

**Should We Accept The Suggestion That If Death
Is The End It Must Be Irrational To Fear It?**

When considering this question, we must assume that the death and the fear are bound to the same subject; it may well be rational to fear a loved one's death, however the concern of this question is whether it is irrational to fear my own death, rather than that of another. Additionally, death must be defined as an infinitely lasting, total void of any subjective experience; immortality, or personal survival after death of any kind must be ignored. This essay will attempt to show that the conclusion set out in the question above does not apply in all cases. A number of well known arguments to the effect that fear of death must be irrational will be considered, each argument presented will be analysed, with the resultant conclusion being that a fear of death can be rational.

Death is a cause of fear to most. It has been suggested that our fear of death originates from an imagining of ourselves, in a dead state. This claim, if true, would certainly render our fear irrational, as in death there is no longer a 'self' to imagine. As Epicurus stated;

"Death ... is of no concern to us for while we exist death is not present, and when death is present, we no longer exist."¹

This is an argument that was taken up and expanded by his later follower, Lucretius in book three of his epic poem, *On The Nature Of Things*, in which he states that "One who no longer is cannot suffer"; an undeniable truth if we accept that death is indeed the end. Lucretius goes on to cite numerous examples, monologues and scenarios designed to show the irrationality of death related fears.

Nagel has reduced Lucretius' arguments to 3 'types of problem'². The first argument suggests that death is not a bad thing, that fear of death is irrational as death itself holds no positive or negative value, the reasoning being that an act cannot be bad if it is not 'positively unpleasant'³. As death doesn't actually do anything bad to us, we cannot think of it as an evil, and we therefore have no reason to fear it. Death merely deprives us of something that is good. The problem is perhaps best explained with the use of a metaphor; consider the act of taking something, we can see that the act of taking is neither good nor evil – its value is only discerned when looking at what is taken; if I take something of yours that you like, then the act of taking becomes bad, but if I take something that you don't like, then the act becomes good. In the same manner, the act of death is neutral; its value is based only on the value we place on life. In essence, death is only bad if we like life, and if we do consider life as a good, then the act of death becomes an evil, and one which can rationally be feared.

The second type of problem takes a different stance, examining the actual state of 'us' when dead – if we accept that death is, as posited in the introduction, a total void of all existence, then there is no-one who actually *is dead*. If this is so, then how and when can death occur to a particular subject? Surely we cannot rationally fear something that never happens to us? This problem seems to suggest that I have no cause to fear death because it is not really me who dies, or at least, once I am dead, it is not me. This issue cannot be sidestepped by suggesting that it is the process of dying that we fear, for as Nagel states "I should not really object to dying if it were not followed by death"⁴. Certainly, we may conclude that I have no reason to fear being dead, for I will never reach that state, but even accepting that it is not me who is dead, it is still rational for me to fear the end of my life, rather than the beginning of my death. Of course, we won't ever be able to think to ourselves "Oh, how I miss being alive" when we are dead, but that does not mean that, while alive, we have no cause to lament the future end of our life.

¹ Epicurus, (BCE 342-270), *Letter to Menoceus*

² Nagel, (CE 1937-), *'Mortal Questions'*, p4. Cambridge University Press, 1979.

³ Nagel, (CE 1937-), *'Mortal Questions'*, p4. Cambridge University Press, 1979.

⁴ Nagel, (CE 1937-), *'Mortal Questions'*, p3, footnote. Cambridge University Press, 1979.

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Finally, Lucretius offers the 'mirror argument'; if we take the state of death to be equal to the state before birth, how can we justify a fear of death, when there is no fear of the state before our birth? The obvious problem with this reasoning is it's lack of logic; the opposite conclusion can be drawn using the same reasoning; How can we justify our lack of fear of the state before our birth, given that we fear death so much? Whichever way you use the reasoning, the weakness is the same; it does not show one fear to be rational and the other not, it merely shows an inconsistency in our attitude towards the two states. A way to resolve this inconsistency is to examine the first premise; that the non-existence of death is equal to the non-existence before our birth. This equivocation is flawed, though there can be no doubt that the amount of existence is the same. The difference between the two states is one of temporality; it is a common view that the past is unchangeable, the future not so. As birth occurred in the past, we do not consider it possible to alter its date, compare this with the date of our death, which we like to think is not set in the same manner. If our view of time is correct, then our fear may be called rational, in the same way that fear of a future misfortune is rational whereas fear of past misfortune is not.

Nagel highlights another argument against this third problem, suggesting that;

"Distinct possible lives of a single person can diverge from a common beginning, but they cannot converge to a common conclusion from diverse beginnings"⁵

That is to say, we can conceive of the case where I may die tomorrow, next year, or ten years from now, and I would be the same person in all cases, however to say that I could have been born yesterday, last year or ten years ago and still be the same person is simply not coherent, even if we consider the state of each resultant life when at the equal ages. We were born at a certain time, and had we not been, our existence would be so radically different that it would not be appropriate to think of those alternate selves as synonymous with our current self. The opposite is not true of the multiple selves that were born at one point, but die at different times. This conclusion may be further supported by the Lockean idea that personal identity can be said to consist of continuity of memory – in the former case of an altering death date, the memories of each possible life would be consistent up to the earliest date of death, but in the latter, no memories would necessarily exist commonly between any of the possible lives, thus, the period after our death differs in a unique way to the period before our birth, and we cannot use the two in comparison. Having established that we can no longer treat the two in the same way, we need not accept this argument as proof that fear of death is irrational.

The major problem we find with Lucretius' reasoning is his constant underlying assumption that

"When you find a man treating (death as a grievance), be sure that (he believes that) after death he will still experience sensation"⁶

This is not necessarily true; I may fear death, not because I fear what will happen to my body or self after I die, but rather because I fear that I will not be able to experience all that I want to experience. Death may well be feared, not because I may exist to experience its detriments, rather because I will no longer exist to fulfil such plans as can only be fulfilled while in existence. This cannot be nullified by the argument that I will no longer exist to lament their incompleteness, as the nature of the fear is such that it may be applied while I do exist. Nor can it be countered by the idea that however long I live I will always die, and be dead for eternity, and that therefore whenever I die I will still have incomplete projects. There is no reason why

⁵ Nagel, (CE 1937-), *'Mortal Questions'*, p8. Cambridge University Press, 1979.

⁶ Lucretius, (BCE 94-55), *We Have Nothing To Fear In Death*, In *Life and Meaning*, O. Hanfling (ed), p79

the inevitability of death should give us cause to cease fearing it.

In conclusion, even when we accept that there will be no survival, bodily, mental or otherwise of ourselves, fear of death cannot immediately be ruled irrational. Comparing death with states of non-existence in the past can be of no help to us, for death is so vastly different from those states. The fact that we do not exist after death does not mean that fearing its occurrence should be treated as irrational; our fear is directed towards the end of life rather than the start of death. While death itself can itself not be an evil, our fear may be based on other detriments than the state of death, but nevertheless, it is the state of death that causes these detriments, and hence is a suitable object for fear.

Lucretius is correct that if our fear is based upon a belief that we will somehow experience the state of death, then it is irrational, as we will never be able to experience being dead. However, Lucretius seems to fail to account for fears of death rooted in the fact that my present incarnation wants to fulfil certain goals, and experience certain qualities of life, and death will deprive me of those opportunities. Such a fear may be called a fear of the end of life rather than a fear of death, however the two surely equate, and if not, the latter is the cause of the former, and thus we may rationally apply our fear to it.

Bibliography

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