

# A TREATISE OF THE ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHER IBN SINA (AVICENNA) ON THE FEAR OF DEATH AND THE TREATMENT OF ANXIETY CAUSED BY IT

Ahmed Pajević<sup>1</sup>, Izet Pajević<sup>1,2</sup>, Edin Dedić<sup>3</sup> & Mevludin Hasanović<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Medicine, University of Tuzla, Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina

<sup>2</sup>Department of Psychiatry, University Clinical Center Tuzla, Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina

<sup>3</sup>Behram-Bey's Madrasa Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina

## SUMMARY

Although the issue of death and fear of it is one of the oldest issues that man has dealt with, modern secular psychiatry today, as before, does not pay enough attention to the phenomenon of fear of death. The famous Islamic philosopher and physician Ibn Sina, better known in the West as Avicenna (980-1037), wrote *A Treatise on the Cure for the Fear of Death and the Treatment of Anxiety Caused by It*, more than nine centuries ago. Bosnian Islamic scholar Mehmed Handžić translated this treatise from Arabic into Bosnian 80 years ago. This paper provides basic data and a summary of this translation with a focus on the analysis of key terms from the Arabic language used by the author in the original paper from the perspective of today's psychiatric terminology and then its integral translation into English. In addition to its historical significance, we believe that this discussion has its practical significance today, so we hope that this paper could encourage further fruitful discussions in professional circles dealing with this topic.

**Key words:** fear of death - anxiety - Ibn Sina - Avicenna - psychiatry - psychotherapy

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## INTRODUCTION

80 years ago, the great Bosnian scholar Mehmed Handžić (1906–1944) made an excellent translation, from the Arabic language, of a short treatise by Ibn Sina entitled: *A Treatise on the Cure for the Fear of Death and the Treatment of Anxiety Caused by It*. This translation, along with a short Preface by the translator, was first published in the Islamic journal *El-Hidaje*, V, Sarajevo, 1941-42, No. 4-5, p. 90-98. It was later reprinted and republished in the journal *Islamic Thought* (II / 1980, 23, 31-35) and found its place in the collected works of Mehmed Handžić (*Selected Works, Book V: Studies in Sharia Law*, Sarajevo 1999: 442-456.) The translation was made according to the Cairo edition from 1917 (Handžić 1995, 1980). The title in the Arabic original reads: "Risala fi alshifa' min khawf almawt w muealajat alaightsimam bih". In the European edition, the Arabic title of this treatise reads: "Risala fi def'iighammi min almawt", i.e.: "A Treatise on Repelling the Worry about Death". It was printed twice in French in Leiden (1894 and 1899) under the title: "On the Cure for the Fear of Death" (Handžić 1999).

In a short introduction in the form of a preface he wrote on this occasion, with basic information regarding the *Treatise* itself and a brief review of the life and work of the great Islamic philosopher and physician Ibn Sina, the translator, Mehmed Handžić also gives a brief explanation of what prompted him to choose this one, from Ibn Sina's numerous treatises, which refers to the issue of treating the fear of death, and says: "The issue of death and fear of it is one of the oldest issues that man has dealt with. Different people have solved this

problem in different ways. Religions did not leave this question aside just as well, they rather included it in their most important teachings, providing a solution for it, each in its own way. The immortality of the soul, which makes man a man, has been adopted in almost all religions as a matter not to be debated. Every individual even, deals with the problem of death within his soul, and many times he is overwhelmed by the fear of that event, which is inevitable for every living being. As you can see, this issue is very important and a problem that has been addressed from all sides. The Islamic philosopher Ibn Sina in his mentioned treatise, gave an explanation of this question from his point of view. I have tried to translate this treatise of his before, but now, accompanied by a short introduction about the author, I present it to the public" (Handžić 1999).

## BRIEF DISCUSSION

The questions and dilemmas that Ibn Sina discusses in this treatise are still relevant today. Modern secular psychiatry has focused on the fact that facing the possibility of one's own death is accompanied by fear and anxiety and on the question of what do people actually fear about death and whether they fear actual death or maybe something else. In doing so, a distinction is made between fear and anxiety. The fear of death is related to the fear of the real possibility of pain and psychological suffering that are frequent companions of the dying process. On the other hand, anxiety is a fear without an image of a specific dangerous object and is related to the experience of death as something unknown, without knowing when, where and how one will die (Gregurek

2005). "Fear" is typically taken to refer to brain states associated with presentations of overtly dangerous stimuli. Unlike "fear," from this perspective "anxiety" refers to brain states elicited by signals that predict impending, but not immediately presenting danger. Thus, unlike "fear," "anxiety" involves a more sustained change in the brain, manifest when a threat is still relatively removed from the organism in a spatial or temporal context (Sadock et al. 2017a). Death and dying are accompanied by psychological and physical suffering in interaction with each other and numerous fears that are interpolated into these two categories. Fear of death can manifest itself in various forms: fear of physical suffering; fear of humiliation; fear of ending unachieved goals; fear of psychological agony; fear of consequences for the family; fear of what comes after death (Gregurek 2005).

