than defined, maintaining the notion that there is an open-ended character to our being, grounded in our freedom, which can never fully be captured by a closed definition. The equating of brain death with personal death, he asserts, a hypothesis that has erroneously come to be treated as a fact. He also notes that the Harvard Committee shifted attention from the best interests of the person who is dying to third-party interests in legal protection for the withdrawal of life support and for the earliest possible harvesting of organs.

In his address to the Transplantation Society on August 29, 2000, Pope St. John Paul II accepts the neurologic criteria for brain death “if rigorously applied” (n. 5) and also accepts the notion of the brain as the source of integration for the body, but the criteria remain controversial. Spaemann asks a fundamental personalist question: is someone who has suffered brain death a dead person or a dying person? He comes down squarely for the latter. Bioethically then, our duty is to care for the dying, to care for individuals for whom the process of dying has become irreversible.

Spaemann is not alone among Catholic scholars in questioning the use of the neurological criteria for death. He recalls the notion of metaphysical death as separation of the soul from the body, which is recognized in physical signs that occur after death and which brings moral (rather than absolute) certitude that death has occurred. He takes issue specifically with the position put forward in 2002 by Edward Furton in support of the neurological criteria, in which Furton distinguishes between “the life of the person and the life of the body”—a distinction Spaemann finds untenable and troubling. The Harvard criteria opened a can of worms, and debate over the definition of death using neurological criteria has become more contentious rather than less since 1968.

This brief collection of essays serves as an excellent introduction to Spaemann’s thought, and deserves a wide readership among those in the fields of bioethics, moral theology, and philosophical anthropology as well as among general readers. It could also serve as a higher education text in bioethics and philosophy classes. It is more than enough to pique the reader’s curiosity and create a desire to learn more. For those who wish to do so, a natural progression from Love and the Dignity of Human Life would be to Spaemann’s Persons: The Difference between “Someone” and “Something.” Those who do so will be rewarded with philosophical rigor, deepening reflection, and thought-provoking ideas.

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2 Edward J. Furton, “Brain Death, the Soul and Organic Life,” National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly 2.3 (Autumn 2003): 455–470. Dr. Furton is editor-in-chief of the NCBQ.

Books Received


Knowing the Natural Law: From Precepts and Inclinations to Deriving Oughts, Steven J. Jensen. Catholic University of America Press, 2015.