

Is fear of death itself a rational preoccupation?

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The irony of fearing death is beyond comprehension, in that so many people continue to fear death, yet they also know that death is the only certainty in life (Nyatanga, 2001). The other intriguing point is how possible it is for someone to fear death when they have not experienced it themselves? In addition, one might want to ask, what exactly do people fear when they fear death? These fundamental questions are the basis for the following arguments on whether fear of death itself is rational enough for us to engage in.

However, it must be emphasized that the ideal of rationality, and its justification as the pure source of truth, is beyond the scope of this discussion. Furthermore, the arguments will be biased towards the assumption that death itself creates a state of non-existence and nothingness in those who are presumed dead.

The fear of death is well documented and has been measured by researchers for sometime now, e.g. the Collett-Lester Fear of Death Scale (Lester, 1994). It appears that fear of death is experienced by most people with a developed concept of life. Although these people acknowledge and accept that life has a beginning and an end, they still fear the end — death.

Fear of death may also be influenced by what meaning people place on death, e.g. for themselves and those loved ones they leave behind when they die. Although it is not yet clear what constitutes fear of death exactly, there is, however, a genuine belief and consensus that fear of death does exist and has a definable base that can be quantified.

Why most people continue to fear death

The fact that death is probably the only true certainty in life and yet most people continue to fear it, seems to have no justifiable and logical basis. People who

continue to fear death without having experienced it, prompts the question about the logical basis of such fear, and what exactly they do fear. One possible explanation is that, death, as we know it, deprives life of its joys and happiness, goals most people try to achieve. Death disrupts the possibility of further life and the realization of one's aspirations.

The goal of happiness and its significance can be traced back to Aristotle (384–322 BC), who maintained that it (happiness) is the highest good; the highest good is what is valued for our sake and not for the sake of anything else. However, using the doctrine from Epicurus (341–271 BC) and the Epicureans, happiness alone is not sufficient as a final state of being. Happiness is, therefore, associated with pleasure which is perceived as the ultimate state of exaltation.

There are two types of pleasures (moving and static) identified by the Epicureans, and pleasure itself is also seen as satisfying one's desires. The moving pleasures are associated with the process of satisfying the desire, e.g. eating a cheese burger when one is hungry. The actual process of eating would involve an active titillation of the senses of taste and associated physiology, which would, in turn, create the feeling that most people refer to as pleasure. It then follows that after the desires have been satisfied, maybe after a burger or two, and the person feels no need or desire for more, this state is itself pleasurable, and the Epicureans refer to this as static pleasure, which also happens to be the best pleasure one can achieve.

It is important to try and apply this idea of pleasure at different levels and not just the physical as provided in the example above. Psychological pleasures can encompass fond memories or regret over past mistakes or omissions, while fostering future confidence of pleasures to occur.

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'...the Epicureans believed strongly that all the happiness and pleasures can be destroyed by anxiety about the future, especially fear of death.'

This is important to understand, because the Epicureans believed strongly that all the happiness and pleasures can be destroyed by anxiety about the future, especially fear of death. If this destruction was to be avoided it was, therefore, imperative to banish fear about the future and death. The teaching was to face the future with confidence that one's desires will be met, which will lead to a state of ataraxia (total tranquillity) of mind. Given this position, it was also important equally to demonstrate that fear of death had no basis whatsoever in this life.

Is there a basis for fearing death without experiencing it?

The rational approach sees no logic in fearing something one has not experienced, because one has no real personal appreciation of that phenomenon. The case of fearing death when it has not occurred poses a great philosophical challenge, and Lucretius (341–271 BC) introduces the symmetry argument against fear of death. Lucretius, a poet in the Epicureans, argues that no-one fears the time before which one existed.

In other words, no-one is afraid of prenatal existence, because one is not aware of it. In this context, the time before which one existed (pre-birth) is relevantly like one's future non-existence (death). The central argument is that one cannot be affected negatively in either pre- or post-existence periods, as one has no experience of either. This point needs further discussion, and other people's views would be welcome.

Lucretius claims further that it is reasonable for one to fear something relevantly like what one does not fear only if one justifiably believes that the two things are different. To complicate it further, Lucretius goes on to state that, no-one justifiably believes that one's future non-existence is relevantly different from one's past prenatal non-existence. Therefore, it is not reasonable now to fear one's future non-existence, one's being dead and one's death.

Therefore, death, the most frightening of all bad things, is nothing and the rationale is given as follows: when we exist, death is not yet present and when death is present we do not exist. In this analogy, death is neither relevant to the living nor the dead.

To rehearse the point made earlier about being affected negatively by either prenatal

or post-death existence, it becomes crucial, if one was to refute the assertion, that proof is established of the difference between the two extreme existences. This was made by Nagel (1970) who argues that there is a difference between prenatal and posthumous non-existence. His argument is simply that, the time after a person's death is a time of which his death deprives him. It is a time in which, had he not died, he would be alive. Therefore, any death entails the loss of some life that its victim (the dead) would have led had he not died at that or any earlier point in time.

It can be concluded here that Nagel is suggesting implicitly that we cannot say something similar about birth, hence he exposes the asymmetry between prenatal and posthumous non-existence. However, what he does not deny is that the dead person has not got a concept of this time he has been deprived of once he is dead. In that case, Lucretius's argument seems to be more persuasive but only at a philosophical level, because in reality people still fear death.

What exactly do people fear when they fear death?

It is arguably not death itself that people fear, but what is associated with its arrival or presence. It is more the consequences of death than death itself that people fear. Death causes a multitude of losses and at different levels, e.g. social, psychological, emotional, physical and spiritual. The indiscriminate nature of death often leaves people with no control over their life and aspirations.

Some people believe in an afterlife, and may fear death, because it may not deliver the afterlife they were anticipating. There are several reasons for this fear, one of which could be premature death, and hence the dead was not well prepared to enter (or be entered into) an afterlife. However, the problem of talking about a premature death suggests that there is somewhat an acceptable point (mature death) when death is welcome.


It is difficult to reject the notion of an afterlife, since so many people report the experience. However, according to Williams (2005), the challenge is on the skeptics to prove its non-existence and explain it away as for example, a dying brain's mass hallucinating tunnels, or lights and voices. The question to ask here is if there is an afterlife, what type is it going to be, heavenly or hellish.

Williams believes in the principle that life is what you make it and he is convinced that the afterlife will be based on the same thinking. He gives an example: we can kill and end up in prison or we can do good things and live contently. Williams believes this principle belongs to hell and heaven, but, for us, what is even more important to consider is that if fear of death is justifiable, it would have to be the fear of going to hell.

Conclusion

Given all the above arguments, it is plausible to conclude that there still does not seem to be a rational basis for the dying person to fear death although, at the same time, there is valid argument in those around the dying person to fear death. As explained earlier, it is the aftermath of death, the meaning and impact of death that most surviving relatives tend to be worried about.

This philosophical commentary has provoked different avenues of thought and rightly served its purpose for this innovative journal. I sincerely hope that other readers will feel free and able to contribute their thoughts to this commentary, regardless of how diverse their views may be. What I have tried to do is present one view that challenges the entrenched belief that it is rational to continue to fear death.

It must be noted that this journal is proactive in affording such commentaries to happen, and for that we should all welcome this much needed platform. 

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