

## Response to Prof. Lizza's "Why Brain-Death is Death"

By Jie Yin

Prof. Lizza argues that "...the concepts of a 'drive' and 'felt need' are not biological concepts at all and therefore cannot explain in modern biological terms what it means for an organism to be integrated internally or externally with its environment." In short, Lizza thinks the terms used by U.S. President's Council on Bioethics on "brain death" meant to be biological but it failed to recognize that those terms are actually metaphysical. The reflection on why brain death is death shows us that it is the notion of brain death that captures the whole definition of death, or to put it more precisely, the definition of a "philosophical" death.

Lizza argues for a philosophical definition of death, and I myself have no question about the significance of arguing for a distinction between the death of persons and the death of organisms. When I was reading Lizza's article, an idea regarding whether we could shape a coherent belief system of definition and criterion of death came into my mind, or to put it in a metaphysical but not so epistemic way—isn't there a gap between the definition of persons and the neurological criterion of death? As Youngner says, death is a social construct. A philosophical death as well as other notions of death embedded in different cultural, moral, religious and political background might lead to different criterion of death, legal or neurological ones, whichever has the power to affect our real lives. I interpret this as saying that our conception of death is socially embedded, and this means we cannot use a calculator or a computer program or any fixed procedure to declare one's death. To declare one's death can never be genuinely "objective" if we accept any not-so-biological definition of death. For example, how could you determine whether or when one's soul leaves the body? Dr. Pellegrino also says that "...I don't think that we are going to be able to discern that moment by any test that I know". Thus in some sense, the Council's redefinition of death has the advantage of not throwing away once and for all those complicated stuff (e.g. soul or other similar notions in different cultures) that we cannot define clearly or simply reduce to scientific terms. Laymen might not accept a definition of death merely in the philosophical dimension or any other sense at all, and even if they do learn how to philosophically reflect on the definition of death, it is still likely that they won't find comfortable in accepting a so-called "corresponding" neurological criterion of death, especially when the criterion is applied to their very significant others. Of course it is one thing to talk about the philosophical definition of death, and it is another to talk about how people think about "death". But if this is not a problem for philosophers who aim to explore the philosophical essence of any social phenomenon like death, then it might not be the problem for scientists, either.