

## AN OVERALL CONCEPT OF EUTHANASIA

### Abstract

The topic of euthanasia, which belongs to the branch of applied ethics mainly to the domain of bio-ethics, has become a hot topic of debate in recent times. The supporters of euthanasia claim that patients suffering severely has the right to choose their death in order to get relief from the unbearable pain and suffering; while on the other hand, the opponents believe that this method is a form of murder or suicide which is ethically as well as legally not acceptable. This chapter is an attempt to throw some light upon the basic and major aspects of euthanasia. Here, we shall briefly discuss about the classification of euthanasia and about its pros and cons which have created a moral dilemma. Meanwhile, we have also attempted to highlight the viewpoints of some religious systems, regarding the practice of euthanasia.

**Keywords:** Euthanasia, Voluntary Euthanasia, Involuntary Euthanasia, Non-Voluntary Euthanasia, Passive Euthanasia, Active Euthanasia, Physician-Assisted Suicide, Pros and Cons.

### Authors

#### **Mina Kumar**

Guest Faculty  
Department of Philosophy  
Paschim Guwahati Mahavidyalaya  
Guwahati, India.  
minakumar94352@gmail.com

#### **Bhupali Kalita**

Guest Faculty  
Department of Philosophy  
Paschim Guwahati Mahavidyalaya  
Guwahati, India.  
bhkalita600@gmail.com

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The growth of human intellectuals has paved the way towards a faster and advanced progress in medical science and technology. These phenomenal advances have brought significant impacts upon human life and society, which have given rise to a number of issues. 'Euthanasia' has become an active area of research in bio-ethics. Bioethics, which is a branch of applied ethics, provides ethical guidance in a particular field of human conduct. It mainly deals with ethical, legal and social issues regarding biomedical and biomedicine research. The practice of 'euthanasia' faces certain ethical, social and legal issues and hence, at present has become one of the most controversial topics among the researchers.

On the basis of historical research, it is claimed that euthanasia was practised in the ancient Greek and Rome. Hemlock (a poisonous drug) was used as a means of quick and immediate death on the island of Kea, a technique also employed in Marseilles. Euthanasia in this sense of ending a person's life was supported by Socrates, Plato and Seneca the Elder in the ancient world.[1] Moreover, in recent times, though euthanasia has been legalised in some countries; yet most of the countries find difficult to accept euthanasia as a legal or ethical right. There is always a question of legalising the practice of euthanasia. It is a disputable issue, as it involves planned or intentional ending of human life. Patients who suffer from severe incurable diseases often face an unbearable anxiety and pain; and these gradually worsen with time. In such a situation, either the patient or an appropriate person on behalf of the patient chooses to end the patient's life rather than suffering from the unbearable illness. Here, a question arises whether people should be given the assistance in killing themselves or whether they should be left to suffer the pain caused by terminal illness. The concepts of right to live and right to die with dignity have created a major debate regarding the topic of 'euthanasia'.

## **II. MEANING AND DEFINITION OF EUTHANASIA**

The term 'euthanasia' is rooted in two Greek words: 'Eu' means 'Good' and 'Thanatos' means 'Death'. This means a good or an easy death. This term was first used in the medical context by Francis Bacon in the 17th century to refer to an easy, painless and happy death. [2] It is an act or practice of ending the life of an individual, who is suffering from terminal illness or an incurable condition, by injection or by suspending extraordinary medical treatment in order to free him from pain. The Oxford dictionary meaning of the word 'euthanasia' is the painless killing of a patient, suffering from an incurable and painful disease or in an irreversible coma. It is the practice of killing a person or an animal without pain who is suffering from a disease that cannot be cured. The Cambridge dictionary defines 'euthanasia' as the act of killing someone who is very ill or very old so that they do not suffer anymore. Euthanasia is also known as mercy killing because it ends one's life in a painless manner in order to relief him from his incurable pain and suffering. Moreover, the current definition of euthanasia can be regarded as the painless inducement of a quick death. The main motive behind this practice is to provide a painless or a less painful death to a sufferer. It is practiced so that a person can die with dignity just as one chooses to live with dignity.

