

Outline for Informative Speech: 4-20-11: Ryan B. Chamberlain

Speech title: Evolution of Death

Specific purpose: To inform the audience of the evolution of the concept of death; and where it may lead us.

Thesis statement: Conception of death is evolving, and we are in the middle of what could be the biggest breakthrough on the issue.

Introduction

I am going to tell you about something that I'm sure most of you probably think you already know what there is to know about; death. But, what is death? Can any of you here today give me an unarguable definition of death? Some of you may remember that this is the subject of my studies here at P.C.C. and in my future studies even more so, hopefully. Since I am so interested in this subject and read about it all the time I want to try to explain why answering that question is such a touchy and difficult task. "Wink, wink," It comes down to the fact that life is so extremely complex.

After I explain the difficulties of defining "death," I will present to the best of my ability the current prevailing clinical definition of death. "That is when a doctor pronounces a human dead, and notes the time and date, like I'm sure you've seen on any one of those hospital based soap operas, right?" No really though, my main goal is to show how the concept of death has evolved throughout time, and where it may be going in the future.

1)The concept of death is hard to define.

a)The Merriam-Webster 2011 edition dictionary's top definition, which I got from www.merriam-webster.com says death is "a permanent cessation of all vital functions : the end of life."

b)In a study of the concept of death in Switzerland, Titled; "Brain or Heart? The Controversy over the Concept of Death" found in *Social Studies of Science* by Brante and Hallberg published in 1991, the author(s) state the controversy of when a human being is to be considered dead is proposed by those saying that keeping someone alive with assistance from technology while the brain ceases to perform necessary functions (and will never recover) is expensive and could be considered ethically "wrong." Therefore, we should be using the definition of "death" as "brain-death."

i)The opponents are, as stated by Brante and Hallberg in the article previously mentioned, saying that the proponents of the new definition are not doing it for moral reasons but for technological reasons, such as transplant surgeons will create more business for themselves if brain-death was introduced.

ii) Another argument is that there is no truly 100% accurate way to say that the brain is irreversibly lost its ability to perform necessary functions, therefore possibly removing the possibility of recovery.

2) The concept of death has evolved through time.

a) In the Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite 2011 edition it states in the early 1200's death was mainly considered to be definite when the head was severed or breathing stopped.

b) In the 16th century a Flemish doctor named Andreas Vesalius, considered to be one of the greatest anatomists of all time, was performing a postmortem examination when the body showed signs of life, He was forced to leave Spain in 1564, according to Britannica.

c) During the 19th century live burial fears led to many demands that putrefaction, the only true proof of death of a human at the time, be the determining sign of death for these bodies.

i) The horrifying short stories written by Edgar Allan Poe he tells of a Russian nobleman who patented a coffin that was equipped with a "system of bells and flags" for summoning help from above ground if a "corpse" should come to life in ground.

ii) It was in this era, around 1874, when in the U.K. started to require doctors to register a death date. Before that it wasn't even required a doctor to have even seen the body.

iii) The second half of the 20th century has seen many developments in the medical and neurological fields, bringing along new controversies concerning the "point of no return."

A) The "point of no return" is when in the "process" of death reaches a point where one cannot recover.

d) In a study of the concept of death in Switzerland, Titled; "Brain or Heart? The Controversy over the Concept of Death." Found in Social Studies of Science by Brante and Hallberg published in 1991 the author(s) state that "Prior to the 1950's, the question of when a human being is to be considered dead had not been regulated by law."

i) These questions and concerns were discussed in 1698 at the 22nd World Medical Assembly in Sydney, Australia. The assembly stated "clinical interest lies not in the state of preservation of isolated cells but in the fate of a person. The point of death of the different cells and organs is not as important as the certainty that the process has become irreversible. Irreversible loss of function of the organism as a

whole “became an accepted clinical criterion for death,” according to the Encyclopedia Britannica.

3)Right now we are amidst the controversy.

a)We go by heart failure as the “clinical definition” or “legal clinical definition.” says Merriam-Webster's 2011 online dictionary found at Merriam-Webster.com/dictionary.

i)But, if opted for the patients family may keep a patient on life support with assisted living machines for undetermined lengths.

b)If we discover something new in the next few years it may be possible to redefine death yet again.

Conclusion

Just to review what has been considered here; we first discussed what the difficulties of defining the concept of death. Then we looked at how the concept of death has evolved over time, and finally, we saw that this controversy is going on right now because the concept is evolving even as we speak. With technology comes new information which, in this case, may show us new ways to consider a concept we have been trying to understand since the beginning of time.

Technical data can never answer entirely the question of the concept of death. So, one might consider thinking of death as the “irreversible loss of the capacity for consciousness combined with the irreversible loss of the capacity to breathe.” The anatomical basis for this concept would be the loss of brain-stem function. The brain-stem is the oldest, most primitive part of your brain, controlling breathing and contractions of the heart. But...what if we could find a way to reverse “brain-death’ in the way that we are learning to grow new hearts in laboratories, and on the brink of creating the first entirely man-made living cell? Could we turn “irreversible loss of function” into something reversible? The question I want to ask you all today before I finish is, “If you could keep any one person from dying, or even bring them back if you got to them quickly enough, who would it be, and what would it mean to you?”

References

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