

Fear—A Positive Potential: Classic Explanation And New Elucidation

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Abstract

Fear is universal, can be reasonable or without any reason, ever-shifting and indefinable but one of the most common and mysterious emotions experienced by mankind. This paper aims to investigate the notion of fear which is usually associated with apprehensions and intimidations but I argue that it is a positive emotion having potential of playing a productive role in motivating a person to be a constructive member of the society. Moving into the realm of fear is challenging too because it not only exposes the individual to vulnerability but there is also a possibility that the new chance might not work out. It not only mobilizes energy in coping with pressures but drives man to take preventive measures against expected or unexpected threats. Acknowledging fears and embracing them boldly induces a person to think about the origin and causes of fears. The objective of this paper is to highlight how fear equips a person to not only handle challenges of life with confidence but also to love life with its entire splendor. To validate the argument, research and analysis done in this paper, present evidence by examining and appraising viewpoints of both the classic as well as the modern philosophers.

Keywords: death; fear; feeling; human; rational; self;

Introduction:

Fear is the most natural and common emotion that humankind experiences. It activates nervous system, mobilises available energy in body and restructures work of all bodily organs. This results in sudden increase of heartbeat, enlarged pupils and slowing down of activity. At the same time, the endocrine gland produces an influx of adrenalin, which narrows down veins, thus drawing out blood from cells of skin. The feeling of fear results in shift in the work of nervous system and variation in blood pressure. This happens in **reaction to some kind of threat**. The

most common and general threats which a humankind confronts are fears “related to **death**” (Saliba39-42) and **collapse of life ideals**.

Fear—A Positive Potential:

Fear is a rather uncomfortable experience that often disturbs people, puts one out of action and may cause psychosomatic disorders. Other fear-caused reflexes are shivering or dryness of mouth, reduction of one’s body weight, loss of appetite and confusion in case of an indispensable threat. Rosfort says, “The feelings involved in fear, for example, may tend to block our higher cognitive skills to promote the immediate instinct to flight from the object that causes the emotion” (257). It can be destructive to the point where it leads to the deterioration of personality.

Man is afraid of losing his comforts, dignity, reputation, job and cherished ideals. The fear of losing his comforts motivates him to construct better ideals to further his ease. It is often due to the fear of losing job that people are urged to work efficiently and bear disgrace in the process of earning their livelihood. It is the fear of losing family name that urges a man to not to indulge in such activities which may stigmatize the family honour. Cancer patients undergo traumatic chemotherapeutic treatment and withstand painful radioactive rays in fear of losing life. Thus, fear has a double function to perform. Being ambivalent in nature, it is both maleficent and beneficent. My argument in this paper is that fear is more useful as it plays a productive role in motivating a person to play a constructive and effective role in the society.

In the process of evolution, fear served as a defence mechanism against hazards of nature. Later, with the creation and establishment of human society many types of fears receded. While confronting an environmental hazard or a fierce animal, the skin grows pale, this indicates the effect of adrenalin, which forces blood to flow back from the surface of the body and stomach to be redistributed in muscles. The human organism gains energy, when fresh supply of blood reaches muscles of the body. This mobilization of energy helps him in coping with threats in critical situation. This is one of the **constructive functions of fear**—providing a man with enough strength to withstand pressures of life that is helped by the flow of adrenalin in blood that supplies muscles with extra oxygen and minerals. In such cases, fear becomes defensive because it is linked to self-preservation thus playing a beneficent function in human life.

The **second function of fear is that it** induces man to take preventive measures against encountering the cause of pain, which he has already experienced back in time. The memory of acute pain registers itself on the subconscious of an organism essentially promoting precautionary measures to be taken against the cause of pain. Poland observes, “We leap for joy, but we cringe for fear. Yet we know that cringing resistances not only hide but also signal what threatens to emerge. So it is worth the effort to look fear in the face as much as possible” (203).

Fear also persuades man to move strategically in an unknown situation. When not enough information is available for the one who has to take a subjective decision, fear dictates the strategy. Fear in this case shields the individual from possible psychological and communal threats. It serves to ensure that the person takes in and considers every tiny detail in the evaluation of situation, which may save the individual from embarrassment. Talking about life, Howes says, that it is necessary to take risk and action. He continues,

Mistakes will happen no matter what. It's a part of the game; it's part of life! Fear is a necessary component of that — it helps you calculate the risk—but you can't let the fear make the decisions for you. You must feel the fear, process it, and do what you need to do to achieve what you've set out for yourself." (112)

Classic Explanation:

Francis Bacon (1561-1626), an English author and philosopher, postulates that the greatest fear that a living person experiences is the fear of death. He says, "[m]en fear death as children fear to go into the dark; and as that natural fear in children is increased with tales, so is the other" (12). For a man it is as natural to experience the fear of death, as it is natural for a child to fear darkness. In both the cases, it is innate. The more one discusses and thinks about death, the more one becomes afraid of it because "fear breeds fear" (Kuwabara 1260).

Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), a Dutch philosopher. He is considered as one of the greatest rationalists of 17th Century. Spinoza relates fear to hope. When we think of future, the soul feels joy because of hope which we might associate with the possibility of good future. At the same time, if the mind thinks of bad possibility then fear enters in our soul. While talking about fear, Spinoza thinks that it is the nature of a man to first think with a good possibility and then about the bad option. With hope is associated confidence but fear brings in despair and sorrow with it. This takes a man to a conflicting state of mind. He brings in courage to come out of this state of vacillation but if the situation is enormous then he has to add bravery to the feeling of courage. Spinoza associates hope with fear saying that they are primary feelings which result either in confidence or despair. God is the highest good. All things are what they are because of Him. So we must not fear the highest good. Spinoza argues that deception and malice are associated with those whom we are afraid of. We deceive to sustain power, while supposes privation of goodness. We need not to be afraid of God, who is Almighty, All-Powerful and Supremely Good. He concludes his discussion by saying that "there is no hope without fear and no fear without hope" (Spinoza 303).

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855), a Danish philosopher, poet, social critic and religious author, widely considered to be the first existentialist philosopher, finds the cause of

unrest in human life is the result of separateness from the Pure Being. The need to come to terms with God leads, in the opinion of Kierkegaard, to three kinds of movements: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. These are different ways of trying to get over the feeling of dread of estrangement. At the aesthetic stage, man is aware of true relationship between the eternal and the temporal. This is a stage of indiscriminate enjoyment or suffering and there is no question of choice. At the ethical stage, there is a possibility of two alternatives because the impact of what is eternal on what is temporal is noticed here. This means that man can either choose to pursue the Infinite to be in tune with it, or choose to remain finite. Nevertheless, both these choices are doomed to end in despair, because both these attempts are one-sided. Man cannot be Infinite in its purity, nor can he get rid of fear of the Infinite by concentrating on his finitude. Man is ambivalent—a combination of finite and infinite. If he concentrates on becoming purely eternal, he will be moving in the region of ideals that he cannot put into practice. It is on this ground that Kierkegaard finds fault with Hegelians who define reality as rational and try to fit reality into the triadic development of ideas—thesis, antithesis and synthesis. On the contrary, if man is wholly concerned with the finite, he would be labouring at in procuring material things and temporal objects. Instead of finding himself in ever-changing flux of the outside world, he would be lost in it. The result is utter despair and the real solution of the problem of overcoming the fear of unknown consistently remains there. It is only at religious level that man can hope to overcome his fears. In contradistinction with the Pure Being, man is always sinful and engaged in baser activities of the temporal world. It is only when he repents than God forgives him. Self-realization that consists in overcoming fear is possible only when eternity is seen in its proper relation with temporality, when man's sinfulness is accepted and when God's forgiveness is sought through repentance. Kierkegaard, however, does not believe in pre-destination. The future is open so man is free to choose. He cannot just use his experience mechanically or adjust his future line of action accordingly. So fear becomes a positive potential as it leads to the process of repentance, self-realization and to oneness with Pure Being. Fear is what we experience in response to sublime also. Looking up at the mountain may arouse fear but the experience becomes joyful as the climber reaches the top. Therefore, fear can be a part of the process but when the product comes in hand than fearful darkness is transformed into joyful light. While positioning fear within the discourse of sublime, one may identify that "fear would be an appropriate response to take towards an object, though one has managed to resist or overcome it in some fashion" (Cochrane 128). Therefore, the darkness and the light, the fear and the sublime are ambivalent characteristics of a same phenomenon.

