

What Do the Humanities Do in a Crisis?

Crises are, at least while they are happening, not educational opportunities. But there are still things to learn.

Agnes Callard

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Humanists, usually masters of inactivity, should be well-equipped to deal with a pandemic. What does it mean if they can't?

Universities are cloistered gardens. The classroom is the innermost sanctum of that cloister, where worldly demands can be blocked out long enough for a group of people—some of whom had no prior interest—to share a poem by Horace, or an argument by Aristotle. In the past few weeks, as schools have sent students home, that sanctum has been breached. Moving classes online means replacing the shared, clean space of the classroom with a collection of private and cluttered rooms. Even when we cannot see the piles of dishes and laundry, or hear the children yelling, the cares that lurk in the background divide and distract us. Many universities are expanding their pass/fail options, an acknowledgment of how hard it is to keep the coronavirus out of the room—and to keep Horace or Aristotle in it.

To some, these problems will seem trivial. Don't we have bigger concerns at the moment than ancient poets and philosophers, or the difference between a B-plus and an A-minus? Even in good times, the humanistic academy is mocked as a wheel turning nothing; in an emergency, when doctors, delivery personnel, and other essential workers are scrambling to keep society intact, no one has patience with the wheel's demand to keep turning. What is the role of Aristotle, or the person who studies him, in a crisis?

Perhaps the most pessimistic answer to this question can be found in the essays of Jean Améry, an Austrian Jew, born Hanns Mayer, who wrote movingly of how his own humanistic learning failed him during the Second World War. Faced with the sheer physical brutality of the concentration camps, Améry came to see the intellectual life as a game, and intellectuals as “nothing more than *homines ludentes*,” or people playing. He compared himself unfavorably to those prisoners who had a political or religious cause to cling to—Marxists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholics, and practicing Jews. Being part of a larger struggle made them “unshakable, calm, strong,” he wrote. Their cause served as a kind of substratum, which made life during the camps continuous with life before and after it, whereas people like himself—humanists, philosophers, skeptics—fell into despair, and, in the face of atrocity, “no longer believed in the reality of the world of the mind.”

Améry was ready to grant that intellectuals with a practical mission, who advocate for a moral cause, are capable of heroism. We might count Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr.; Marx and Gandhi; Jesus and Muhammad; and Mary Wollstonecraft and Susan B. Anthony in this group. These intellectuals fought for equality, dignity, and the sanctity of human life. Jean Améry did not identify as one of them.

Améry was also tortured by the Gestapo, and confessed that he would readily have betrayed his comrades if he had had any information to reveal. He thus distinguishes himself from another sort of intellectual hero—those who have the fortitude to refuse to speak, when tortured, or to insist on speaking, when pressured to remain silent. Galileo is the classic example of such an intellectual martyr. One might also cite Socrates, Giordano Bruno, Thomas More, and Spinoza.

Nothing prevents these two categories from intersecting: some people are both silenced and have causes. But many humanistic intellectuals belong to neither category—no cause to fight for, no enemy to fight against. These causeless, unmartyred intellectuals are the people whom Améry found wanting. He described not only their physical weakness—they have trouble fending off pickpockets, enduring an uppercut, or even making their beds—but also how poorly they fare socially, their inability to communicate with non-intellectual comrades. Améry’s hope was for such people to prove heroic in *every* disaster, including those of great physical deprivation. If we ask, instead, whether they do so in *any* disaster, our outlook might change. In fact, if there is any crisis that ought to prove the worth of the humanistic intellectual, it is the peculiar one that we face today.

The coronavirus is, for the vast majority of us, a call to inaction. It puts life on pause, diminishes our place in the world, and forces us to turn inward. In response, we have settled on some shared tactics. Those who have no practical part in ameliorating the crisis might, if they are free to do so—no children to entertain, the ability to earn money from home—strive to bury themselves in work. Productivity can serve as a talisman, or a coping mechanism. One might also indulge in distraction: video games that simulate the work we cannot do, movies that substitute a fictional world for the one that might be collapsing around us, alcohol to blunt the pain and fear. Productivity numbs us in one way, distraction in another, and when both routes fail to yield the desired effect, we turn to anxiety—namely, by consuming the news.

Numbness or anxiety: are these our choices? Humanism points to another possibility. Aristotle distinguished between relaxation (*anapausis*), which is when we take a rest from activity with a view to resuming that activity, and true leisure (*scholē*), which is inaction meant for a higher purpose—*theoria*, or contemplation. The academy exists for the sake of contemplation. (Indeed, the English word “school” comes from *scholē*.) Contemplation is not readily classified as a belief that one fights for, and attempts to squeeze its value into the language of justice or dignity or basic human rights will fall flat. It is better characterized as an object of love and reverence, and a source of fulfillment. For humanists, contemplation is not a cause. It is a calling.

At the moment, if someone can dedicate empty hours to a higher calling, she is turning straw into gold. It follows that humanists should find ourselves well equipped to flourish, given the circumstances. Now is an apt time to ponder the fact that the human condition means living under the shadow of death. It is an apt time to situate the present in the broad sweep of history. Deprived of the reality of human connection, we are at least in a position to appreciate the idea of it. And, given that many of us are teachers, we should also be able to communicate this to others—to offer them a way out of numbness and anxiety. For perhaps the first time in history, a global catastrophe has forced a huge, literate, Internet-savvy population indoors. And yet, if this is the test we humanists have been waiting for, then it is a test I find myself unable to pass.

