

“Euthanasia: To be or Not to be?”

Sonia Mehta

Department of Philosophy DAULAT Ram College University of Delhi
E-mail: soniamehta@outlook.in

Abstract—As life begins to fade away on a hospital bed, is there an array to end it with dignity? Or do our Doctors or Laws will decide how and when we will go?.....

Euthanasia is one of the burning issues of human concern that enthrone of an endless debate, has not and probably cannot yield an unanimous decision. To permit or not to permit has remained an enigma the world over. Moreover, the advancement in the field of medical science and technology has made the issue of Euthanasia more pertinent and significant for the present scenario of contemporary society to ponder upon. From the moment of his/her birth, a person is clothed with basic human rights. Right to life is one of the basic as well as fundamental right without which all rights cannot be enjoyed (embodied in Article 21 of Indian Constitution). Now, this ‘Right to life’ has been interpreted by the Indian Judiciary in various ways so as to include within its purview several new rights such as the Right to live with human dignity, Right to livelihood, Right to shelter, Right to privacy, Right to food, Right to education, i.e., for the true enjoyment of the Right to life. But can this ‘Right to life’ be decoded to such an extent, which leads to its self-destruction or self-opposition? That is, can it embrace within its domain the Right not to live or the Right to die? This is the turning point where the debate, “To be or not to be” arises, involving moral, religious, legal, medical and even political aspects.

This research paper thus will try to approach this issue from the perspective of dignity and quality of life, which is of greater importance than the mere prolongation of life i.e. the Moral dilemmas surrounding the Euthanasia.

The discussion is organized as follows: Firstly, the present paper will set out some preliminary concepts and distinctions, which will comprise of meaning, types and ways of Euthanasia. Secondly, it will highlight the difference between Euthanasia and some related concepts like murder, suicide, assisted suicide and physician-assisted suicide. Thirdly, it will ponder over the theological aspect of the issue. And then finally sum up, by showing how far Euthanasia can be morally permissible and what are its moral implications.

Keywords: Euthanasia, Voluntary Euthanasia, Non-voluntary Euthanasia, Involuntary Euthanasia, Active and Passive Euthanasia, Assisted Suicide, Physician Assisted Suicide.

1. MORAL DILEMMAS

- Is it ever correct to end the life of a terminally ill patient who is going through acute pain and suffering?
- Isn't it cruel to let people suffer pointlessly?
- Under what circumstances can euthanasia be justifiable, if at all?

- Is Euthanasia a Moral Option?
- Is there a difference between killing someone and letting them die?
- Is Active Euthanasia morally better than Passive Euthanasia?
- How does my view of God affect my understanding of taking human life?
- How does Human Dignity relate to taking human life?
- Do I have a “Right to Die”?
- Does the Right to live with dignity incorporate the Right to die with dignity?
- Is it Wrong for me to Want to Die?
- Should human beings have the right to decide on issues of life and death?

Before venturing to delineate the pros and cons of the aforesaid plethora of moral dilemmas, it is essential to put the word “EUTHANASIA” in the proper perspective.

2. DEFINITION OF EUTHANASIA

In order that the issue of Euthanasia can be properly dealt with, it is first essential to define the term used. The implication of the term Euthanasia is itself cloaked in ambiguity. The word Euthanasia originated from the two ancient Greek words, ‘Eu’ means ‘Good’ and ‘Thanatos’ means ‘Death’. So, it literally means good and easy death. Oxford dictionary define it as ‘bringing about of a gentle death in the case of incurable and painful disease. Ultimately, the basic intention behind Euthanasia is to ensure a less painful death to a person who is any case going to die after a long period of suffering.

3. TYPES OF EUTHANASIA

- **Voluntary Euthanasia:** When the person who is killed has requested to be killed i.e. when a person asks for death.
- **Non-Voluntary Euthanasia:** When the person who is killed made no request and gave no consent i.e. when the

person is not mentally competent, such as a comatose patient.