Ibn Sina, on the other hand, starts from the premise that man is basically a religious being (*homo Religiosus*) and bases his approach to this problem on the spiritual and religious aspect, specifically, Islamic teaching. It focuses on the root cause of the fear of death and classifies those who may have that fear into five categories: 1. the one who does not know what death is in essence; 2. the one who does not know what will happen to him after death; 3. the one who thinks that death itself brings great pain in addition to the pain that comes with the disease that causes it; 4. the one who fears the punishment that will follow after death; and 5. the one who mourns for family, children, possessions, and worldly pleasures and delights. He then emphasizes that all these reasons are unfounded and unrealistic and then systematically, with logical argumentation, explains his claim by giving clear mental guidelines for overcoming such a situation for each of these categories (Ibn Sina 1999, 1980). For Ibn Sina's approach, we can say that from the aspect of modern psychotherapy, it is predominantly cognitive-behavioral. It is cognitive because its goal is to form appropriate cognitive patterns in an individual, that is, basic beliefs that will help a person get rid of distorted opinions that affect our emotions and behavior, and it's behavioral because through changing the basic beliefs Ibn Sina wants to direct a person to know himself and distinguish what benefits him from what is harmful when it comes to this life and life after death and to act accordingly (Pajević et al. 2021a, 2021b).

From today's perspective, it is interesting that Ibn Sina, in the very title of his treatise, made a distinction between the fear of death as such (*khawf*) and the hardship, anxiety, mental pain that comes from it (*ightimâm*), which in modern psychiatry and psychology is referred to as anxiety. In Western psychiatry, this distinction between fear and anxiety was introduced only in 1894 with Freud's description of Anxiety neurosis. This distinction between fear and anxiety arose accidentally. When Sigmund Freud's early translator

mistranslated *angst*, the German word for "fear," as anxiety, Freud generally ignored the distinction that associates anxiety with a repressed, unconscious object and fear with a known, external object (Sadock et al. 2017b).

There are many words in Arabic that denote fear. The word *hawf* (خوف) is most commonly used, which in Arabic dictionaries has the meaning of *the expectation that something undesirable will happen or that something desirable will be missed*. When the feeling of fear intensifies and interferes with person's normal functioning, then it is called *qalaq* (قلق) *anxiety, instability*. And when it becomes unbearable and preoccupies a person, then the word *gamm* (غم) is used (Ibn Sina 2004, Mustafa et al. 1989). Ibn Sina, in his treatise, discusses the question of fear of death which can reach the stage of *gamm* or *ightimâm*. However, he does not deal with this last phase and its symptoms, as it is usually done today, but deals with the causes of fear of death, which if not treated properly, over time can develop into a mental state called *gamm* (anxiety, worry), or into some of the Anxiety or fear-related disorders.

In the hope that this paper could encourage further fruitful discussions in professional circles dealing with this topic, we bring an integral translation of Ibn Sina's Treatise into English:

*Ibn Sina (Avicenna)*

#### **A TREATISE ON THE CURE FOR THE FEAR OF DEATH AND THE TREATMENT OF ANXIETY CAUSED BY IT**

Thank God, The Lord of the Universe! May God's mercy be upon our guide Muhammad (pbuh) and his good and pure family. And then:

As the greatest fear, which can overwhelm a man, is the fear of death, and as this fear is general fear, and, besides its generality, truly the heaviest and strongest of all fears, I felt obliged to explain this issue. Fear of death can only overtake a man who doesn't know what death is in its essence, or the one who doesn't know where his soul will go after his death, or the one who thinks that once his organism is broken and destroyed his personality will perish and his soul will cease to exist with it, as in it will be completely gone and nonexistent, and that the world will remain still whether he existed or not, just as those who don't know about the existence of the soul after death and about its new life, think. The fear can also be caused by the person thinking that death carries severe pain with it other than the pain of illness which can precede death and lead to it. The cause of fear can also be a person's belief in the punishment that will come to him after death, or that he is disappointed and does not know what will happen to him after death, or that he regrets the property and other things he has acquired. All of these thoughts are unfounded and unrealistic.