## **III. CLASSIFICATION OF EUTHANASIA**

Euthanasia can be classified into the following five types:

- 1. Voluntary Euthanasia:** Voluntary euthanasia is conducted with the consent of the patient. When the patient makes a conscious decision to seek help with ending his life, it is considered as voluntary euthanasia. The person must give his full consent and demonstrate that he fully understand what will happen. It is attempted upon a person who willingly wants to end his life in order to get rid of his incurable pain and suffering. Voluntary euthanasia has been legalized in a growing number of countries.
- 2. Non-Voluntary Euthanasia:** Non-voluntary euthanasia is conducted when the consent of the patient is not possible. This type of euthanasia occurs when the person (a very young baby or a person of extremely low intelligence) is unconscious, permanently incapacitated or unable to make any meaningful choice between life and death. The decision of conducting this form of euthanasia is mainly taken by an appropriate or conscious person on behalf of the patient. This type of euthanasia is legalised in some countries under certain limited conditions, in both active and passive forms. For instance: Child euthanasia, which is illegal worldwide but decriminalised under certain specific circumstances in the Netherlands.
- 3. Involuntary Euthanasia:** Involuntary euthanasia is conducted without asking for consent of the patient or against the will of the patient. This type of euthanasia occurs when the person who dies chooses life, but he is killed anyway. This type of euthanasia is usually not considered as legal. Though, it is considered as a murder, yet it is possible to imagine cases where taking away the life of the patient may be regarded as beneficial who has been suffering from severe incurable and unbearable pain since a long period of time.

Following are some of the instances or circumstances under which a terminally ill patient might be given euthanasia;

- When the person is in coma for many months or years.
  - When the person is too young to give any constant or to make any decision.
  - When the person is mentally retarded to a very severe extent.
- 4. Active Euthanasia:** Active euthanasia is another type of euthanasia. It is occurring when the medical professionals or another person directly or deliberately do something that causes the patient to die. For example: Purposely giving someone a lethal dose of a drug to end their life, in order to get relief from pain and suffering is considered as active euthanasia. Active euthanasia also including helping the patient to die on the basis of a appeal either by the patient or of those close to him or her, usually direct family members.
  - 5. Passive Euthanasia:** Passive euthanasia is abstains from performing the action which may keep the patient alive. It is a practice of intentionally letting a patient die by withholding artificial life support system like ventilator or feeding tube. Passive euthanasia can includes turning off respirators, halting medications, discontinuing food and the water so the patient dies due to of dehydration or starvation.

#### **IV. EUTHANASIA: DIFFERENT FROM SUICIDE AND PHYSICIAN-ASSISTED SUICIDE (P.A.S.)**

We can perceive a difference between suicide and euthanasia. In suicide, a man knowingly and willingly ends his life by using harmful means such as consuming poison, hanging with a rope, cutting wrists, etc. It is an intentional act of killing oneself due to depression or various reasons in his or her personal life. On the other hand, the practice of euthanasia is conducted by other person to bring to an end the life of a sufferer. In euthanasia, a third person is either actively or passively involved in taking away the life of another person. It cannot be termed as murder because here euthanasia is conducted only to provide a less painful death to one who has been suffering from severe incurable and unbearable pain since a long period of time.

Moreover, a difference also exists between physician-assisted suicide (P.A.S.) and euthanasia. Assisted suicide is an act which provides aid or help to an individual to commit suicide. When a doctor or a physician helps a patient to kill himself by providing a prescribed lethal medication, it is termed as physician-assisted suicide. In assisted suicide, the patient consciously and voluntarily ends his or her life. But euthanasia may be active, passive, voluntarily, involuntary as well as non-voluntary. Nevertheless, both euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide lead to the same outcome. They are the means to realise the end of a good death.

"The first attempt to legalise euthanasia took place in United States." [3] People have debated over the ethics and legality of euthanasia and P.A.S. (Physician-Assisted Suicide) for centuries. The laws regarding euthanasia and P.A.S. vary from states to states and countries to countries. In the United States, P.A.S. is legal in Washington, Oregon, California, Colorado, Montana, Vermont, Washington, D.C., Hawaii. This list may grow because currently, many states have P.A.S. measures on legislative ballots. Outside the United States, P.A.S. is legal in Switzerland, Germany and Japan. The countries where both euthanasia and P.A.S. are legal are : The Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Colombia, Canada, Spain, etc.

