

Is it rational to fear death?

“It’s not that I’m afraid to die, I just don’t want to be there when it happens”

Woody Allen.

“The conscience of death accompanies us since childhood as conscience of the absolute destruction of the only precious treasure of ours: our I”

E Morin, Method V

Before attempting answer the question “is rational to fear death,” it is important to attempt to define exactly what we mean by death.

There is firstly the process of dying, then there is the moment, the precise point in time when death occurs, and then there is “being dead.” Even “being dead” has different definitions nowadays, as bodies can be kept alive when brain death has occurred, or when the body can no longer breathe without assistance, and so persons (or indeed animals who are experimented on) can be kept in a state of near death for some time whilst others make decisions regarding their welfare. This essay will consider whether it is rational to fear death in all these definitions, but also whether it is rational to fear a “normal” death, that is, one that occurs naturally, in old age without the medical interventions mentioned above.

We are all born and we all die – that is the only thing that most humans have in common, and we share those traits with every other living thing. Alone of all the animals, we are conscious that we will die and we live with that knowledge from a very early age. It is a burden to some but not to everyone. We know that the world existed long before our arrival – and yet that does not matter as much as the knowledge that the world will carry on after we have died. We mourn the death of young people much more than the death of old people who have lived their allocated span – but why should one life be considered more valuable than another? The “old” have wisdom and learning and their lives ought also to be considered valuable.

Most of us who are living a full and contented life regard the end of life as a pending and final interruption to what we are doing, and then a “full stop” with who knows what beyond. If we are lucky we will have left something of ourselves behind, be that something our genes, or a book, or a work of art. We also have the dubious “comfort” of knowing that everyone else in our lives will be dead within the next hundred years. Religions have tried to soften this blow to our sense of individuality and self by proposing a future and sometimes better life – but only if we subscribe wholeheartedly to their teaching. Children do not choose to be born to a specific faith so belief could be considered a cultural activity, and consequently no blame ought to be attached to those born outside those particular cultures that can have no knowledge of its teachings. A life after death should surely be promised to all of us if faith is to mean anything, but it is only on offer to those who adhere to that particular religion, and each religion has its own version of paradise so there is little comfort to be found in the

way that religions view being dead.

It is interesting to consider a possible world in which death always occurs at an old age, with everyone dying peacefully in bed surrounded by family and friends. How would that society view death? Fear of dying would be absent as the process would always be painless, and perhaps the fear of death itself would be diminished as a consequence. It would largely depend on the beliefs of that society. Perhaps that possible world would be thought of as “heaven” and death would consign people to a definite “hell.” Perhaps then, the fear of death is a cultural phenomenon?

In this world, the process of dying can be terrifyingly painful – torture, illness, dementia, being caught in a natural disaster such as the tsunami – all of these provoke real fear in most people. That fear is rational. It also serves a purpose, which might also be considered one of the reasons that humans have evolved so successfully. The fear of dying teaches us how to remain safe in our environments and the lessons of what is considered safe and what is not are taught to children by their parents throughout their long childhoods. Recognising what is safe and what is not leads us into considering how we behave in order to survive. Fear of death can therefore be seen as beneficial to the human race.

Not wanting to die a painful and lingering death is perfectly rational, but perhaps that is not what is meant by the question which asks about “death” and not “dying.”

Is it rational to fear the moment of death itself? Would one recognise that moment when, apparently, all consciousness ceases and non consciousness occurs. Again, I think we fear the process rather than the moment itself. There are many stories of people who have had “near death experiences” and who watched as they were resuscitated or found themselves walking into a blinding light. All the stories share certain characteristics, and it is my belief that what is happening is that the subconscious mind acts in a specific way to interpret what is happening to the body in the same way that dreams comment on and interpret what we go through during the day whilst we are asleep at night.

I think once again it is rational to fear that the moment of death might happen whilst we are in agony, but the actual moment of death in that case would be a release and might be welcomed. Similarly the moment of death when one is ill or depressed might be welcome, so it is not possible to state with any certainty that the moment of death is feared by everyone. That fear might be irrational as death could be a release, a relief, or merely a falling asleep.

Death in life, which is one way of considering Alzheimer’s disease or dementia (or even being kept alive by machines on intensive care wards) presents different fears, and might be thought to mirror our fear of “being dead.” Our personality and our individual self disappears, our memories of the past are lost as is our future projected life, and another self appears bearing no inner resemblance to our previous self and who is not the “I” that we have been. This surely is a form of death which most of us fear almost as much as death itself and it is a convenient way of deciding whether it is rational to fear death.

What we fear is the loss of that which makes us who we are. In fearing Alzheimer’s or dementia, or even some brain injury, we fear the loss of our dignity, the loss of the memories of those who are close to us, the loss of the knowledge of who we have been, who we are and who we might yet become. The present recedes and all that remains is a body without a purposeful mind. That surely is a metaphor for death itself? And yet – there is still life

and as the proverb says – where there is life there is hope, and that holds true in many cases. With these diseases there is, as yet, little hope of recovery of the self. Is it rational to fear life in a body, without the person who is identifiably “me” in that body? The answer is surely yes.

So in death, where I am once again missing, first from my corpse, and then from the world itself, is it rational to be afraid? And if so, what is it that I am afraid of?

Speaking personally, I am not afraid of death; rather it is the process of death that scares me or the prospect of living with illness and without dignity. But it is nevertheless hard to envisage a world without myself in it. Whenever I do try to imagine the world as it will be when I am dead, I find myself a spectator and cannot imagine my absence. I even appear as a spectator at my own funeral!

What it is hard to be reconciled to is the knowledge of the absence of the person that I am in a world that continues without seeming to notice that I am not there. Perhaps, if those who are solipsists are correct, the world as it is will die with me? In either of those cases I still find that the fear of death is not rational. *If* I continue as a spectator, *if* I am wrong and there is life after death, then there is nothing to fear. If on the other hand, death is just a complete ending, then there is also nothing to fear.

Death, or being dead, is not, using Thomas Nagel’s phrase, the great “evil” that can befall us. Rather, it is the meaning of the life we are living and what we have achieved and have still to achieve and the manner of our death that should detain us. As Bernard Williams demonstrated in his essay *The Makropulos Case; Reflections on the tedium of Immortality*, living a long life without purpose might well be no life at all and death in that circumstance might be welcome – although I think that for most of us who read and study or enjoy travelling, the notion that eternal life might be tedious is unthinkable. On the other hand, the knowledge that we will not be here forever gives us the impetus to leave something behind, or to be creative. However, we cannot avoid death. There is, as yet, no elixir that grants us eternal life, and the only eternal life that has so far been promised, is the Christian eternal life – but in death.

It is perfectly rational to act in ways that promote our safety and wellbeing, and that do not bring about our premature deaths. It is rational to be afraid of the *process* of dying. Perhaps it is because we do not really understand what happens after death itself that we are afraid, as children are afraid of the dark. Perhaps we are afraid of the permanent extinction of that which is our unique self from the world? That might be considered a rational fear.

It is a consequence of being human that we worry at all about our deaths, but rational or not, we should not allow those fears to dominate our lives. As Wittgenstein says;

“Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death. If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present...”

## **Bibliography**

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