Edmund Burke (1729-1797), is an Irish author, political theorist, and philosopher insists on trusting "not to human reasonings, but to human nature, of which the reason is but a part, and by no means the greatest part" (196). "No passion," Burke insists, so "effectually robs the mind

of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear,” but his account of fear indicates that it has some intelligence (230). Fear holds value for it is related to self-preservation and it is “impossible to be perfectly free from terror” (236). Fear would not occur, Aristotle maintains, without the belief that bad events are impending (155). Burke maintains that fear “operates in a manner that resembles the actual pain;” indeed, the only difference between the two is that pain affects the body first while terror first affects the mind (285). The crucial difference is that fear is *about* pain, while pain is borne by physical state.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), a French philosopher, playwright, novelist and literary critic suggests that fear originated from accusing look of society. The fear of the concentration camps is aroused by a tap on shoulder, the threat of being shot, the constant surveillance made it difficult during the Second World War to know who your friend was and who your enemy was. To be observed meant that someone constantly doubts one’s intentions. Sartre brings out the paralyzing and unnerving effect of the stare of agency. The society that causes fear within people is evil because it results in alienation of the individual. In order to overcome self-alienation, he says, one must try to be one with one’s self. The mental and bodily appropriation should be the aim of every activity in the opinion of Sartre. Love, masochism, desire, sadism, fear and hatred are the channels through which the self tries to appropriate the other. If the other is enemy, these reactions are to be used with all intelligence of the self. If the enemy is full of guile, the process of self-identification must be used with superior guile. The tactics employed by the enemy must be foreseen and an attempt must be made to defeat him. Thus, love and other human relationships are used as weapons of war for tactical advantages. Love no more remains a sign of mutuality, but a shrewd feeling in the process of one-sided self-identification. It involves an element of cunning or shrewdness, and not necessarily rationality. Sartre’s principle is ‘In choosing myself, I choose man’; in acting on the principle of making a personal choice, Sartre seems to recognise the agency in man. This is the principle on which everyone must act. Sartre wants to preserve freedom of choice by going counter to rationalist dogma of determinism. In his declaration that every man should act freely, no appeal is made to the faculty of reason, and no suggestion to the follower of this principle. Sartre asserts that choosing is choosing well and this assertion is dogmatic, for in practice sometimes we choose rightly, and sometimes wrongly.

In views of Bacon, Kierkegaard, Burke, and Sartre, it is observed that there is a common desire to overcome the feeling of fear but not in terms of reason. Bacon thinks that it is instinctive to experience fear no matter how brave or mature a man is. Kierkegaard finds the remedy in the feeling of repentance, which he regards not merely as a subjective but as having an objective reference to Personal God; Burke correlates fear with the feeling of sublime and Sartre finds it in the feeling of freedom which is experienced in the commitment of self in every action.

New Elucidation:

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1875-1975), a Russian philosopher, literary critic, and scholar who worked on literary theory, ethics, and the philosophy of language. The folk culture inspires Bakhtin because “the images of folk culture are absolutely fearless and communicate this fearlessness to all” (39). He appreciates the medieval and Renaissance grotesque, because he argues that it is filled with the spirit of carnival thus liberates the world from terrifying elements of life. The frightening aspects of life are converted into “amusing or ludicrous monstrosities” (47). He says that laughter helps in incapacitating fear, “for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority” (90). Just as language is a characteristic of human species so is laughter a characteristic of human species.

Derrida (1930-2004), a French philosopher, recognized for developing a form of semiotic analysis known as deconstruction. He talks of fear from the perspective of hurting someone by criticizing some text, institution or personality. He feels fear to write but at the same time he feels a compulsion on himself to write. He says:

Each time that I write something, and it feels like I'm advancing into new territory, somewhere I haven't been before, and this type of advance often demands certain gestures that can be taken as aggressive with regard to other thinkers or colleagues — I am not someone who is by nature polemical but it's true that deconstructive gestures appear to destabilize or cause anxiety or even hurt others - so, every time that I make this type of gesture, there are moments of fear. (n.p.)

TichNhatHanh (1926) is a Vietnamese Buddhist, monk, teacher, peace activist and author. He also believes that fear is essential wisdom to get through the storm of life. He thinks that as human beings we should have powers to acknowledge our fears to get rid of their control. He suggests practicing *mindfulness* and to “face our fears and no longer be pushed and pulled around by them” (2). Management of fears is to be done by practicing to invite all our hidden fears to come to the surface. Life only becomes worthwhile if we have a clear vision of all our fears. Besides this, one should feel the beauty and blessings of nature surrounding us. He, like Bacon, thinks that the greatest fear which a mankind faces is the fear of death. He suggests that we need to free ourselves from the concept that we are more than just bodies which will decay, but we should understand that we are beyond physical bodies which have not come from nothingness and will not disappear into nothingness. Tracing the history of fear in human life, he says, that the first fear which a human child experiences is the fear associated with the desire to

