

# Arguing Euthanasia: An Ethical Study

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### Abstract

Life of a human being is undoubtedly valuable and every human beings ultimate effort is to protect own life at any cost. But the situation is not always same. Especially where the person is suffering from pain and agony due to some incurable disease then life seems to be a curse to the concern person. In such a situation sustaining life seems to be a great problem and death seems to be the only option to get rid of such situation. Quitting life by voluntary consent is termed as good death or euthanasia in medical science. Euthanasia is nothing but a lawful act of medical field for ending a person's life. But if we focus more on the characteristics of euthanasia we can find that euthanasia is not always conducted on the voluntary consent of the ill person. Rather it is also done where voluntary consent of the person is unavailable (i.e. In-voluntary and Non-voluntary euthanasia). Now we can say that if it will be permitted in law then the race of human being surely falls in great danger. The concept of euthanasia is surely debatable. And here the key question is "should law allow us to kill human beings for the sake of moral obligation to relieving pain or providing good death"? Hence the purpose of writing this paper is to examine the questions related to euthanasia or good death. The moral aspect of euthanasia is also a matter of discussion of this paper.

**Keywords:** Good Death, Autonomy, Right To Death, Sanctity Of Life, Palliative Care, Situation And Ethics.

### Introduction

From ancient time the debate regarding euthanasia is very controversial as well as in modern era also it remains the same. Euthanasia has been called moral issue of the 1980s. Euthanasia has been practiced since thousand years but it became a burning issue in twentieth century. Euthanasia first originated in ancient Greece. Then the term "euthanasia" meaning was a common practice of voluntary death by a person himself who is generally old and sick and was in search of painless and easy death. But the current form of euthanasia differs from that of ancient Greece practice of euthanasia. The meaning of euthanasia changed in the form of assisted death. Later in middle of twentieth century the meaning of euthanasia gained a negative implication where Nazis started a program of mass murder of physically and mentally ill people who are treated as unfit to live. Generally euthanasia is a termed as "good death". But if we talk about the contemporary time we can see that medical technology has advanced a lot. Now with the advancement of medical technology an ill person can be keep alive over longer period. And moreover new innovations in medical science can cure some disease now a day which was incurable earlier. So the question is featuring on advancement of medical ethics is it justifiable to assist in dying an ill patient who might has future probabilities to cure. An ill patient wishes to die due to lack of assistance and care of his family and friends because a terribly ill patient feels himself as a worthless being. But there was a new dimension of health care named palliative care which improves quality of life of patients by giving an intensive care in homely atmosphere. Palliative care neither slows down nor hastens death of an ill person rather it helps to live comfortably a person until natural death. The concept of palliative care makes euthanasia useless. So, the question arises here is it ethically right or wrong to practice euthanasia? The main aim of this paper is to look into the arguments in favor of euthanasia and against euthanasia and in this process establish my thought on this matter in the lights of ethical judgments.

**Meaning of Euthanasia**

The term euthanasia derives from two Greek words eu (good or well) and thanatos (death), and it means good or happy death.<sup>1</sup> The term euthanasia originally meant only "good death" but in modern society it has also come to mean a death free of any anxiety and pain, often brought about through the use of medication.<sup>2</sup> It has also come to mean "mercy killing" that is deliberately putting an end to someone's life in order to spare the individual's suffering.<sup>3</sup>

There are different definitions of euthanasia. The Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary 7<sup>th</sup> edition (2005) defines euthanasia as a practice (illegal in most countries) of killing without pain a person who is suffering from a disease that cannot be cured. The Voluntary euthanasia society looks to the origin of the Greek words (eu and thanatos) and says that a modern definition of euthanasia is: A good death brought about by a doctor providing drugs or an injection to bring a peaceful end to the dying process.<sup>4</sup>

From the above definitions of euthanasia we can easily imply the characteristics of euthanasia. Thus we can call euthanasia as a form of mercy killing which is done for the rational request of the person who is terminally and incurably ill or injured. In most cases of euthanasia someone must accommodate the person in response to the concern person's request. Generally physicians and family members or care takers of the patient do the mercy killing on behalf of the patient's request. These types of euthanasia lead us to divide it into two types, i.e. active euthanasia and passive euthanasia.

