of the walking dead *Mussalman*.
6. Améry controversially compares the destigmitization of suicide with the decriminalization of homosexuality.
7. The linguistic shift occurred considerably earlier in English. The term "self-murder" was commonly used in the sixteenth century but was mostly replaced by the less value laden "suicide" by 1650 (Bahr 2013).
8. Améry distinguishes himself from his contemporary anti-psychiatrists. He does not think madness represents a social construct and is dismissive of attempts to valorize irrationality.
9. Améry does not directly reference Hume's *Of Suicide* throughout his *On Suicide*. However, the English title is a direct reference to the prior work. Similarly, given Améry speaks at length of his study of his reading of the British empiricists it is highly likely he was familiar with the work.

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