survive at the time of birth. For nine months a child has lived in a very comfortable and protected environment but when he comes to this world he experiences cold, hunger, jarring sounds and dazzling light. Hanh calls it the “original fear” (7). Out of serene environment flung into a place where he has to encounter sufferings, as first he has to thrust water out of his lungs and then he will have to inhale oxygen to survive. So fear is probably the first emotion which a human child experiences as he is pushed into this world, based on the original desire to live. Man is afraid of loneliness which makes him look for the caretaker, search a friend, a suitable partner and finally wishes to have children. He buys various commodities of life to be accepted by the people around him in fear of rejection. He is afraid to be abandoned and left alone. This primal fear is behind most of his actions and attitude towards life. Giving the example of Buddha, he says, that he became fearless because he practiced mindfulness. By confronting his fears, he achieved calm and peace of mind. State of fearlessness is the ultimate joy as “[w]hen you touch nonfear, you are free” (6).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION:

Can we then completely get rid of the feeling of fear in action? Is every fear immoral and irrational? Is it possible to put in the place of fear, some thought, feeling or good intention in the contemporary world. It is not possible to achieve this objective, and even if it were possible to achieve it, it would be ruinous from the organic or personal point of view.

Fear in excess can be killing or paralyzing but it can be a positive emotion as it keeps a man active and agile. The time when a person is not afraid, he is not learning much from the experiences of life because life which is predictable and familiar is not dynamic and lively, consequently preventing a sense of stagnation from taking hold. Fear takes one outside the comfort-zone and compels a person to take a new step which might involve risk. In such a case risk is related to fear. In order to grow in life; one has to take risk and to embrace fear. This can be related to professional life like dumping a job which is offering no growth or promotion, and to personal life like ending a relationship that is not working anymore or shifting to a new place of living as the present place has become a source of discomfort. Exploring the realm of fear is challenging too because it not only uncovers weaknesses of the individual but there is a possibility that the new chance might not work out. It demands shifting of mindset and breaking of previously established principles and philosophies of life. It is vital to build an essential commitment to go ahead for taking the chance and planning the change. Discussing the intentions with close relations, believing in them, and thinking of a reward if it is successfully executed are inspiring to take the risk. This fills up a man with creative energy and new ideas are clicked in one's mind. Once the decision is taken then it is necessary to take action because inaction feeds and grows fear while action escalates confidence and helps fears to subside. There

is a possibility of flying higher or crashing down and burning oneself, but either way, it is certain to land somewhere new and fresh. Recognizing fears and facing them boldly tempts a person to think about sources and causes of fears. This prepares a person to not only manage challenges of life with confidence but also to love life with all its beauty. It becomes easier to control external consequences as opposed to feel as if being operated by them resulting in a sense of wholeness to emerge.

Fear is noticeable in human lives on various levels. Sometimes it is a result of aligning oneself with social norms like keeping up appearances or fear of losing prestige and status; at other times running after blind competition can be a cause of fear. On personal level, fear becomes obvious by the desire to prove one's potential. People suffer from fear because of being exposed as incompetent or they are afraid to cope with unexpected losses. Fear being a positive potential has a negative side too because a person who is afraid of survival will think many times before sharing his support to others. It is seen that those communities in which individuals are not worried about their survival, people are more willing to offer their support, part their knowledge, share their quantifiable and emotional assets with others.

Progress is likely to come in managing and using fear to one's advantage. It is a misconception that fear negates courage, instead when man is afraid he musters up all his courage to overcome fears. Nothing great can be accomplished without facing fear. Every dream aspiring towards greatness can be a little terrifying. We often *think* things are going to be tough but there are some fears which in reality do not exist at all. Many great men reveal in their interviews and auto-biographies that they experienced pressure, stress and fear at different times of their lives.

Fear serves a biological purpose in the struggle for existence by making the organic life aware of its enemies and thus putting it in a position to erect a defensive mechanism against them, "passions motivate us, but they never inform; reason, on the other hand, informs, but can never motivate human beings" (Dewey 1922). It is a common experience that some fears are rational and some irrational. It is fears of the latter kind that need to be eradicated and replaced by a rational outlook. Dictatorships, which exploit pathological fear in the interest of dictators and through long subjection instill fear of freedom, are to be deprecated for this reason. This does not however mean that we should not have even rational fears. Fears of losing the moral principles of mutuality, equality in humanity, freedom, if totally eradicated would make us indifferent to morality and loss of fear of the right kind would end up by making us less human. It is, however, not only fear that should determine our action or life, but also reason which would lead us to decide what to fear and what not to fear. In this sense, then, it is through reason that we should determine the place of fear in life, and not the other way round as we see it done in many a human situation.

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