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## **The Technology of Torture and the Failures of Human Appropriation: Jean Améry as the Modern Bearer of a Secret, the Jewish Soul.**

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"Texas, can you hear me? Tell your boss that the prisoner they brought in yesterday swallowed a pill...cyanide, Texas. Hey, come closer to the monitor, look, I made him cough it out [laughter]." Texas, a secret police torturer then took the microphone and looking at the monitor that showed the beat up prisoner, said: "Hey, little bird, you won't die when you want to. We decide when you die. Here, we are God."

—From *Garage Olimpo*<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The justifications of torture are multiple; however, the most common arguments pertain to the extraction of information and its utilitarian value. In the case of Jewish people—from the 16<sup>th</sup> century *new convert* to the particular case of WWII resistance fighter Jean Améry—torture has been a practice that reenacts the maximum illusion of power: the imposition of the torturer's sovereignty over the victim's body and the simultaneous aspiration to discover a secret, which encompasses the Other's alterity—which is to say, the soul. Such aspirations have as foundation a confession under extreme physical and mental pain, which is always, regardless of form and content, part of the Said—or the language of ontology and essence. This practice engenders a technology that reduces human beings into voiceless matter, hence violating the commandment of infinite responsibility for the Other. To be sure, torture seeks to obliterate the soul in the effort to erase a *genos*, in this case, that of the Jew, who is bound to abide by the Saying: "Here I am" (*Hineni*) as testimony of the Infinite. Thus, in this paper I argue that torture constructs the world, regime and identity of the torturer who is necessarily enforcing a mode of thought in which human beings are abstractions, or repositories of unknown secrets, believed to be the source of social contamination and evil.

### **Creating men: Utilitarian knowledge and identity**

In 2008 the Argentinian philosopher Jose Pablo Feinmann linked the obsession of finding the origin of the world with the practice of collecting information by dubious means. According to one of his articles, the concern to find the so-called God's Particle is correlated to "creating" men. The correlation points to the fact that "while good old Peter Higgs looks for God's Particle, the CIA confesses to

having tortured thousands of prisoners in Iraq in search of information. [This] is known as ‘information task’ [information gathering], and it is good for finding a little tiny piece of God in the infinite, or it can be used to fabricate a man, or it can also be used to chop that man into little pieces” (Feinmann 2008).

Feinmann does not agree with the methods and waves of terror emanated from the “premeditated koranic (sic) cataclysms.” On the other hand, the “two demons” theory cannot justify the attempt to impose the belief that some new and advanced techniques of interrogation do not imply torture at all. The legalization of torture is extremely insidious because it absolutely ignores the testimonies of the victims who have survived the torture inflicted on their bodies and minds by totalitarian states. The point of Feinmann goes beyond the legalistic aspects of torture; his aim is to make a connection between a certain way of thinking that implies the desire to control the universe (or to appropriate it through understanding it: “finding a piece of God,” that is), and the creation of men, whether those men are constituted as masters of the world or simply disposable. Precisely because this age of technology and globalization engenders a series of “-isms”<sup>2</sup>—“and these lead to ways of acting, as well as to ways to avoiding action...”—it is important to note that “thoughts beget words, and words beget deeds, both action and failure to act invariably stem from reflection” (Patterson 2012, I). Even more important to know is that the referred ways of reflection can be deadly, and it is not the content of thought as much as the *mode* of thought that makes it “the roots of genocide,” and everything that precedes it, torture and apathy included (ibid., I.)

In order to oppose, resist and nullify a modern philosophical perspective in which the individual signifies a rational system or a structure that represents a way of being in general terms, the thought of Emmanuel Lévinas (1905-1995) is a breath of fresh air. His challenge is to opt for total aperture to the Other, collocating him/her in apposition of height, hence eliminating the possibility of obliterating his/her existence by apprehension within the same. Such will be spinal cord of this work:

The relation with Being that is enacted as ontology consists in neutralizing the existent in order to comprehend or grasp it. It is hence not a relation with the other as such but the reduction of the other to the same. Such is the definition of freedom: to maintain oneself against the other, despite every relation with the other to ensure the autarchy of an I. Thematization and conceptualization, which moreover are inseparable, are not peace with the other but suppression or possession of the other. For possession affirms the other, but within a negation of its independence. “I think” comes down to “I can”—to an appropriation of what is, to an exploitation

of reality. Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power. It issues in the State and in the non-violence of the totality, without securing itself against the violence from which this non-violence lives, and which appears in the tyranny of the State (Lévinas 1996, 45-46).

The case of Jean Améry (1912-1978) is one of the paradigmatic examples of torture under the German National Socialist state, and it aptly illustrates such a mode of thinking. In his case, the association of his identity as a Jew with “something” that must be radically appropriated and obliterated resulted in countless hours of pain inflicted upon his mind and body. Simply put, Améry became the victim of a mode of thinking that can be considered an “illness” in which indifference (as has “befallen all humanity” in the post-Holocaust era) engenders “apathy towards one’s fellow human being” and as a result “the other does not matter, the other is reduced to mere matter” (Patterson 2008, 174). One cannot help but think of Primo Levi’s observation that the Nazis looked at Jews not as human beings, but as creatures who lived in different worlds, like fish in an aquarium (Levi 1996, 105).

Indeed, the case of Jean Améry, as documented in his book *At the Mind’s Limits*, exemplifies how torture works as a technology based upon the illusory recollection of information. Torture, while pursuing a utilitarian application, also has the function of elaborating the corrupted pieces of an ontology in which the perpetrator becomes master of the world, and the victim a defenceless slave of pain and horror. Therefore, torture can be considered as the preamble to genocide, due to its dehumanizing nature.

Hans Mayer, known as Jean Améry, would develop a life between those two names; a life without the search for peace. Améry (an anagram of Mayer), would keep hidden his first identity through his odyssey to become another person; nevertheless, the shattered pieces left of him from his stay in various Nazi concentration camps would remain in his name and identity. As he argues: “whoever [is] tortured, stays tortured [for the rest of his life] (Améry 1980, 34). The apparent rupture of a previous identity never constituted a true distancing from his old self, and the man who survived the concentration camps would never escape from the number on—and *in*—his arm: Jean Améry never would eliminate the camp built within his flesh because his experience with the horror of torture remained with him as much as his former self, Hans Mayer, and the road of rancour and resentment that he could never abandon (Cohen 2004, 3-9).

