

Afraid of the Dark: *Nagel and Rationalizing the Fear of Death*

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Thomas Nagel, in his article *Death* (1994) sets out to examine what it is about death that a person finds so objectionable. He begins by assigning value statements to life and death, those being good and evil respectively, and determines that death is no evil for the person who dies and therefore is nothing to fear. He contends that what one objects to when thinking about "death" is not death itself, but rather the loss of life. In a short paragraph, with an almost dismissing tone, Nagel touches on the idea that many people fear death because of a misunderstanding of what it is "like" to be dead, in that many people view death as a state, where Nagel, like Epicurus, sees death as a non-state. This is an idea very closely related to Nagel's inquiry yet he gives it short-shrift. In the course of this paper I examine this neglected concept of a "misunderstanding" of the experience of death, showing that this misunderstanding is in fact, a rational, if not the most fundamental cause of our fear of death. Throughout, I draw on both Nagel and Green's response (1982) response to Nagel.

To understand the position being taken by myself and that being held by Nagel and Green we must first define what we mean by death and show how it is distinct from dying. Both Nagel and Green use the Epicurean idea of death, that being death as the end of existence. When one dies, they no longer are; they cease to be. Death is a *non-state* where one does not exist. There is no afterlife, no heaven or hell, not even a mind trapped in a decaying corpse in a box. When one dies, s/he ends. *Kaput!* However, this non-state of death is different from the experience or state of *dying*. For when one is dying they are still alive, no matter how close to death s/he is. Life and death are distinct opposites, like black and white, either one exists or one does not exist. But when dying, one is still existing and experiencing and feeling pleasure and pain. Essentially then, the difference is that dying is a *state* while death is a *non-state*.

Nagel begins his article by trying to discover what is "evil" in or about death.¹ Note, he is examining *death*, not *dying*. He begins this way because he feels that if something is being feared, it must be because there is something evil or objectionable about it. For instance, one may fear bees because s/he is allergic to them and being in the presence of a bee could cause extreme displeasure. Thus, according to Nagel, this possibility for displeasure is what is "evil" about the bee. Therefore, it is rational for this person to fear that which may cause him/her evil, that being the bee. But what is evil about death? What in death, a non-state, can cause displeasure to the person who is dead to the point where s/he would be justified in fearing it? In death one cannot experience or opine about things. One is neither capable of feeling displeasure or having an experience which could cause displeasure. Since there is nothing for the dead person to feel or experience that would be in any way evil, then there is nothing, according to Nagel, for him/her to fear. If one does not exist then no harm can come to him/her. Why would one fear something that could not cause him/her harm? (Nagel 1994)

Nagel comes to the conclusion that it is not death, the non-state, that one objects to, but rather the deprivation of life. He uses the example of non-existence prior to birth. One does not typically object to his/her not existing before birth but one *does* object to not existing after life. This is because, before birth nothing was lost, but after death there is the deprivation of life. Because there is something in life to compare to non-existence, death becomes objectionable, because existing is clearly better than not existing. He points out that when value is attached to life experiences, such as "eating is good", "jogging is bad", and the bad outweighs the good, one would still choose to live for the small amount of good s/he was experiencing, because the alternative would be no experience at all. The idea of ceasing to experience is that which is objectionable for Nagel, not the prospect of nonexistence, because there would be no subject to opine about that state (or rather, non-state). (Nagel 1994)

It is important to distinguish here that the objection to the loss of life is still an objection related to death, not dying. Nagel

is not saying that one objects to the process or experience of losing life, such as how one might object to being suffocated as a process for losing life. He is saying that, since death is the absence of life, and being in the dead non-state (in as much as a subject or object can be in a non-state) deprives someone of life, then that deprivation of life is that which is objectionable. O.H. Green argues that since being dead deprives someone of life then death and the loss of life are the same. (Green, 1982) Nagel rejects this notion, arguing that the loss of life is a mere side-effect or by-product of death. It just so happens that one must lose life to be dead, in the same way that one must be injected with a needle in order to get a vaccination. One may fear vaccinations because of the pain involved in the shot, but it is not the vaccination that s/he fears but rather the pain of being injected. The pain is a by-product of the injection, and the injection is only necessary as a vehicle for the vaccination. The loss of life is a by-product of becoming dead (note *becoming dead*, not *dying*; becoming dead is the disappearance from the live state, the ceasing to exist), and becoming dead is what must happen in order to be dead.