#### **V. ETHICS IN EUTHANASIA**

There is a moral dilemma regarding the topic of euthanasia. As a hot topic of debate, euthanasia gives rise to a number of questions regarding its acceptance and denial. Following are some of the possible general arguments laid down in favour and in against the practice of euthanasia:

##### **1. Pros of Euthanasia: Arguments in Support of Euthanasia**

- The prime aim of euthanasia is to reduce the unbearable and incurable pain and suffering of an individual. It provides an easy death to a terminally ill patient. For example, in case of active euthanasia, a patient dying from incurable cancer of the throat is in terrible pain that he cannot be tolerated. He is certain that he is going to die in a few days and decides not to live for those days, since the pain is unbearable. So, in this case he may ask the doctor to end his life.
- Self-determination is another principle that allows one to accept the practice of euthanasia. Human beings should have the right to be able to decide when and how

they die. Moreover, the right to live with human dignity, which is one of the fundamental rights guaranteed under Article 21 in the Indian Constitution, clearly signifies the personal liberty of a citizen. In which an individual has the right to live a life with at least minimum dignity, and where dignity below that a individual has no live a life then he should be given a right to end his life. So, euthanasia allows a person to die with dignity having complete control of his situation.

- When a patient is terminally ill, the expenses for his medical care and treatment also rise quickly due to aggressive treatments, costly medicines, and visits of family members to hospital for long duration. But, there may seem no hope of recovery. Moreover, in such a case to pay these expenses become a major problem for the patient's family. So, the family members under certain circumstances may take a decision to end the life of the patient.
- Against the opponents of euthanasia, it can be claimed that conduction of euthanasia to reduce the pain of a person is not regarded as murder. The reason behind conducting euthanasia is altruistic and beneficial in nature, because it is an act of painlessly putting to death to those who are suffering from painful and incurable diseases. So, the motive behind this is to help rather than to harm.
- Supporters of euthanasia claims that just as passive euthanasia have been allowed in some countries and in India under strict guidelines, likewise active euthanasia must also be allowed. An individual may come to an end his life in the cases of extreme misery and may prefer to die a painless death rather than living a miserable life with that pain and suffering. Conducting euthanasia upon an incurable ill patient not because relieves the unbearable pain and anxiety of the patient but also relieves the anxiety of the patient's family and that of his close ones.
- Euthanasia can be perceived as an act of humanity towards the terminally ill patient. The patient should not be forced to suffer through a long and painful death. If there is lack of any other possible or justifiable means of recovery, then euthanasia can be regarded as ethical and justifiable, because the quality of life of the terminally ill patient becomes so low that death remains the only justifiable means to relieve suffering.

Therefore, on the basis of the above arguments it can be stated that conducting euthanasia is considered as rational, ethical and legal for being based on the circumstances of terminal illness, unbearable and incurable pain, increased disability and fears of becoming a burden to family and friends. But, as we know that the topic of 'euthanasia' has faced severe criticisms and its practice has been vehemently opposed by most of the people and organisations; so below are some of the arguments mentioned, against the practice of euthanasia.

## **2. Cons of Euthanasia: Arguments against Euthanasia**

- Human life is a basic good as opposed to an instrumental good, a good in itself rather than as a means to an end. Human life is sacred because it's a gift from God. Therefore, the deliberate or intentional way of taking away human life should be prohibited, except in some rare cases, like self-defence.
- Active euthanasia, involuntary and non- voluntary euthanasia are equated with murder. It is considered as murder with intent. We have no right to take the life of a person who wants to live or whose consent is unavailable. We are morally obliged to

refrain from killing or harming each and everyone. So, similarly doctors should be morally obliged to try to prevent patient deaths.

- It is often said and believed that no one can escape from the fruits of their karma. The one who suffers from pain is only due to his or her own karma. So, the practice of Euthanasia not only devalues human life but also regarded as a sinful activity to alter the law of karma.
- Euthanasia also goes against the medical ethics. Medical ethics deals with the treatment and healing of the patient's pain. It is not about ending the life of the patient where one finds no solution. Instead of encouraging a patient to end his life, the medical practitioners should either try to cure the patient or encourage him/her to fight against the pain with faith and strength. So, providing euthanasia won't be considered as lawful because, the patient may well survive later.
- Moreover, the decision to ask for euthanasia may not be directly and strictly made by the patient himself. When a person (patient) starts to feel that he has become a burden on his family and relatives, he comes under psychological pressure to end his life. So, one should never demotivate the hope for recovery of the patient. Our mental strength often helps us to defeat most of the diseases, which may seem to be incurable.
- If suicide is considered as ethically wrong, then euthanasia should also not be allowed on the same ground. A person commits suicide when he goes into a state of depression and has no hope from his life. Similarly, a person asks for euthanasia when the same situation arises and when he finds that there is no hope of recovery from the pain that he is suffering. But such tendencies can be minimised by proper care of the patients and arising hope in them.
- Providing euthanasia to a patient either voluntarily or involuntarily, passively or actively or non- voluntarily may lead to greater possible chances of mishandling it. There are many chances where the cases or circumstances may be overlooked. Hence, many questions arise such as: How would one justify or assess whether a disorder of mental nature qualifies mercy killing? What if the pain threshold is below optimum and the patient perceives the circumstances not to be worthy of living? What if the individual chooses to end his life by conducting euthanasia as an option, but the family would not agree? How would one know whether the wish to die is the result of unbalanced thought process or a logical decision in a mentally ill patient, who is also going through a severe physical illness? Therefore, it becomes difficult to determine and justify under what circumstances or conditions one should conduct euthanasia to a terminally ill patient.

