

Theories of Holocaust Survival: Preserving and Discovering
Humanity

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Abstract

This thesis explores the topic of Holocaust survival, specifically, the theories that have postulated how Jews managed to survive the concentration camps with their humanity still intact. Exploring such theories is necessary for us to understand how surviving one of history's most atrocious events was possible against all odds. In doing so, we encounter notions of humanity that serve to unravel our previously held convictions of humanity, and indeed, what it means to be human. Noted Holocaust scholar, Terrence Des Pres, presents a theory that suggests there is a structure to survival by which one can survive if he or she preserves their biological self, which in turn will preserve their spirit. Bruno Bettelheim, a Holocaust survivor, postulates that autonomy was the key to surviving in a way that sustains humanity and selfhood. Both Des Pres and Bettelheim explain how their theories were necessary to avoid becoming a *Muselmann* who, in the camps, was a person on the verge of death and was thought to be devoid of humanity. Giorgio Agamben, an Italian philosopher, explores the figure of the *Muselmann* in a fresh way, claiming that he cannot be excluded from concepts of humanity. I conclude that while all three theories provide valuable ideas to shape our understanding of survival, it is evident that humanity exists in ways that are imperceptible to us. Even though we cannot recognize all forms of humanity, as is the case with the *Muselmann*, that does not guarantee an absence of humanity. The ways in which humanity conforms and deforms with each individual allowed for survivors, and even the *Muselmann*, to maintain their humanity in different ways.

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Introduction

Understanding Holocaust survival in all of its capacities is extremely difficult to achieve, if not altogether impossible, and the ways in which survival is spoken about by Holocaust survivors and scholars vary greatly. Though there has been debate about what constitutes a Holocaust survivor, The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum “honors as survivors any persons, Jewish or non-Jewish, who were displaced, persecuted, or discriminated against due to the racial, religious, ethnic, social, and political policies of the Nazis and their collaborators between 1933 and 1945” (1). This fully inclusive and functional definition will be used as a foundational definition of a Holocaust survivor for the purpose of this thesis. However, the scope of this thesis allows for the examination of only one aspect of such survivors: those who were prisoners in the concentration camps. Some Jews were selected for manual labor, as opposed to being selected for immediate gassing upon entering the camps, and as a result, they had a chance, even if just a small one, to live. The arguments that will be evaluated here focus on how those prisoners not immediately murdered survived with their humanity still, to any extent, intact. After all, how was it that surviving extremity without having one’s humanity completely obliterated was possible? The diverse range of contributive works on the subject shows how many of the answers to this question remain mostly subjective. Despite this, the ambiguous nature of, and subjective responses to, the question of survival in fact provide the foundation for the most beneficial and effective way of thinking about this topic.

The three main thinkers whose theories and arguments will be analyzed in this thesis are Terrence Des Pres, Bruno Bettelheim, and Giorgio Agamben. Des Pres was a distinguished Holocaust scholar and professor at Colgate University. His most successful book, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*, was well-received by the public and constituted a major

contribution to Holocaust studies at large, but more specifically, to the study of survival. He postulates that survival was achieved by preserving oneself biologically, so that the spirit is also preserved as a result. Bruno Bettelheim was a Holocaust survivor, writer, and psychologist, who came to the United States after surviving Dachau. He offers a theory of survival based on his first-hand experiences as a survivor, and postulates that autonomy, even in its most passive and basic form, is what allowed people to preserve their humanity and survive. His main work on this theory is his book *The Informed Heart: Autonomy in a Mass Age*. Both Des Pres and Bettelheim are preeminent contributors to studies of survival and Holocaust studies overall. Their theories are analyzed in this thesis in order to evaluate notions of humanity, and to further understand the complexities of Holocaust survival. Giorgio Agamben is an Italian philosopher who has an overarching project entitled *Homo Sacer*, wherein he explores political philosophy. Within that project is his book *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, which is used in my thesis to support the analyses of Des Pres and Bettelheim, as well as to explore notions of a figure (that will later be expanded upon) called the *Muselmann*. The *Muselmann* was the figure in the camps that was so deprived of everything that he was on the verge of death, with only a matter of time until he actually perished. He was also thought to be devoid of humanity. The *Muselmann* plays a central role in the theories of Des Pres, Bettelheim, and Agamben, as well as in an extensive range of subjects, including politics, ethics, medicine, and more.

The contributions that all three of these thinkers have had on the topic of survival are indispensable. They provide groundbreaking thoughts that are at times provocative, disturbing, reassuring, and overall, explorative of ethical and metaphysical questions. Yet, questions regarding Holocaust survival can never be fully exhausted, and for that reason among others, I found it to be of utmost importance to evaluate and question the work that has already been

produced on this topic. In this thesis I explain how nearly impossible it was to survive the Holocaust, considering how—especially in the concentration camps—the Jews were living life in extremity. That is, they lived in conditions completely inconducive to life. I then analyze Des Pres’ notion of the “survival structure,” wherein he claims that one must choose to live and then care for the body in order to preserve the spirit. Following this, I analyze Bettelheim’s theory in a similar fashion, exploring his claim that remaining autonomous sustains selfhood and humanity. Finally, I turn towards Agamben to understand the opposite side of Des Pres’ and Bettelheim’s arguments: the *Muselmann*. Both Des Pres and Bettelheim claim their theories of survival are necessary for one *not* to become a *Muselmann*, since he was thought to have no humanity and was expected to die. However, Agamben challenges this notion, claiming that concepts of humanity cannot exclude the *Muselmann*. I ultimately support Agamben’s claim, though only after much critical analysis, and conclude that the theories of Des Pres and Bettelheim, as well as the *Muselmann* himself, reveal to us that we do not fully know or understand the notion of humanity as much as we may have previously liked to believe. I argue that humanity can exist in forms and spaces beyond our ability to perceive and understand, which is why and how many survivors managed to keep their humanity intact. Further, it is why the *Muselmann* was not, and could not, be devoid of humanity altogether.

