

Journal Entry #5: Brain Death

In this response journal I will discuss Truog and Miller's claim, implicit throughout their entire article *Changing the Conversation About Brain Death*, that "... 'brain death' does not signify biological death but is merely the extreme end of the spectrum of neurological injury." (12) Their solution to the problems of defining death is in many ways similar to the "fuzzy logic" solution proposed by Brody in the last article we read. This is a solution I whole-heartedly support. I agree with Truog and Miller's idea that legal death must be considered separately from biological death. However, their separation of brain death from biological death (and the implicit claim that brain death is a purely legal concept) I find somewhat more troublesome.

In a broad sense, what do people mean when they say someone has died? They mean, in my experience, that the person in question has ceased to function and interact with our world, and that this can never be reversed. If there is a "standard" definition of death, I believe that this is it. Apart from those with exceptionally strong religious faith, I don't think that anyone with a relative in a deep and irreversible coma will not mourn as if they are dead. The fact that in most cases of death the person is what Truog and Miller call a "biological corpse" is, to my mind, more of a side note than the main point.

Therefore, why should brain death not be considered in at least some sense a biological death? Someone who is brain dead meets both the criteria listed above. Brain death is not *just* the "extreme end of the spectrum of brain injury," any more than death defined as the complete cessation of all bodily functions is the extreme end of the continuum of aging. Truog and Miller state that "...while both [a quadriplegic and a brain dead person] are ventilator dependent, dependence upon life support is no more relevant to whether one is living or dead for these

patients than it is for those who require dialysis or a pacemaker.” (10) This is a compelling claim, yet I think it is important to remember that there *is* an essential difference between these two cases – in one case, machinery preserves *only* the “bodily” functioning of the organism, while in the other (the case of the quadriplegic) consciousness (and therefore personhood, perhaps) are maintained.

I believe that Truog and Miller would dismiss this as a non-biological distinction, and I think that this is a mistake. The brain is an organ that expresses a function, namely consciousness and behavior. It is a biological phenomenon just as much as the functions of the liver or heart or lungs – and the distinction between a beating heart and a still heart would never be called non-biological. In fact, the function of the brain is far *more* important than the functions of these other organisms, because it is not only essential to (unsupported) life, but also gives rise to the aspects of our lives that make us uniquely human – sentience, culture, and the like. Thus, if we were to remove brain death from the definition of biological death, we would cause the biological definition of death to become divorced from the intuitive conception of death I described above. I do not think this is necessarily a bad thing – the intuitive definition is not always the correct or useful one. But in this case, I think it is something that is worth more consideration, and I think that the implicit dismissal of consciousness as a non-biological (or at least not biologically important) function is deeply problematic.