- **Involuntary Euthanasia:** When the person who is killed made an expressed wish to the contrary i.e. when a person is killed against his express will.

4. MODES OF EUTHANASIA

- **Active Euthanasia-** (killing, Euthanasia by action): Intentionally causing a person's death by performing an action such as by giving a lethal injection.
- **Passive Euthanasia-** (letting die, Euthanasia by omission): Intentionally causing death by not providing necessary and normal (usual & customary) care or food & water i.e. withholding or withdrawing life-sustaining treatment. All three kinds of Euthanasia listed above can either be active or passive.

5. WAYS OF EUTHANASIA

- **Lethal Injection**
- **Suicide Machine**
- **Palliative/Terminal Sedation:** means the use of sedative medication to relieve extreme suffering by making the patients unaware & unconscious, while artificial food & hydration are withheld, during the progression of the disease leading to the death of the patient.
- **Peaceful Pills**

6. SOME RELATED CONCEPTS

6.1 Euthanasia and Murder

In murder, the murderer has the intention to cause harm or cause death in his mind. But in Euthanasia although there is an intention to cause death, such intention is in good faith. A doctor goes for Euthanasia only in the case of patient's who are suffering from a terminal disease, is in an irremediable condition or has no chance of recovery or survival.

6.2 Euthanasia and Suicide

Suicide means an act of self-killing or self-destruction, an act of terminating one's own life and without the aid or assistance of any other human agency. Whereas in Euthanasia or mercy killing on the other hand implies the involvement of other human agency to end the life. Mercy killing thus is not suicide and the provisions of Section 309 do not cover an attempt at mercy killing. Thus the two concepts are both factually and lawfully distinct. .

6.3 Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide/Physician Assisted Suicide

Assisted Suicide- Suicide with the aid of other person's information, guidance, and means to take his or her own life. And when the other person is a doctor, it is a 'physician assisted suicide'. Thus, in assisted suicide the patient himself/herself performs the act of suicide, the other person simply helps (for example, providing the means for carrying out the action). On the other hand in Euthanasia the doctor himself (by act or omission) kills the patients.

7. THEOLOGY AT THE CROSSROAD

Among different religions also there are two contradictory views, one that support Euthanasia as a moral deed and another which consider Euthanasia as a bad deed as it disturbs the life and death cycle.

- **Christianity-** Life is a God gift that should not be destroyed. One of the 10 commandments is "thou shall not kill". God is in everyone and every living thing. If you harm a living thing, you harm God.
- **Muslim Beliefs-** Allah gives all life, so it is sacred. Only Allah can choose when a life will end.
- **Jews Belief-** the preservation of human life is one of the supreme moral values. Saving someone from pain is not a reason to kill him or her.
- **Sikh's Belief-** The timing of birth and death should be left in God's hands. They have a high respect for life.

So far we have discussed different religious views, which are against Euthanasia. Now, we will discuss religious views, which favored Euthanasia.

- **Hinduism and Buddhism-** According to Hinduism and Buddhism when the person has achieved all his/her aims in life and finished performing all the duties and responsibilities that were assigned to him and his body becomes a burden, then '*Prayopaveshan*' is allowed. Since it is a non-violent, calm and is only for people who are content with their lives.
- **Jainism-** allows '*Santhara*': When all the purpose of life has been served or when the body becomes unable to serve any purpose, one wishes to adopt a *Santhara*.

8. ANCIENT INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION

This tradition also justifies the idea of a man wishing his own death. As per Hindu mythology Lord Rama and his brothers took '*jal samadhi*' in River Saryu near Ayodhya. Ancient Indian history also tells that Lord Buddha and Lord Mahavira attained death by seeking it.

All these practicing of *Prayopaveshan*, *Santhara*, *Samadhi* and *Ichha Mrityu* are the different types of voluntary deaths. These acts do not trouble many, as they are the part of some religious ritual of a particular sect and we quietly allow all these because their religious gurus to attain them have sanctioned them. But, the question is, how are these practices and Euthanasia differs, they are not? It is a very true fact that we fear death, at least a premature death. Every one in this world wants to survive for a long and by every possible way wants to have prolonged existence. But when life becomes far more painful and unbearable than death, it is very normal to desire death. So, death is never the first choice, and people opt for this path only because there is none other left to take.