Living in Extremity

With six million Jews having been murdered in the Holocaust, it is easy to comprehend the fact that surviving the Holocaust was an unlikely feat, and that those who did survive constitute the far minority of Jews who were the victims of the Third Reich. From the time the concentration camps were established in 1933, to the time the camps were liberated in 1945,

Jewish inmates suffered atrocities hitherto unprecedented. Jews lived in what is referred to as a state of extremity, meaning the conditions were so intolerable that inmates were perpetually on the verge of death. Des Pres claims the harsh conditions wherein disease, despair, and dehumanization thrived created the grounds for “the first condition of [extremity, which] is that there is no escape, no place to go except the grave” (Des Pres 7). Looking at the reports that detail the reality of the concentration camps helps us reach a better understanding as to just how horrific the conditions were. Dr. Joel E. Dimsdale of Harvard Medical School edited *Survivors, Victims, and Perpetrators: Essays on the Nazi Holocaust*, which contains an important essay entitled “Stress and Coping under Extreme Conditions.” In the essay, three main features are explored as reasons for why the concentration camps in particular were so extreme, and therefore resulted in unspeakable amounts of stress:

First is the pervasiveness and persistence of hostile the forces...there was no area of mental or physical activity that was left unassaulted in the camps and almost no respite from the assault... Second, there are few situations in which the opportunities for acting upon the environment are so limited... [Third,] the suffering experienced there could not readily be given life-supporting meaning. (Benner et al. 222)

It is likely that every story of the camps portrays one of these main aspects, giving a us a small insight into the reality of extremity. In *Auschwitz Report*, Primo Levi describes the dystrophic diseases that many suffered from as resulting from a diet so poor that it lacked the required qualities of essential fats, animal proteins, and vitamins, making it “clear, therefore, that nutritional deficiencies of these kinds and on this scale were the primary cause of the dystrophies that affected almost all of the prisoners... All of them, in fact, very quickly became emaciated” (Levi and De Benedetti 47). There was also exhaustion that plagued all, and especially working,

Jews: “The work to which the great majority of prisoners was assigned was manual labour of various kinds, all very demanding and unsuited to the physical condition and abilities of those condemned to it” (Levi and De Benedetti 46). There was no lack of many other diseases circulating as well, as gastrointestinal, infectious, and cold related diseases and illnesses permeated the camps.

Further, the fact that the prisoners were forced to live in their own filth is widely known, and has been recounted many times by both survivors and scholars alike. Des Pres termed this horrifying reality as “excremental assault.” Latrine usage was severely restricted in the camps, and prisoners were constantly subjected to the degradation of public excretion. The prevalence of gastrointestinal diseases, including dysentery, made the need for latrine usage immediate. However, permission to use them was mostly denied, and the topic of excretion—spoken about in any capacity—was a humiliating and degrading experience for all prisoners. The Schutzstaffel (SS) and even Kapos (Jewish prisoners appointed as guards and functionaries) brutalized and dehumanized the prisoners by doing things such as forcing them to excrete on themselves, and/or forcing them to report about their excretions. Eva Schloss, who was a prisoner of Auschwitz by the age of 15, tells her own experience of such horror:

Early on the second day I began to suffer from violent stomach cramps. I had very bad diarrhea and needed to relieve myself almost immediately. I could hardly contain myself as I went to ask the Kappo at the end of the barrack if I could go to the latrines.

“[Damned shit-bee,] it is not your turn,” she spat at me.

“But I have to go!” I was quite desperate.

“You must wait for your turn like everyone else!” she said.

I could hardly believe that she could refuse me, and I did not know what to do. I had terrible cramps that doubled me up, and it was impossible for me to hold on for even two more minutes. I got outside the barrack just in time to crouch down and use a corner of the yard.

But the Kappo had followed me out, and she stormed over, yanked me up and cursed, “You filthy Jew!” She slapped me around the head as hard as she could, yelling, “This is the way you will die! Infected with dysentery and typhus—because you animals can’t control yourselves!”

She had a firm grip on my dress. She dragged me forward, hitting me viciously across my face, first on the right side and then on the left until my ears rang and I felt even sicker than I was already.

“Here is a bad example to you all,” she shouted to the others. “Her thoughtless action will give you all contagious illnesses. She is a typical specimen of you pigs and we will punish her!”

Everyone was called out to witness my degradation. (Schloss and Kent 69)

Eva continues her story, telling us how her punishment was to hold a wooden stool above her head, in the unbearable heat, for two full hours while her stomach cramps worsened. Her mother was knelt down in front of her, watching, without the ability to do anything as her daughter suffered. The story paints an image of hell that relegates our convictions of what it is to be human to nothing more than a morsel of hope within a matrix of doubt.

Another stark and defining example of extremity, and what it’s like to live in extremity, is the existence of the Sonderkommando. This was a unit that was comprised of Jews who were forced to “unload the corpses [from vans] and bury the bodies...[and] work in the gas chambers,

cutting their hair and burying and burning bodies” (Bergen 176-180). After a while, such Jews were usually also murdered and then replaced. The position could essentially be equated to a death certificate, and even if it did not (for some very few individuals), the job demanded too much from the victims psychologically, and their desire to live was many times stripped from their psyche. We can gather as much from this chilling example: “One Jewish man assigned to the task found the bodies of his wife and two children in a mass grave. He begged the SS guards to shoot him” (Bergen 176-7).

Keeping in mind that these disturbing examples are but a few (and therefore they portray a very small image of the reality of the camps), we can begin to see how the Holocaust in its entirety thus posited existence in extremity in a way that seems beyond comprehension. Biologically speaking, people were brought to the brink of survival and stayed there for longer than we might have previously believed possible. This state is both emotionally and intellectually desolate, as well as biologically precarious, as people straddled the line between life and death. The epitome of the figure straddling life and death is the *Muselmann*; that is, a person who is starved and exhausted—both physically and emotionally—beyond the point of cognitive functioning. (The term “*Muselmann*” is a German word that directly translates into the word “Muslim.” The etymological roots and its meaning are debated, but some theorize that this term was used because the *Muselmann* resigned himself to his fate in the way Muslims submit themselves “unconditionally to the will of God” (Agamben 45), or because of the way especially weak *Muselmanner* fell to the ground, which resembled a prostrated Muslim praying. Thus, the etymology of the term “*Muselmann*” is a topic of its own that requires close study.) The *Muselmann*, as Holocaust survivor Jean Amery describes, “was giving up and was given up by his comrades, no longer had room in his consciousness for the contrasts good or bad, noble or

base, intellectual or unintellectual. He was a staggering corpse, a bundle of physical functions in its last convulsions” (Amery 9). That the *Muselmann* represents the severest state a human being can reach in terms of quality of life is undeniable. Based on Amery’s description, we can gather that the *Muselmann* constituted survival in its most primal form. It is thought that human faculties were essentially stripped from the *Muselmann*, and their survival was strictly biological. Primo Levi portrays *Muselmanner* as “non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand” (Levi, “Survival in Auschwitz” 90). In dealing with the notion of “divine spark,” Levi effectively comments on the seeming lack of personhood suffered by those who have crossed the fine line between what was, in the concentration camps, “indistinguishable: the human and the inhuman” (Agamben 58), or, the *Muselmann*. Thus, exploring the ways in which people managed to survive while maintaining personhood and humanity is an anomaly we struggle to understand. For people who have not experienced living in extremity like the camps, imagining it can only take us so far. Understanding how people both live and die in extremity is a multi-faceted endeavor, one which requires resignation to the possibility—and likelihood—that we may never be able to fully comprehend such a state of existence. Nevertheless, we must undergo this potentially futile journey if we are to approach the topic of Holocaust survival.