“Every morning when I get up I can read the Auschwitz number on my fore arm,” recounts Améry (Améry 1980, 94). For him it meant a troubled existence because he could only be “a Jew in fear and anger, when—in order to attain dignity—fear transforms itself into anger” (ibid.,100). However, to speak

of indignation and resentment is not necessarily to speak of vengeance. Before his torture experience Améry acknowledges that he had a “nonrelationship” (sic) with the Jews and that he shared practically nothing with them; his language, childhood memories and cultural experience were simply different (ibid., 97). Thus, it would be difficult to find evidence in his early life that would justify labelling Améry a Jewish thinker. However, after the experience in the Nazi camps the number on his forearm touched the “deepest and most closely intertwined roots” of his existence; Améry could no longer surpass the “interstellar distances” between his neighbours and himself: “Bonjour, Monsieur...Bonjour, Madame.” He could not trust “an American UN delegate by the name of Goldberg [who] practiced a most dignified anti-Communist American patriotism.” Accordingly, nothing—whether declarations of human rights, democratic constitutions, or the free world and the free press—“can again lull [him] into the slumber of security from which [he] woke up in 1935” (Améry 1980, 95). To be sure: Améry did not trust the world anymore. Being tortured solidified his identity as a Jew, and the number engraved in his arm would remain as a lifelong reminder.

The greeting between neighbours—“Monsieur,” “Madame”—did not revive Améry from his “mortal illness... And so they remain strangers to one another” (ibid., 95). This is what makes Améry a Jewish thinker: the perception of the lack of relationship and his awareness of being in a personal search for an identity that cannot by any means “stand as a barrier between [him] and [his] solidarity with every threatened Jew in the word” (ibid., 97). Améry, as will be discussed later, remained hostage to what in the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas is called the Said (the language of ontology, essences and being) until the day of his death; yet he never ceased to give testimony, which represents the Saying (the expression and labour implicit to the ethical responsibility towards the Other) through his solidarity with other victims of torture and violence throughout the world.

To understand the mechanism of torture as a technology that results from a certain ideology and simultaneously collaborates in the entrenchment of such an ideology, it is necessary to first examine the nature of the state which engenders torture and its logic, as well as the ideas that nurture the idea of man. It will then become clearer how the proximity between science, technology and totalitarianism has produced a method of self-reaffirmation and destruction of the Other, a practice called torture.

### **The abstract human being: The state’s delirium for cleanliness.**

According to scholars like Marie Fleming, genocide and its preamble, torture, seem to be a problem of modernity. This asseveration is directly related to the

nature of the modern nation-state in which the concepts of power and sovereignty are adapted to a new geopolitical and geo-strategic reality, especially the single feature that encompasses the “body” of the people. This can be seen in the work of political theorists like Thomas Hobbes, who argues that in order to avoid the state of nature—essentially a *war of all against all*—humans construct a society in which an amalgam of all individual powers incorporates into a single political body, a “Leviathan” that becomes ruler and ruled simultaneously. This entity, which represents the “sovereign’s power, is derived from each individual’s natural right of self-defence, which the individual never gives up” (Fleming 2003, 108). While for Hobbes authority is transferred vertically, from the people to the ruler (thereby justifying absolutism), in other political philosophers, such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the people are the sovereign and constitute a “body politic” with its own will. Both points of view develop a powerful formula that can be summarized as follows: just as the king has/is one body, so the people have/are one body (Fleming 2003, 109). The analogy can be explained in the terms of Emmanuel Levinas’s thought, which is of course central to this paper. For him “the priority of Being over existents is to already decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with *someone*, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the *Being of existents*, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing)” (Lévinas 1996, 45).

The totalizing principle undergirding the notion of a body politic elicited dangerous reactionary impulses within most modern nation-states. States of all types became obsessed with the purity and cleanliness of their own social bodies, and they found in violence and repression an illusory guarantee of cohesion and homogeneity. With the help of the modern bureaucratic apparatus, the torturing-genocidal state generated cooperation between the people and the ruler in order to enact these “cleansing” operations. However, there is in social cleansing a metaphysical aspect that transcends the biological, and such is the case of the Nazis torture of the Jews. Indeed, the Nazi notion of *Rassenseele* underscores this point. Explaining the concept of *Rassenseele* or “race-soul,” chief Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg (1893 – 1946) writes, “Soul means race viewed from within. And, vice-versa, race is the externalization of soul” (Rosenberg 1974, 34).

Hitler stated that the establishment of “a real community of people” required the “moral purification of the body politic.” His speeches make endless references to “ridding the communal body of ‘degenerative elements,’ ‘destructive cells,’ ‘sickness,’ and especially ‘parasites’” (Fleming 2003, 109). Such biological metaphors imply a totality wherein any and all divergence from the One is perforce a sickness.

Furthermore, in the perverted Nazi utopia, the idea of cleanliness and healthiness was associated with peasantry as the foundation of a strong nation. A pure German race could be found only in the primordial image of the *Volk* and its agricultural roots. Hitler “proclaimed that a nation can exist without cities, but a nation cannot exist without farmers.” Himmler added: “Cowards are born in towns. Heroes in the country.” The whole glorification of the peasants had the purpose of reinforcing the opposite urban stereotype: “the Jew was characterized as materialist and thus the enemy of *Volkist* spiritualism, as a rootless wanderer, as the epitome of finance, industry and the town and thus alien to the agrarian peasant ideal of the *Volk*” (Kiernan 2003, 42). This Nazi environmentalism contributes to the view of the Jew as a stain upon nature—indeed, upon *all there is*. Such an idea is encompassed in the term *Judenhaß*, in which the representation of evil goes beyond political, racial and religious terms; it comprises layers of anti-Jewish hatred, a mixture that included medical and Darwinian phraseology in which Jews were considered as scourge (*Seuche*) or bacteria (*Volksbazillen*) “that needed to be excised from the body of the German nation (*Volkskörper*)” (Michael and Doerr 2002, 31).