Green, as I've already stated, disagrees with Nagel on this point. He argues that the fear of the loss of life, which Nagel accepts as rational, translates to a fear of death. Green begins also with the idea of good and evil as a way to examine the fear of death. He embraces the Epicurean notion, as does Nagel, that death is not an evil for the one who dies. He argues that there are two kinds of good and evil, subjective and objective. Subjective good and evil requires consciousness of the good and evil. Because the dead are not conscious, clearly death is not a subjective evil. Objective good and evil are things which temporally impede normal function. It can be said that death is the ultimate impediment of normal function and therefore must be an objective evil. But Green argues that objective good and evil must have a spatio-temporal subject to affect, and since death deprives one of his/her status as a subject, there is nothing for the objective good or evil to affect. But death's status as something not good or evil does not mean it is not something to fear. (Green 99-105)

Green defines fear as “an emotional response to expected disutility under conditions of subjective uncertainty.” (Green 105) Since death is the ultimate expected disutility, and certainly it can be said that there is a subjective uncertainty surrounding death and one’s meditations on death, then by Green’s definition death is most definitely something to fear. But, he notes, that the fear of death is rational only as the desirability to live, not as the undesirability to die. He argues that men fear not living longer, and since death is that which causes someone to not live longer, then it is death that one fears, not just the deprivation of life. It is only when one examines death and its relation to life, discovering that death is the end of life, that one begins to fear this thing called “death”. (Green 105)

Both Nagel and Green discuss the experience of death as a reflection of the loss of life. The only difference is that Green argues that the two are the same. Yet I feel Green’s overall argument is weak, and that he occasionally misinterprets Nagel, but he presents an interesting, methodical approach to defending the Epicurean good and evil argument. His article actually doesn’t even deal with rationalizing the fear of death until the last page. Because of the compelling arguments presented by Nagel and Green, I find no justifiable way to argue that death, in the Epicurean sense, is an evil. But, I do not see Green’s argument that it is rational to fear death solely because it is a loss of life to be sufficient. I am inclined to agree with Nagel that the loss of life is merely a by-product of death, so therefore they cannot be equated. I am now charged with the lofty task of justifying the rationale behind fearing death. The key to this is in the Nagel passage I mentioned earlier, where he dismisses the notion of fearing death due to a misunderstanding of it as a *state*.

Because I will be focusing so closely on this passage, I feel it is necessary to quote it:

The point that death is not regarded as an unfortunate *state* enables us to refute a curious but very common suggestion about the origin of the fear of death. It is often said that those who object to

death have made the mistake of trying to imagine what it is like to *be* dead. It is alleged that the failure to realize that this task is logically impossible (for the banal reason that there is nothing to imagine) leads to the conviction that death is a mysterious and therefore terrifying prospective *state*. But this diagnosis is evidently false, for it is just as impossible to imagine being totally unconscious as to imagine being dead...Yet people who are averse to death are not usually averse to unconsciousness (so long as it does not entail a substantial cut in the total duration of waking life). (Nagel 23)

Here Nagel acknowledges the "common suggestion" that many fear death because they cannot logically comprehend what it is like to be dead. One is incapable even of comprehending the reality of unconsciousness. Thus, when thinking about what it would be like to be unconscious, what s/he is really doing is imagining what it would be like to be conscious while one's body was in a state similar to that of an unconscious person. Perhaps it would be that the mind would function but the body would be in paralysis, without any functioning sensing faculties, thereby trapping the mind in a dark box for all of eternity. This prospect alone is terrifying, yet the uncertainty and mystery of the myriad of possibilities after death amplifies that terror.

For Nagel, this is absurd. Obviously, since death is not a state, then this idea of fearing the state of death is foolish and should be cast aside. He feels that this misunderstanding causes the common suggestion to be "evidently false" because it is "impossible to imagine being totally unconscious." (Nagel 23) One's "failure to realize that this task is logically impossible" (Nagel, 23) leads them to fear death because it is mysterious. So, Nagel argues that because one does *not* realize that imagining oneself dead is logically impossible *that* is why s/he sees death as mysterious, and therefore, terrifying. Nagel does not reject the notion that things that are mysterious are terrifying, rather he feels that if one understood the logical impossibility of under-

standing the situation then it would no longer be mysterious. But isn't the logical impossibility of understanding something the very root of its mystery?