## I.

To the one who does not know death and does not know what it is, I will explain to him that death is nothing more than the soul abandoning the use of its tools, and these are the various parts of the body, whose group is called the organism. It's exactly the same as when a craftsman leaves his tool. That is because the soul is an immaterial substance and not an occurrence nor an accident. Therefore, it does not suffer decay. This reasoning requires the expert knowledge that precedes it, and this is explained and elaborated elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> When this substance is separated from the organism, it still exists in its own way; it becomes pure and cleansed from physical turmoil and happy with perfect happiness. It cannot perish, nor does it lose its being. Only the phenomena, properties and relations between the soul and the body decay because of their opposites. As far as the spiritual substance is concerned, it doesn't have an opposite, and everything that decays does so because of its opposites. If you were to observe the material substance carefully you would notice that it doesn't decay nor does it disappear as such, but only changes from one form to another and loses only some of its properties and features. How could it, therefore, be imagined and assumed that a spiritual substance that does not suffer any changes or changing, but only receives the perfections and completeness of its form, can perish and be destroyed?

## II.

The one who is afraid of death because he doesn't know where he is going after death or because he thinks that his personality will disappear if his organism is broken and disarranged and that his soul will cease to exist because he doesn't know that the soul shall still exist but he doesn't know about its new life; he isn't really afraid of death he just doesn't know the things he must know. Therefore, ignorance is the danger that causes fear. And this ignorance actually encouraged scholars to seek science and to tire themselves by

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<sup>1</sup> The soul is immaterial according to Ibn Sina. The soul has three kinds: plant, animal, and the soul that thinks and makes a man a man. His predecessors have been proving the immateriality of the soul by logical evidence. Ibn Sina was the first one who was proving this by mental experience: „Let's imagine a man, created without eyesight so that he can't see any of his skin; his limbs are separated so none of his body parts touch each other; let's say he is floating in an empty space, where there is no air so he can't feel or hear anything. Won't this man be completely unaware of his body? Won't he be able to understand only one thing, and that is the existence of his soul, the existence of 'he'. Therefore, the existence of the soul is immaterial and unrelated to the body.” - So argues Ibn Sina. We find similar evidence in Descartes, which has caused thinkers such as Valois and Fouriani to claim the possibility that Descartes became acquainted with the opinions of Ibn Sina. Fouriani proved that the passages from Ibn Sina's "Al-Shifa", which refer to this issue, were translated into Latin earlier.

serving it. That is why they abandoned their bodily pleasures and peace and instead chose hard work and little sleep. They observed that the peace which man attains when he shakes off ignorance is true peace, and that true fatigue comes from ignorance, for ignorance is a mental illness, and to be cured of it means salvation, eternal peace, and lasting pleasure. When the scholars were convinced of this and when they were clear in this respect and penetrated to that essence and reached peace and tranquility, all worldly things lost their value in their eyes, the wealth, the riches and bodily pleasures as well as desires which lead to it, and all that the ordinary masses hold great they have watched with contempt, for it all has little permanence and duration, it passes quickly and perishes, and when it is realized, it is followed by many worries, and when it disappears again, great sorrows occur. This is why they limited themselves to the amount that is necessary for worldly life and completely rejected the excess of comfort which has many flaws that I pointed out and many that I didn't. Besides, all these desires are without end, because when a person reaches a certain limit in one regard, other desires occur that seek another limit, and they never stop at one, nor do they have an end point. And this is death of which there is no fear; greed for that is the greed for the temporary; occupation by it is a useless occupation. That is why the scholars resolutely claimed that there are two kinds of death; death by will and natural death; so, too, there are two lives; life at will and natural life. By death at will, they mean killing your desires and breaking your bond with them; by the life at will they mean the food, drinks and passion which man endeavors to attain in this world, and by natural<sup>2</sup> life they mean the eternal existence of the soul in permanent pleasure, that it achieved with the help of knowledge it gathered and by getting rid of the ignorance. That is why the wise Plato - God may give him peace in his grave! - advised the one seeking wisdom, telling him: "Die at will to live spiritually (by nature)".