This tendency encompasses a regression in psychological terms. Nazism represents the return to organized magic practices; hence the accusation of Jews’ participation in “forbidden magic and bloody rituals.” This way of thinking requires forcefully the presence of an “Other” to consolidate the “deep-seated fascist desire to regress to archaic practices of sacrifice” (Fleming 2003, 101). The Other becomes the perfect culprit and the impurity within the body politic.

In Nazi Germany, the leader and the people joined forces in the mission of cleansing the body politic; any element deemed unfit would be either “re-educated” (although no Jewish people could be re-educated) or could be simply destroyed. This sovereign body became an expression of the union between a leader, its people and one blood, a combination that adjudicated itself in the modern right to death but was not far from its predecessors, rulers who denied the people as a legitimate source of sovereignty (*ibid.*, 113).

The overall racist conceptual framework determined a series of triggers easily recognizable, replaceable, and oriented towards the supremacy of a single nation/people. Hence the link between euthanasia and the destruction of the Jews, in which the “unworthy of life” concept was taken very seriously by the Nazis, to the extent of creating a connection between the euthanasia candidate’s “lack of productivity and degenerate outward appearance” and ideas related to Jewish “unproductivity and physical appearance.” The whole issue could be reduced to biological inferiority, irrespectively of the person’s racial identity (Kiernan 2003, 32). However, the Jew’s “biology” is tied to the Judaism that he or she represents by his or her very existence.

Jean Améry suffered the consequences of the reduction of human beings to abstractions. This mode of thinking turned into policy, as Améry found when he first was arrested in July 1943 by the Gestapo. “Death to the SS bandits and Gestapo hangmen,” read the fliers that Améry distributed among German soldiers in the (vain) hope of convincing some of them of the madness of Hitler. He knew that spreading such anti-Nazi propaganda would lead to a terrible end if he was caught. When he *was* captured, he humbly consented to reveal everything his captors wanted to know; after all, he knew almost nothing about his resistance organization (Améry 1980, 24-26).

After the first blows to his face, any illusions he might have harboured fell away. “Does one really know [what will happen during torture]?” he asked himself. In the moment of torture all kinds of fantasies and naïve concepts vanish, and reality makes a ruthless entrance. If police, the most visible agents of a state, are allowed to hit somebody in the face, then “the prisoner is helpless... [one then thinks] they will do with me what they want” (ibid., 27). The face after all is the start of the epiphany of Otherness, and the reminder of its irreducibility to an apprehensible matter. As Lévinas proclaims, “God speaks to the I starting from the face of the Other” (Lévinas 2002, 192).

During torture the idea of help vanishes instantly. According to Améry, the “Hitler vassal had to torture, destroy, in order to be great in bearing the suffering of others. He had to be capable of handling torture instruments, so that Himmler would assure him his Certificate of Maturity in History...” (Améry 1980, 30). In the concentration camp the Other is not only killed; he or she must disappear from earth without leaving any trace of his or her existence. In the Nazi view, history amalgamates people irrespective of the position of height occupied by the Other. In point of fact, the Nazi view is the antithesis of Lévinas’ own: “when man truly approaches the Other he is uprooted from history” (Lévinas 1996, 52). For the Nazi, by contrast, to get a Certificate of Maturity in History is nothing but a reward for the effort to obliterate the “very existence of the Jewish community, whose presence as people apart cannot be synthesized and whose *Dasein*, or ‘being there,’ the Nazis sought to erase” (Patterson 2008, 9).

For Améry, the Nazis exterminated and enslaved, but by means of torture “they wanted to obtain information important for national policy. But in addition they tortured with the good conscience of depravity... They tortured because they were torturers. They placed torture in their service” (Améry 1980, 31). Such claims are not only enraging and clarifying but betray a vision of the world not usually associated with its genocidal side: the Western thought tradition, particularly in its speculative ontological mode, which has as its overarching goal “to rule over reality through reason and thus appropriate everything outside the self for the self. Knowledge is the key. Knowledge reduces good and evil to

concepts, nothing more than understanding and ultimately the will of the ego” (Patterson 2008, 30). To be sure, the work of the thinking ego may embrace the search for God’s Particle or the creation of super torturer-soldiers or the consideration of men as a technological device as a means to find—or assault—a truth that it is absolutely unknowable: the soul; all performed with a smile and the certainty of doing a good job, while accumulating knowledge and, perhaps, enhancing the universe. Hence Lévinas’ distinction between totality, which is theoretical, and infinity, which is ethical. Totalitarianism is, after all, the logical end of the impulse towards totality (Lévinas 1996, 83-84).

**Extracting the soul: The abstract man’s secret.**

The use of information as a tool of policy composition can be traced to antiquity. A fabulously iconic example of how the extraction of information contributes to the establishment of identities, however, is seen in the figure of the *marrano* or the *conversos* (the “pigs” or new converts to Christianity) during the Spanish Inquisition. “These Jews try in every way to subvert the Holy Catholic Faith and are trying to distance faithful Christians from their beliefs,” asserted the Catholic King Ferdinand and Queen Isabel in their 1492 Edict of Expulsion (Zivin 2014, 22). The threat of the Jewish convert resides in the anxiety caused by the resistance to classification. However, the interrogators of the Inquisition were trying to extract more than a confession or information. They were trying to extract the soul as a means of saving the soul of the other: those who begin by saving souls will end by torturing bodies. The Jew is precisely the one who does not set out to save the soul of the other, but rather to alleviate the physical suffering of the other. Therefore the Jew undermines the project of torture as an appropriation or salvation (the same thing) of the *soul of the other*.

Such a problematic belief and practice signified the complex status of the new Christians during the colonial expansion of Spain. After all, a good part of the *marranos* were essential to the crown insofar as their services as priests, soldiers, politicians, professors, judges, theologians, writers, poets physicians and traders were indispensable to the new order (Zivin 2014, 22). The threat hence rested upon a fiction. The uniqueness of the *marrano* placed in this “other within” represented the “major obstacle to the invention and preservation of the ‘pure’ Christian subject.” This is the main reason why *conversos* or New Christians were the principal targets of the Inquisition during the first part of the sixteenth century (ibid., 23).

