

Polly the Parrot

by Theodore Dalrymple

Most people sometimes get things wrong—I myself have sometimes mistaken the times of trains—but there are some people who get almost everything wrong. They are tone-deaf to reality, as it were, but they are not entirely useless, especially when they write, as many of them seem compelled to do. You have only to read them to know what cannot possibly be the case: they have a kind of negative authority.

Among them is a British journalist called Polly Toynbee, a scion of that most distinguished family. She writes regularly in the British liberal-Left newspaper, the *Guardian*, and she is compassion made prose—dull prose, it may be, but prose nonetheless. Nobody suffers in the world but she feels for him, in the same way, more or less, as God knows and cares about sparrows. The wonder is that she gets any sleep.

One of her more recent pieces expressed the opinion that we ought to get terrorism into proper perspective. Amen to that: is there anything we ought *not* to get into the proper perspective? But the question is, what *is* the proper perspective? As Hamlet would have put it, “Aye, there’s the rub.”

Well, Miss Toynbee tells us that many more people die on our roads than die by terrorist attack, *ergo* road safety is more important than national security. Since our chances of being killed in a road accident are so much higher than those of being killed by a terrorist, it is—if we are rational—of traffic that we should be the more afraid, and therefore worry more about.

Where does one begin? Indeed, is it worth beginning? It is unlikely, after all, that anyone will have his mind changed by anything that one writes. Those sympathetic to Miss Toynbee’s

view are not going to say, "Aha, now I see what she says is ridiculous!" Either you see it at once, or you don't see it at all. Perhaps the most appropriate response is just a short and contemptuous "Hah!"

However, nonsense should not go entirely unopposed. Even on Miss Toynbee's view of the world, in which, alas, she is far from alone, what she says is wrong. For in 2014 there were roughly 250 times the number of deaths from malaria (about 450,000) as there were deaths on British roads (1775). Therefore we ought to be 250 times more concerned about malaria than about deaths on British roads.

Of course, this rather depends on who we are; but as Miss Toynbee generally takes the whole of humanity for her parish, it is no argument that malaria causes very few deaths in Britain, because one death for her is the moral equivalent of any other death wherever it takes place. In this she is a little like Australia's greatest living philosopher, Peter Singer, who (if I read him aright) once wrote that we should be as concerned about a preventable child death on the other side of the world as about one in our own town or street. Therefore if it cost \$10,000 to save a child's life in Australia, and that \$10,000 could save 100 lives elsewhere, no matter where, Australians should spend the \$10,000 on saving the lives elsewhere. The great philosopher admitted that we might sometimes be allowed a slight partiality for our own children, but he did not say how slight; however, we should be grateful that he did allow at least a faint glimmer of sense to enter his worldview, it presumably having occurred to him that a world in which parents did *not* have a slight preference for their own children would be about as warm as the surface of Pluto.

Let us just return to the question of precisely how concerned we should be about road safety in Britain. As a passenger on a bus, I am, according to the statistics, about 370 times less likely to be killed on the roads for each mile travelled than

a motorcyclist, and even as the driver of a car fifty-six times less likely. Cyclists are at very nearly as great an increased risk as motorcyclists. Even pedestrians are (on this way of measuring things) nineteen times more likely to be killed than drivers or passengers of cars, and 126 times more likely than passengers in buses.

On the other hand, in absolute numbers twice as many drivers of cars are killed as motorcyclists or pedestrians, and about seven times as many as cyclists.

Nor is this all. People between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five are many times more likely to be killed than people between the ages of fifty and fifty-nine. There are geographical variations as well. In absolute numbers, the most fatalities occur on country roads, but the most serious non-fatal injuries on roads in towns. Should we be more concerned about the safety of rural or urban roads? How many serious accidents equal one death?

There are approximately five times as many deaths from cancer of the pancreas in Britain as from road accidents, and approximately fifty times as many from ischaemic heart disease. In fact there are many diseases which cause many more deaths than road accidents—exactly how many each disease kills depends on how you classify them.

How, then, is one to express a degree of concern about anything and everything precisely in proportion to what Miss Toynbee calls the real risk? It would probably take a supercomputer to work out all known risks from a single point of view: but we do not even have a single point of view. A tennis player has more to fear from a knee injury than a barfly. Moreover, it is perfectly obvious that if we ordered our priorities according to a universal scale of importance, even if such a scale were possible (which it is not), we should live in a deeply impoverished world and culture. Not even the taxonomist of butterflies or the bibliographer of

T.S. Eliot would claim that his was the most important subject in the world, and yet we should all be much the poorer if nobody devoted himself to arcane matters.

It is as well that Miss Toynbee was born after the Second World War, for she would have urged the population to get the dangers of the Blitz into perspective. After all, fewer were killed in the bombings during the entire war than died of heart disease in one year of it. If only the government had spent on the primary prevention of heart disease the money it spent on aircraft and other air defences, think how many British lives would have been saved! What a missed opportunity!

For most people, no doubt, though not, apparently, for Miss Toynbee, there is also a considerable moral difference between car accidents and terrorism. Generally speaking not even the worst drivers, or the drunkards, actually intend to kill their victims. Moreover, if there is going to be motorised vehicular traffic at all there will be road accidents: the death rate will never be nil. (Interestingly, for every mile travelled on the roads in 1949, the year of my birth, the risk of being killed was 320 times what it is now, despite there being now at least ten times more vehicles on the road.) Some fatality—though its precise extent cannot be estimated—is accepted as an inevitable consequence of motorised transport. But we do not accept even a single death by terrorism in concert halls, however terrible the music played in them might be.

If Miss Toynbee really cared for the cyclists, motorcyclists and pedestrians mown down in such numbers in Britain and elsewhere, the first thing she would do would seek to prohibit cycling, motorcycling and walking in the streets, especially by those over the age of sixty, who are at such high risk of accident. If people really *had* to move around in an irresponsible fashion, it ought to be by the safest means possible (for Miss Toynbee tells us that it is the

government's duty to nudge us into our own safety), namely by bus that collected them directly from their door. If this were to be done, about a thousand lives a year would be saved.

Injury is a bad thing, particularly if preventable, and ought to be prevented if possible. The largest single cause of injury in the Western world is the playing of sport, therefore the playing of sport ought to be prohibited. This would do wonders for minds as well as bodies, and would have the added advantage of reducing half the population to complete silence through lack of anything else to talk about.

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