

THE PROBLEM WITH PESSIMISM



By: *Issam Ismail*

It can be hard to be an optimist in today's world. We are constantly flooded with news stories of terrible events, and it is true: the world is a terrible place for many unfortunate people. For example:

The UN estimated that in 2017 there were about 68.5 million forcibly displaced individuals on the planet. The highest level recorded since World War II and its immediate aftermath. To put that in perspective that is higher than the entire population of the United Kingdom (66.02 million in 2017).

According to the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, we are currently "2 minutes to midnight," the closest the clock has ever been to Doomsday. This is as close as it was in 1953 at the height of the Cold War.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reported in 2014 that more than 1.3 billion people (18.5% of the earth's population) live in extreme poverty, earning less than \$1.25 a day. In 2017, 1 in 26 children born did not make it to their fifth birthday, meaning a total of 5.4 million children died in that year alone.

Global warming alone poses the most dire problem currently facing humanity. Professor David Reay, an emissions expert at the University of Edinburgh, said to The Guardian in 2017 "The need for concerted action on climate change has never been so stark nor the stakes so high." In 2016 CO₂ levels in the atmosphere officially passed 400 ppm or the "carbon threshold," meaning we have gone past the point of no return; our planet is being destroyed and yet only scant efforts are being made to stop it. This is but a modicum of the many terrible injustices being committed everyday.

Apologies if this information dampened your mood; it definitely dampened mine. These terrible facts coupled with the rise of online journalism and the worldwide accessibility of phone cameras allows disasters to be broadcasted almost immediately to millions via online news sources and social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. We're constantly flooded with one tragedy after another, unable to catch our breath before another one pops up on our newsfeed. It can be easy to fall into the feeling of pessimism. Everything is terrible. The world is (literally) on fire and there's very little you can do about it.

However, plunging into this trap of thinking is ignorant and in many cases is self-indulgent. It wipes away any form of responsibility or obligation for one to act upon the world and attempt to change it, even if it's in the most miniscule of ways. Pessimism is to surrender yourself to the current existing circumstance, it is an acknowledgment of defeat against the seemingly monolithic and unfair forces acting upon this world. In many ways, it bears a resemblance to conservatism, an ideology disinterested in the future, preferring a romanticised image of the past. Although a pessimist and conservative may vary wildly on political issues, the outcome of their stances is the same, bitter defeatism. Apathy in working towards a kinder, more just world is unacceptable. The Quran itself stresses the importance of civic duty and resisting inequity:

O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even though it be against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, be he rich or poor, Allah is a better Protector to both. So follow not the lusts of your hearts, lest you may avoid justice, and if you distort your witness or refuse to give it, verily, Allah is Ever Well-Acquainted with what you do. (An-Nisaa' 4: 135)

For many people such as the refugees and victims of unnecessary brutal wars and occupations, those living in poverty or under the prejudices of discrimination against their identity, people living unhappy and unfair lives, and even us, the relatively privileged people living in first world countries, pessimism isn't a luxury that can be afforded. Our wealth cannot protect us from the current catastrophe of global warming, and if things keep going at this rate then we will lament the days when instead of being pessimistic we could have enacted change. This dwelling on the "futility" of action is telling people that they cannot hope for a better future, they cannot get the justice they deserve. Rather they can accept their current situation and be grateful for what they have. Anyone with basic human empathy can realize the absurdity of such a demand and realize the inherent inhumanity of pessimistic thinking.