

The Nature of Death

Here, we will ask: What is death? When does it become true that you are dead?

1. Death and Two Views of Personal Identity: What is death? According to Physicalism, you are a physical body. So, it stands to reason that you die when your body ceases to be. Even if you are a Substance Dualist (and you believe that you are a soul), you will likely say that SOME sort of death occurs when your body ceases to be—even if your soul then goes on to live somewhere else (e.g., in heaven).

So, we have a first pass at an answer to the question, What is death?

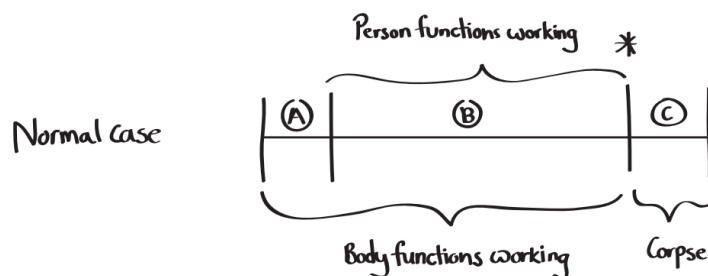
(a) **What is Death?** Death is the destruction of the body.

But, that isn't quite right. Unless you are cremated, or your body is destroyed in some other way, your body continues to exist long after you are dead—namely, as a corpse. Surely it is true that you are dead when your body is a corpse.

So, perhaps we ought to say that death occurs when your body ceases to FUNCTION in some appropriate way (call it 'B-functioning', B for 'body'). Living bodies function in a certain way that corpses do not. So, then, let's try again:

(b) **What is Death?** Death is the ceasing of the body to function in some appropriate (unspecified) way (i.e., the event where 'B-functioning' ceases).

But, we have said that what YOU are is a PERSON. Note that your body existed before you came to exist as a person (namely, as a fetus, or an infant). (*Infants aren't "persons" in the philosophical sense, since they are not yet self-aware or capable of introspection, critical thinking, etc. This will become relevant when we study the ethics of abortion!*) Similarly, your body typically exists after you cease to exist as a person (namely, as a corpse). Kagan represents this normal progression as follows:



But, which are we interested in defining? The death of a living body, or the death of a PERSON? If we want to know when YOU cease to exist, we should probably focus on the latter. However, it seems to be possible for the person to cease to exist BEFORE the body stops living (i.e., before B-functioning ceases). For instance, imagine that you get into a terrible car crash, or fall victim to some degenerative disease which causes all of your higher cognitive processes to cease (maybe you are in a permanent coma, or a persistent vegetative state). Meanwhile, your body lives on. Your heart beats, your lungs take in Oxygen, your body digests nutrients, and so on. Might it be true to say that you have died in this case, while your body lives on?

If so, then what seems relevant is not your bodily functions, but the functions of PERSONHOOD. Recall that a person is an individual with a certain sort of cognitive capacity. Kagan calls the relevant sort of functioning "P-functioning" (P for 'person'). So, then, perhaps the correct view is:

- (c) **What is Death?** Death is the event where 'P-functioning' ceases (i.e., certain cognitive processes cease to occur).

Note that this definition no longer says anything about one's body. Really, whether one prefers answer (b) or (c) will depend on what one's answer to the question of identity was. If you think that you continue to exist just as long as your BODY does, you will likely prefer (b). But, if you think that you continue to exist just as long as your PERSONALITY does, then you will prefer (c).

Kagan thinks it odd that the body theorist must say, of the persistent vegetative state case just described, that you are still ALIVE, you are just no longer a PERSON (as if being a person is just a temporary "phase" that one goes through during life). For the body theorist, the problem of "*personal* identity" is a misnomer. Rather, it should be re-named the problem of identity. That is, the question should not be,

- Under what conditions do I continue to exist as a PERSON?

But, rather,

- Under what conditions do I continue to exist?

The former question seems to already assume the psychological view of identity.

[Side Note: Is it morally permissible to remove the heart of someone in a persistent vegetative state to save someone else who needs a life-saving transplant? Must the psychological theorist say yes? (YOU are dead. It is only your body that is still alive, so removing the heart is not murder.) Must the body theorist say no? (Your body is still alive, so it is also true that YOU are still alive, and removing the heart kills you.) Thoughts?]

2. Further Problems for the Personhood View: Many philosophers are attracted to the personhood account of death, answer (c) above. But, there are further difficulties.

Imagine that last night, at 3:00am, you were in a very deep sleep. You were neither dreaming, nor engaging in any higher cognitive processes of any sort. We can truthfully say, then, that your P-functioning had ceased. Does this mean that you died last night? How wonderful, I am glad to see that you were resurrected this morning!¹

No, that won't do. We need to revise our account:

(d) **What is Death?** Death is the event where P-functioning *permanently* ceases.

