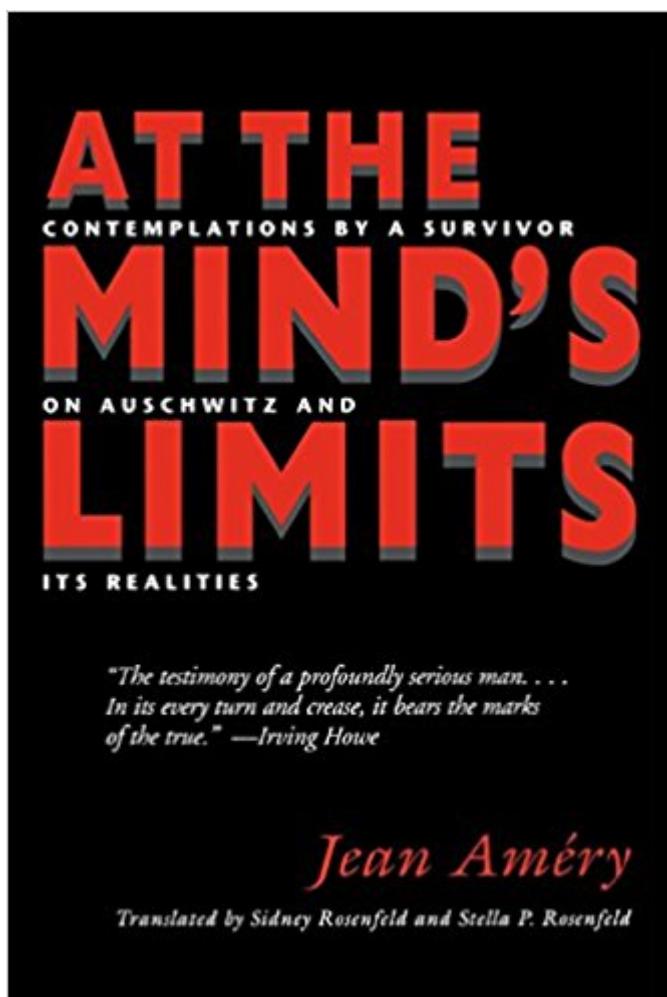


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# At The Mind's Limits: Contemplations By A Survivor On Auschwitz And Its Realities



## Synopsis

"These are pages that one reads with almost physical pain...all the way to its stoic conclusion."

•Primo Levi "The testimony of a profoundly serious man.... In its every turn and crease, it bears the marks of the true." •Irving Howe, *New Republic* "This remarkable memoir...is the autobiography of an extraordinarily acute conscience. With the ear of a poet and the eye of a novelist, Amery vividly communicates the wonder of a philosopher•a wonder here aroused by the 'dark riddle'™ of the Nazi regime and its systematic sadism." •Jim Miller, *Newsweek* "Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. The shame of destruction cannot be erased. Trust in the world, which already collapsed in part at the first blow, but in the end, under torture, fully, will not be regained. That one's fellow man was experienced as the antiman remains in the tortured person as accumulated horror. It blocks the view into a world in which the principle of hope rules. One who was martyred is a defenseless prisoner of fear. It is fear that henceforth reigns over him."

•Jean Amery *At the Mind's Limits* is the story of one man's incredible struggle to understand the reality of horror. In five autobiographical essays, Amery describes his survival•mental, moral, and physical•through the enormity of the Holocaust. Above all, this masterful record of introspection tells of a young Viennese intellectual's fervent vision of human nature and the betrayal of that vision.

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## Customer Reviews

Because Auschwitz was among the most brutal of the concentration camps, ruled by capricious, pure force and not by any discernable political or social structure, the intellectual there "was alone

with his intellect ... and there was no social reality that could support and confirm it." In other words, there was no place for the intellect to act, outside of the confines of a person's own skull. Jean Amery's *At The Mind's Limits* is a focused meditation on the position of the intellectual placed in "a borderline situation, where he has to confirm the reality and effectiveness of his intellect, or to declare its impotence: in Auschwitz." In the camp, Amery writes, "The intellect very abruptly lost its basic quality: its transcendence." Considering this loss, Amery describes his own experience of torture, his reactions of resentment, anger, and bitterness, his loss of any vital sense of metaphysical questions, and his search for some way to maintain moral character and Jewish identity in the absence of such consciousness. --Michael Joseph Gross

Text: English, German (translation) --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

### Exceptional

Prior to reading Amery's book, I thought of myself as thoroughly read in what one French scholar has called "the writing of the disaster," but Amery's may be among the half dozen essential texts in the now overwhelming body of Holocaust literature. A profound meditation on language, on mind, and on disaster in the 20th century.

