

"Men fear death as children fear to go in the dark; and as that natural fear in children is increased with tales, so is the other"

IS IT RATIONAL TO FEAR DEATH? (G Hackett)

People come with many different fundamental views. Some already arrive "pre-packaged" with views learned from family and the family religion (if any). Those who believe in a religious doctrine may have a view of continuity of life after death. Catholics believe in a heavenly existence for those who have behaved themselves during life, whilst Buddhists believe that only the ego dies while the soul migrates into another physical being either higher or lower on the evolutionary scale, depending on whether the deceased lived a good or bad life. For such believers, there should be no fear of death, as the religion teaches. Other people have no religion, and believe that the end of life means the end of everything. However, the fear of death seems to possess people irrespective of religious belief.

Is death a process or an event? Does death happen in single instant, or does it unfold over a period of time? Death can be a *state* (being dead), the *process of extinction* (dying), or an event that occurs at the end of the dying process. Death in all of these senses can be further distinguished from events—such as being shot—that cause death. What is it that we actually fear of these happenings?

In addition to the question of death being a process or an event, it is also relevant to consider the nature of the event. Some people take an animalist view of humanity, which would mean that we regard death as occurring when the processes necessary to sustain life cease. Others hold a "personist" view of human life, and hold that death occurs when the personality has completely disintegrated. Yet others maintain a "mindist" view, which would argue that death has occurred when the mind no longer exists. It can easily be seen that in the latter two cases, physical death (cessation of chemical processes, photosynthesis, homeostasis, etc) may not have occurred, even though the individual may be regarded as dead. We should also note here, that where the definition of death might cause problems, the law, and medical practice adopt a custom of checking brain stem and electrical activity. Making these observations on the definition of death may shed some light on our fears, and whether they are rational. Instead of saying to yourself "O death where is thy sting", say "O absence of electrical activity, where is thy sting".

In my adaptation of the biblical phrase in the above, I have deliberately used levity in order to point up where our fears are seated. Many people will say they do not fear death as an event, but are terrified of states such as advanced dementia, brain-stem death and vegetative states. We may fear, quite rationally the state "Lebensunwertes Leben" (life which is unworthy of life) to use the chilling Nazi phrase.

Is death necessarily a bad thing? The opinion of Epicurus (C340 BC) is interesting in this matter.

"Death ..., the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not." By this mysterious phrase, Epicurus seems to suggest that whilst we are living, death has not occurred, and so cannot harm us. After death, it is too late to harm us. This may be insufficient to take away the fear of death, but it is certainly an argument for regarding such a fear as irrational. Lucretius, who based much of his work on Epicurus also believed that death per se was harmless, and provided further reasons why it was irrational to fear it. After death, says Lucretius, we will cease to be; the world will exist, but without us in it. It is the anticipation of this total cessation of self/identity/soul which causes us to fear death. Yet, he says, using an argument based on symmetry, the position is just the same before birth; we do not exist in the world. However, we do not seem to fear this state of affairs (though we might find it difficult to conceive of it). As with

Epicurus, this may not take away our fear of death, but it suggests further reasons why such a fear is irrational.

Comparativism is the most widespread analysis of the benefits and evils of death. According to comparativism, the value an event E has for me, is roughly the sum total of my existing benefits plus the value of the event E minus a similar calculation of values/benefits in a world where the event E does not happen. If the value of our existing benefits plus those from anticipated future events is greater in the world where we continue to exist, compared to a world where we have died, then death is harmful. If the reverse is true, then death is beneficial.

Many writers e.g. Nagel, use comparativism to argue that it is rational to fear death because death may harm us, by preventing us enjoying the value of future events such as E. Death is a kind of deprivation. However, it may be difficult to argue for this, as one can only regard deprivation as bad when one experiences the deprivation itself. The deprivation of food, water, social activities, entertainment can be bad only because there is a conscious mind to experience the "barren life" without them.

Yet do these arguments pointing towards the rationality or irrationality of fearing death carry weight with us? Perhaps the fear of death is connected ultimately with the inevitable loss of consciousness, sentience, identity and mind. It is difficult to conceive of a world which existed before us which did not have us in it, and we cannot conceive of a world which will continue to exist after we have ceased to exist. Perhaps it is the anticipation of death which is the problem. The fear of death harms us - not death itself. The manner of our death frightens us, but not death itself.

G Hackett