Biological Preservation for Spiritual Survival

Terrence Des Pres focuses strongly on the necessity of biological survival within extreme conditions. He begins his argument with the highly problematic claim that “survival is an experience with a definite structure, neither random nor regressive nor amoral” (Des Pres v).

(Why this claim is dangerously problematic will be expanded upon later.) He goes on to reveal that the goal of his book, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*, is to reveal said structure, which begins with the idea that an inmate in the concentration camps must choose to live. Of course, whether or not they lived or perished was ultimately a fate beyond their control, but the notion that one must choose to live so that they will not die (as opposed to being murdered), is a notion widely posited by both scholars and survivors alike. Despite the fact that life is not guaranteed to anybody living in extremity, Des Pres claims, “the bare possibility of survival is not enough. There must also be a move beyond despair and self-pity to that fierce determination which survivors call up in themselves. To come through; to keep a living soul in a living body” (Des Pres 7). Thus, Des Pres is not solely concerned with physical survival, as Giorgio Agamben would have us believe when he oversimplifies Des Pres’ notion of survival “to be nothing other than biological life as such” (Agamben 93). Instead, he is also concerned with spiritual survival.

In fact, Des Pres’ concern with the necessity of physical preservation for survival is only half of his argument; for him, physical preservation is a precursor to spiritual survival. His claim that one must move beyond despair and self-pity may sound borderline impossible. (How can one escape the reality to which they are subjected? A reality that is by nature one of despair and hopelessness?) Yet, he says this is possible when prisoners assume a fighting attitude of sorts, which allows them to act and therefore retain faith in themselves: “[The victim] refuses to see his victimization as total, fights it as best he can, and will not consent to death in any form. He will not, that is, accept the logic of the situation imposed on him” (Des Pres 8). This notion that prisoners must reject logic is substantiated by Primo Levi in his testimony, *Survival in Auschwitz*:

If we were logical, we would resign ourselves to the evidence that our fate is beyond knowledge, that every conjecture is arbitrary and demonstrably devoid of foundation. But men are rarely logical when their own fate is at stake... One learns quickly enough to wipe out the past and the future when one is forced to. (36)

Thus, by not resigning themselves to the logical outcomes of their situation, by eliminating past and future considerations and truths, victims were able to, as Des Pres says, act in ways that sustained faith in themselves.

For Des Pres, choosing to live and not resigning oneself to the logic of the extreme situation, and therefore freeing oneself enough to act, meant responding to the immediacy of biological needs. When living in extremity, biological needs are so immediate, so extreme in and of themselves, that tending to them cannot be delayed. Des Pres juxtaposes this reality with that of normal society, by explaining how in civilized society, there is a divide between mind and body whereby cultural and intellectual matters are valued at the expense of bodily needs. For instance, many religious practices require denying the body of what it needs in order to properly perform a ritual; fasting is a common example. Even on a somewhat trivial level we can think about how one may put off a trip to the bathroom if he/she is in the midst of an important business meeting, or a perhaps a school exam. According to Des Pres, the notion that biological needs are separate from what feeds our humanity (namely, cultural, religious, and intellectual matters) is a notion that does not and cannot exist in the state of extremity:

The basic structure of Western civilization or perhaps of any civilization, insofar as the processes of culture and sublimation are one, is the division between body and the spirit, between concrete existence and symbolic modes of being. In extremity, however, divisions like these collapse. The principle of compartmentalization no longer holds, and

organic being becomes the immediate locus of selfhood. When this happens, body and spirit become the ground of each other, each bearing the other's need, the other's sorrow, and each responds directly to the other's total condition... There is a strange circularity about existence in extremity: survivors preserve their dignity in order 'not to begin to die'; they care for the body as a matter of 'moral survival.'" (Des Pres 65)

Thus, the sublimation we are accustomed to in society is non-existent in the extreme state. Such a notion is also put forth by Holocaust survivor and psychoanalyst, Anna Ornstein, when she says that "To pass from civilization to extremity means to be shorn of the elaborate systems of relationships, to lose one's social identity, one's family, all personal belongings, the entire cultural matrix that had previously sustained us" (Ornstein 62). This change, she said, occurred within mere hours. As a result, if one is to survive in the camps and not fall into the condition of the *Muselmann*, matters of body and mind become one inseparable, co-dependent entity that demands care. Des Pres says that care begins with tending to one's physical needs for biological survival, so that the spiritual component may also survive. In Primo Levi's account, he delineates how in extremity "it is practically pointless to wash everyday in the turbid water of the filthy washbasins for purposes of cleanliness and health; but it is most important as a symptom of remaining vitality, and necessary as an instrument of moral survival" (Levi, "Survival in Auschwitz" 40). When sublimation vanishes in extremity, the spirit does not perish alongside it. Instead, the spirit endures and is expressed through a different outlet: the body. As Jean Amery said, "The boundaries of my body are also the boundaries of my self. My skin surface shields me against the external world (Amery 28). The body therefore serves as a house for the spirit. Everything that is real in the camps, "actual life and actual death, actual pain and actual

defilement...now constitute the medium of moral and spiritual being” (Des Pres 69). Hence, the spirit and body—and the actions that give life to both—become one.