The phrase active euthanasia is used to refer to those cases in which the patient is deliberately killed. Here in the cases of active euthanasia a direct dose of lethal injection or life taking medicine is used to end the terminally ill patient's life directly to eliminate the patient from further suffering. The phrase passive euthanasia, in contrast, refers to those cases which the patient is not killed directly rather he is allowed to die. In such cases of passive euthanasia doctors, family members and care takers simply refrain from doing anything to keep patient alive and withdrawal of treatment is done to allow the patient to die.

The debate of euthanasia starts from the distinction of active and passive form of it. In Western countries it is believed that active euthanasia is immoral because it is nothing but a pseudo murder. They also think that passive euthanasia is acceptable because in the case of passive euthanasia we refrain from doing anything that will cure the person rather than killing ourselves, which makes passive euthanasia relatively acceptable. Thus we can quote from Gomez, A Pilgrim's Notes:-

"In Catholic understanding, there is moral distinction between active and passive euthanasia as the former one is procuring death while the later is allowing to die".<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, euthanasia is divided into other three kinds of voluntary euthanasia, in-voluntary euthanasia

and non-voluntary euthanasia depending on who makes the life ending decision. Voluntary euthanasia occurs when the concern ill person, while in a rational state of mind requested a voluntary death and the request is fulfilled by the doctors or family members. Non-voluntary euthanasia occurs when the concern person is unable to express his desire in the matter of death or may be in a state where his consent is unavailable, but he is killed deliberately or allowed to die. On the other hand In-voluntary euthanasia occurs when a conscious but terminally ill person did not give consent about death or wish to go on living but is killed forcefully.

Physician-assisted suicide is closely related to euthanasia. In physician assisted suicide a physician provides instruction or medicine to that person who wants to commit suicide but could not do so by himself and seek help from the physician. The physician does not carry out personally the action of ending the patient's life; rather it is the patient who causes directly his death with the help of the doctor. The physician simply prescribes the lethal dose and drug then the patient takes own life with the help of that prescribed medicine or lethal injection. The person who chooses physician-assisted suicide is himself the principle cause of his death while the physician is a symbolic cause of death.

The act of euthanasia may be of any kind but it always killing of a human being. And ethics always have problem with killing a human being in any form. The debate of euthanasia begins with that point of wrongness of killing a human being. There are people who are in favor of euthanasia and also people who are against it. Now I am going to discuss both kinds of arguments regarding euthanasia.

**Arguments in Defense of Euthanasia****Autonomy of the patient in favor of euthanasia**

The first major argument to support euthanasia is rooted in autonomy. Every human being is free and autonomous. And they can choose anything according to their wish and therefore they also may choose a peaceful death rather than bearing painful sufferings and that life which is no longer considered to be a worth living at all. Any individual person has the right to make a similar decision and all other person must respect his or her autonomous decision. It would be a cruelty of the physician and the friends or family members if they ignore the death request of the concern person. Thus to refuse the patient's request seems like a failure to respect the autonomy of the patient. A famous writer and one of the euthanasia advocates Peter Singer relate right to die to the right to life. According to him:-

"The most important aspect of having a right to life is that one can choose whether or not to invoke it. We value the protection given by the right to life only when we want to go on living. No one can fear being killed at his or her own persistent, informed and autonomous request".<sup>6</sup>

**The Right to Death Favors Euthanasia**

Those ethicists who want to defend euthanasia present another argument in favor of it.

Here the main question is a person has a right to die? The supporters of euthanasia advocate that a person must contain such right to die. The defenders of euthanasia also justify their position by saying that a terribly ill patient not only chooses death for himself but also he chooses it in behalf of all those persons who are associated with him and taking care of him. The patient doesn't want to be a burden to the loved ones and to the society. So, the defenders of euthanasia argue that a patient has the right to choose death and we all must have to respect and grant this right as an act of sympathy toward every human being like us. We can form an argument here:-

**Premise 1**

Every human being has a right to life.

**Premise 2**

Right to life entails right to choose.

