

DEFINING DEATH DEBATE WITHIN ROMAN CATHOLICISM

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Abstract

In addition to the general bioethics community, there has been vociferous debate among bioethicists working within the Roman Catholic tradition concerning the proper definition and clinical determination of death for human persons. In the 1980s, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences [PAS] sponsored two working groups that concluded in favor of the “whole-brain” criterion recommended by the Harvard *ad hoc* Committee and a U.S. Presidential Commission. In the late 1990s, however, a former member of one of those working groups, D. Alan Shewmon, began critiquing the whole-brain standard based on his analysis of various cases of prolonged somatic survival following whole-brain death. In 2006, the PAS sponsored another working group in which support for the whole-brain standard was re-affirmed; however, a “minority report” was simultaneously published featuring papers by Shewmon and other critics. Continued debate among Catholic scholars has included a 2014 symposium at the Catholic University of America – with papers subsequently published in *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 41:3 (2016) – and a 2016 conference at Marquette University.

From the Catholic perspective, the debate turns on the concept of an organism’s “integrative unity” in accord with an Aristotelian-Thomistic conception of the ontological nature of human persons – known as “hylomorphism.” In this poster, I will outline the history and parameters of the intra-Catholic debate and offers reasons in defense of the whole-brain standard by equating it with the Aristotelian-Thomistic concept of “substantial unity.” I also critically examine certain thought-experiments utilized by Shewmon to raise questions concerning the ontological status of bodies that have been decapitated but maintained artificially, or severed heads that may be conceivably maintained such that consciousness may persist.