In these extremely painful reflections on his fate during the Third Reich, Jean Améry paints a very disturbing picture of man, civilization and society. His text is a forceful plea for a total condemnation of all kinds of torture and its devastating effects. Torture, human beings, the world. Faced with unlimited evil power in the hands of a torturer man becomes pure flesh. A tortured man broken by violence, who cannot expect any help and who has lost all rights of self-defense, is nothing more than a body. From the first lash he receives, man is deprived of what is called his 'confidence in the world'. This confidence constitutes the certainty that the other will spare him according to social contracts, that he will respect his physical existence. Torture as a physical rape becomes an act of existential annihilation, since there is no hope to be helped. A tortured person becomes a stranger in the world. Society. What overwhelmed Jean Améry really was the society of man. For him, it is the society of men and it alone which robbed him of his confidence in the world. A specific society was the Third Reich: Germany killed Jews and political opponents, because it believed that this was the only way to realize itself. Torture was its essence. But, for Jean Améry, one should not forget

that the Greek civilization was built on slavery and that an Athenian army butchered the population of the island of Melos as the SS did in Ukraine. For Jean Améry, every society thinks only about its own safety and has nothing to do with damaged lives; it only looks forward and, in the best case, it tries to prevent that the same things will happen again. The spirit, religion, the intellectuals Jean Améry came to understand that the whole question of the activity of the pure spirit doesn't arise when a human being is dying from hunger or exhaustion. He didn't only lose his mind in a concentration camp, but he simply stopped to be a human being. In there, rational and analytical thinking led simply and directly to self-destruction. As for religion, at no time did he discover the slightest reason to believe, even when he was waiting all the time to be executed. He didn't believe in the God of Israel. As for the skeptical and humanist intellectuals, they were the object of scorn both from the Christians and the Marxists, with leniency by the first, with resentment and frustration by the latter. What he became and what he expects Jean Améry had no illusions. At Auschwitz, the victims did very understandably in no way become more human, more altruistic or morally more mature. One doesn't contemplate a spectacle of sadistic criminal human beasts without losing one's respect for all concepts of man's innate dignity. What he expects is an act of salvation: Germany should really and openly reject everything it perpetrated in these days of deep self-degradation during the twelve years of the Third Reich. But, here too he has no illusion: Hitler's Reich will be seen as a historical accident. These extremely painful texts illustrate the collapse of the concept of human dignity, of man's spiritual strength and positive rationality and, ultimately, of man's civilization. Essential reading for all those interested in human nature.

Ever since writing a term paper on Amery's "At the Mind's Limits", I have continuously come back to this work. There is a lifetime's worth of contemplation to survey here, not that this is an autobiography or even a complete memoir, but the years of his life on which he writes and the experiences dissected provoke a lifetime's worth of questions, mostly unanswered. I think of this work as a distinct and great existential accomplishment. It provokes the reader to empathize while simultaneously making him question or even feel guilty for such empathy. How can an intellect, in the modern west at least, empathize with one who has experienced dehumanization to such an unimaginable degree? The short answer is that to try to do so is impossible and even probably detestable, morally speaking. But isn't the motivation of Amery's expression the prevention of such dehumanization in future? And isn't such prevention dependent on empathetic attempts at least (among other things)? These are unanswerable contradictions for the reader. But the introspective applications make this a necessary book to read over and over again.

Of all the Holocaust books, this book stands above the rest, with the content focused not on the gory details of Nazi atrocities (which are by themselves worth reading if you want to validate the experiences of those who suffered), but rather on the psychological implications of being a victim. Only books by Primo Levi contain this degree of depth of thought and introspection.

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