

Why People Who Believe in God Fear Death

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Introduction

Some philosophers and social scientists think that most people who claim to believe in God do not really believe in God. One especially prominent variant of this suggestion is that people who claim to believe in God are afraid of death. And they grieve when someone they love dies. If they believed in God, they would not experience such emotions or exhibit such behaviors. Therefore, they do not believe in God.¹ As Rey (2010, p. 261) puts it:

Contrast the reactions in two situations... in the first, the wife has to be sent off to a luxurious convalescent hospital for care for two years before the husband can come and join her.... In the second, the wife is about to die, and the husband has been told he will follow in two years. If, in the second case, there really were the genuine belief in a heavenly afterlife that (let us suppose) they both avow, why shouldn't the husband feel as glad as in the first case—indeed, even gladder, given the prospect of eternal bliss! However, I bet he'd grieve and mourn “the loss” like anyone else.

As Van Leeuwen (2016, p. 619) puts it:

factual beliefs, more generally, stay operative in guiding behavior across settings. Religious credences, however, aren't like this. Religious attitudes about the afterlife, for example, tend to become inoperative outside religious settings.... This partly explains why there are so few willing martyrs. It also helps explain the observation that religious people facing death are as fearful as atheists or more so (Dawkins, 2006; Chapter 10; Rey, 2007). Their credence in the afterlife is not operative in all settings, and it doesn't eliminate the factual belief that death is final.

I show that the hypothesis that people who report believing in God actually do believe in God is able to explain these observations.

First Explanation: Fitness Enhancing Fear

Assume for the sake of argument that if God exists, there is nothing to fear about death and nothing to grieve at the passing of a loved one. Even so, there is an evolutionary story about why someone who believes in God would nevertheless fear death and grieve.

Our ancient ancestors found themselves in environments in which fearing death increased their fitness. Organisms that greatly feared death in such environments survived long enough to reproduce at a greater rate than organisms that did not. Make the fear of death deep and immovable and primal and you will get greater fitness for that organism. Make the fear of death easy to pry loose and you get reduced fitness. In light of this, a human produced through evolution will have a primal, difficult to remove fear of death. Even if one intellectually recognizes that what happens after death will be good, one will still be afraid of death.

¹ Others who endorse this argument are Malinowski (1926, p. 105-6), Dawkins (2007, p.155-6), Huemer (2020), Leng (2024 , p. 159), Mercer (2009, p. 42-3), and Schaefer (2014, p.13). For related arguments, see Dennett (2006) and Van Leeuwen (2023). See also Feldman et al. (2016).

One might reply that this explains why it is difficult to remove the fear of death. But, one might insist, fear of death nevertheless rules out belief that what happens after death will be good. The two mental states cannot be present together. If indeed evolution has built us in such a way that we are unable to pry loose the fear of death, then it has also built us so that we are unable to believe that God has good things in store for us after we die. One can't really believe that what happens after death is good if one is afraid of death in this way.

I do not think this reply is successful. There are many examples in which deep seated fears like this coexist with the belief that there is really nothing to fear. Consider a famous case introduced by Tamar Gendler. She discusses a transparent walkway that extends out of the western rim of the Grand Canyon over vast empty space with jagged rocks below. People who visit the site report knowing it is safe. But they also experience fear. Many refuse to go out into the middle of the walkway and instead cling to its edges. A few especially brave people are able to overcome their fear and go to the middle and are rewarded with a t-shirt. Gendler's diagnosis of the case is that people really believe what they say they believe. They know the walkway is safe. But they are nevertheless afraid. This is also Daniel Dennett's diagnosis of the case. Discussing Gendler's example, Dennett and his coauthor Ryan McKay (2009, p. 499) state:

A person who trembles (or worse) when standing on the glass-floored Skywalk that protrudes over the Grand Canyon does not believe she is in danger, any more than a moviegoer at a horror film does, but her behaviour at the time indicates that she is in a belief-like state that has considerable behavioural impact.

So I want to draw together two ideas to explain why people who believe in God might fear death. First, there is an evolutionary story. The ancient ancestors of such people were in environments in which a primal and difficult to remove fear of death enhanced their fitness. Second, there are cases, such as Gendler's skywalk case, in which primal and difficult to remove fear coexists with the genuine belief that there is nothing to fear. Together these ideas are sufficient to explain why people who genuinely believe in God fear death.

