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Death

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Defining Death

The definitions of death that Lizza discusses can be divided into two major categories: those that purport to be purely biological, and those that claim to extend beyond the realm of biology into philosophy, culture, and other humanistic fields. There are three purely biological definitions. First, the original somatic definition – a person is dead when his or her heart and lungs are no longer functioning. This has been largely dismissed as simplistic and unhelpful in our modern world, where we can keep hearts and lungs functioning long after many other important aspects of the "person" are gone. The second biological definition is whole brain death – irreversible loss of functioning of the entire brain.

This definition is supposedly justified by the third biological definition: loss of integrated functioning of the organism as a whole. This "definition" is really more of an underlying principle, which can be used to justify a great number of more specific definitions. For example, it is clear that it can be used to justify the original somatic definition, since an organism without a functioning heart or lungs is no longer integrated. It is more appropriately used to justify the whole brain death definition. The argument runs that the death of the brain destroys integrated functioning just as much as the death of the heart.

The second category of definitions is far too complex to be divided neatly into any set number of definitions. There are those definitions which focus on loss of consciousness, usually equated with loss of higher brain functioning. This raises the interesting question of whether or

not this is really a non-biological definition – but such a question is outside the scope of this paper. The most interesting class of definitions, in my opinion, revolve around loss of "personhood." These definitions, then, are as diverse as the definitions of personhood. If we define personhood as consciousness, then the loss of consciousness definition and the loss of personhood definition become identical. If we define personhood as something else, then the discussion becomes even *more* complicated.

I think that the ideal definition of death is one which takes into account two major factors. First, that death is a process rather than an event. Second, that within that process we will have multiple definitions of what counts as "dead" depending on whether we are looking for death in a purely biological or scientific context, in a societal context (for example in the case of organ transplantation), and otherwise. Broadly speaking, the definition must take into account that death is not homogenous or unilateral, and that finding a definition that matches our intuition is less important than finding one that can be used to make difficult moral decision concerning people who are in the grey area between life and death.

This definition is the one put forward by Brody in "How Much of the Brain Must Be Dead?" His argument in favor of this definition begins by examining a problem with the whole brain death definition – namely, that the clinical criterion used to determine whole brain death can be met while some element of integrated functioning still remains. (Brody 74) He says that this is indicative of a fundamental problem with trying to define death as an event rather than a process. (75) He elaborates:

> Consider the organism that suffers damage to its brain so that it is no longer conscious and can no longer engage in responsive or voluntary movements. At some later stage, it loses the capacity to breathe on its own so that its respiration must be supported

> artificially. At a later stage, its capacity to regulate hormonal levels stops. Somewhere during this time period, its auditory pathways stop functioning. Finally, its heart stops beating. Is it really meaningful to suppose that the organism died at some specific point in this process? (79)

The answer is no. Rather, we can say that at some point before the start of this process, the organism was fully alive, and by the end of the process it is fully dead. *During* the process, however, it is neither. Brody uses the metaphor of "fuzzy logic" to describe this view of death as non-binary.

This is not a full definition, however. It is an essential step to shift our underlying conceptions of death from event to process – but this alone will not allow us to answer difficult questions like "can I transplant the organs of this anencephalic?" Brody suggests that at different points in the process different acts are acceptable. (79-80) I would like to conclude, however, by returning to the idea of a single definition of death. Rather than claiming that this is the only definition, I will claim that it is the most important. My definition here will be the loss of personhood definition, applied in the context of death as a process rather than as an event. Here I will define personhood as consciousness. Consciousness encompasses memory, emotion, cognitive functioning – all the things that compose our identities. Once these things are irreversibly lost, the person who possessed them is lost as well. We may not be able to define the exact point in the process of death at which this loss of consciousness and personhood occurs – for example, if higher brain functioning is lost by degrees. But once no higher brain functioning remains, once consciousness is entirely lost, this is when I think we may say that a *person* has died. The *organism* is still dying. But the human being who loved and was loved, who shaped the

world and was shaped by it, has ceased to be. This, to me, is the time to grieve, and the time to withdraw from the organism the rights accorded to a person.

Works Cited

All parenthetical citations refer to Brody's "How Much of the Brain Must Be Dead?" which I do not know how to cite since the .pdf file does not include enough information