

Death Journal #7

Alzheimer's is a devastating disease in many ways. It kills slowly and with a sustained agony that spreads beyond the person who is actually physically ill. One fascinating aspect of the disease is that it specifically affects the brain, and even more importantly it first targets the parts of cognitive functioning that we consider "personality" – memory, executive functioning, emotional control. This raises an interesting connection with our discussion earlier in the semester concerning the definition of death. For example, if we were to accept that death means the loss of consciousness or perhaps personhood, then we must ask: at what point is an Alzheimer's patient technically dead? When they finally lose all memory of their former selves? When they can no longer walk? When they can barely move?

I think, that if we were to accept the loss of consciousness definition, that we would at the least have to maintain the person who originally exhibited Alzheimer's symptoms is dead when none of their memories remain. It may also be that we could decide upon a range of amount of retained memories which does not constitute the same person – for example, if an Alzheimer's patient appears to retain only a single memory of little importance (perhaps eating a slice of pizza), then it might not be unreasonable to say that the original person is no longer alive. The exact cutoff point is, of course, a matter which cannot be pinned down – I refer to the "fuzzy logic" of before.

What, then, are we left with? Is the body of the original person, while still functioning (in between the stage of extreme memory loss and complete impairment), a person? If we accept the above argument then it would have to at least be a *different* person. I think that this is, in fact, what we must maintain. Consider the man Nuland mentioned who forgot his wife completely

and actually entered into another relationship while in hospice. He was functional enough to carry on a relationship with another human – to deny him the classification of “personhood” would be, to put it mildly, problematic. Perhaps we could say that they are a person, but one who lacks permanent form or personality – that is, their “self” is constantly changing, or at least the portion of it composed of memory.