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A Burlesque of What We Should Be

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On the night of Friday, November 13, coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris, France, cost the lives of at least 129 people while many more were wounded. The assaults, carried out by radical Islamist group ISIS, shocked the entire world. Just this month, suicide bombings in Lebanon and Egypt took the lives of around 50 people. Attacks like these are almost daily occurrences in war-torn countries like Syria, where many victims are innocent children. Syria's citizens go to extreme measures in an effort to escape the brutal violence happening in their homeland.

Hearing news like these baffles me every time. Throughout the weekend, social media was inundated with posts about the attacks, calling out for solidarity towards those affected. One post stuck out for me: it detailed the latest events around the world and ended with the line "This world scares me." Indeed, it scares me too.

When I first read *On the Sufferings of the World* by German thinker Arthur Schopenhauer, it seemed unnecessarily pessimistic and coming out of a place of pure bitterness. However, his thinking makes sense to me now. It conflicts with the view of the world I usually have, where I think of suffering as unfortunate but with a hidden purpose. I often refer to Martin Luther King Jr's popular quote, "Only in the darkness can you see the stars" or the saying "Everything happens for a reason" to, in some extent, justify why bad things happen to good people. But in light of these recent events, I can't help but feel so incredibly naïve to think this way. The beliefs I hold are put to the test. I find it unfathomable how God could let awful things like this happen so much unless His idea of fun is some sick joke at humanity's expense. What could possibly be a good reason for the immense suffering that goes on? Schopenhauer says,

There are two things which make it impossible to believe that this world is the successful work of an all-wise, all-good, and, at the same time, all-powerful Being; firstly, the misery which abounds in it everywhere; and secondly, the obvious imperfection of its highest product, man, who is a burlesque of what he should be. (Schopenhauer 103).

This perspective is the exact opposite of what the humanist Giovanni Pico della Mirandola proposes in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, which is that “man is, with complete justice, considered and called a great miracle and a being worth of all admiration” (Pico della Mirandola 76). I can’t agree with his statement. The atrocities committed by human beings around the world are evidence that man cannot be the best of a good God’s creation.

I think we, humans, have failed as a race. The world we were given offers so much, yet we take it for granted and insist on draining it of its resources. The kind of brutality we see today is by no means anything new, as war and terrorism are as old as time. Pico della Mirandola, when stating that man is “the free and proud shaper of [his] own being” so that it can shape his life into whatever he desires (77), fails to take into account man’s sinful nature and his propensity to do bad instead of good. So Pico’s idea of our free will being our biggest and most sacred asset seems to me just idealistic, since when given the choice, man seldom chooses the right one. If God did make us, I can’t imagine he wanted the gem of His creation to behave.

I know that good does exist in this world and that man can be kind and selfless. I know our free will has as much potential in creating beauty than it does in destroying it. It is the triumph of the latter that worries and scares me. The idea that we should just focus on the bright side, to me, is not a good way to live. In my opinion, we should see both equally. We should support and encourage the good, of course, but we must acknowledge both sides and also fight the bad. It’s just difficult to do so when our well-intentioned efforts seem pointless; when for every one noble act, ten evil ones seem to happen.

I wonder what events made Schopenhauer have the outlook he had about life, and I wonder if any acts of random kindness ever made him change his mind or at least, contemplate the idea that the world is not “a penitentiary” (Schopenhauer 104) and that one can find beauty in it. I wonder if the global outrage towards the recent terrorist attacks will fade in a matter of weeks and with it, my new pessimistic views of the world. I wonder which option is worse: to feed the fatalistic outlook on life, or focus on the nice things while forgetting about the suffering going on. Is it possible to find a balance between the two?