The problem of a secret internal part of the Other thus become a problem of hegemony since that *other* side of the *converso* challenges ideas of reunification, nationalism and colonialism; it exposes them as the failure that they have always been in terms of projects of political, religious and identity ambition.



Explained in a broad philosophical manner apropos of contemporary times, Ricardo Foster claims that the “marrano represents the alter ego of the modern subject, both because the fractured, incomplete marrano exposes the impossibility of the modern Cartesian subject’s claim to wholeness, rationality and autonomy, and because the marrano inhabits a crack in the decidedly modern project of colonial expansion” (ibid., 23). In a manner absolutely antithetical to the Levinasian Other, the ideal modern subject becomes the autonomous executioner, the hunter of secrets kept within those whose alterity represents a threat to the One so vital to a totalitarian perspective.

Through the use of torture, the *marrano*, crypto-Jew or modern Jewish man—such as Jean Améry—becomes a body with no voice; it is the torturer’s “colossal voice, [the] voice of the creed that eclipses the voice of the Jew to extract the confession not of a crime but of a creed” (Patterson 2012, 156). The secret, then, is Judaism, which resists totality and therefore the Said. And for the Nazis and other devotees of totality, that secret must be rooted out and eliminated. After all, the primary aim of the Spanish Inquisition was to de-Judaize Spanish Christendom (the Portuguese Inquisition had a similar aim); any tendency toward Judaizing was deemed heresy, which poses its own dangers. In other words, this heresy (Judaism) was the secret that had to be exposed; for the Nazis, Judaism was the disease or the poison that had to be purged from humanity.

The Inquisition thus was concerned with a secret thought to be fixed in the core of the Other’s identity, but this secret is “ultimately, fundamentally unreadable, signalled by the elliptical silence in place of a response.” Even when the *marrano* is metonymically the subject that carries a secret within himself, the performativity of refusal makes such secret untranslatable simply because the proper name of the “crypto-Jew cannot be confessed but can only be resisted through active silence.” The *marrano*, the crypto-Jew and the crypto-subject bear a secret that constitutes his identity “while at the very same time making identity impossible” (Zivin 2014, 33). This is exactly what Améry went through while captive in concentration camps; the Nazis, by means of torture, attempted to find that hidden truth, the truth not of a resistance fighter but of a Jew. This action implied the absolute imposition of sovereignty over the *worthless* Other, which by the same token established the Nazi identity as conqueror and supreme being. The “secret” which cannot be known is nothing but the human soul in its dimension of depth, and therefore non-extractable.

The link between the Inquisition dynamic *marrano* conversion, by means of fear and torture, and the conquest becomes evident through a shared element in both: Inquisition logic. Torture is symptomatic of Inquisitional logic, and the latter grounds itself in the violent conversion of others, so it is not surprising that “the Inquisitional logic is the necessary companion of Spanish imperial reason...

it represents the violent face of the dominant concepts of modernity: identity as reflexivity or self-presence (and perforce difference as its corresponding mirror image), sovereignty, and the idea of the political as the... divide between friend and enemy” (ibid., xii). The perfect foundation, in other words, for constructs such as “race” that marked a clear border between us and them, and that before its association with biological components, established complex political or religious divides, as in the case of commoners/nobility and Christians/Jews/Muslims in fifteenth-century Spain, respectively.

The consideration, thus, of conversion as the backbone of both the Inquisition and colonization exposes these enterprises as totalizing violence originated as a response to internal instability and heterogeneity (Zivin 2014, xii). Here totalizing violence should be understood mainly as torture, which, “more than utilitarian... is tied to an ontological aim guided by a certain mode of thought” (Patterson 2012, 142). Such a mode of thought considers humanity as an abstraction; flesh and blood persons become just members of a species (ibid., 2). It is in this way that the idea of man is tailored to fit the depuration project of humanity. Or, to put it more bluntly, this is how mass murder becomes possible.

The aforementioned mode of thought derives from Greek philosophy, which tends to follow a logic based upon the “same.” Things are extant, and even when different they are differentiated internally and are turned over to totalizing categories of the “autonomous thinking ego.” Ontology as a system that expresses Being became the foundation of empires and thereby reducible to a simple formula: “Being is; non-Being is not. What is Being if not the foundation of the world, the horizon that encompasses totality within which we live, the frontier for which our armies vie for control?” (Dussel 1985, 5).

Jean Améry narrates how the torture inflicted upon him was pure power, a dominion over spirit and flesh. It was the “agonizing sovereignty” exercised by people who basically usurped God’s place: “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 1980, 36). Indeed, in modernity the experience of being varies, and a negation of the Other occurs excluding the absolute, comparable to the medieval God. The ego remains godless, but this is not so grave; what is overwhelming is that the ego constitutes itself as a Totality. For example, in the Cartesian *ego cogito*, man remains as solipsist even when there is still an “idea of God.” This *I think* develops a cultural object with economic and political value, which is also central in Hegel, who promotes a modern totality in plenitude by considering that being is Knowledge and Totality is Absolute; an Absolute “that cannot be considered anything else but an irreducible god, not *fysis*, but Subject” (Dussel and Guillot 1975, 20). This notion in reference to Améry’s suffering, as flesh and blood, as tortured person, affected his certainty about reality, but by

that same token reinforced his identity: “Antisemitism, which made a Jew of me, may be a form of madness; in any event a historical and social fact. I was, after all really in Auschwitz and not in Himmler’s imagination” (Améry 1980, 98). Indeed, Judaism is what makes persons Jewish, and the main characteristic of the assault of the Nazis on the Jews was the assault over everything they represented: God, Torah, Covenant, the sanctity of human persons, and the self’s absolute ethical responsibility. This is what makes traditional Western ontological thinking antithetical to Jewish thought: Its devotion with “a philosophical tradition that understands freedom in terms of autonomy, authenticity in terms of resolve, and humanity in terms of contingency; that displaces God with thinking ego, and takes ‘rational’ conclusions, rather than divine commandments, to be the basis of morality” (Patterson 2008, 18). The confirmation that the Cartesian modern—*model*—subject would become the *wolf of men* in the presence of people bound by relationship, heteronomy, and commandment.