Because your personhood did not PERMANENTLY cease last night at 3am, it is not true that you died. Problem solved? Unfortunately not. Consider:

Permanent ceasing of P-functioning is **not sufficient** for death:

Night Stroke Frank falls into a deep and dreamless sleep at 3:00am. He remains in this dreamless sleep until 4am, when he has a stroke and dies.

Intuitively, we want to say that Frank died at 4AM, not 3AM. But, note that it was true at 3am that Frank's P-functions had permanently ceased. After all, starting at 3am, he would never again function as a person. So, permanent P-functioning cessation is not sufficient for death (by this we mean that, if it is true that one's P-functioning has ceased, never to return, this does NOT guarantee that one is dead).

Permanent ceasing of P-functioning is also **not necessary** for death:

Lazarus Lazarus has died. His body lies in a tomb, and is beginning to rot. Then, Jesus of Nazareth comes along and resurrects Lazarus from the dead.

¹ This used to trouble me a lot. Remind me to read a poem I wrote about it, if I forget.

Intuitively, we want to say that Lazarus was indeed dead. But, he CAME BACK from the dead. On proposal (d), we cannot say this. It entails that Lazarus was never dead in the first place! (since it was NOT true that his P-functions had PERMANENTLY stopped) Note that answer (d) cannot even MAKE SENSE of the concept of resurrection from the dead. On that view, there is simply no such thing.

In light of these objections, we should revise your definition of death once more:

(e) **What is Death?** Death is the event where the *ability* to P-function ceases.

When one is asleep, one still has the ABILITY to engage in certain sorts of cognitive processes—namely, if you are woken up! With this revision, it follows that Frank was alive between 3am and 4am (even though his P-functions had permanently ceased). For, during that hour, he still possessed the ABILITY to P-function. If we had shaken him, for instance, he would have stirred and began functioning like a person.

By contrast, Lazarus was indeed DEAD while laying in his tomb because he was NOT capable of functioning like a person during that time. If we were to shake him, for instance, he would have merely continued to lay there, unthinking, dead.

On proposal (e), someone in a persistent vegetative state (where the brain is so damaged that they will never recover) is dead; while someone in (a certain sort of) coma—namely, one where they retain the ability to “wake up”—is not dead.

3. Suspended Animation: There remains a special problematic case. There are some who hope that technology will one day be able to cure all diseases—or perhaps even defeat death! With this hope in mind, a few rich people have chosen to have their bodies (or just their heads!) [cryogenically frozen](#) in suspended animation, anticipating the day when scientists will be able to “thaw them out” and revive them.

Suspended animation is also popular in sci-fi movies, where astronauts are frozen in suspended animation aboard their spaceships as they make the decades- or centuries-long journeys through space, before being revived at their destinations.

Assume that suspended animation involves the complete cessation of all bodily functions AND personhood (i.e., all B-functions and P-functions). The person is quite literally FROZEN. What should we make of such technology, if it ever comes to exist? Is the suspended individual dead and then resurrected? Or, rather, is she actually alive the entire time?

[If suspended animation is too science-fictiony for you, consider instead the [tardigrade](#) (or “water bear”), a microscopic organism which can survive being frozen to near 0 degrees Kelvin (-273 Celsius), or completely dehydrated for many years, or even being in the vacuum of space (!) in total stasis, and then revive from its suspended state, unharmed. Is the tardigrade dead and then resurrected? Or is it alive the entire time?]

Personality View: Proposal (e) above has two options: (i) One might say that the suspended individual is alive, since she DOES still has the ability to engage in P-functioning. She may need more than a shaking to wake her up, but still there is SOMETHING we could do to “wake her up”. On this view, someone who has gone into cardiac arrest would still be counted as ALIVE, since there is something we could do to “wake them up”—namely, shock them with defibrillators or whatever.

(ii) Alternatively, one might say that the suspended individual does NOT have the ability to engage in P-functioning. The re-animation of the suspended individual merely RESTORES that ability, which was lost during the suspended animation. This answer, though, faces the difficult task of explaining what the difference is between sleep and temporary comas on the one hand, and suspended animation on the other. And it is not clear that this difference is easily definable.

Body View: The body theorist has similar options. They can say either that (i) The suspended individual is dead because all B-functions have ceased. Unfreezing them merely brings them back from the dead. Or (ii) The suspended individual is still alive because they still have the ABILITY (in some sense) to engage in B-functioning.

Conclusion: It should now be apparent that coming up with a satisfying definition of death is no easy task!