

Death is Something to be Feared

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The Apology by Plato is an account of the trial and death of Socrates, where he attempts to defend himself against charges of corrupting the youth of Athens, angering the Gods, and others. Socrates is facing the death penalty if convicted, and this fact motivates one of the major themes present in Socrates' speech. This theme is his suggestion that it is not rational for himself or others to fear death. He builds up a multitude of reasons for this belief; most of which revolve around the idea that since we do not know what death entails for us, we have no concrete reasons to fear it. While I do concede some of his points, I am in overall disagreement with Socrates and his rationale. I believe that it is not only rational, but in the best interest of a being to fear death. I'll start by re-creating Socrates' argument, which will cover the various reasons he gives throughout his trial for this belief. I'll then give my argument for why Socrates was wrong and it is rational to fear death. Finally, I'll finish up by responding to some possible objections to my argument.

Given the punishment if Socrates is convicted, the topic of death and how one should confront it is present in Socrates' mind during his speech. Although the majority of his commentary on the subject comes during his sentencing, he does touch on the topic during the early parts of his speech. "Wherever someone stations himself, holding that it is best, or wherever he is stationed by a ruler, there he must stay and run the risk, as it seems to me, and not take into account death or anything else compared to what is shameful." (*The Apology*, 28D). Socrates says this in the context of talking about his dedication to his pursuit of philosophy, his main passion in life. He is using this

comparison as an reason to justify his continued pursuit of studying and teaching philosophy even though it might lead to his own death, claiming that it would be shameful for him to give up his pursuit that was bestowed upon him by god (an oracle) in the face of worldly threats like physical violence. This is one of the main limbs of his argument, that if one believes that they are doing right (in his context meaning the gods have assigned him to this task), it is wrong to fear death because it might lead you to abandon your pursuits. He continues this argument later in the text, saying “For neither in a court case nor in war should I or anyone else devise a way to escape death by doing anything at all [...] And there are many other devices to escape death in each of the dangers, if one dares to do and say anything at all. But I suspect it is not hard, men, to escape death, but it is much harder to escape villainy. For it runs faster than death” (*The Apology*, 39A). Here he is once again saying that possessing a fear of death will cause or tempt someone to ‘leave their post’. He makes the comparison to the soldier under the orders of a general, which is an analogy to himself under the guidance of the oracle. He goes onto his next point, stating the following : “For [fearing death] is to seem to know what one does not know: no one knows whether death does not even happen to be the greatest of all goods for the human being; but people fear it as though they knew well that it is the greatest of evils” (*The Apology*, 29B). One of the main tenets of the teachings of Socrates is that most people tend to think they know much more than they actually do, and his wisdom comes from his acceptance of the fact that he knows nearly nothing. In the same fashion, Socrates points out that no one has any proof of what happens after death, and that assuming it to be a negative thing is another instance of people assuming beliefs they are not strictly justified in having. He continues on this topic later in the text, where he discusses the 2 possibilities of what the after-life is like as he interprets it. The first possibility is that one experiences nothingness, which he compares to the

deepest sleep that one can imagine. The next is that he gets to roam with the gods and continue his pursuit of philosophy; “[...], to associate with Orpheus and Musaeus and Hesiod and Homer, how much would any of you give? For I am willing to die many times if these things are true...” (*The Apology*, 41B). (By “these things” he means if it is true that he will get to meet with the gods). He states that neither of these two options are bad things, and that they both actually might be quite nice. His point being that the fear of death, which is so pervasive amongst his peers, is unfounded in reason and should be abandoned. He does touch on the subject a few more times but all of his reasons can be reduced to the two stated above; fearing death can cause one to avoid their duties, and that we do not have strict proof that death is a bad thing.