People become expendable when humanity is conceived in terms of essence, when subjectivity becomes sameness. This is the result of a thinking that discards the physical “bond of flesh and blood,” eliminating the metaphysical binding of the absolute ethical demand that Judaism attests to. *Par excellence*, this is the activity of the rational being in philosophy, and the salvation-seeking sinner of religion (Dussel 1985, 4).

**A concrete human being: Levinasean thought and the infinite responsibility.** Jewish thought is opposed to this abstract thinking, and the thought of Emmanuel Lévinas, with its concern about the tyranny of the “I” and knowledge or apprehension of the Other, best instantiates this opposition. “There is in knowledge, in the final account, an impossibility of escaping the self; hence sociability cannot have the same structure as knowledge” (Lévinas 1985, 60). Indeed, Lévinas’s argumentation, grounded in the arena of ethics, seeks to find a route towards a philosophy rooted in the concrete or flesh-and-blood human. His credo *ethics as first philosophy* employs a phenomenological and metaphysical approach to combat the homogeneity inevitably produced by abstract thinking. By means of a non-violent dialogue, Lévinas postulates a reflexion based on the existence of subjects radically different from each other but equally valuable in the construction of a non-totalitarian humanism. Thus, a peripheral system in which plurality is the foundation of dignity would be free from attempts to assimilate or exterminate—free, in other words, from *allergic reactions*. The allergic reaction caused by the assumption of Being—a sort of essence—as assimilation into the One/Same in a Totality, or an Absolute, has two dire aspects: one, the self can remain subjugated to the sovereignty of the ego and live in the solitary confinement of the “there is”; and two, the deprivation of sociality impedes the

fulfilment of a pre-originary commandment. Thus, for Lévinas God and Torah are indispensable for ethics: “But the irresistible weight of Being...receives a challenge from Torah, which jeopardizes its pretension of keeping itself above or beyond good and evil,” he writes in “The Temptation of Temptation” (Lévinas 1994, 39).

In Lévinas’ thought, Totality, which includes philosophy, theology, and anthropology—and indeed *all* abstract, and hence reductionist, systems of thought—leads to the appropriation of the Other. Work, understood as being-for-the-other, is the key in surpassing the isolation; in this way, movement is an important element in Levinasian thought. Movement towards the Other, or being-for-the-Other, necessitates a calling into question of the self by itself. This is needed to help the ego escape the “there is” in order to undo itself and overcome the allergy that causes its own subjugation. The ego needs to make a deposition. “This deposition of the sovereignty by the ego is the social relationship with the Other, the dis-interested relation.” By undoing itself, the ego stops the allergy in both ways, endogenously and exogenously, and begins the exercise of responsibility, infinite in nature. This action means “being-for-the-Other” and simultaneously “stops the anonymous and senseless rumbling of being” (Lévinas 1985, 52). From Améry’s perspective, however, allergic reactions have prevailed: Hitler has gained a posthumous triumph; nothing but invasions, torture and destruction have been recorded in history since the consideration of “Versailles and the economic crisis... [that] drove the people to Nazism,” which he qualifies as a “childish evasion” (Améry 1980, viii). In this same vein, Améry thinks of the concept of dignity, relating that “after 1929 other countries also had their jobless, and among them was America; but it produced a Franklin Delano Roosevelt and not a Hitler” (ibid., viii). These comments constitute Améry’s capital point, arising from the search for a proper grounding for the concept of dignity: “I brushed off [that concept] with the sweep of a hand, as it were, whereas later, in the essay on my Jewishness... believed to recognize that dignity is the right to live granted by society” (ibid., xiv). Hence, from his Jewish point of view, Améry links dignity with relation and a consideration of height impossible without the Other—precisely as inscribed in the Jewish tradition, itself inscribed in the number on his arm.

In order to escape from being and the allergy it causes, one has to consider the supremacy of the ethical over being. One must avoid the utilization of knowledge as means of appropriation of the Other; instead it should be an extension of existing in order to achieve a relationship. Here Lévinas enunciates one of the most important premises of his work: First philosophy is an ethics. The experience, that is, of a relationship “not in synthesis, but in the face to face, in sociality, in its moral signification.” The interpersonal relation “is not a matter

of thinking the ego and the other together, but to be facing” (Lévinas 1985, 77). The human relation cannot be synthetized nor thematized, two of the predilections of Totality.

As Leo Baeck states: “Every system of thought is intolerant and breeds intolerance, because it fosters self-righteousness and self-satisfaction—it is significant that the most ruthless of inquisitors have come from the ranks of the systematisers” (Baeck 1976, 43). And yet, when Améry experiences the pain of torture that “borders violation of myself by another... [One] is overcome by pain through torture [and] experiences his body as never before. In self-negation, his flesh becomes a total reality... [And] only in torture does the transformation of the person into flesh become complete” (Améry 1980, 33). The transformation of the body into a mere expression of pain is what makes the body an instrument in the illusion of the extraction of information or the scientific mining of data. One cannot help but be reminded of the mining of gold from the mouths of dead (and living) Jews underwent at concentration and death camps. In the words of Primo Levi “...the very gold of our teeth is their property, as sooner or later, torn from the mouths of the living or the dead, it ends up in their hands” (Levi 1996, 83).

However, the metaphysical in Jewish thought should not be regarded as opposed to the empirical. Lévinas argues that “the metaphysical resides in the ethical care for, and not in the epistemological penetration through to essence of, bodily existence.” Thus, the Other “embodies revelation” as long as he or she does not become the victim of any type of conceptualization or categorization into a “general entity” (Mack 2003, 123). This is a crucial reminder that in Levinasian thinking Totality pertains to the theoretical, while Infinity encompasses the ethical.

Lévinas then states that the absolute other “whose alterity is overcome in the philosophy of immanence on the allegedly common plane of history, maintains his transcendence in the midst of history.” In this way, Lévinas delineates his understanding of German Idealism as a philosophy of immanence; as with Rosenzweig, history is for Lévinas Idealism’s collaborator, a clear reference to Hegel’s dialectics. “The latter theorized war—in which the members of a specific community become acquainted with their ‘master’ death—as realization of the idealist insight into the ‘nothingness’ of empirical life” (ibid.).

