

Journal Entry #2

Since we began introducing multiple definitions of death, I have been trying to organize them in a coherent way. There is the purely biological definition, consciousness definitions, “loss of integrated functioning of the organism,” the list goes on. I have grouped these definitions into four categories. These categories are neither exhaustive nor fully discrete; however, they have helped me personally to clarify what we have been discussing. Furthermore I believe this classification represents a significant analysis of the material.

First, there is the standard biological definition of death. This definition focuses on the cessation of blood circulation, and ignores questions of the brain or consciousness as a determining factor. So far I think we have fairly conclusively discarded this definition. Lizza’s example of a headless body kept alive by machinery is one convincing counterargument, as well as the fact that such definitions leave out a huge part of the “human being” – that is, the cultural and social components that make us so unique.

Second, there is the definition generally stated as “loss of the integrated functioning of the organism as a whole.” What *exactly* this means is somewhat unclear. At first glance it may seem simple – if someone’s kidney’s shut down, they will die, and their integrated functioning will cease. But what of cases such as a amputees? Surely they no longer function as fully integrated. Or perhaps people with pacemakers, or other artificial bio-assist mechanism? As biological organisms, they have lost the ability to integrate their own functioning. Thus, this definition too fails to fully define what we call “death.”

Third, there is the definition which takes loss of consciousness as the death of a person. This definition is not necessarily distinct from the one above; for example, one could argue that

the loss of consciousness *does* constitute a loss of integrated functioning – that consciousness is an essential component of a human being. A loss of personhood is also connoted here. One could draw (as Lizza does) a distinction between a “person” or “human” and a “humanoid body.” A person has sentience, consciousness; a human body, by contrast, has only the ability to maintain functioning of everything below the neck. To me personally, this definition seems promising – the primary objection is that it seems to violate our “traditional” ideas of death. For example, a person in a coma might, under this definition, be considered dead (though the factor of irreversibility may change this).

However, I think the real question is not to find what our “traditional” definition of death really is – in fact, I think that such a task is impossible. When we say death, even confining it to meanings concerned only with biological beings, we mean different things. One might say, to a grieving family member who has pulled the plug: “He died a long time ago, you know.” This would be no less true than the statement that he didn’t die till just now. Death need not be a singular phenomenon. I think that the real challenge is to find a definition of death that will allow us to *ethically* make choices such as pulling the plug on people in comas or PermVS.