Des Pres also dedicates quite a bit of space to talking about the social nature of human beings, believing that social organization is a precondition to humanness. He argues that in extremity there is a need to help others, and that need arises as if instinctual, or biological, as it were. He believes that socialization is a component of human nature, and be it spiritual or physical, such a notion is compatible within the workings of his theory. For instance, if one takes care of themselves physically (to the best of their ability), then they in turn are caring for themselves spiritually. Consequentially, their humanity would not be completely suppressed, in which case it would be possible for their social nature (an expression of that humanity) to arise as a need desiring to be met. If we look at survivor testimonies, we can find plenty of examples when prisoners set out to help one another, and in doing so, create a semblance of a social structure. In the camps, this social structure presented itself through a variety of outlets, not least of which was the exchange of communication between prisoners that served to feed the humanity of those speaking and listening. For instance, Viktor Frankl tells us in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, about a man who snuck into his barracks when he first arrived in Auschwitz:

In spite of strict orders not to leave our “blocks,” a colleague of mine, who had arrived in Auschwitz several weeks previously, smuggled himself into our hut. He wanted to calm and comfort us and tell us a few things. He had become so thin that at first we did not recognize him. With a show of good humor and a Devil-may-care attitude he gave us a few hurried tips. (Frankl 37)

It is difficult to imagine what a few words of comfort might mean to someone suffering in extremity. That Frankl's colleague risked himself to offer these words does suggest he felt a need

to help. Similarly, Ornstein describes another way in which help was offered when she tells the story of how she borrowed bath water from two more “privileged” Jews in the camp:

I went up to the girls and told them in broken German that I would love to use the water and would put the empty pail wherever they wanted it. I was afraid they would chase me away because I had come upon them in this manner, especially since they were both naked. But they were pleased that I had asked for the water and promised to give their used water to me again. (Ornstein 95)

She goes on to explain how each time the girls gave it to her, she shared the water with her mother and cousin who were in the camp with her. Concluding the story, Ornstein offers some insight on the extent to which this bath water helped: “I believe that the luxury of our occasional bath played an important role in my mother’s survival” (Ornstein 96). Ornstein’s story supports Des Pres’ theory in two ways: the first is that caring for the biological needs of the body (by washing, in this case) does contribute to survival, and the second is that there was some form of social structure going on in the camps, meaning that de-sublimation was not total. For if it was, then the prisoners—like the girls sharing the water—would feel no need to help one another. Why else would the girls in Ornstein’s story share the bath water, if not only to help Anna? They received nothing in return and were putting themselves at risk. Nonetheless, they still wanted to help, which allowed Anna to help her mother and cousin. This suggests that Des Pres’s claim about human nature containing a social aspect, which expresses itself as a need when in extremity, is grounded in truth.

In addition to survivor testimonies, Des Pres relies on scientific findings to substantiate his claims. Claiming that morality and society rest on nature, he says “biological sciences confirm the fact that all life depends on systems, that everywhere a tendency to order governs

behavior. From cells to men, life-forms possess both internal and external means of bonding and communication” (Des Pres 143). Thereby deeming “social organization as a function of life itself” (144), Des Pres confidently concludes his theory of the survival structure. That is, in order not to become a *Muselmann*, but to survive the concentration camps as a man with the spirit intact, one must preserve himself biologically. By doing so, he ensures the maintenance of his spirit, and is able to participate in a social order. Participating in the social order perpetuates this structure, as things such as trading with, and getting support from, people ensure that the life form—both physical and spiritual—are further nourished. In one of his final remarks, Des Pres says how “Stripped of everything, prisoners maintained moral identity by holding some inward space of self untouchable, and they did it by the way in which the body itself was carried and cared for” (202). Thus, despite Agamben’s remarks that Des Pres reduced survival to the biological functioning of bodies as such, Des Pres instead presents a theory of survival that constitutes the survival of both body and spirit; a survival that he postulates preserves humanity. The idea that spirit is connected to a body is key; that “the soul lives *in* [the] flesh” (Des Pres), and as a result, one who cares for his body is caring for his spirit.

Agamben’s remarks are unfair to Des Pres’ overall goal. To say that Des Pres is ultimately postulating that one only needs to rely on the cellular functioning of the body in order to survive the camps is a misrepresentation of his theory, because it is only half true. Agamben completely disregards the second, most important half of Des Pres’ theory, namely that biological preservation, and yes—cellular functioning—are necessary means for preserving the spirit. Yet, while Agamben is unfair, he is edging on a question that requires further exploration: what have we ultimately learned from Des Pres’ theory? Despite Des Pres’ well-researched and well-substantiated work, if we accept his claim that the mind and body collapse in extremity,

then the conclusion that biological preservation is necessary for spiritual survival is, quite frankly, obvious. There is no lack of scientific research corroborating this claim, and people were well aware during World War II, as they are now, that the brain can only function if the body is in a healthy enough condition to do so. Bruno Bettelheim (whose theories on survival will be reviewed in a later section) even said in a radio interview in 1961 (fifteen years before Des Pres published his book), that “in order to take your fate into your own hands, you have not only to have a working mind, but also a working body” (Bettelheim, Chicago History Museum). In fact, Des Pres’ entire argument is formulated on the basis of the mind/body collapse claim, and it is up to us whether or not we accept or reject it. Either choice is perfectly valid, as the question regarding the mind/body divide is a longstanding source of polemics within the philosophical tradition. This means that Des Pres’ entire theory is true if, and only if, we accept it to be true that the mind and body collapse in extremity. If we do, then that the body must survive in order for the spirit to survive is, on the basis of science and logic alone, the only and indubitable conclusion. However, if we choose to refute the claim that mind and body collapse during extremity, then Des Pres’ entire argument loses the foundation on which it was built, rendering it unsound. Nonetheless, Des Pres’ theory still proves valuable as it points towards questions regarding humanity that must be explored. For instance, his claim that one must first choose to survive poses a lot of questions about the role of choice in selfhood and humanity. His peer, Bruno Bettelheim, attempts to uncover exactly what that role is, and how it helped people survive.

Preserving Humanity with Autonomy

In Bruno Bettelheim's book, *The Informed Heart*, a different theory takes form with the notion of autonomy presenting itself as the main way in which prisoners were able to survive with their humanity intact. Much like Des Pres and many others, Bettelheim too believes that one must first actively choose that he or she *wants* to live. As opposed to resigning to the logical outcome of the concentration camps, which was, of course, death, one must actively decide that they nevertheless still want to live. Bettelheim was able to conclude that this will to live was a necessity for people to survive the camps after observing how a great number of prisoners "simply died of exhaustion, both physical and psychological, due to a loss of desire to live" (Bettelheim 146). The idea of "simply" dying arises out of a comparison to the Jews who were murdered. Thus, Des Pres and Bettelheim begin their theories at a very similar starting line, establishing that one must first choose to live, "to remain alive, not begin to die" (Levi "Survival in Auschwitz" 40). As previously noted, Bettelheim also supports the idea that one must care for the body in order for the mind to work. However, the similarities between Bettelheim's theory and that of Des Pres mostly end with that agreement. Whereas Des Pres focuses primarily on the body in survival, Bettelheim is concerned with the mind, and his theory is applicable in a way that is not structured, like Des Pres', but instead fluctuates with each individual. His theory diverges and morphs into one that is more profoundly human, getting to the core of what it is that constitutes and therefore preserves our humanity.