Regarding grief: Grief itself is maladaptive. But the mechanisms that cause grief enhance fitness. Young children and animals do not have the concept of death. But they experience grief as a result of even brief periods of separation from those with whom they are attached. They display two reactions to such separation. First, they display increased activity, calling, proximity seeking, and distress. Second, they display depressive reactions and withdrawal. This is observed in young children and young animals that are briefly separated from their parents or caregivers. It is also observed in adult animals when they are briefly separated from their mates or from their peer groups.

It is speculated that grief in reaction to separation consists of two processes with distinct causes.² The active process in which the organism engages in proximity seeking and suffers distress is caused by an alarm reaction to the loss of a significant individual. This mechanism increases fitness by raising the probability of reunion with a significant individual. But it lowers fitness when the significant individual is dead because there will be no reunion and it uses resources that could be spent elsewhere. The passive process in which the organism suffers depression is distinct and is caused by deprivation of stimuli which provides behavioral and physiological regulating derived from the lost relationship. This mechanism increases fitness by providing behavioral and physiological regulation. But it is maladaptive when a loved one dies because the organism undergoes withdrawal from the relevant stimuli.

² See Chapter 4 of Archer (1999) and Chapter 9 of Nesse (2019)

So the mechanisms responsible for grief themselves enhance overall fitness by facilitating the maintenance of relationships. But when lasting separation is unavoidable, as it is in the case of death, the result is maladaptive. The active phase is spent seeking reunion when such a reunion is not possible. And the passive phase results in withdrawal of stimuli that causes depression. Humans inherited these mechanisms from their earlier human and nonhuman ancestors. And so they experience grief when separated from a loved one.

In light of all this, the explanation of why people who believe in God grieve is this: Grief is caused by separation. Animals and young children grieve even though they do not have the concept of death and even when there is a mere brief separation. Adult humans who are separated from one another grieve. Mere separation is sufficient for grief. It need not be caused by the object of one's attachment no longer existing. It requires only that one is significantly separated from the object of one's attachment. Mere separation will set off the alarm that yields the active phase of grief. And mere separation results in withdrawal from the stimuli provided by the object of one's attachment that regulates behavior and emotions. This causes the passive and depressive phase. Death, whether permanent or not, is a separation from the object of one's attachment. It sets off the alarm initiating the active phase of grief. And it deprives one of stimuli which then initiates the passive phase of grief.

Second Explanation: Fear of Low Probability Possibilities

Imagine you just rolled a twenty sided die and the outcome is hidden from you for two days. After the two day period is up and the result of the roll is revealed to you, one of three things will happen: If you rolled any of 3 through 20, you will go to paradise. If you rolled a 1, you will go to hell. And if you rolled a 2, you will cease to exist. Given all of this, you have a credence of .9 that you will be in paradise in two days. Nevertheless, it is psychologically plausible that you would experience fear and unease.

Now imagine your friend is spending time with you as you await the outcome. Your friend says, 'I don't understand why you are so nervous. You claim to have a credence of .9 that you will go to paradise. You should be excited! You must not really have a credence of .9.' You reply, 'Look, the stakes are so high and the outcome of the roll is so momentous. There are low probability outcomes of the roll that are really bad for me. They likely won't happen. But their probabilities are not so low that I can just ignore them. Maybe I am risk averse in such a way that the salient possibilities for me are the bad ones even if I see that those possibilities have a low probability of obtaining. But I'm going to be somewhat anxious, and those possibilities will be on my mind, until I am on the other side of paradise.'

Perhaps some people who are confident that God exists find themselves in a position similar to the one you find yourself in in the die case above. They feel that it is very likely that God has something good in store for us after we die. But there are enough people who have darkly pessimistic views about what happens after death that they can't dismiss such a possibility as much as they would like. And there are enough people who think that you cease to exist after death that they just can't dismiss that either. So they find themselves with some anxiety when facing death. Some people might have the sort of psychology that fixates on low probability bad outcomes. And even though they have a high credence that they will be in paradise, the low probability bad outcomes are sometimes salient to them. They won't be always and completely at ease until, and if, they are on the other side of paradise.