9. WHAT ARE WE STRIVING FOR?

So the relevant question that arises is: What are we striving for? Euthanasia means “a good death,” “dying well”. But, What is a good death? A death, which comprises the following:

- Peaceful
- Painless
- Lucid
- With loved ones gathered around

10. COMPASSION FOR SUFFERING

The pertinent question is: How do we respond to suffering? Should we go with the first three options or the last one from the following?

- Hospice and palliative care
- Aggressive pain-killing medications
- Sitting with the dying

OR

- Euthanasia

11. ARGUMENTS AGAINST EUTHANASIA

- Demeans the Sanctity of life. Human’s life is a God gift and ending life is wrong and immoral. Human beings cannot be given the right to play the part of God. It is only due to ones karma that one suffers in ones life.
- It is against the “The Hippocratic Oath”. Medical ethics incorporate nursing, caring and healing and not ending the life of the patient. In today’s scenario, medical science is advancing at a great rate. Thus even the most incurable diseases are becoming curable today. Thus instead of encouraging a patient to end his life, the medical practitioners should boost up the patients to lead their painful life with strength that should be moral as well as physical.
- The term “ Terminally Ill” is not subject to a fixed definition. The term terminally means any disease that curtails life even for a day, or within a month, or in a year

or terminal old age. Even within the medical community there is disagreement about who is a terminally ill patient and thus the group could cover a very wide collection of patients.

- It leads to slippery slop argument. For example firstly it may be legalized only for terminally ill patient but later on laws can be altered and then it may allow for non-voluntary or involuntary.
- It discourages scientists who are looking for a cure for incurable ailments in particular and advancement in medical science as a whole.
- Miracles do happen in our culture especially when it is a subject of life and death, there are examples of survivals of coma patients after many years and we should not forget human life is all about expectation.

12. MORAL ISSUES SURROUNDING EUTHANASIA

Euthanasia has many moral issues; among them most prevalent are the following:

- Sanctity of Life
- Quality of Life
- Personhood
- Autonomy

12.1 Sanctity of Life

The Idea that God created humans, so only He can take life. Under no circumstances does anyone have the right to take their life, or let anyone else take their life for them. Natural Law- Primary Precept: “preserve innocent life” But Euthanasia is not killing or murder, but to be practiced on the ones who are terminally ill-no hope of recovery.

12.2 Quality of Life

The idea that if someone is still enjoying happy relationships, can commune and is not in any awful condition, then to ask for Euthanasia is wrong. As the people here are still able to enjoy “higher pleasures”. But Euthanasia is given to someone, who is in a primitive vegetative state (PVS) with a very low quality of life, who could no longer enjoy any form of pleasure at all.

12.3 Personhood

Person is one who has the ability to make rational decisions, is conscious and is independent. Without these, some would argue that a being is no longer a person, and if someone is not a person certainly they are no longer bound by any sanctity of life argument and have the right to die. Therefore, in the case of PVS patient, with low moral standing, to ask Euthanasia for them is morally and ethically right.

12.4 Autonomy

We are autonomous agent i.e. have the right to take our own decisions. So, Do we have a right to die? Do we be the owner of our own bodies and our lives? If we do, does that give us the right to do whatever we want with them?

Until recently, end-of-life decisions for most of the people were very easy: we tried to stay alive as long as we could, and then we just died. Today, we are lucky if we are able to “just die.” A Thought worth pondering: add life to years and not years to life.

Thus, I conclude my paper by saying few lines: “It is better to die with dignity than to live a helpless life in a vegetative state. If I am in such a situation, without repentance, without guilt, I will put myself to eternal sleep. I am sure, in my rebirth, it will be a stronger me”.

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