People tend to be at the very least wary of things they do not understand. For instance, let's say a human went to another planet, in a far distant galaxy. When she reached this planet she found that the entire civilization lived under water. She was greeted upon arrival by a creature from the planet who looked human. From her studies before arriving she knew that their physiological make-up was exactly the same as a humans. She saw no gills or breathing apparatus to aid the creature in breathing underwater. Upon asking how it was that the entire civilization breathed underwater the creature seemed confused and said that they breathed the same way as they did on land, through their mouths and noses and into their lungs. The human could not understand this, because on earth, if you breath water into your lungs you will drown. The creature invited the human to the Capitol of the city to meet their mayor but the only way to get there was by a long, tubular elevator that ended at the bottom of the sea. Were the human to take the elevator she would be so far below the surface that she would likely not be able to withstand the pressure, and if she found that she couldn't breath, she would be too deep to reach the surface before the air in her lungs ran out. It would seem that this would be a frightening concept to the human. Logically, she knows that her body is not made to breath water, but the creatures on this planet, who are physiologically identical to humans, seem to have no problem. The human is aware that she is logically incapable of understanding how these creatures breath underwater. But that does not make the situation any less mysterious. If anything, it makes it more mysterious. The mystery, in conjunction with the frustration of being logically incapable of understanding something, will likely result in the human being too afraid to go to the Capitol building at the bottom of the sea.

If the human were not aware that the situation was logically impossible to understand, then perhaps she would decide to follow the creature, since it seemed from observation that he

was physiologically identical to her, and he could breath underwater, so maybe she could too. Perhaps there was something about the functioning of the lungs that she did not understand. The mere possibility of a logical explanation would be, at least, something. This failure to realize the logical impossibility of the situation would, in a way, provide a possible explanation for the situation. It would create a reasonable solution to help alleviate the fear of the human. So, Nagel's contention that the common suggestion is evidently false because one cannot logically comprehend true unconsciousness or death is itself evidently false because it is this logical impossibility that causes one to fear death.

So, the fear of death comes from a fear of not understanding, a fear of the unknown. This is quite different from a *fear* of the loss of life. I would not even go so far as to call the objection to the loss of life a fear as much as simply, an objection. The loss of life is lamentable, not terrifying. One is not frightened of not existing and not experiencing, s/he is angry and sad. It does not scare me that, once dead, I will no longer be able to eat chocolate; it depresses me, sincerely depresses me. The thing that is frightening is the unknown *state* that will replace the state that I know, that I live in, that allows me to eat chocolate. Not only do I not know what that state is, but I cannot even imagine what it could be.

This holds regardless of whether one believes in an after-life or not. Whether death is a non-state or some sort of metaphysical existence, it is still entirely different from anything one has ever even remotely experienced. In that we are existing, physical beings, the idea of not-existing is not even within the realm of things our mind can comprehend. How can I, sitting here at my keyboard, existing, possibly understand what it would be like to not exist? It isn't like being asleep or unconscious, it is not being. The very idea violates the law of non-contradiction. I cannot be and not be; and since I have always been, and only know what it is like to be, I cannot know what it is like to not be. And if our death is something metaphysical, I cannot know that metaphysical being in the same way that I can-

not know not being. Since my pre-natal existence I have been a physical creature. I have lived and experienced the world through a body that smells and touches and sees. I have no idea what it is like to be not physical. A metaphysical existence would not be a glorified physical existence, up in the sky, sitting on a cloud, eating all that you want without gaining weight, which is a common misunderstanding of the metaphysical after-life, as expounded by multiple religions. It would be something beyond the comprehension of my physical brain in the same way that not existing is beyond my comprehension.

Since the state or non-state of death is completely incomprehensible it is uncomfortable to try to make sense of it. And once one realizes that it is logically impossible to make sense of, but also completely inevitable that it will occur, there is a panic and fear associated with making that leap. So, unlike fearing merely the implications of death, that being the loss of life, death itself, the experience or non-experience of death, is actually justifiably feared. Nagel contends that at the time one is dead s/he will have no opinion of it so one should not fear it, but that does not stop one from fearing it before hand. Not all things must be feared in the moment. They can be feared in anticipation. Nagel acknowledges this and says that one fears in anticipation the loss of life. But the loss of life is not what one is fearing, lost life is merely being lamented. It is the unknown, logically incomprehensible death state (or non-state) that incites fear. So many of life's fears are rooted in a fundamental fear of the unknown, like being afraid of the dark, or afraid of strange places and people, or of the boogiemán. In childhood many fears result from fearing the unknown, because one hasn't experienced enough to know what to expect of different experiences. As we grow older and experience more we replace magic and mystery with science and fact and our fears are alleviated. Death is not something we can try or test and then know about. We will never have the benefit of other's experience to Shepherd us through the valley of darkness. And that is what is frightening; That unknown, incomprehensible abyss beyond the light of life. In the end we are still afraid of the dark.

Notes

- ¹ Note here that Nagel is discussing what is “wrong with death”. By the term “evil” he is referring to that which causes the objection or harm of death.

Bibliography

Nagel, Thomas, “Death”, *Language, Metaphysics, and Death*, NY, Fordham University Press, 2nd ed., 1994, pp. 21-29.

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