Bettelheim discusses what he refers to as a "concordance of opposites." He stresses the need for the desires of the heart to merge with the reasoning of the mind in an effort to firmly establish one's convictions. Whereas society as we know it separates reason and emotion, Bettelheim believes that we must bring the two together, so that they can work as one. When

they work as one, people are able to develop moral convictions. If our logical and emotional selves do not merge, he argues, one cannot live a satisfying life as an individual person, or, in the case of extremity, survive with one's humanity intact. (There is a parallel here in regard to Des Pres' notion that the mind and body must collapse in extremity, in ways that they do not in normal society. However, Bettelheim is, again, concerned with the mind. As opposed to Des Pres, he identified a division in normal society between aspects of the mind itself, not between the mind and body.) Establishing one's unwavering moral convictions is necessary to understand what one's "point of no return" is. The point of no return is an absolute necessity if one is to survive as a man, and not just as a body. In other words, it is an absolute necessity in order to avoid becoming a *Muselmann*:

But to survive as a man not a walking corpse, as a debased and degraded but still human being, one had first and foremost to remain informed and aware of what made up one's personal point of no return, the point beyond which one would never, under any circumstances, give in to the oppressor, even if it meant risking and losing one's life. It meant being aware that if one survived at the price of overreaching this point one would be holding on to a life that had lost all its meaning. (Bettelheim 157)

Such a point of no return is different for everyone, and Bettelheim explains how truly essential convictions developed in the minds of prisoners after spending a long time imprisoned in the camps. Once establishing a point of no return, one must continually remind himself of those convictions that define it. Perpetually reminding oneself and informing oneself about those convictions was the only way they could "serve as the mainstay of a radically reduced but still present humanity" (Bettelheim 157). By clinging steadfast to these convictions, by making internal judgments about what is right and wrong in the state of extremity, one was able to

remain human. This is opposed to only existing as a functioning body; existing in a way that was completely and totally passive to all things happening around and to someone. In other words, making convictions and judgments based on those convictions was what prevented one from becoming a *Muselmann*.

Despite the fact that one could not always act on their convictions, the fact that they had convictions and informed themselves of them was an act of autonomy in itself. This, in Bettlheim's view, is the determining factor for whether or not one could preserve their selfhood and therefore their humanity. In order to survive, it was necessary "to carve out, against the greatest of odds, some areas of freedom of action and freedom of thought, however insignificant" (Bettelheim 148). In the face of things such as meaningless tasks that the SS assigned, coupled with nearly no time alone for oneself, and the volatile environment making it impossible to plan ahead, the prisoners had to protect themselves and take actions in some form to preserve their individuality. Not doing so was dangerous, because "when they stopped acting, they soon stopped living" (Bettelheim 148). Primo Levi, for example, talks about the many things the prisoners had to do in the camps, describing them as "infinite and senseless" (Levi, "Survival in Auschwitz" 34). Yet, Levi managed to sustain his selfhood and humanity throughout and beyond his imprisonment. He discovered how to act autonomously after the advice of a fellow inmate convinced him to do so:

Precisely because the Lager was a great machine to reduce us to beasts, we must not become beasts; that even in this place one can survive, and therefore one must want to survive, to tell the story, to bear witness; and that to survive we must force ourselves to save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization. We are slaves, deprived of every right, exposed to every insult, condemned to certain death, but we still

possess one power—the power to refuse our consent. So we must certainly wash our faces without soap in dirty water and dry ourselves on our jackets. We must polish our shoes, not because the regulation states it, but for dignity and propriety. We must walk erect, without dragging our feet, not in homage to Prussian discipline but to remain alive, not to begin to die. (Levi, “Survival in Auschwitz” 41)

Acts of autonomy, even in the simplest of forms, such as making internal judgments about the people and things in the camps, came to serve as the foundation for resistance to the extreme environment. By refusing total spiritual mutilation, the Jews of the camps clung to what it was that made them human.

Conversely, it was the Jews who came to believe what the SS said (that they were going to die, that they had no hope or meaning) who eventually dissipated into something thought to be devoid of humanity: the *Muselmann*. Such prisoners were “so totally exhausted, both physically and emotionally, that they had given the environment total power over them. They did this when they gave up trying to exercise any further influence over their life or environment” (Bettelheim 152). They accepted orders without making judgments on them, without feeling sentiments of resent or hatred. Such resignation, Bettelheim believes, is what made the difference between sustaining one’s humanity and decimating it.

Yet, finding a balance between exercising one’s autonomy in a place where doing so is nearly impossible seems to be a dilemma without a solution. However, Bettelheim details a remedy that is both autonomous and discreet, allowing one to exercise their limited but existent autonomy in a way that doesn’t mean sacrificing their lives. It was to observe everything going on in the camps, without betraying the fact that one was actually making such observations; it was analyzing those observations, and eventually, developing essential convictions based on

them. As a result, one could exercise “the last freedom that not even the concentration camp could take away—to decide how one wishes to think and feel about the conditions of one’s life,” (Bettelheim 265). In doing so, the Jews established their point of no return, making it so that even if they “cannot live, at least [they] die as men” (Bettelheim 265). Autonomy was, in a sense, a life-drive.

Hence, autonomy was the ultimate factor that Bettelheim believed allowed Jews to survive while preserving their humanity. Interestingly, while Des Pres proposes a theory that is quite different, his theory of the structure of survival nonetheless begins by putting Bettelheim’s theory into practice. That is, the structure begins with an act of autonomy. We can recall Des Pres’ emphasis on the need to *choose* to live. Such a choice constitutes an autonomous act, and while Des Pres’ theory quickly moves away from this choice and into the necessity of caring for the body, it is unquestionable that he actually supports Bettelheim’s theory. It would be impossible for him to refute Bettelheim and maintain his structural theory of survival as it stands.

