

## **Is it Rational to Fear Death?**

The Roman Stoic Musonius Rufus once claimed that when it comes time to die he will finally “be set free from the fear of death”. As humans we all share this inescapable fear, but is it rational? In this essay I argue that the fear of death is merely a passionate emotion. Not only is this fear not rational but it can be reduced, perhaps even eliminated, though the use of our rationality. Death is not something people naturally desire. Aristotle argued that the end of all our desires is eudaimonia. All of our desires are indirectly a desire for a good well-being. When something is feared, being the opposite of desire, it is feared because we believe it will bring the opposite of well-being, suffering. Therefore, our fear of death, in truth, is a fear of suffering. To be more precise, it is the anticipation of suffering in the future caused by death that we fear. To conclude that it is irrational to fear death we must refute the reasons one fears death. The suffering that we fear include emotional, physical, or spiritual fear, however the fear of death can also be a combination of these forms of suffering. With the aid of our rationality all three of these can be severely reduced or ideally eliminated.

First, we fear the emotional suffering caused by death. This is the fear that we have mislived, or that we have left work unfinished. We have regrets and fear we will not have enough time left to correct them. We have dreams we fear will go unfulfilled. The sand in our egotistical hour glass continues to fall and we realize our infinite desires cannot be fit into our finite lifetime. It is as if we are sitting for a long written exam. We focus intensely on our work and as time goes on we peak up at the clock more frequently. As we work our mind wanders over the questions completed and we wonder if we really understood the last question correctly. Perhaps we should revisit it and make some changes, but time is running out and we fear we won't have enough time. So we continue to work a little longer. The next time we look up at the clock we realize there is only a few minutes left and three questions to go. We fear we won't have time to get them all done now. As the sweat starts to drip from our forehead we suddenly realize the irrationality of the situation. We may have no time to revisit completed questions and may have no time to finish the ones to come. However, we can only focus on the present moment, this question, and do it to the best of our ability. Whether we like it or not the clock continues to tick and its finiteness is out of our control. Our fear during the exam is a fear of emotional suffering because we may run out of time before we can correct completed questions and finish uncompleted ones. However this fear is irrational because it wrongly assumes we have control over time. We cannot change the past and we cannot have certainty of the future, we only control the present moment. It is through this understanding that fear of emotional suffering vanishes, whether our focus be on the end of our exam or the end of our life.

For some, the anticipated emotional suffering is strong but for many it is the anticipated physical suffering that they fear most. People fear the moment of and after death. Depending on their faith, an infinite number of possibilities could occur after death. Most people, though, believe in three general paths. First there is something after death and it will be good in which case there is nothing to fear. Second there is nothing after death. Here there is nothing to fear because if there is nothing there is no physical

suffering. The third alternative is that this something after death will be bad and physical pain is possible. However even this fear is irrational as we have not experienced a life after death therefore there is no experience to present to the imagination. Even if we grant that this alternative holds us still in possession of a body that feels pain, ultimately it is irrational to fear the future in general, something that does not yet exist.

While the fear of emotional and physical suffering is quite real, perhaps the greatest fear we have is the anticipation of a spiritual suffering. One reason we fear death is because we desire to be immortal and fear the death of our ego, our spiritual self. Perhaps we fear being forgotten. Our main instinct is that of survival so of course we don't want to die. A professional golfer will fight for his spot on the tour but eventually his career will decline and he must accept stepping down to allow the next generation an opportunity to shine otherwise his decision not to retire would be considered selfish. In life we must do as the golfer and know that when the time comes we must accept our fate and make room for future generations. Every generation before us died to make room for us, we must do the same. If we consider life from this perspective of constant change we can see how it is irrational to fear the pain of spiritual death however that does not mean it is easy to accept. To do this we must use our rationality and constantly consider how insignificant we really are in the eternity of time and the infinity of space.

While the fear of death exists, it is within our control to ignore it. Fear, like thirst, is natural but cannot be claimed to be rational. If my doctor tells me to have no liquids before surgery it is rational to ignore my instinct to drink. Caution is rational, fear is not. Ultimately our fear of death is a fear of the future and our inability to be content with the present. A life is good because of how well it is lived, not how long it is. Another Roman Stoic, Seneca, believed that, "As it is with a play, so it is with life—what matters is not how long the acting lasts, but how good it is". Regardless of whether we reduce or eliminate this fear it is still an irrational passion that uses our imaginative faculties for its own ends. It tricks us into believing we know the unknowable in death and hence have reason to fear it. In the *Apology*, Plato stated that, "Being afraid of death is to imagine as if you know what you do not know. For this fear of death is indeed the pretence of wisdom, and not real wisdom, being the appearance of knowing the unknown; since no one knows whether death, which they in their fear apprehend to be the greatest evil, may not be the greatest good. Is there not here conceit of knowledge, which is a disgraceful sort of ignorance?" Death is unknowable and the fear of the unknowable is not rational. It is imperative that we expose this fear for the illusion that it is because it is this fear of death that prevents us from truly living.