In addition, that man, who is afraid of natural death, is truly afraid of what he should desire. And this is because death is a term that completes the definition of man. Namely, man is a living being who thinks and dies. Therefore, the notion of death completes his essence and perfects it, and with its help he rises to his highest spheres. The one who knows that each thing is made up of its essence, and the essence consists of the nearest genus term (genus proximum) and the traits by which it differs from other terms of the same genus (differentia specifica) and that the closest genus term of man is a living being and his traits are that he thinks and dies, he will also know that he will dissolve into his

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<sup>2</sup> The term "natural" used here is a literal translation of the Arabic term "ṭabīī", but in our language the term "natural" does not fit. The term "spiritual", "mental" would be more appropriate.

genus and his traits, for all that is composed undoubtedly dissolves into those notions of which it is composed of. Therefore, who can be more ignorant than one who is afraid of what constitutes his personality; who can be in a worse condition than the one who thinks that he is perishing by living and becoming deficient by completing himself! Because when the deficient is afraid of his completion, then he does not know himself to the fullest. Therefore, a reasonable person is obliged to be afraid of shortcomings and flaws, and to be pleased with everything that perfects him. He is obliged to seek everything that will complete him, perfect him, bring him honor, elevate his degree and free him from his restraints in a way that he will be safe from danger, and not in a way in which he will be even more restrained, more complicated, and connected.

He is obliged to be completely assured that the holy divine substance, when it gets rid of gross bodily substances becoming purer and clearer rather than connected and murky, ascends to the highest world, becomes happy, returns to its kingdom, approaches its Creator. It manages to come into the neighborhood with the Lord of the Universe, mixes with good souls like itself and others like it, and saves itself from what is contrary to it. On the basis of this we know that the soul which parts with the body, longing for it and fearing that parting, will be unhappy to the extreme and in great pain in regard to itself and its essence; it will turn to the farthest side of its permanent abode and always seek peace and tranquility there.

### III

As for the one who thinks that death has great pain in addition to the pain of illness, which can precede and lead to it, he has a completely unfounded and incorrect opinion. And this is because pain happens with comprehension, and only the living can comprehend and feel and only the living receive the influence of the soul. As for those bodies that don't receive the influence of the soul, they cannot have any pain or feel at all. Therefore, death, which is nothing but the parting of the soul with the body, cannot have pain at all, because the organism has suffered and felt due to the soul and its impact on it. Therefore, when the organism becomes a body, on which there is no impact of the soul, then it does not feel or have any pain. From this, it is clear that death is a state of the organism which occurs as a result of the separation of the soul from it and therefore this state cannot be sentient or painful, because the organism felt and had pain only by means of the soul.

### IV

He who fears death because of punishment is not really afraid of death, but is afraid of punishment. Punishment, on the other hand, can be for what remains with him even after death. It follows that he inevitably confesses his sins and ugly deeds, for which he deserves

punishment, and in addition he acknowledges the Righteous Judge, who punishes for ugly, and not for good deeds. Therefore, he fears his sins, not death. He, on the other hand, who fears punishment for a sin, is obliged to abstain from that sin and be wary of it. The ugly deeds, which are called sins, originate from the rusty and negative sides of the soul, and these negative sides of the soul are the flaws that we enumerated (elsewhere) and listed the virtues that are opposite to them. Therefore, he who fears death in this way, truly does not know what he should be afraid of, and he fears what there is no fear of and what has no action at all. The cure for ignorance is knowledge; the one who has knowledge, is in the clear and the path of happiness is clear to him and he will follow it. Whoever takes the right path to a goal, that path will undoubtedly bring him there. This certainty, which comes from the basis of science, is the belief held by one who is clear in regard to his faith and who adheres to wisdom.

