Phil 394D
Seminar on Death
February 9, 2005

The Mystery of Death

1. Some assumptions about death.

   a. We have tentatively accepted the doctrine of the unity of death. 'Dies' is univocal in its central literal uses concerning biological organisms.

   b.   We have tentatively accepted the doctrine of the conceptual primacy of 'dies' in the Death and Dying family. 'Death', 'dying', 'dead', 'undead', etc. will be defined in terms of it.

   c. We have tentatively accepted the doctrine that death involves life.

   d. We have admitted that we cannot give a clear and fully satisfactory analysis of the concept of life.

   e. "The gift of life". I propose, nevertheless, that we bestow upon ourselves the gift of life. That is, I propose that we assume that we understand the concept of life well enough to make use of that concept in our analysis of death.

2. The analysis of the concept of death vs. the provision of a medically useful criterion of "death".

   a. Analysis would be necessary; criterion would be contingent.
   b. Analysis would not be a matter of convention; criterion would be conventional
   c. Analysis would not be relativistic; criterion would be relativistic.
   d. Analysis would excellent if it were true; criterion would be excellent if it were useful.
   e. Analysis would apply to anything that could die; criterion would apply only to people.

3. Perrett's Analyses.

   D2: x dies at t =df. x is a living biological organism up to t, but at t x is destroyed (or annihilated, or disintegrated).

4. Four Auto Accidents:

   Accident One: the car hits a solid concrete abutment at high speed. It is mangled beyond repair -- utterly crushed. The car has been destroyed, but it is neither annihilated nor disintegrated.

Accident Two: a bomb goes off in the car. Bits and pieces of the car fly in all directions. No piece larger than 25 pounds survives intact. The car has been destroyed and it has disintegrated, but it is not annihilated.

Accident Three: a magical wizard casts a spell on the car. At midnight, the simply goes out of existence without leaving so much as a wisp of smoke as residue. It has been annihilated. It did not disintegrate. It is not clear to me that it has been destroyed. (Though I don't care.)

5. A problem for Perrett's first analysis: The case of the dead butterfly.

6. Another idea from Perrett:

D2': x dies at t =df. x goes from being alive before t to being dead after t.

7. Three Versions of the Standard Analysis.

D1: x dies at t =df. x ceases to be alive at t.

D2: x dies at t =df. x ceases permanently to be alive at t.

D3: x dies at t =df. x ceases irreversibly to be alive at t.

8. Three cases involving Jerry Lewis (just to show that these are distinct)

Case One: Jerry Lewis is undergoing open heart surgery. Some mishap occurs and Jerry's heart stops beating. All electrical activity in his brain ceases. Eventually, they manage to get a heartbeat. Then brain activity resumes. Then Jerry is stabilized. He ceased to be alive for a while, but came back to life. He died1, but not 2 or 3.

Case Two: Just like Case One, except that the operating room personnel don't even try to revive him. They let him stay dead. But I stipulate that they could have revived him. A suitable application of the paddles to his chest would have gotten his heart going.

In this case he died1 at the moment when he stopped being alive. He also died 2, but he did not die 3 until sometime later. Hence we have three concepts of death.

9. Counterexamples to the Standard Analyses.

The case of the frozen man who is later revived. He stops living for a while, but does not die. This example refutes D1.

Dsa: x dies at t =df. x ceases permanently to be alive at t, but x does not go into suspended animation at t.

Dnd: x goes into suspended animation at t =df. x ceases to be alive at t, but x does not die at t.

The case of the frozen twins. One is later revived; the other is not. D2 implies that one is dead, the other is not *during the first year on ice*. This seems crazy, so D2 is false.

The case of the frozen, damaged twin. There is no time at which he ceases irreversibly to be alive. So D3 implies that he never dies.

D4: x dies at t =df. (i) x ceases permanently to be alive at or before t, and (ii) at t it becomes physically impossible for x ever to live again.

The case of the frozen twin whose revitalization chemicals are lost.

D5: x dies at t =df. (i) x ceases permanently to be alive at or before t, and (ii) at t *internal changes occur in x* that make it physically impossible for x ever to live again.

The case of Alvin the Amoeba who splits, thereby giving "birth" to Amos and Ambrose the Amoeba babies.

etc.

10. The Mystery of Death: if we restrict ourselves to relatively clear concepts such as the concepts of life, cessation, physical possibility, internality, permanence, etc., then we will find it very hard (or maybe impossible) say exactly what we mean when we say that something dies at a time.