

Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* professes that dehumanization of both slaves and slaveholders is the most brutalizing effect of slavery. Furthermore, Douglass claims that the valuation of the slaves (pg. 27) shows this brutality far more than the beating of Aunt Hester (pg. 4). This is further supported by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which attributes the state of one's character to habit and deed.

For clarification purposes, when I refer to having "humanity" I am not necessarily referring to having some humaneness. I am referring more to having something of being a human – good or bad. The slaveholders were cruel people and in mentioning their humanity I do not mean they are upstanding people, just that they are humans.

Aristotle claims that "we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, and brave by doing brave acts" (lines 102-103). We learn by doing and by doing we learn. Therefore, habits are essential to maintaining virtue or character. These habits define us. The slaves and slaveholders are forced to form habits that dehumanize slaves and slaveholders alike; otherwise, the entire system of slaveholding would collapse. This principle is what shows the true difference between the beating of Aunt Hester and the valuation of the "property."

The largest difference between these two scenes is how the slaves and slaveholders view themselves and others. Aunt Hester rebels against her master because she still views herself as a person capable of choice. She prefers Lloyd's Ned to the Master and acts upon this preference. By acting upon this preference, Aunt Hester asserts her humanity. By Extending Aristotle's "State of Character" to include the "State of Being," we can link this deed to the state of being human.

Captain Anthony was angry with Aunt Hester because at some level he saw a small piece of humanity in her. A horse fighting with another horse may be annoying to a horse owner, but it is not worth beating a horse over. After all, the horse is just an animal. If this same rule applied to Aunt Hester, then Captain Anthony would have no reason to completely lose his temper. But the Captain was jealous of Lloyd's Ned because Aunt Hester favored him over the Captain. The Captain must give her some semblance of having choice – even if he does not want her to have choice – and his jealousy drives him to brutally beat Aunt Hester. The Captain beats Aunt Hester out of jealousy and in so doing becomes a more jealous man. Not only that, but to become so jealous of a slave requires the slave to be at some small level considered a pseudo-equal. This would mean that some small shrivel of humanity is still left in the Captain.

Thus, even though the scene with Aunt Hester is extremely brutal, both Aunt Hester and the Captain at some level see Aunt Hester as human. This recognition of her humanity – however

small it may be – also gives the Captain a tiny piece of humanity as well. The valuation scene, on the other hand, removes even this tiny sliver of humanity.

The slaveholders are ranking “men and women, old and young, married and single...with horses, sheep, and swine” (pg. 27). When the slaveholders behold the slaves they see nothing more than animals. By treating humans as animals, they turn themselves into animals. They cannot recognize their fellows as humans any more and because of this are able to witness even more brutality without feeling guilt or empathy. This view of people as talking animals causes many issues when mulatto children are born to slaveholders. Suddenly, a tiny sliver of humanity begins to creep back into their hearts – after all, they are still the children of their fathers. This creeping humanity must be exterminated quickly, before the practice of slaveholding can be damaged, and so often the children are sent away or are beaten even harder than the other slaves (pg. 2-3). It is similar to how male lions will kill and eat male lion cubs because one day they may pose a threat. It is *animalistic* behavior, exemplified by the outright treatment of men as livestock.

The slaves, on the other hand, *allow* themselves to be treated as livestock. They are being controlled by the “irrational” part of their souls (*Ethics*, lines 80-89). The vegetative division of the soul, the part that is “common to all species and not specifically human” (*Ethics*, line 81) guides their lives. They have no time to expand their knowledge or dwell upon how their lives could be improved. They live as animals, and are used to being treated as such. They lose the part that makes them human: the rational part of the soul. The slaves choose to ignore their humanity because the slaveholders have taken that humanity from them. The slaves are then no better than animals, by their own estimation as well as their masters’.

Thus, it is the valuation scene that is more brutal than the beating of Aunt Hester. The valuation scene removes all humanity, whereas some small semblance of humanity remains with Aunt Hester and even the Captain.

When I began preparing to write this essay I wanted to look up what exactly the definition of brutal was. I found it to be “savagely violent.” Using this definition, of course, the beating of Aunt Hester is extremely brutal. It was horrifying to read. In comparison, as awful as the valuation scene was, it felt more “okay.” After all, the people were at least not getting beaten. Preparing for this essay made me think a lot more about brutality.

It is true, Aunt Hester’s scene is physically violent – and very much so. But when I thought about the mental and emotional scars that would arise out of the valuation, I was terrified. I imagined what it might be like to know that I was no better than a cow, to be ranked side by side with both my friends and family *and* livestock. When I tried to think about it, I could not

comprehend it. It was such an alien thought. Of *course* I am better than a cow! Yet these people were so downtrodden that they saw themselves as animals.

In some ways I felt like a bad person for being “more okay” with the valuation scene than the scene with Aunt Hester. But I thought about it a bit more, and realized that the level of abstraction created by time would make any of it hard to understand. I am sure the beating of Aunt Hester was more violent than I could ever comprehend. It changed the way I viewed Douglass’ *Narrative* overall. Now I view Douglass’ *Narrative* as an opportunity to peek into history through a real account, instead of just another autobiography. His tale did not apply to just one man, but to many, and should be remembered as such.

I kept this in mind while writing this essay. It helped me to see the connections between Aristotle and Douglass and to better understand just how brutalizing all of slavery was.

But this specific type of brutalization is still alive and well. It may not be to the degree that it was in slavery, but this dehumanization is still happening. A simple example is statistics. When people become numbers, they are no longer people. We do not feel for the numbers as we feel for those we can see. The people mentioned in statistics are not people. This thought belittles our own humanity. Another example is advertisements, such as television commercials. Many are set up to make the men think the product helps to get together with women. Instead of talking about the actual merits of the product, advertisers appeal to base emotions and reactions. The people are just animals following instinct rather than rational thinking beings. This dehumanization is one of the worst in today’s society. It makes me wonder what exactly our society will become. While we care about progress, we also seem to head backwards in some regards. But I have hope, because history shows that things can change. Slavery has been mostly eradicated, and is continually being stopped. Dehumanization is a problem but one that can be conquered.