

First Place Senior Essay
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I Believe in Humanity, but I Fear We Might Lose It

Among a sea of human tragedy and treachery in Elie Wiesel's *Night*, one moment of his memoir has not left my thoughts. It was a moment where time stopped before me, where my conception of pain and horror shattered before my eyes. As his starved and cold fourteen-year-old self was driven away on the train tracks out of Gleiwitz, Elie Wiesel witnessed bread rain down from above, thrown into his cattle cage from the onlookers. Bread crusts, the ultimate sustenance among a group of starved individuals. He witnessed a son kill his father for a crust, a miniscule hope for survival. Some may say that the men in that cattle cage were no longer men. Sometimes, I fear they may be right.

I fear that humanity is something that can be stolen. It can become as ephemeral and impermanent as youth, clothes, and money. The Holocaust proved that the human spirit, something that once seemed to exist within, without a price tag or vulnerability, was threatened and destroyed.

Yet human virtue never disappeared from the experience around the Holocaust. Each SS soldier did not come without a liberator. Each bystander and "bread thrower" had its fair share of individuals who aided others when no one asked. Each destruction of a human soul was never without a preserving one, and this dichotomy appeared in Wiesel's own experience. I see it in the way that Juliek did not join the millions of dead without a final song. I see it in the way that Elie Wiesel would rather die with his father than live without him.

When I picture myself in these defining experiences, I wonder about the extent to which I would aid a Jewish family, if I would allow them to hide with me, if I would keep quiet

about a family's location from the soldiers at my door, if I would risk my family's safety to prevent the death of another. I believe people can justify moral virtue in either path, whether it be saving strangers or protecting one's own family. In an honest evaluation, I can only see myself protecting my own family at any costs. I would show absolute loyalty to whomever I need in order to preserve my own life and the lives of those closest to me, only aiding those in danger when it was absolutely free of risk. And, although I would retroactively prefer to be on the other side of history, the morally virtuous side of selflessness, I believe that the high stakes would push me to the side of self-protection. Nonetheless, the two narratives of moral virtue remain in conflict.

Philosophers throughout history have attempted to fight this ambiguity and create ethical systems that produce the most ethical human action. Immanuel Kant's universality test, which hypothetically made the action in question a universal norm, can determine the virtue in that choice. In a scenario where the bystander is universalized, the world would be consumed by the vices of ignorance, in which the need for self-preservation would condone perpetual genocide. There would be no regulation or questioning of actions, and the world would fall into moral decay. According to Kant, my instinct of self-preservation is unethical, because this mentality has enabled the killings of millions of people. Essentially, Kant asks us to remove ourselves from the bystander mindset at the risk of our own death, a cause that I want to believe in and a cause that I can never guarantee I would have followed.

Most people can agree where the true heroes stood in the Holocaust: Those who risked their lives for others. Yet, the countless other men and women who remained silent and irresponsive in the face of human destruction only prove that ethical ambiguity was replete in the hearts of many people. What I fear is that the Holocaust destroyed humanity in another dimension. By virtue of inaction, all bystanders have destroyed themselves in the same way that the Nazis destroyed the spirits of men, women, and children. I fear that

the man in the cattle cart, a man who killed his own father without a moment's hesitation for a crust of bread, exists within us, too.