Torture can be better explained in terms of the abstract thinking of German Idealism, which opposed itself to the Judaism that, to the Nazis, Améry represented in his very flesh and blood: when the flesh and blood that embodies revelation can be reduced to a pile of bones and skin that *cannot* be heard, then the absolute imposition of Nazi’s sovereignty has been achieved. In the account of Améry: “The tortured person experienced that in this world there can be the

other as absolute sovereign, and sovereignty revealed itself as the power to inflict suffering and to destroy.” This dominion of the torturer, Améry says, has nothing to do with the power invested in social contracts (Améry 1980, 39). Therefore, torture is the intimate expression of the *logos* of domination, which, due to the aforementioned traits, constitutes the rational, calculated and necessary expression of modernity and the global model of civilization that Améry considers as a Hitlerian triumph: “Czechoslovakia 1969, Chile, Phnom-Penh, the psychiatric wards of the URRS and the murder squads of Brazil and Argentina” (ibid., vii). In more recent years, one is likewise reminded of Rwanda, East Timor, the former Yugoslavia and Guatemala. Moreover, when the torturer has control over the Other’s “scream of pain and death” and is thereby the “master over flesh and spirit,” the act of pain infliction produces the total inversion of the social world (ibid., 35). “A slight pressure by the tool-wielding hand is enough to turn the other—along with his head, in which are perhaps stored Kant and Hegel, and all nine symphonies, and the World as Will and representation—into a shrilly squealing piglet at slaughter” (ibid.). The torturer as absolute sovereign claims possession of his fellow man, hence destroying social contract, order and civilization.

**The mechanics of torture: The supremacy of the abstract over ethics.**

Even more, the destruction of which Améry speaks includes the destruction of language. Torture reduces human language to primal words and sounds, but as Elaine Scarry argues, “it is itself a language, an objectification... [Because] agonizing pain is inflicted on a person; but torture, which contains specific acts of inflicting pain, is also itself a demonstration and magnification of the felt experience of *pain*” (Scarry 1985, 27). In these terms, the assault on language, which is the bridge among human beings and the representation of their relations, is also an assault on the Jew. In other words, if the human being is a speaking being, a *medaber*, as Jewish thought maintains, the assault on the soul is an assault on the speaking or the capacity for language that constitutes the humanity of the human being. Levi hints at this when he states “that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man” (Levi 1996, 26).

The complexity of pain infliction includes a structure based upon what it is private and uncommunicable, located within the body of the victim. Torture, then, denies what has been objectified and falsifies the reality originating from it that creates through pain, hence building a convincing spectacle of power in which the masters are the torturers and the regime they represent (Scarry 1985, 27). “What assists the conversion of absolute pain into the fiction of absolute power is an obsessive, self-conscious display of agency.” This is achieved in some measure by showing the weapons that will be used in the process of torture,

which “not only converts but announces the conversion of every conceivable aspect of the event into an agent of pain” (Scarry 1985, 28). This behaviour, reflected in the brutality of the jargon utilized in torture, can be confirmed in Améry’s account of being taken into the “business room... [Where the business] obviously was a flourishing one. Under the picture of Himmler, with his cold eyes” conducted by very efficient vassals that recorded everything carefully and discerned about the objects that made of Améry a true partisan, specifically his gold bracelet (Améry 1980, 30).

Agency and the production of a world of torture create an abhorrent scene of self-centred aspirations, a work of compensatory drama and illusory power. This is the reason why Jean Améry was taken immediately for interrogation to a “business room,” while in similar and well-known events that occurred after the Holocaust a grim group of idioms defined other horror chambers along these same lines: “production room” in the Philippines; “cinema room” in South Vietnam; “blue lit room” in Chile” (Scarry 1985, 28); and “surgery room” in Argentina (*Garage Olimpo*).

It is important to note that torture includes three different phenomena, which elaborate the illusion of power. First, pain has to be inflicted intensively over a person’s body; second, the administered pain has to be amplified *within* the person’s body, and thereby made visible at any cost, because pain per se is invisible to the torturer; and third, the objectified pain is read as power through the “obsessive mediation of agency” which simply denies pain as pain (Scarry 1985, 28). “He is on me and thereby destroys me,” relates Améry; and this signifies absolute sovereignty over the tortured person, which is to say that a social contract cannot regulate such invasion. There is nothing one can do when the other one “who knocks out the tooth, sinks the eye into a swollen mass, and suffers on the body the counter-man that the fellow man became” (Améry 1980, 28), simply because help will not come, pain is invisible for the perpetrator and the act of torture needs to be re-enacted repeatedly until considered objectified by the torturer. Totalitarian thinking, as John Wild argues, “accepts vision rather than language as its model. It aims to gain an all-inclusive, panoramic view of all things, including the other” (Wild 1996, 15).

Here, the objectification of pain can be related to the absolute rejection of the ethical responsibility to render help in the face of the outcry of the Other, and act of total, abominable, imposition of sovereignty. Precisely because the Other is “otherwise” and invisible (hidden, secret, inviolable, non-possessable), “irreducible to his appearing, thus reveals himself as face.” But this face is not about physiognomy or appearance. It is what in the countenance of “the other escapes the gaze when turned to us,” therefore it becomes immensely vulnerable due to the irreducibility of its alterity (Burggrave 1999, 29).

So the process of torture, with its three separate phenomena and the intentional erasure of the face, articulates the exercise of torture as a perfect technology in which the prisoner's world is destroyed in order to edify of the identity of the oppressor through the gathering of manifold information forms. During the Inquisition torture was a means to save souls, or so the perpetrators argued, but the information obtained after unimaginable suffering became elliptical and self-supportive for the inquisitors. While there is no evidence that any souls were saved through the maceration of the body of the *marrano*, the witch or the Indian, even after the "confession" of faith preceding a horrible death, there is evidence of the ways in which torture destroys and simultaneously builds a world, even if it is supported by the illusion of power. The testimony of Jean Améry constitutes the most solid evidence in terms of world destruction and its transformation or reconfiguration into a pain-inflicting machine.

