

The research project “Concepts of death” aims to resolve a set of problems at the intersection of medicine, philosophy of science, and ethics. Brain death is a kind of brain lesion, such that neither the brainstem nor the structures that are located above it can function, and they cannot regain the ability to function in the future. However, is brain death the death of a human being? Why is brain death a better criterion for death than the death of a finger? Most of us can probably intuitively grasp that brain death differs significantly from “finger death”; however, not so many people are aware that medicine alone cannot resolve these questions. What is indispensable if we want to answer these questions is to refer to philosophical analysis.

The most widespread concept of death, one which has a bearing on the legislation of many countries worldwide, identifies death with the cessation of an organism or, in other words, with a state when a body ceases to be an integrated whole. For many years it was thought that a braindead human being no longer constitutes an organism. However, the investigation conducted by the American neurologist Alan Shewmon at the turn of the 21st century convincingly showed that a braindead patient might display a set of functions such as sexual maturation, proportional growth of the body, wound healing, or the maintenance of homeostasis. The presence of these functions constitutes strong proof of the integrated functioning of a human organism.

In response to Shewmon’s findings, which were published in the most widely regarded journals of the philosophy of medicine and neurology, some philosophers sought a new justification of the claim that brain death is the death of a human being. The research project “Concepts of death” is intended to further these efforts and consists of three subprojects.

The first is entitled “Research on biological and bioethical concepts of an organism.” Here the goal is to analyze the relationship between the notion of an organism that is implicit in the bioethical literature and the parallel notions of an organism elaborated by philosophers of biology. In bioethical literature about the definition of death, a frequently ventured thesis is that death is a biological phenomenon. It is stated that a human dies in the same sense as a dog, a tree or a piece of grain, and all living organisms in general, and that death in a biological sense, has a single meaning. Contrary to this, recent findings put forward by philosophers of science suggest there are many research paradigms in biology with their own distinct conceptions of an organism. The PI hypothesizes that there are also different parallel biological concepts of death.

The second subproject is entitled “Research on the relation between the concept of soul and brain death.” It aims to analyze and criticize a famous Catholic bioethics concept, according to which humans are souls, and souls are what makes human bodies organisms. The principal investigator (PI) will develop an argument showing that even if souls exist, we are not souls, and their fate is entirely indifferent to us. The discussion will be built upon the PI’s idea that has been presented in embryonic form in his article “Death as the Cessation of an Organism and the Moral Status Alternative”, accepted for publication in the *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*. The PI will elaborate on the argument, according to which the Aristotelian-Thomistic concept of the soul has an absurd consequence. According to it, we can survive our brains’ substitution with entirely new ones provided that they are grown from our stem cells.

The aim of the last subproject, entitled “Research on the concept of moral status,” will be to fully elaborate a concept of death which identifies it with the loss of the characteristics which mean that something might be good or bad for a human, or that a human might be helped or harmed. In light of such a conception of death, it is highlighted that the word “death” in its primary sense carries a strong moral and emotional load. PI hypothesizes that the utterances, which include the word “death,” are similar to ethical utterances. When I say: “I’m afraid of death,” my utterance has a similar character as when I say: “I’m afraid that someone will wrong me” or “I’m afraid that something will harm me.” It will be argued that the sense of the word “death” when we use it this way is far from the meaning of this word when a biologist puts forward the hypothesis that “A protozoan will die due to the influence of a substance x.”