

DEFINIRE LA MORTE. UN'INDAGINE LOGICO-FILOSOFICA

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Abstract. This paper undertakes a logico-philosophical analysis of the current definition of death as the irreversible loss of all brain function. The definition is first approached on the assumption that it is a stipulative definition (DS), i.e., a definition which assigns a meaning to a term by means of a definitional equivalence. Since a DS results in an analytic truth ("truth by convention"), it follows from this that it is immune to empirical refutation: recalcitrant evidence (such as, e.g., the persistence of the hypothalamic-endocrine function in patients who meet the current clinical criteria for brain death) can be discarded as irrelevant or otherwise reconciled with the definition. The definition is then approached on the assumption that it is an operational definition (DO), i.e., a definition which assigns a meaning to a concept C in terms of some set of criteria (in this case clinical tests) for the empirical determination of C. The implications of considering the definition of death a DO are discussed, in particular conceptual proliferation and "naturalization". Finally, the definition is approached on the assumption that it is a persuasive definition (DP), i.e., a definition that assigns a new meaning to a familiar term T by changing T's extension without substantially changing the particular evaluation associated with T (T's "emotive meaning" in Charles Stevenson's words). The result in the case at hand is that patients not classified as "dead" according to the traditional, cardiopulmonary definition can now be so defined and treated accordingly. A feature of DPs is that they make the venerable "fact-value dichotomy" untenable. It is argued that we should shunt definitively aside that dichotomy and acknowledge the role of definitions as "ways of worldmaking". The paper closes with some remarks on the importance of considering "death" as an "essentially contested" (but not essentially indefinable) concept.

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