



Thought For The Day

Transcript

Nigel Warburton 15th February

I was on the train to London a few days ago when, as we were passing through a station at high speed, there was a disconcerting jolt ... we went over something on the rails. The train carried on for a few hundred yards, and then stopped... and we waited. There had been an obstruction on the track, we were told, and we had to get clearance. An 'incident' had occurred. Nothing more specific. After an hour and a half of waiting, and learning that the driver had had to be replaced, most of us realised what had happened: someone had thrown themselves under the train.

At this point selfish concerns about being late for appointments evaporated considerably. Most people's thoughts, I suspect, were with the train driver and with the friends and family of whoever had taken this desperate step. But not for too long. We had to get back to our lives despite having been unwilling accomplices in someone else's suicide.

When we eventually pulled into Paddington, we hustled into the underground and got on with whatever we had to do. That's what being alive is like.

It's a cliché, but still true, that death is all around us, often painful death, but we are shielded from it most of the time. We rarely encounter death or even give it much thought. But perhaps we should.

As a philosopher I think it is something worth thinking about quite hard. I like the classical idea that philosophy should teach us how to accept death. But it can take a real death to focus the mind.

If, like me, you believe that death is the end of all experience, then there is great consolation in thinking that when it has happened there won't be anything else. That's it. Epicurus was surely right when he said: when I am there death is not, and when death is there, I am not'. As he pointed out, we don't worry about the eternity before we existed, why be concerned about the eternity during which we won't exist in the future?

Atheists often describe believers as indulging in wishful thinking when they claim that there is a wonderful afterlife to come. But from my perspective never-ending life would be a kind of hell that would remove meaning from everything I did, like an interminable piece of music that never reached its final chord. If wishful thinking is believing something that would be pleasanter than the truth, then this is a misnomer. I don't want what the philosopher Bernard Williams called the sheer tedium of immortality - even if it were an option.

What is bad about death is what it does to other people: the ones left behind to grieve, and experience absence. Slow death, and pain in dying are terrible facts of the human condition. But death itself is nothing to fear. Paradoxically, death, like love, makes life worth living...