Bettelheim’s theory also points to why Des Pres’ claim, “survival is an experience with a definite structure, neither random nor regressive nor amoral” (Des Pres v), is problematic. If Des Pres’ claim were true, then it would require that everybody who survived had the same experience, because they would have journeyed through the same “definite structure” of survival. He believes the structure is so definite because of the similarities expressed in many survivor testimonies, yet at the same time he dismisses a sentiment expressed by survivors that is so common it is “a locus classicus of literature on the camps” (Agamben 89), which is, namely, guilt. Because Des Pres sifts through the aspects of testimonies that seem congruent with and supportive of his theory, he is able to conclude that “the world survivors speak of has been so rigidly shaped by necessity, and so completely shared—almost all survivors say ‘we’ rather than

‘I... The facts [of living in the camps] lie embedded in a fixed configuration’ (Des Pres 29).

However, this is far from being true, as both Bettelheim, Levi, and a mass of other scholars and survivors emphasize how individual everyone’s experience was. As Primo Levi says, “It must be remembered that each of us, both objectively and subjectively, lived the Lager in his own way” (Levi, “Drowned and Saved” 75). Des Pres himself hypocritically (once again) even says: “we cannot know, we have no *way* of knowing, what provokes a survivor’s behavior unless we accept at face value the content of his or her story” (Des Pres 44). However, accepting one’s story at face value does not guarantee *true* knowledge of his or her experience, and to believe that it does is dangerous, because we are then free to make assumptions based on what we believe to be first hand knowledge; assumptions like “survival has a definite structure” fall victim to this.

In reality, it is quite simply impossible for us to truly understand the experiences of the Jews in the Holocaust—particularly those who were in the camps. Living in extremity posits the experiences of such Jews in a time and space beyond complete, accessible comprehension. Further, said experiences were highly individualized, and each and every person had an experience so different from one another that two men sharing a bunk could be experiencing similar realities in entirely different ways. To assume otherwise and place the experiences of the Jews within a “definite structure” is a method unnervingly reminiscent of the structures that resulted from the overall outlook that Nazi Germany had regarding Jews.

Des Pres also confirms a second central part of Bettelheim’s theory, namely, that one must establish convictions and continually remind themselves of them. He says how “in extremity every moment of life is purchased at exorbitant cost, forcing the survivor to repeatedly consider the balance of values” (Des Pres 23). However, he explores this notion no further. The claim that one is constantly evaluating and considering values is a large one, pointing to aspects

of our humanity that require exploration, and along with it comes an extensive variety of implications; to ignore them is negligent. There are infinite aspects of life in the camps that point to notions of humanity which must be continually revisited. The extreme situation demands as much, because it reveals far too many holes in our convictions to carry on as usual. There is one entity in the camps that reveals those holes in every part of its being—in its very existence. That entity is the *Muselmann*. Thus far, the theories analyzed here have postulated the ways in which Jews managed to survive by preserving their humanity so that they do not become a *Muselmann*. But, we must ask, is it possible for the *Muselmann* to be devoid of humanity? The *Muselmann* is treated as a monstrosity of sorts, characterized in a way that demonizes him. However, if we turn to the other sides of the theories of Bettelheim and Des Pres, we discover the *Muselmann*, and find an entity that requires exploration in its own right; exploration that goes beyond only declaring one must not become a *Muselmann*. Essentially, it becomes an exploration of humanity.

The Muselmann

The figure that stands between life and death in the concentration camps, the one that creates a third realm barring the direct migration from life to death, is the *Muselmann*. Giorgio Agamben astutely notes that the *Muselmann* “marked the moving threshold in which man passed into non-man” (Agamben 47). That is, the transition from which humanity subsided into nothing other than seemingly bare life—that is where the *Muselmann* stands. This figure, Agamben claims, is one in which all disciplinary standards and concepts pass through, and ultimately fail in their attempt to stand in what is a chasm of impossibilities. Notions of ethics, physiology, anthropology, psychology, politics—everything, it seems—implode when put to the test of the

Muselmann. That is, of course, characteristic when dealing with cases of extremity. The *Muselmann* is perhaps the extreme within the extreme, serving as an exception to all of our previously held convictions.

Agamben discusses how it was impossible to witness the *Muselmann*, how nobody dared look at those who had become “the men in decay” (Levi “Survival in Auschwitz” 89). He suggests that other camp prisoners would not look at the *Muselmann*, because “what man despises is also what he fears resembles him, the *Muselmann* is universally avoided because everyone in the camp recognizes himself in his disfigured face” (Agamben 52). Likewise, Bettelheim dedicates a subsection in his book called “Don’t dare to notice” to talking about the things that one could not observe, and yet had to. Agamben explains that despite how the *Muselmann* was an outstanding aspect of the experiences that survivors bore witness to, historical documents regarding World War Two and the persecution of the Jews very rarely mentioned the *Muselmann* until about fifty years after the war. This suggests two things: the first is that survivors *did* bear witness to and observe *Muselmann*, if not overtly, then in the method delineated by Bettelheim (noticing without showing so, and not outwardly reacting to the observation), and perhaps even subconsciously. The second is that, considering the lack of historical reports on the *Muselmann*, people of the world did not necessarily look away because they saw themselves in the *Muselmann*, but rather, because in him they saw the epitome, the ultimate culmination, of what happens when people activate the full potentiality of evil that may reside within us all. They saw in the *Muselmann* something atrocious; they saw, not necessarily in the *Muselmann* himself, but *through* him, the despicability, the unfathomability, and the seeming impossibility of the evil that produced him. Survivors *did* bear witness to the *Muselmann*, whether historians, anthropologists, politicians, and whoever else wanted to admit it

or not. As Bettelheim says, “only the good society could create the good man, though in reverse form; because I saw before my eyes how a bad environment so obviously evoked evil in men” (Bettelheim 14). The environment to which he refers did not, of course, start in the concentration camps, but in a society that was considered advanced in all regards. It makes one wonder in extreme discomfort, then, what we know about advanced, “civilized” societies, and further, what we know about ourselves. Hence the desire of many to look away from the mirror that the *Muselmann* was.

