

On the Need to Think Clearly

One has to pity—a little—politicians obliged to react publicly to events such as those on November 13 in Paris. They can't pass over them in silence: but what can they say that does not sound banal, hollow, and obvious? They can only get it wrong, not right.

That does not excuse inexactitude and evasion, however. French president François Hollande called the attacks cowardly, but if there was one thing the attackers were not (alas, if only they had been), it was cowardly. They were evil, their ideas were deeply stupid, and they were brutal: but a man who knows that he is going to die in committing an act, no matter how atrocious, is not a coward. With the accuracy of a drone, the president homed in on the one vice that the attackers did not manifest. This establishes that bravery is not by itself a virtue, that in order for it to be a virtue it has to be exercised in pursuit of a worthwhile goal. To quote an eminent countryman of the president, Pascal: *Travaillons, donc, à bien penser: voilà le principe de la morale*. Let us labor, then, to think clearly: that is the principle of morality.

President Obama was not much better. He made reference in his statement to “the values we all share.” Either he was using the word “we” in some coded fashion, in spite of having just referred to the whole of humanity, or he failed to notice that the attacks were the direct consequence of the obvious fact that we—that is to say the whole of humanity—do *not* share the same values. If we shared the same values, politics would be reduced to arguments about administration.

Politicians are not the only ones, however, to utter worse than clichés (which have at least the merit of being true): the Irish pop star turned guru, Bono, said that the events on November 13 were an attack on music. Mr. Bono might as well have said that this was an attack on restaurants, or even on

Cambodian cuisine, or for that matter on football. Apparently, in his view, if only the French government outlawed music, the terrorists would achieve their ends and would therefore desist from future attacks.

On the night of the events, I followed the coverage in the *Guardian*, the British liberal newspaper whose website is one of the most popular of its type in the world. When the acknowledged toll of the attacks was still “only” 40, the paper published an article saying, *en passant*, that the vast majority of Muslims abhorred these attacks. I do not exclude the possibility that this is so, but we do not know, and can probably never know, that it is so: for if Queen Elizabeth I had “no desire to make windows into men’s souls,” we have no ability to do so, certainly on this question. But the *Guardian* wanted it to be so, and therefore, to its own satisfaction, it was so. This is a kind of magical thinking that persists in a supremely scientific age, and is dangerous because completely ineffective.

If ever there were a time to keep Pascal’s words in mind, this is it.

First published in