

Is It Rational To Fear Death?

The question in the title of this essay is best when treated as a rhetorical one, as this represents something we may only aspire in answering, but will never live to tell the tale until it is too late.

If we are to attempt to assess death and its impact on us, we can divide it into a number of stages, namely the process of dying, death itself, and the post death experience. The process of dying may be a painful one, which is notable area of concern. We may be fretful of this element of death not only for ourselves, but for our loved ones. In this case our fear is justified, as well as any feelings of loss for others after they have departed. This is a natural part of co-existing with others and is a process we can only try to have enough courage to endure. With improvements in medicine and pain relief, is this the part of it we may focus on? I would say no; palliative care for the elderly has never been better. The experience of ending ones years should not be the main focus of worry in contemplating the end. If life can be defined as a set of experiences, the process of illness and decay will detract from the sum total of what we can expect from a full life lived, but this is not an experience to be overly fearful of. Therefore we are left with the subjects of death itself and what happens after death, if anything.

The ancient Greek philosopher, Epicurus argued that we had no recollection of the world before life, and therefore should have no awareness of it afterwards. We live in the here and now. When we die, that is the end, but for now we live and it is that simple:

“Where I am, death is not; where death is, I am not.”

Therefore we did not realise anything before life started, so it should be the same after life has finished. One of his followers, Lucretius furthers the argument that the end of life is quite straightforward and we should not be afraid if we are level headed about it:

“Why doubt, then that the power to banish fear belongs to reason alone? Our life is one long struggle in the darkness; and as children in a dark room are terrified of everything, so we in broad daylight are sometimes afraid of things that are no more to be feared than the imaginary horrors that scare children in the dark.”

In looking to the experience after death as above it would appear that the prospect of non-existence should be similar to an eternal sleep and the peace it could deliver. It is only fear of the unknown that perturbs us. For believers in the afterlife also there is much to look forward to. These views are echoed by Socrates in *The Apology* as two most possible outcomes, each equally favourable.

At this stage we must ask ourselves about death in itself, and what it represents. We may not look forward to the end of the subjective experience, as this represents all we know. The end of life will bring with it an end to all that we can anticipate in this world. Every moment in our past recollections, present deeds and future desires will be gone. This, while not to be favoured, may not be sufficient reason to fear it, especially when it is certain and unavoidable. We could make the conclusion that, since life is a succession of mostly good experience and death stops life, death itself is bad. As Geoffrey Klempner points out, life on

other possible worlds may only consist of horrific, harsh and sad outcomes. We could conclude that death may not be a bad outcome in these places. The inhabitants of such worlds may disagree with us though and cling to the experience of living as much as we do. Therefore we cannot solely assume that we persist in living because of the myriad of good experience it offers. The will to live, instilled in us through thousands of generations of evolution, is too strong. Darwinism dictates, that through successive generations of the survival of the fittest, humans today should be finely tuned to living as long and as comfortably as possible. This is an aspect of our psychological make-up we need to recognise in trying to analyse the experience of fear.

One is prompted at this stage to examine our emotions. Is it fear, or more like terror? How appropriate are such feelings if the process of ceasing to be is as straightforward as Socrates, Lucretius or Epicurus suggest? Again we consider our loved ones and may worry about the welfare of them when we are gone. Should such feeling be ones akin to horror though? If death just represents life as a series of usually good experiences cut short, how appropriate are such strong emotions as dread and how rational are such feelings?

Shelly Kagan points to three conditions for fear of death to be appropriate. These are a) fear requires something bad, b) a good chance of this bad thing happening and c) there has to be some uncertainty about the bad thing happening. We have already ascertained that death in itself is not necessarily bad and there is every chance of it happening. We may only analyse the uncertain aspect of when death may arrive. Kagan uses the analogy of young students being at a party, not knowing exactly when their parents will arrive to bring them home. This may be between 11 pm and 1 am. The apprehension involved in anticipating a premature departure may incur some concern, and the departure itself may invoke feelings of anger, regret, resentment or sadness. However dread of the loss of more of life's opportunities, from this perspective, would be misplaced. Therefore we could conclude that fear of death itself is inappropriate and irrational.

In returning to Lucretius' comments on the child's fear of the dark as an aspect of the unknown, his judgements seem offhand. In fearing the dark as children, we gradually get used to it, overcoming our fears in the knowledge we will see the light again. With death, this will not always be so. Our own intrinsic personalised inductive belief that we go to bed every night, only to wake up the next day, are not being just challenged. They are destroyed, and there is nothing we can do about it. There will always be the uncertainty of flicking the switch one last time. Socrates described philosophy as preparation for death and the certainly the fear of death tests the philosopher's principles of rationality.

References

Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Edward Craig)

Yale courses: Death (Shelly Kagan), lecture 22. Fear of Death

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-lF-uMlfl6s>

Eternal Oblivion and Socrates

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eternal_oblivion

Suffering, possible worlds and the multiverse (Geoffrey Klempner)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LEOXqakeIIA>

Darwinism

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darwinism>