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Hospitality

by David O'Sullivan

(Philosophy 1110)

If a person were chosen, at random, to ponder the question “What is the opposite of cruelty?” it would not be surprising for him or her to quickly answer with “kindness.” Not to say that people do not think, but most may not see the question from a philosophical point of view. It is easy for one to assume the answer is “kindness” because it may, at first, appear to be the “black-and-white” solution. The opposite of bad is good. The opposite of up is down. But the opposite of cruelty has more profundity and significance than the aforementioned examples.

The word “cruelty” comes from the Latin *crudus*, which roughly translates to physical harm and bloodshed. In its simplest form, this is what cruelty is. According to philosopher Philip P. Hallie, however, the worst kind of cruelty is less of a physical attack and more of an emotional one. In his work titled “From Cruelty to Goodness,” he states that “. . . cruelty (what the anti-cruelty societies usually call ‘substantial cruelty’) involves the maiming of a person’s dignity, the crushing of a person’s self-respect.”¹ In other words, Hallie is saying that to be cruel is to damage a person in such a way that he or she feels worthless. After experiencing cruelty, kindness cannot restore one’s dignity or self-respect.

Cruelty is an experience with which the human race bears great familiarity. If one were to expand upon Hallie’s definition of cruelty, this experience originates from within human ranks as one that is inflicted upon each other. This human act of cruelty has been witnessed throughout history, and can be illustrated by the actions of world leaders in recent decades. One such example can be seen through the result of Adolf Hitler’s rule of Germany during the Second World War. Elie Wiesel, a holocaust survivor, describes his experience as a prisoner in his work *Night*. He states that, “We were incapable of thinking of anything at all. Our senses were blunted; everything was blurred as in a fog. It was no longer possible to grasp anything. The instincts of self-preservation, of self-defense, of pride, had all deserted us”². Elie’s explanation of the prisoners’ feelings, or lack thereof, conveys what it is like to have suffered cruelty. Wiesel recalls that while being forced to run during frigid winter nights, the guards would shout at them to run faster, calling them “swine” and “filthy sons of bitches”³. This type of experience is beyond physical pain, and no amount of kindness could equal an opposing force.

Imbalance of power, according to Hallie, is the key factor which preserves cruelty. He believed that when both the victim and the victimizer believe the victim to be a lesser person, cruelty will remain. One who has lost the willpower and confidence to end the cruelty they are enduring may need strength from an outside source. It is imperative that this outside source carries the power necessary to eradicate cruelty. This outside source of power is, in fact, the opposite of cruelty, and it closely relates to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

In his writing “Respect for Persons,” Kant highlights the importance of treating people as an end. In this he means that there is final value in every person, and one should not use another only as a means to benefit themselves. Things, on the other hand, only have relative worth and can be used as a means only.⁴ One could argue that if a person were only ever used, and not appreciated for his or her value as a human, they would be experiencing cruelty. To know the opposite of cruelty, one must understand the value of a person and the value of hospitality.

“Hospitality” is a word derived from the Latin term *hospes*, which means “host,” “stranger” or “guest.” Generally speaking, the term “hospitality” is used when referring to a host treating a guest

with respect and providing for his or her needs. For an act to be considered hospitable, a “host” and “guest” are not required in the literal sense. Simply treating a stranger with respect and accepting them as a person is demonstrating hospitality. The understanding of this concept of hospitality carries significance because it gives insight as to why Hallie believes it to be the opposite of cruelty.

Hallie describes the opposite of cruelty as hospitality. He sees hospitality as a method of eliminating imbalance of power, which is essential in the ending of cruelty. While kindness may play a role in showing hospitality, there is much more to being hospitable. Showing hospitality to a person is to treat them with respect, cordiality, and sincerity. It is the recognition that people exist not only as a means, but as an end. To someone whose self-respect and dignity have been crushed, hospitality from another person can have rehabilitative effects. Hospitality can restore a person’s humanity, dignity and sense of self-worth. It can give them the strength they lacked to fight against cruelty. For these reasons Hallie claims that, in fact, hospitality is the opposite of cruelty.

To reiterate, not all opposites may be as concrete as the opposite of left, or the opposite of black. While many may have differing opinions on the opposite of cruelty, I doubtlessly believe that Hallie is veracious in saying it is hospitality. Kindness alone would certainly never harm a person’s self-respect; however it does not have the same effect as hospitality. Cruelty is nothing short of dehumanization, it is the elimination of a person’s self-respect and dignity. Hospitality is the elimination of imbalance of power, and is likewise the restoration of the previously mentioned human traits.

References

¹ Philip P. Hallie, “From Cruelty to Goodness,” in Keith W. Krasemann, ed., *Quest for Goodness* (Acton: Copley Publishing, 2011), 28-41.

² Elie Wiesel and Marion Wiesel, *Night* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, a Division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 45.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, “Respect for Persons,” in Keith W. Krasemann, ed., *Quest for Goodness* (Acton: Copley Publishing, 2011), 69-73.