What is this specter, the *Muselmann*, then? A human, a non-man, a mirror, a void? Answers regarding these questions become obscure as we realize how little we know about the topic that the notion of the *Muselmann* breaches: humanity. Agamben says that what is at stake in the camps is just that, because “What is at stake in the ‘extreme situation’ is, therefore, ‘remaining a human being or not,’ becoming a *Muselmann* or not” (Agamben 55). And in fact, that is what the theories outlined and analyzed here so far seek to explain: how to survive the concentration camps by not becoming a *Muselmann*. However, Agamben thinks that “becoming a *Muselmann* or not... was a question of trying to preserve dignity and self-respect” (Agamben 55). Dignity and self-respect are only one part of the notion of humanity, though, and Agamben severely mistakes this when he references Bettelheim’s “point of no return” as being the line for which self-respect and dignity, not the entirety of humanity (like Bettelheim believes), is dependent:

Bettelheim seems to imply something of the kind when he speaks of a ‘point of no return’ beyond which the prisoner became a *Muselmann*... Naturally, Bettelheim realized that in the extreme situation, real freedom and choice were practically non-existent and often amounted to the degree of inner awareness with which one obeyed an order... For

Bettelheim, the *Muselmann* is therefore one who has abdicated his inalienable freedom and has consequently lost all traces of affective life and humanity. (Agamben 56)

Dignity and self-respect are not, however, what the “degree of inner awareness” was ultimately trying to preserve—it was humanity altogether. The mistake is nonetheless understandable, as the figure of the *Muselmann* confuses our convictions. Jean Amery points to the ambiguity—and even his own confusion—surrounding notions of dignity:

I must confess that I don't know exactly what that is: human dignity. One person thinks he loses it when he finds himself in circumstances that make it impossible for him to take a daily bath. Another believes he loses it when he must speak to an official in something other than his native language. In one instance, human dignity is bound to a certain physical convenience, in the other, to the right of free speech, in still another perhaps to the availability of erotic partners of the same sex. (Amery 28)

Bettelheim details a similar idea when describing his notion of a point of no return. He talks about how people think they know what their point of no return is, but it “changed for each person as time passed” (Bettelheim 157), especially after so many degrading experiences. Only after extended time in the camps and the accompanying dehumanizing experiences did their essential convictions begin to solidify.

It is Bettelheim's idea that to preserve humanity in the camps, prisoners must establish their convictions and their point of no return, and then constantly inform themselves of each while making judgments on their observations. However, what is not Bettelheim's idea (as Agamben claims it is) is that the *Muselmann* *abdicated* their “inalienable” freedom, which is the ability to choose and be autonomous (even if only within the confines of one's mind and inner judgment). Bettelheim takes care to explicitly explain the SS's “means of destroying the

prisoners' belief that they had some basis for hope, some influence over their life, and therefore some reason for wanting to live... But these people had not... made an act of decision and submitted to fate out of free will" (Bettelheim 149-152). While Bettelheim does go on to say that the *Muselmanner* gave up on trying to exercise any form of autonomy, he only says so after detailing that it was because the *Muselmanner* were "so totally exhausted, both physically and emotionally" (Bettelheim 152). We can recall Primo Levi's description of the emaciation that prisoners, especially the *Muselmanner*, suffered from. Revisiting Des Pres' notion, we already understand the extent to which the body must be cared for in order for the mind to function. Thus, not only is it grossly unfair to say the *Muselmanner* "gave up" or "abdicated" their freedom, it is plainly incorrect given the circumstances.

Not only does this show that the *Muselmann* did not simply relinquish his freedom of autonomy, but it also suggests that perhaps such a freedom is not actually inalienable. How could the camps cause an abdication of an inalienable freedom from millions of people? How could that occur on a scale so large that it was referred to as "extermination of fabrication by 'conveyor belt'" (Agamben 71)? Survival was highly unlikely, and surviving with one's humanity intact is a true enigma; thus, it is not feasible to assume that autonomy was an inalienable freedom in the camps. Bettelheim believes that autonomy was "the last freedom that not even the concentration camp could take away" (Bettelheim 265), but the *Muselmann* defies that claim rather than confirms it. It has been said many times by many survivors that the *Muselmanner* were like "walking corpses" (Bettelheim 151), completely apathetic and passive to all that happened to them. However, such behavior was not a choice, or it would in fact be an act of autonomy. Hence why the notion that autonomy, even inner autonomy whereby people make judgments, was not

an inalienable freedom—perhaps it was something that yes, even the concentration camps *could* take away.

Agamben goes on to challenge Bettelheim’s “point of no return” theory. Instead of the *Muselmann* serving as “the cipher of the point of no return and the threshold beyond which one ceases to be human” (Agamben 63), the *Muselmann* is an experiment of sorts that forces us to question morality and humanity:

If one establishes a limit beyond which one ceases to be human, and all or most of humankind passes beyond it, this proves not the inhumanity of human beings but, instead, the insufficiency and abstraction of the limit... Simply to deny the *Muselmann*’s humanity would be to accept the verdict of the SS and to repeat their gesture. The *Muselmann* has, instead, moved into a zone of the human where not only help but also dignity and self-respect have become useless. But if there is a zone of the human in which these concepts make no sense, then they are not genuine ethical concepts for no ethics can claim to exclude a part of humanity, no matter how unpleasant or difficult that humanity is to see. (Agamben 63)

While Agamben makes a crucial point in defense of the *Muselmann* (one that needs further exploration, as he drops the issue there), he does so by way of a misunderstanding and unethical means. For instance, the entire point of Bettelheim’s point of no return is that it is, specifically and above all else, subjective. How can all or most of mankind pass beyond a limit that is highly individualized? It does seem like he is agreeing with my earlier point that, since there were so many people—millions—who passed beyond their own point of no return, there must be a flaw in Bettelheim’s theory. My conclusion was that the freedom of autonomy is not inalienable; Agamben’s is that the limit is abstract and insufficient. However, the flaw cannot be that the

limit is insufficient or abstract, because without a definition of what *is* a sufficient limit, we may conclude that one can keep pushing back their point of no return infinitely, in which case Bettelheim's theory would have no ground whatsoever. We also cannot establish a sufficient limit, because then it would be objective rather than subjective. What this flaw proves, rather, is that the *Muselmann* has been pushed beyond humanity as we know it, which in turn shows that we do not actually know humanity.

Further, if Agamben was using the concentration camps as a microcosm of sorts when he says that "all or most of humanity" passed beyond the point of no return, then we must reject it on this basis as well, for it is unethical. Doing so would treat the camps as a normal situation, as a form of regular society by which we can evaluate and judge "all or most of humanity." Doing this to further his own argument, namely that the *Muselmann* cannot be excluded from concepts of humanity, is unacceptable. He is right in his conclusion, but not because of the way he went about proving it. The entire nature of the extreme situation is that it cannot be used in comparison, or with reference, to normal, everyday life. In which case, terms such as "all or most of humanity" certainly cannot be utilized. Moreover, while he is right that the *Muselmann* cannot be excluded from concepts of humanity, he is wrong in suggesting that the *Muselmann* is excluded within Bettelheim's argument. Specifically in the cases of Bettelheim and Des Pres, the *Muselmann* is inherently tied into concepts of humanity. He is the figure that they analyze enough to even form their theories. Thus, while he is what they say prisoners must not become in order to preserve their humanity, he is not excluded from their concepts of what humanity is. Instead, he defines them.