Although I grant some of his premises, I disagree with Socrates’ conclusion, and I think that it is rational for a being to actively fear death. I’ll start with Socrates argument that having a fear of death can prevent one from doing what they are meant to do, like a soldier leaving his post, or in Socrates’ case, abandoning his pursuits which were endorsed by the gods. Socrates seems here to suppose that having a fear of death will necessarily cause someone to forgo being brave, as if the two concepts are mutually exclusive. I do not believe this to be the case. One can possess a fear of death and use this fear to guide themselves without allowing it to cripple their pursuits. Taking the soldier example, he can go into battle bravely, perform his duties, all the while using his fear of death to his advantage. It is his fear of death that causes him to try to stay alive while still performing his duties, and his state of being alive is of benefit to his superiors because an alive soldier is more useful than a dead one. Likewise, if Socrates were to have feared death, he might have been able to talk his way out of being executed while still staying true to his beliefs and life goals. He claims that it was the lack of interference from the gods that caused him to believe he was doing no wrong that

day, as he states in the following quote : “But the sign of the god did not oppose me when I left my house this morning, nor when I came up here to the law court, nor anywhere in the speech when I was about to say anything, [...] But as it is, it has nowhere opposed me either in any deed or speech, concerning this action.” (*The Apology*, 40B). This is assuming that the gods are active in the micro-affairs of humans, which is something I disagree with. It is not possible for Socrates to know that it wouldn't have been more pleasing to the gods for him to keep his head low while on trial in order to avoid execution, allowing him to continue on his worldly pursuits. The way Plato describes it, Socrates was in some ways disrespectful of his accusers. He acknowledges that he sounds boastful at times during his speech, and his overall tone could have had an effect on the outcome of the trial. If he was more fearful of death, he might have been able to appease his accusers, allowing him to continue on living. This last point that I made assumes that to continue living is better than to die, which brings me to my next contention with Socrates.

Socrates claims that it is irrational to fear death because we cannot be sure that death is an overall unpleasant experience. As described earlier, Socrates describes two scenarios of what happens after one dies, and neither of them he claims are bad enough to be something to fear. Even if something else entirely occurs after death, we do not know that it would be an overall bad thing to experience. I disagree with Socrates on multiple counts. To start, even if I were to grant that what is to happen to our minds after death could be described as pleasant, it is still eternal while our time on earth is limited. Given the incomparable difference between spending an eternity doing anything after death and the very short time span that a human has on earth, it makes sense to try and postpone your death as long as possible. Even if death is quite pleasant experience, the fear of death has been a beneficial instinct in the survival and propagation of our species. It might be brave and

admirable of Socrates to not fear death but had his father or any other direct-ancestor done the same there might not have been a Socrates to begin with. I will concede this is not the strongest point of my argument, and I will address that in the next paragraph, but it is important to note that Socrates is making some large assumptions in his justifications; namely the possibility of him being able to directly continue his worldly pursuits in the after-life. If this were certainly the case then it would make sense to abandon a fear of death, but we have no evidence of this being the case, and thus by Socrates own logic we should not interpret the possibility of a pleasurable after-life as a reason to embrace or not-avoid death.

There are a few possible objections to my argument. Some people might claim that possessing a fear of death will cause most people to more easily abandon their principles, and thus removing a fear of death will allow one to stay more true to themselves in that they are more likely to live as they see fit as opposed to living by the rules of others. While I grant that this there is some truth to this, it's true that having a strong enough fear of death can cause someone to 'abandon their post', this does not imply it is overall beneficial to abandon the fear altogether. I believe that the gains that are provided by having a fear of death, such as being more inclined to act in the best interest of ones own survival, outweigh the possible benefits that abandoning the fear brings. As I mentioned earlier, removing your fear of death might seem like a brave and admirable thing for you to do, but had one of your direct ancestors done the same thing than they might have gotten killed before having the chance to set your existence in motion. Others might claim that I am making the assumption that there are no gods and no heaven in the afterlife, and that if these exist then the afterlife might be pleasant and thus shouldn't be feared. I agree, I do not have rigorous proof surrounding the existence of anything in the afterlife, but in my opinion that does not count as

much of an argument for either side, as nobody can be sure of what happens in the afterlife. Since nobody can be sure what happens, I would contend it makes sense to be prudent and fear death in an attempt to prolong ones time on earth as long as possible.