Compare: Imagine you are forced to play Russian Roulette.³ If you fire and there is a bullet you violently die. But if there is no bullet, you get a million dollars. It would still be very scary. As you load the single chamber of the gun, and then roll the cylinder, it would be natural for you to be afraid. It would be very strange for someone to say to you 'What are you so stressed out about? You are about to become a

³ I thank Redacted 1 for this example.

millionaire! It is normal and natural for people to fear events that they judge to have a low probability even if they have a high credence that a much better outcome will obtain. Human psychology is complicated enough that there are many different emotional reactions we can have to a single probability distribution (Chappell (2012) makes a similar point in her paper about this topic). It is not simply a matter of ‘the person thinks this outcome is unlikely, therefore the person is not worried about it’.

Third Explanation: What We Lose When Someone Dies

On the traditional Christian view, it is unclear exactly how things will work in the afterlife and what experiences we have there. After death, according to Christians, we are radically transformed. Now let me spell out why this is relevant.

Go back to Rey’s example of the young couple. To make the example analogous to the traditional Christian view, he would have to make it so that the couple is no longer married when his wife must leave for the luxurious resort. And the former husband would have to have only the vaguest understanding of what will happen to her there and how she will be transformed before he sees her again. I think it makes sense for him to be sad and anxious in that case even if he can be confident that what happens to his wife will be good. The relationship they had is gone. His ex-wife will be radically transformed when he sees her again. Even if the relationship they had is replaced by something much better, it is understandable that he would be sad and feel that there has been a loss.

Another disanalogy is that in most real life cases, when one young spouse dies, the other does not follow a mere two years after. If the spouses are in their twenties, the remaining spouse may expect to have 50 years or more left. If I learned that I would be separated from my wife for 50 years because she was going to a luxurious resort and the life I thought we would build together is gone, I would be upset. If the young couple has children this will be compounded. I would think that I was part of a team that was raising these children. Now the other member of the team is at a luxurious resort for 50 years and is cut off from our children as they grow and develop and become adults. That would be upsetting. The separation involved in death is significant.

Consider a couple that is getting divorced.⁴ A divorcee might feel that the divorce is net beneficial for each member of the couple. But she may nevertheless mourn the loss of her marriage. It would be weird to say to someone, ‘Look, there is no way you really think getting divorced was the overall better option. After all, your primary emotion is grief at the divorce. If you really thought it was overall better your primary emotion would be joy.’ We might recognize that one option is net better. But we might nevertheless feel more sadness than joy. Indeed, one reaction to the divorce she might have, even if she thinks it is a net positive, is to hold a mourning ceremony.

My father recently died. Some of the things that made me sad seem to be immediate and visceral and independent of any metaphysical or religious views I might hold. When I was with his body shortly before he died, I could touch him and talk to him and engage with him. When I was with his body after he died, just seconds later, he was gone. I felt like I touched his former body but couldn’t touch him. I remember the moment he died and I saw that his body was completely different. His body at the moment was still warm. But otherwise it seemed radically changed. I remember touching his body later when it was cold after he had been preserved and it was radically different still. I felt this way: my dad was here, now he is not, I don’t know how things will be when I see him again. And I felt deeply sad. Something about that, just on a primal level, hurt me. It didn’t matter if he was now in a better place or that I would one day see him again. What mattered in that moment is that my precious father and I were separated. And such separation seemed deeply wrong and evil in a way that was independent of what might happen in the future.

⁴ I thank Redacted 2 for this example.

The idea that mere separation is sufficient for grief is substantially anticipated by Nicholas Wolterstorff in *Lament for a Son*. As he (1987, p. 30-1) puts it:

Elements of the gospel which I had always thought would console did not.... I did not think of death as a bottomless pit. I did not grieve as one who has no hope. Yet Eric is gone, *here* and *now* he is gone; *now* I cannot talk with him, *now* I cannot see him, *now* I cannot hug him, *now* I cannot hear of his plans for the future. *That* is my sorrow.... For *that* grief, what consolation can there be other than having him back?... Nothing fills the void of his absence.

This matches the phenomenology I had surrounding my father's death.

The Deaths of Strangers

So far I have been discussing why we regard our own deaths and the deaths of loved ones as bad. It remains for me to explain why we regard the deaths of distant strangers with whom we are not biologically or socially connected as bad. I have space here only for an evolutionary explanation. I must leave the theological explanation for another occasion.