Over the past few weeks, I’ve had the same fantasy over and over again. In it, I fall asleep and wake up when the pandemic is over. To relieve my guilt over not helping

others, my mind extends the sleep over the whole land, as in fairy tales. Everyone healthy and not caring for the sick just lies there, peacefully, for months, even years. Then they wake up happily, and things go back to the way they were.

In fact, I am not asleep. I am awake, following the news incessantly, annoyed by the tiniest inconveniences and obstacles. Jean Améry was tortured by the Gestapo; I am having a panic attack because I can no longer access my campus office. People outside are gasping for air, dying; meanwhile, the mess in my bedroom prevents me from working. What depresses me most is my laxity. Suddenly, it's O.K. to let my kids play video games, to wear the same clothes as yesterday, to put minimum effort into dinner, night after night, to read and write and think less than usual. My forgiveness of myself strikes me as a form of despair—the very opposite of rising to meet a challenge, which involves holding oneself to a higher set of standards. I have never felt less heroic.

Allowing for the possibility that other humanists are faring better, I must nonetheless concede that my own humanistic learning has failed to prove itself in a crisis that seems almost to have been designed to showcase its strengths. It has not produced meaning or purpose or psychological fortitude, either for myself or for others.

Is this a strike against humanism? I say no. I say it is a strike against crises. Améry thought that the Holocaust exposed his true self: “nowhere else in the world did reality have as much effective power as in the camp, nowhere else was reality so real.” The brutality and horror Améry was subjected to was persuasive. It persuaded him that his previous life, when he was a student studying literature and philosophy in Vienna, when he wrote a well-received novel, when he believed in the life of the mind—all of that was illusion, pretense, word games. But it wasn't. Brutality is not an argument, and it is tragic that having one's sensibility brutalized by cruelty should seem, to the one undergoing it, like being awakened to the true nature of reality.

Being the beneficiary of a much gentler crisis, my vision is less distorted than Améry's. I have never been surer of the value of *scholē*—the power of dedicating your time to a higher calling—than now, when I cannot and wish I could. Some of the best things are delicate. The fact that they can be crushed is not an argument against their value but one in favor of providing them with protective enclosures. Yes, it is possible to spin the straw of empty time into gold, but such a pursuit requires many supports. I can teach you to see something in the abstruse arguments against atomism in Aristotle's *On Generation and Corruption*—to become excited by them, engaged by ancient physics—but things need to be just right. I need a physical classroom, a blackboard, a set of students I have spent a quarter getting to know. I need the world outside to stay quiet. The fact that current circumstances impair that setting is not a refutation of philosophy. It is a proof of how much effort we should put into getting things back to normal, so that we can once again help each other see the world of the mind for the beautiful, wondrous place it is.

Perhaps the special danger of a crisis that leaves a lot of time for thinking is that one will try to learn too many lessons while inside it. Crises are, at least while they are

happening, not educational opportunities. They are events that befall us, that harm us. They target everything about us, including our faculty for learning.

Should we believe in intellectual heroism—even of the causeless, unmartyred variety? Of course. But instead of looking for it in a time of crisis, we might turn our attention to the world inside the garden, and remember the last time it happened that a student whose head was full of unspoken brilliance finally, one day, raised her hand. We should contemplate what happened next: how the words poured forth, how she laid herself bare in the face of her terror and self-doubt, how the classroom listened, rapt, learning from her. Every teacher knows that intellectual heroics are real. We also know something about what they are like: communicative, pedagogical, and often invisible to the person engaging in them. And that lesson brings us back to the story of Jean Améry.

Améry wrote a book about suicide, and, a few years after writing it, he took his own life. He understood his wartime experiences as a test of everything he was—a thinker, an aesthete, a reader, a person—and he judged himself a failure. He wrote, of the experience of being tortured by the Gestapo, “It still is not over. Twenty-two years later I am still dangling over the ground by dislocated arms, panting, and accusing myself.” But what Améry could not foretell was the effect of his writing, which is deeply sensitized to pain, to indignity, to deprivation and loss. He speaks of suffering in the voice of someone who was able to protect himself from none of it, and he drives this vulnerability home to the reader by way of careful, dispassionately precise analysis. His tone is measured, literate, comprehensive. He is a man, and he is every man.

Améry’s essays tell the truth, but not the whole truth. They tell the story of how his humanistic learning failed him in the concentration camps, but they do not tell their own story—how it was possible for a man to convey an experience that borders on the incommunicable. The answer is: humanistic learning. Wracked with shame, Améry invites us to gaze upon his destroyed person, so that we may learn a truth we refuse to know: “whoever was tortured, stays tortured.” In his hands, a whole set of words—“concentration camps,” “brutal,” “exile”—are exposed as having been, in the mouths of others, placeholders for an understanding we had been hoping never to acquire. I say this as the granddaughter of four concentration-camp survivors. My grandparents never could—and perhaps never wished to—convey to me what Améry did. If ever I spoke of “torture” before reading Améry, I was *homo ludens*, playing a game with words.

He who wishes to speak of the destruction of the human spirit cannot expect a receptive audience. Améry understood his reader; he knew what he was up against. His words sail across the gulf of time and space and culture—and the deepest gulf of all, between the one who has been tortured and the one who has not—to address the reader in the native language of her own mind. In the end, she cannot help but let him in. This is an astonishing communicative triumph; one would not have thought that humanistic learning was up to such a test. But Jean Améry proved that it was. He was a hero. He was a teacher.

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The New Yorker, Annals of Inquiry. <www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-inquiry/what-do-the-humanities-do-in-a-crisis>

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