### V

Whoever thinks that he is not afraid of death, but mourns for his family, children and property he leaves behind and grieves for the worldly pleasures and enjoyments that will pass him by, should be explained that there is no use to grieve over what must inevitably happen. Man belongs to a group of beings that perish and whatever becomes, that perishes. Therefore, the one who would like not to perish, at the same time, he wants not to exist. Whoever doesn't want to exist, wants to perish. So, it seems that at the same time he wants to perish and not to perish; he wants to exist and not to exist. It is clear that this is an impossibility that cannot come to the mind of a reasonable person. Besides, if it were possible for man to remain eternal, those who were before us would have remained eternal. If, on the other hand, people remained eternal in addition to the reproduction that exists in them and if they did not die, the whole earth would become cramped for them. You will understand this best from what we are about to present. Suppose that one of the people who existed four hundred years ago has remained until now and let's say he is one of the respectable people so that it would be possible to count his descendants who exist, such as *Amir al-Mu'minin Ali ibn Abi Talib*, may God be pleased. Suppose he has his descendants and they reproduce eternally and none of them die. Then calculate how many of them will exist by today. You will surely find that there will be more than ten thousand people. Suppose all the people who existed in that century on Earth in the East and the West remain alive as well. If they reproduced in this fashion you would undoubtedly be unable to count them. Then calculate the surface of the Earth, because it is finite and its space can be calculated. By doing this you will realize that the Earth could not stand so many people even if you imagined them just standing next to each other, let alone sitting

and working. There would be no land left to cultivate, no space for sowing, no width for walking and moving any of them, let alone for anything else. All this would happen in a short time span, so imagine what would happen if it went on for longer and the number of people kept multiplying in this proportion. And this is the state of the one who wants to live forever and who despises and hates death and thinks, due to his ignorance and stupidity, that it is possible. Therefore, perfect Divine wisdom and general justice in perfect administration remain as the only right way; it cannot be deviated from and that is perfection in generosity after which there is no higher perfection.

Therefore, he who fears death, fears God's justice and wisdom, and he even fears His generosity and His gift. Based on the above, death is neither ugly nor bad; ugly and bad is the fear of it, for he who fears death does not know himself or his essence.

In fact, death is the parting of the soul and the body, and in this parting, there is no decay of the soul, but only the decay of the composition. As for the substance of the soul, which constitutes the essence of man and his core, it remains eternal, because it is not corporeal so that whatever happens to the body must necessarily happen to it as well. Not only that, but it does not have any of the phenomena that occur in the body, such as struggle for place and space, because the soul does not need a place, nor does it strive for temporal survival, because it does not need time either. This substance has gained perfection through the body and senses. And when perfected by them, and then liberated from them, it goes to its holy world which is close to its Exalted Originator and Creator.

The man who gives alms in the name of his dead brother or repays his debt becomes happy with the happiness of the deceased. This is because if the soul is one, then both the one who gave alms and the other soul and all souls in general are one thing. If, on the other hand, the souls are divided, then the one who gives alms does not do the good deed for the said soul, but only because of the similarity between him and that soul. These souls as well, similar to each other, resemble one thing.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Here we notice some kind of doubt in our philosopher's mind, whether the soul of every man exists as a separate individual or whether all souls constitute one universal soul and one individual. However, there is actually no doubt here whatsoever, but the matter is presented in such a way as to highlight all possible assumptions so that the evidence is complete and includes all possibilities. The school of philosophers, to which Ibn Sina belonged, advocates that the soul, after parting with the organism, remains eternal and survives on its own without losing its individuality by merging into anything and merging with anything. This opinion was also advocated by Ibn Rushd (Averroes), although under the name of Averroism, the long-held opinion spread in Europe that the individual soul is mortal and that only the impersonal, common intellect to all people (intellectus), is immortal. Because of this widespread opinion, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) wrote his

(Translated from the Arabic original into Bosnian by Mehmed Handžić (1906-1944) using an edition printed in Cairo in 1917. The translation was first published in the Islamic journal *El-Hidaje*, V, Sarajevo, 1941-42, No. 4-5, p. 90-98. Translated from Bosnian into English by Ahmed Nuruddin Pajević in Tuzla, February 20<sup>th</sup> 2021).

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Ahmed Pajević: made substantial contributions to interpretation of data, participated in revising the manuscript and gave final approval of the version to be submitted.

Izet Pajević: conception and design of the manuscript, collecting data and literature searches, analyses and interpretation of literature, manuscript preparation and writing the paper; and gave final approval of the version to be submitted.

Edin Dedić: made substantial contributions to conception to interpretation of data, participated in revising the manuscript and gave final approval of the version to be submitted.

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work "De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas". Ibn Rushd's followers who were Christians were not on his level. Therefore, not everything they attribute to him can be taken as his opinion. Muslims do not know Ibn Rushd as an opponent of the religion or as its apostate, and this opinion, which is spreading under the name of Averroism, contrasts with both Islam and Christianity.

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Correspondence:

Ahmed Pajević, MD  
School of Medicine, University of Tuzla  
Univerzitetska 1, 75 000 Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina  
E-mail: ahmedpajevic@live.com