

Journal Entry #1

I found the reading assigned (Lizza, Chapter 1) absorbing and thought provoking. It was written in a style I am well familiar with, that of a philosopher presenting his argument. The definition of death is something that I have not considered in depth before, but this reading forced me to evaluate my position, and reach the conclusion that defining death as irreversible loss of consciousness is the most defensible path.

Even if someone is confined to a wheelchair, completely paralyzed, we do not call them dead. Their body is broken beyond repair, yet because they can think we call them alive. One of the greatest physicists of our time possesses a body that is practically useless except to pump blood to his brain. If we removed someone's brain, leaving only their brainstem intact so as to preserve functioning of the rest of the body, I think that the majority of people would grieve as if they person had died. Those who would not do so would be operating under belief (which I believe to be incorrect) that there is something left of their loved one beyond a hunk of meat in a hospital bed.

Two aspects of the discussion particularly struck me. First, the distinction sometimes implied between brain and mind or identity. As far as science can determine, this is a false distinction – or, at the very least, our mind and identity are completely dependent upon our brains. To me this undermines at least part of the distinction drawn between purely biological death and cultural or social death. That is, when we speak of loss of “consciousness,” this is in no significant way separate from the biological discussion.

The second part of the conversation I found particularly interesting was Lizza's assertion that neurological death is merely a new method of determining death as traditionally understood,

rather than a new definition of death. This is a problematic assertion and at best requires further explanation. There are two possibilities – either the definition of death is identical with the criterion, that is, loss of brain function, or the definition of death is different than the criterion, in which case the neurological criterion is incomplete (unable to determine if someone is dead). In a more abstract sense, Lizza draws a questionable distinction between criterion and definition. Is not the definition of something the criterion it must meet in order to be considered within that definition? The criteria for being an orange are (among other things) roundness, orangeness, a certain citrus taste, etc. If we introduce a new criterion of death, then we must also be changing the definition.