**Conclusion**

Thus, Every human being has right to choose death.

This above argument is from the perspectives of the right to death which is an extended version of the argument personal autonomy. It entails that right to live a person's own life according to the individual's own preference should not be restricted by the views of others. By right it is considered that everyone has the right to live a life in a way that the person wants to be and the freedom to choose whatever the person believes is good for him. This argument entails that when a person thought death is better than life then he must be permitted to do so by law.

In 1984 Robert Risley, a lawyer in Los Angeles considered helping his wife who suffered cancer to end her life she asked him to terminate her pain and suffering. Though he was fully aware of its illegality, he commented that "she should have been able to carry out our wishes, and she should have been entitled to assistance". He adds that "we all should have the right to control our own destiny". 7

**Dying with dignity argument supports euthanasia:**

"Dying with dignity" is one of the arguments put forward by advocates of euthanasia. When one ill person completely depends upon another person for his complete care it may be considered as indignity of that ill person. Here dignified death means that kind of death which a person wants. The request of death means to make a way that the patient can die with dignity without further indignity due to illness unless being a burden to his relatives. The defenders of euthanasia advocate that legalization of euthanasia would give terminally ill patients the option to advice doctors to terminate their life at a time and in a manner that would reduce their suffering while maintaining their personal dignity. If there is no chance of recovery then euthanasia must be the only option which is far better than an expensive futile treatment.

If we take here the example of an AIDS patient we can see that this disease is completely incurable and also causes the loss of dignity and selfhood, AIDS disease degrade the patient's

standard into other dependent person. These AIDS patient who have lost their dignity and are totally dependent on other people that take care of them, and depend on medicines to stay alive, have no ability to take part in enjoyable social activity. Thus they lost the dignity as persons. In these cases the decision to end their life is believed to be a dignified death. Thus euthanasia must legalize for the sake of maintaining the death with dignity.

**Elimination of suffering argument in favor of euthanasia**

One of the arguments to support euthanasia is related to elimination of sufferings of the patient. Those people who are in defense of euthanasia believe that it is not morally good to allow people to suffer unnecessarily. If we saw a person in intolerable pain and distress then it leaves a horrible impact on the conscious human beings who see the patient in that pathetic condition. It would be a barbaric and foolish act if we do not spare them from further sufferings. Euthanasia is considered to be justified on the ground that it relieves suffering when pain is unbearable and incurable. Euthanasia is for its defenders a solution to end the intolerable suffering and pain of the patients. Death is perceived to be a merciful act when suffering is unbearable. Thus we can quote:-

When suffering is too intense or illness is incurable, death is a good to be sought. A physician states: "Death is man's greatest blessing when it cancels a life cracked with sufferings and stripped of its meaning". 8

**Arguments against Euthanasia****Euthanasia is against God's will**

Supporters of euthanasia focuses on the autonomy of human being. They argued that every human being has a freedom to choose anything according to his desire and need. But the Christian concept of freedom is something different. According to Christian view one should not exercise his autonomy over god's will. Moreover, life is a precious gift from god and it is the duty of every person to preserve it at any circumstances. Similarly the time of death must be determined by the God only. No human being has the authority to end his life against God's will. So, the act of euthanasia is not permissible. Thus we can quote:-

"The Christian perspectives of freedom and right imply this: everyone does have the right to life, but this right is not an absolute one because as life is given by God as a gift, there is no absolute autonomy: we are stewards of our life. It is like a given talent granted by the master to his servants, and from which he expects them to invest and gain proper return as it is showed in one of the parables of Jesus. (Mt 25: 14-30) 9

**Sanctity of Human Life Argument Opposes Euthanasia**

One of the important objections against euthanasia is sanctity of human life argument. Life is purely sacred and nothing can justify the termination

of such a sacred human life at any state including intolerable suffering. Thus we can form an argument here:-

**Premise 1**

Every human life is sacred.

**Premise 2**

Though human life is sacred then taking life is wrong.

**Premise 3**

Euthanasia is a way of taking life.

**Conclusion**

Therefore, euthanasia is wrong.