My explanation is this: Natural selection sometimes results in organisms that have the disposition to increase the fitness of genetically distant organisms. In humans, that disposition partly includes the belief that death is generally bad and bad for genetically distant humans. Furthermore, the disposition, including the belief that death is bad, are present in humans even in cases in which that disposition is not triggerable such as situations in which a genetically distant human is also geographically distant.

Let me spell this out in more detail: Natural selection sometimes results in organisms that have a disposition to increase the fitness of other organisms to which they are largely unrelated. This occurs in social insects, fish, humans, and other species. In some cases, an organism will even have this disposition with respect to organisms of different species. Richard Dawkins (2008) discusses cases in which fish of various different species have a reciprocal relationship. A large fish will refrain from eating a much smaller fish. Instead, the larger fish will go into a trance. The smaller fish will then groom the larger fish. The smaller fish gets some food and is protected from the larger fish that would otherwise eat it. The larger fish gets groomed. There are some smaller fish that are cheats. They mimic the other small fish that actually groom. But instead of grooming the larger fish, they take a bite out of the larger fish and leave. The mimics are in the minority, however. Dawkins' explanation is that there are three categories of organism when it comes to reciprocal altruism. Suckers give help whether their help is reciprocated or not. Cheats receive help when they can but never give help in return. Grudgers are disposed to give help unless they think that the organism needing help is a Cheat. Dawkins observes that in computer models, if there are only Suckers and Cheats, the entire population declines and often goes extinct. But if there are Grudgers too, eventually the Grudgers will dominate and the Suckers and Cheats will go extinct. Dawkins (2008, pp. 187-8) maintains that this applies to humans but he is unsure about the exact details. Elliot Sober and David Sloan Wilson (1998) argue that, in humans, the disposition to increase the fitness of organisms to which one is unrelated may also arise because group selection favors norms that lower the cost in fitness of that behavior or even make the relevant behavior egoistic from an evolutionary perspective.

Another aspect of my story is that the relevant disposition is partly grounded in the belief that generally death is bad for humans. For example, if I see a drowning stranger and think his death is bad, I am likely to help. On the other hand, if I were to instead think his death is good, I am less likely to help. I might even take measures to ensure that he dies. Indeed, if I think the deaths of strangers are good, I might even start trying to kill people who are not otherwise in danger. This would not increase a stranger's fitness.

So, on the present explanation, humans evolved the belief that death is generally bad for humans even unrelated humans. In some cases, an unrelated human is far away and I have no relevant causal contact with them. I cannot help them. My judgment that their death is bad is inert. But evolution yields the disposition to help others to whom we are unrelated even if there are circumstances in which that disposition cannot be triggered. Compare: Imagine I am separated from all of my biologically and socially close loved ones. They are far away and I have no relevant causal contact with them. If they are in danger, I cannot help them. I will nevertheless judge their deaths to be bad. And this is because natural selection results in organisms that are disposed to increase the fitness of their kin. And that disposition remains even if it is not triggerable because my kin are too far away for me to help. In the same way, natural selection results in a disposition to increase the fitness of those humans who are not our kin. Part of that disposition includes the belief that the deaths of biologically distant strangers is bad. And that disposition remains even if those strangers are distant and even if there is nothing I can do to help them. This explains why the judgment that a distant stranger's death is bad would be resilient even if one knows that the stranger will enjoy a good afterlife.

Traditional and Lay Theology

Return to my discussion of traditional Christian theology. It may be that if one accepts the traditional view, one's stance toward death can be explained by the hypothesis that one believes in God. But some lay Christians are uninformed about the traditional Christian views surrounding death. Some think they know in detail how the afterlife works. And they anticipate reunion with their loved ones while giving little, if any, thought to the radical transformations that occur after death. One might wonder how I can explain this observation.

Note that I do not need every one of my explanations to apply to every believer. It is enough for my purposes that two of the three explanations apply in the case of uninformed Christians. I grant that insofar as the relevant lay Christians have detailed beliefs about the afterlife and insofar as they anticipate reunion with their loved ones in such a way that there is no radical transformation, one of my explanations does not apply. Nevertheless, such uninformed Christians are still the products of evolution and they will have been crafted in such a way that their fear of death is resilient. Furthermore, they may fear what they regard as low probability possibilities in which their detailed speculations are false. Thus, my evolutionary explanation and my explanation from fear of low probability possibilities applies⁵.

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⁵ For comments and discussion I thank....

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