Violence Against Bullies

Aaron, a high school student, dreaded coming to school each day because Ryan, a fellow student, bullied him. Ryan belittled and humiliated Aaron by making fun of his interests, his clothes, and his racial background. However Ryan never physically hurt Aaron. Still, the taunts began to wear Aaron down. He tried asking Ryan nicely to stop bothering him, especially about his family background, but this just made things worse. Once Ryan knew which insults stung most, he was able to demean Aaron with ruthless efficiency. Aaron contemplated soliciting the help of teachers and school administrators, but worried that doing so would be ineffective: the adults might have scolded Ryan and even handed out some minor punishments, but Aaron doubted that these measures would have made the bullying stop. In fact, Aaron imagined that this strategy might lead Ryan and others to mock him for "tattling" and "crying" for help.

One day, Aaron decided that he was going to take another kind of stand. He walked right up to Ryan in the cafeteria and punched him squarely in the face as students, who had stood by each day as Ryan bullied Aaron, looked on. In the   aftermath of the punch, many of the bystanders who had been too afraid to speak out on Aaron's behalf now felt glad that Aaron had fought back. Others, however, felt differently. "Violence is never the answer," one teacher said. "You stooped down to his level and could have made things even worse! There's no shame in asking for help; you should have come to me instead."

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Is Aaron's punch morally permissible? Why or why not?
2. Is it wrong for bystanders to feel happy that Aaron stood up for himself in this way?
3. Do the consequences of the punch affect its justification? For example, if the punch succeeds in stopping the bullying, does this make a moral difference? What if the punch makes the bullying worse?