This argument proves that sanctity of human life is a basic ground for the rejection of killing human beings in the view of Christian tradition. We cannot end human life not only because human life is sacred but also because it has special relation to God. God is the creator of human being as an image of god and nobody has the right to violate this sacred relation between life of a human being and the creator God. The human life is considered holy and sacred because it is related to divine action of God.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church for its part affirms that life is sacred from its very beginning; it involves the creative actions of God. The human person is forever in relationship with God who is the only end of the human person and God alone has dominion over life from the beginning till the end. Taking life is also forbidden by the fifth commandment which is: "You shall not kill", thus it is not right to destroy directly an innocent human being, any human being. 10

**The concept of Palliative care makes euthanasia unnecessary**

Now a day's new dimension of treatment is introduced in medical science which is termed as Palliative care. First we have to define Palliative care. World Health Organization (WHO) defines Palliative care as following:-

"Palliative care is an approach that improves the quality of life of patients and their families facing the problems associated with life-threatening illness, through the prevention and relief of suffering by means of early identification and impeccable assessment and treatment of pain and other problems, physical, psychological and spiritual". 11

If we analysis the above definition we can see that palliative care affirms life and grant death as a normal process. It also asserts that we could not hasten nor postpone death. Palliative care only built a support system to help a terminally ill patient live happily and actively until death. Palliative care is a intensive and special care which gives supportive care to patients who are suffering from terminal illness. Palliative care not only helps to eliminate pain and suffering but also it helps spiritual and emotional up gradation and satisfaction. This is a real compassion or mercy that can be shown to terminally ill people. It includes compassion and empathy of the friends and family members which generates a sense

of assurance that the patient is not alone. Sometimes the request for euthanasia arises out of loneliness, helplessness and depression. Thus the opposition group of euthanasia declared that good palliative care will surely reduce the number of requests for euthanasia.

**Objectives of the Paper**

Euthanasia is a medical procedure in which a seriously disabled and terminally ill person wants a good death that will helps to remove his/her sufferings permanently. In doing so they seek help from physicians, family members. But we all know that ending a human's life before natural time of death is nothing a murder. Ethics also admit that every human being's life is precious and full of future probabilities. And killing in any form is not ethically justified. Most of the religion also admits human's life as a precious gift from God. And according to religious view only the supreme power God can make an end to humans' life and no human being has the authority to do so. If we do so it will be considered as a sin. Remembering all those pre-notion about dignity of human life the aim of my paper is to make a change in our view and concept of dignity towards life. The actual dignity of human being is to show respect to the autonomous decision of a human being who is in great pain or distress. My paper is aimed to bring a positive change in human mind and as well as in legislation so that the act euthanasia can be treated as an instrument or way of treatment that should be used in special situation where death is the only option to salvation.

**Conclusion**

Euthanasia, too is a controversial subject, not only because there are many different moral dilemmas associated with it. In the debate of euthanasia the advocates of euthanasia say that it is a merciful or good way to death. On the other hand there are opponents of euthanasia who consider the method of euthanasia as murder. After presenting both the arguments of proponents and opponents of euthanasia, I would like to sum up briefly the morality of euthanasia. Euthanasia is unethical at the level of reason. The primary responsibility of our society and the concern government is to take care all of its members or civilians and to protect them from any danger. Ethics admits that killing any human being is nothing but a destruction of human's dignity and rights. It also violates the fundamental right to life of a human being. Hence, Ethics admits that legalization of euthanasia is failure of our society and government to protect its members from legal form of killing.

Ethics also opposes euthanasia because the practice of euthanasia creates a lot of ambiguity between the relationship of patient and doctor. Moreover, it will destroy the special role of a doctor as a healer and merely degrade them to the role of killer. But we all know that the role of a physician is to cure the patient and not to kill them. Thus euthanasia is unethical since it includes taking the life of the patient.

Though ethics has an objection in taking human life with or without his consent but in modern day we have to be broad minded so that we could

follow an ethics which is useful with time and situation. To maximize the respect for human beings life, autonomy and dignity active voluntary euthanasia should be legalized in the cases of terminal illness under strong guidelines. If we do so this will be a true respect to mankind.

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