The primary physical act of torture is the infliction of pain, but there is also a primary verbal act: the interrogation, and this is always accompanied by "the question." In the words of Elaine Scarry: "Although the information sought in an interrogation is almost never credited with being a just motive for torture, it is repeatedly credited with being the motive for torture... but what masquerades as the motive of torture is a fiction" (Scarry 1985, 28). In this way, information becomes something else: the flagrant attempt to obliterate the soul.

The connection between the body and the voice is often misunderstood. The questions of torture denote the urgency of the exclamatory, in which the instability of the questioner manifests a strong desire to have his doubts allayed; this is done in a way that implies self-sufficient conviction that needs to be credited or confirmed by the listener. According to Scarry, the questions that matter so much for the torturer usually matter so little to the prisoner that he will give an answer or will make one up to stop the pain. "Intense pain is world-destroying. In compelling confession, the torturers compel the prisoner to record and objectify the fact that intense pain is world destroying... for this reason while the content of the prisoner's answer is only sometimes important to the regime, the *form of the answer*, the fact of his answering, is always crucial" (ibid., 29).

In the verbal part of torture the common mistake is to think of the questions as the motive and the answers as betrayal. Questions credit the torturer and build up his justification. Answers tend to discredit the prisoner and revictimize him/her as he/she becomes the leitmotiv of "his loss of self and the world" (ibid., 35). When Améry was first apprehended and threatened, the Nazi officers told him that if he talked he would be taken to a military police prison. On the other hand, if he did not cooperate—"confess", that is —"then it's off to Breendonk and you know what that means: [uninterrupted torture]" (Améry 1980, 26). Again, the torturer lives in a world of simulacra, where the only reality



is pain infliction on the Other: torturers “give” the false option to prisoners to choose their destination, cooperation with a reward or pain. “I talked,” Améry relates, “I accused myself of invented absurd political crimes, and even now I don’t know at all how they could have occurred to me, dangling bundle that I was” (Améry 1980, 36). Confession, whether true or false, becomes the foundation of the torturer’s credit, which corroborates the unrestricted expansion of his sovereignty or illusion of power.

As noted by Erin G. Zivin, if one is to understand confession in constative terms, a person under torture or the threat of it tells the truth. However, the prisoner might intentionally lie in order to stop the torture. Regardless of the value of the confession, the focus remains, to be sure, on the content of the confession—on “the said, rather than the saying” (Zivin 2014, 132).

The content of the confession as expounded by Zivin does not contradict the notion of the form of the answer in Scarry because for both the *said* is the conductive thread. Indeed, the language of ontology—being and the essences—becomes deficient because of its lack of capacity to express the fundamental ethical experience in the encounter with the face of the other. According to Lévinas, “language... conditions the functioning of rational thought: it gives it a commencement in being, a primary identity of signification in the face of him who speaks, that is, who presents himself by ceaselessly undoing the equivocation of his own image, his verbal signs” (Lévinas 1996, 204). Ergo, it becomes crucial to identify the ethics involved in it. The Said is the formula of language expression at the service of Being, one in which the verb “to be” is understood as a name. It is nominalized, and the name becomes a verb, constituting the entity as “what it is”; the Said operates in what it has been nominated. In the Said identities are forged and the Same is affirmed as ideality. The Said, therefore, is a formula that considers being as essence (that is, as a noun rather than a verb), one which informs about its identification and its incorporation into a cognitive system; it is a realized meaning, an ideal presence and the display of an ontological conceptual ordeal from a certain logos. The Said is always already said, not an event, but a synthesis (Pinardi 2010, 38).

In contrast to the Said, Lévinas posits the “mosaic” of the Saying, which in relation to the subject is passivity that does not force, compromise or multiply the one. The subject’s passivity in the Saying is not the passivity of a language “that speaks without a subject (‘Die Sprache Spricht’): Saying is to offer oneself without the assumption of generosity. More than that, it is to offer oneself through suffering.” In other words, the Said, an ontological primacy, is opposed to the Saying, which cannot be thought as an enunciation, as an act of speech, but as response, a ceding of place to the Other, previous to any acknowledgement (ibid., 39). The Said hence encompasses the act of confession, naming

accomplices, addresses, meeting places; which, as Améry states, “[he] simply did not know [himself]” (Améry 1980, 36). In torture, language does not constitute the means of response to give one’s place to or for the Other. In point of fact, language qua Saying becomes extinguished. The victim, experiencing “all [his] life concentrated in a single, limited part of the body... cannot react... Qualities of feeling are as incomparable... they mark the limit of the capacity of language to communicate.” Torture, from the Latin *torquere*, to twist, Améry relates, implies a *how* of pain that defies the capacity of language to communicate while allowing only an approximation of the *what* it was (Améry 1980, 32). The latter, therefore, implying as it does a total lack of relationship, a blatant rejection to render help and to show generosity, is only appropriation—and in the case of Améry, an attempt to destroy the soul. Torture is the hegemony of the Said over the Saying. Or, to put it slightly differently, it is the hegemony of the utilitarian questions of *what* and *how* over the ethical questions of *why* and *who*.

The Saying shares a close relationship with Testimony. Testimony transforms the listener into a witness, whereas the Said entails a mere gathering of information insofar as what one says cannot completely belong to oneself. Sandra Pinardi comments: “What has been said is deposited before that Saying about the Other, thanks to the witness’s word that ceases to be his property and becomes the place of exposition for the non-articulable word of the Other: of the Infinite that is beyond being, outside essence.” What is really convoked through testimony is the ethical experience of the face-to-face. Thus, the Saying as irreducible to an act allows the passage of the Infinite (Pinardi 2010, 45).

This makes interrogation crucial to the regime, because if pain is invisible and helps to build a distance between torturer and victim, the torturer has nothing. And in order to experience that distance from the prisoner in terms of “having,” his or her physical difference “is translated into a verbal difference: the absence of pain is a presence of world; the presence of pain is the absence of world. Across the set of inversion pain becomes power” (Scarry 1985, 37).