Where does this leave the *Muselmann*? He has shattered normative convictions, and yet in doing so he helps us to define humanity. Marking the threshold between man and non-man,

the *Muselmann* is at once indicative of our inability to fully know the nature of humanity, and our capacity for unspeakable evil. Further, he shows that the existentialist notion that one always has a choice—no matter what the circumstance—is not as infallible as we thought. In the image of the *Muselmann* we see a figure that has been pushed beyond the ability to make decisions even in the form of inner judgments. We also see, as a result, a creature whose humanity has seemingly been snuffed out. However, just as Agamben said, to have a concept of humanity that excludes a part of humanity is not a concept at all. That there was no humanity in the evil acts of the Nazi regime is a solid argument, but to say that the *Muselmann* had none is unjust, even if for no other reason than because innocence is certainly a part of humanity, and the *Muselmann* was in all regards an innocent victim.

Perhaps we may conclude that when humanity comes into contact with unfathomable evil, it cannot thrive in the way we are familiar with it. Perhaps, then, the *Muselmann* has a form of humanity that we cannot recognize, and the limbo-like realm the *Muselmann* created shields it from our understanding. Or, perhaps, so that the humanity of the *Muselmann* does not become further damaged, it is suspended during the extreme situation. It must, nonetheless, still exist, if for no other reason than the proof the surviving *Muselmanner* have offered. While most perished, some returned from that state, or were liberated just in time. Agamben has many quotes to end his book, all of which were from *Muselmanner* who survived, and in those quotes one cannot deny the presence of humanity as they reflect upon the nightmare that it was to be a *Muselmann*. We can review the following quote as a powerful example:

In my own body, I lived through the most atrocious kind of life in the camp, the horror of being a *Muselmann*. I was one of the first *Muselmanner*. I wandered through the camp everyday like a stray dog; I was indifferent to everything. I just wanted to survive another

day... Almost all *Muselmanner* died in the camp; only a small percentage managed to come out of that state. Thanks to good luck or providence, some were liberated. That is why I can describe how I was able to pull myself out of that condition. (qtd. in Agamben 169)

Evidently, Bronislaw Goscinki, the surviving *Muselmann*, recalls how he actually *wanted* to survive another day, even though he was indifferent to everything. Hence the likelihood that just because we were unable to perceive humanity in the *Muselmann*, it nonetheless still exists. It is just hidden away in the third realm of the *Muselmann*, beyond our reach and comprehension. If this is not the case, then *Muselmanner* such as Goscinki would not have been able to pull themselves out of the *Muselmann* condition and return to a somewhat “normal,” recognizable state of humanity, they would in fact have had to recreate their humanity, rather than revive it. Even Bettelheim leaves us with a bit of reassurance toward the end of his book when he says that “in an instant the old personality can be regained, its destruction undone” (265). We too can be left with some reassurance when thinking about the *Muselmann*. His figure is the embodiment of all that evil can be, yet he demonstrates that humanity can exist in a third realm—a threshold of sorts, between life and death—in a form unrecognizable and incomprehensible to all others, but nonetheless still existent.

Conclusion

The *Muselmann* represents the opposite side of the arguments and theories posited by Des Pres and Bettelheim; he is what they say one must not become if they are to survive with their humanity intact. Yet, the *Muselmanner* are still human beings, so they cannot simply be dismissed as that which one cannot become in order to survive. Further, some of them *did*

survive, and the presence of their humanity cannot be denied. What do the theories of Des Pres, Bettelheim, and Agamben offer us, then? They offer us a portal to peek inside notions of humanity, survival, extremity, and evil. Des Pres is absolutely right in his theory that one must care for their body in order to care for their spirit. It has been confirmed by survivors many times, and science is supportive of the claim as well. The body must maintain a level of health in order for the brain to function: food, cleanliness, shelter, etc., are all necessities in that regard. In addition, we can acknowledge the truth of Des Pres' claim that socialization was beneficial to those who survived. That is true regardless of whether or not we agree that socializing is implicit in our DNA, as he suggests. When one has companions to rely on, he can better support a variety of needs, therefore furthering his ability to care for his body, and in turn, his spirit. Another component of Des Pres' theory, the first step, has also been confirmed by many survivors: that one must choose to live. This holds true for Bettelheim as well.

Bettelheim, however, claims that autonomy is the key to spiritual survival. Making choices for oneself, even in the form of inner judgments, is what preserves the selfhood, and ultimately, the humanity of prisoners in the camps. Yet, he too uses the specter of the *Muselmann* to explain this theory. That is, he suggests that in order to survive, one must take certain care not to become a *Muselmann*. Once one has given up their "last freedom," the ability to make inner choices, he will quickly cease to be a human being. The *Muselmann* thus becomes the threshold that one cannot cross in order to survive. However, the *Muselmann* is much more than a looming monster synonymous with the death of humanity.

Agamben addresses the *Muselmann* in a way that explores him beyond his role as that looming monster. He points out how the *Muselmann* establishes a third realm that stands between life and death, and human and inhuman. Yet, the more Agamben explores the nature of

the *Muselmann*, the more flaws present themselves in our previously held notions of humanity. For instance, how can it be that humanity excludes part of itself? To exclude the *Muselmann* from notions of humanity would be to do just that. That would be impossible however, because the *Muselmann* actually helps us define humanity. In showing us how little we actually know, we see more clearly the nature of humanity. This mimics the way Maimonides claims we gain knowledge of God: through negation. By negating certain qualities, one can gain a more intimate knowledge of God. Similarly, the *Muselmann* negates the qualities we thought constituted humanity, allowing us to see some of our mistakes. While we still may not know exactly all that constitutes humanity, we know a bit more about what it can and cannot do. It cannot exclude innocent human beings from its notion, but it can be transformed and suspended into a form and place imperceptible; a place that, hitherto the existence of the *Muselmann*, was unexplored. That is why survivors managed, in whatever way they did, to survive with their humanity intact. It is also why the *Muselmann* cannot possibly be devoid of humanity altogether; because humanity exists in a fluid way that cannot be confined to a singular notion. It cannot exist only on the basis of our recognition of it; for such a notion of humanity would require judgments akin to those commissioned by Hitler and the SS themselves. The fluidity of humanity means that survivors sustained their humanity not only in one way, but in varying ways that were highly individualized.

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