In other words, the greater the prisoner’s pain (and concomitant loss of world), the larger the torturer’s world. Pain objectified through the obliteration of contents of consciousness, along with confession (as another way of objectification), “should act as a sign of pain, a call for help, an announcement of a radical occasion for attention and assistance, [but] instead acts to discredit the claims of pain, to repeal attention, to ensure that the pain will be unseen and unattended” (ibid). In this way, one person’s pain becomes another person’s power. Perhaps this is why Améry “remained tortured” for the rest of his life, and why in the “business” room the intellectual person in pain, regardless of his affiliation and thinking on the outside, became a “Hegelian: [because] in the

metallic brilliance of his totality the SS state appeared as the state in which the idea was becoming reality” (Améry 1980, 12).

Thus, torture disintegrates the elements of consciousness and thereby dismantles the prisoner’s world by objectifying his pain into confession. Moreover, it utilizes physical objects and language, as well as actions, in order to reduce the individual to a state of radical vulnerability. Paradoxically, torture de-objectifies objects, “unmaking...the made,” causing the intensification of the prisoner’s pain through the dismantling of the civilization as known to him. In this light, one may see how the conversion of anything in a room into a weapon signified the beginning of annihilation: “In the conversion of a refrigerator into a bludgeon, the refrigerator disappears... In Germany in the 1940’s [this painful process] is attached to the words ‘ovens,’ ‘showers,’ ‘lampshades,’ and ‘soap’” (Scarry 1985, 41). As Primo Levi might say, such words were transmogrified in the anti-world of Auschwitz, stripped of their innocence and imbued instead with a “savage eloquence” (Levi 1996, 89).

### **Conclusion**

To look for a particle present in the origin of everything, or God’s Particle, can sound mind-boggling and fascinating, and therefore innocuous or even virtuous; after all, science has managed to impose a self-referenced axiology in which its means and goals are axiomatically righteous. However, as Abraham Joshua Heschel claims: “From the perspective of astronomy the extermination of millions human beings would not be different from the extermination of insects or roaches” (Heschel 1997, 237). To talk about particles, then, is *not* the same as talking about the “dust of the earth,” which is the material of which man is made and that expresses the polarity of man: “He is formed of the most inferior stuff in the most superior image” (Heschel 1997, 235).

To dismiss the idea that human beings are something that science cannot grasp is to maintain the mind occupied with the idea of man as essence, which forcibly creates a way of separation between the “We” and “They, thus rendering others faceless and ourselves either murderous or both.” After all, genocidal actions always seem to be rooted in speculative abstraction (Patterson 2012, 3). In a similar manner, the consideration of the human body as an “ingenious assembly of portable plumbing” or a conglomerate of substances and chemical elements that can render a number of products like soap, match-heads or sulphur is what allows some men to treat other men in the “likeness of a machine instead of the likeness of God” (Heschel 1997, 233).

The machine named “man” thereby becomes a technological device to obtain “information,” if only fictitious, and scientific approaches to the implementation of torture justify such a procedure not only in terms of method

but results: Even when the information obtained is mostly useless for utilitarian applications, it always constitutes an asset in the elaboration of an imperialistic identity and the regimes that attempt a body politic cleansing with the objective of unification of those who share one “essence.” For the ego, as Lévinas argues, “The possibility of possessing, that is, of suspending the very alterity of what is only at first other, and other relative to me, is the way of the same” (Lévinas 1996, 38). The blatant refusal to heed the call for help is what makes of torture a technology for mining the precious substance of the Said, better known as information—whether such information is considered truth or lies—and is always the touchstone of a totalitarian Same. Thus, it is crucial to note that the aim of mining the Said is the appropriation and, ultimately, the *obliteration* of Saying. This is where we encounter the metaphysics of torture; the project of obtaining information is transcended and exposed as a fraud. Therefore, torture contributes to the reinforcement of an identity (the totalitarian Same) surrounded by the illusion of power: by destroying the prisoner’s world and enhancing the possibility of creating not only an external jail and world of pain for the victim but a world of destruction throughout all places of the human body. This process makes irrelevant the “secret”—the unknowable human soul—kept inside the body, as the purpose of torture is to objectify pain in ways only valuable and useful for the torturer. In this way the technology of torture is a usurpation of functions, inasmuch as the epiphany of the face is blocked. However, Améry’s “secret,” understood as his Jewish soul, harbours Judaism; in his words: “The impossibility of being a Jew becomes the necessity to be one,” but not a passive person, on the contrary, “a vehemently protesting Jew,” who renders Testimony until the day he dies (Améry 1980, x).

Indeed, for Lévinas, the Saying of the passive subject is not “I am” but a “Here I am” as a testimony of the Infinite. Such testimony does not thematise what it testifies to and its truth is not that of representation (Pinardi 2010, 36). The survivor of torture may find, as did Améry, a way to transform that experience into testimony, into the Saying. This is not to say that there is a good side to torture or a hidden, uplifting aspect; nor does it seek to romanticize torture. Rather, it is an attempt to recognize that an encounter with the true identity—Jewish in the case of Améry—may lead to the inevitable acceptance of the infinite responsibility for the Other.

The event of torture is not temporal because “whoever was tortured, stays tortured.” Torture is ineradicable “burned” into people, even when no “clinically objective traces can be detected” (Améry 1980, 34). People who suffer the destruction of their souls by the brutal and systematic imposition of another’s sovereignty might feel as if they are condemned to live eternally in the all-there-is. Nevertheless, the persistence of pain can lead to testimony, a testimony that

not only foresees, warns and supplicates in order to avoid the idealization and sacrifice of human beings but leads to the rejection of the technological apparatus of torture and its commitment with *useful* violence as a way of knowing how to give death.

## Notes

1 The movie *Garage Olimpo* shows the horrors of the Argentinian dictatorship (1976-1983), and its process of making political opponents “disappear.” Suspects were illegally taken into custody to be interrogated, tortured and the executed. The character of Texas reflects the style of the site’s bosses who had absolute control over prisoners’ life and death. After all they work at “Olimpo,” the lair of the gods. In *Garage Olimpo* directed by Marco Bechis. (Zima Entertainment, 1999) DVD.

2 Solipsism, paganism, fanaticism, etc.

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