## **VI. RELIGIOUS RESPONSES TOWARDS EUTHANASIA**

The major religions have also presented their views and responses towards euthanasia, which we shall briefly discuss here. For Hinduism, by helping to end a painful life a person is performing a good deed and so fulfilling their moral obligations. In Hinduism euthanasia may also be acceptable if it is used for selfless motives. Also, by helping to end a life, even one filled with suffering, a person is disturbing the timing of the cycle of birth and rebirth. Death is a natural process, and will come in time. Both Hinduism and Christianity believe euthanasia as the unlawful killing of an innocent person, despite if it is the person's wish to be euthanized. Hinduism and Buddhism also are against suicide because it as an act of destroying individual's life. Suicide puts a person's spiritual clock in reverse. Instead of achieving the spiritual ultimate goal of liberation, a person will remain trapped in the karmic

cycle of life-death-rebirth. Those who assist in this suicide may also be subject to karmic punishment, for they have violated the principal of ahimsa. They believe that when physical suffering impedes self control and lucidity, it is permissible to shorten life. Extreme suffering might also cause someone to be so attached to their material life (physical body) that they cannot pursue the ultimate spiritual goal of liberation from the material world.

Islam and Judaism have definite views on euthanasia. Islam states that human life is more valuable because it is gifted by God and God will determine humans life that how long each person lives in this world. Therefore human being should not interfere in killing and letting die of a person. The Jewish tradition regards the save of human life as the supreme moral values and forbids doing anything that might shorten life. However, doctors should not it make dying last longer than it naturally would. Jewish law and tradition regard human life as sacred, and say that it is wrong for anyone to shorten a human life. This is because human life is not only his/her life to live and dispose of as they feel like. All human life is of infinite value, regardless of its duration or quality, because all human beings are made in the image of God.

## VII. CONCLUSION

When the discussion turns towards controversial topics like euthanasia, it becomes difficult to claim something either in support of or against such topics. However, in this chapter we have tried to cover some of the major aspects of euthanasia and also pointed out the basic classification of euthanasia. No matter how far the advances in today's world takes place, there would be always a conflict regarding its acceptance and denial, or merit and demerit. Different people will have different opinions regarding a topic or a thing. So, in such a case whatever is claimed becomes only subjective.

But to govern and prevent people to use illegal means to satisfy their needs, there must be certain strict laws and regulations, which help in maintaining discipline and harmony in the society. Similarly, the practice of euthanasia should be bounded by certain strict laws and regulations, so that no one misuses or mishandles its practice. Moreover, the government or the higher medical authorities should lay down certain conditions and circumstances under which a patient can be provided euthanasia. Although, it is difficult to give accurate, objective answers or permanent solutions to the ethical problems and questions; yet the attempts to find their answers and solutions should continue as long as it is possible.

## WORKS CITED

- [1] "Euthanasia". Wikipedia. < <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euthanasia> > Accessed on August 7, 2022.
- [2] Nadeau R. Gentles, "Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide: The Current Debate." Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Co. Limited; 1995. Charting the Legal Trends; p. 727. [Google Scholar]
- [3] "Euthanasia". Wikipedia. < <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euthanasia> > Accessed on August 7, 2022.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Brassington, I. " Killing People: What Kant Could Have Said about Suicide and Euthanasia but Did Not". *Journal of Medical Ethics* . Vol.32, No.10. 2006. pp. 571-574. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27719717>>
- [2] Cartwright, Will. " Killing And Letting Die: A Defensible Distinction." *British Medical Bulletin*. 1996. Vol-52, No.2.

- [3] Dickens, Bernard M. Boyle Jr, Joseph M. and Ganzini, Linda. "Euthanasia and assisted suicide". Cambridge University press, 2009. <https://www.cambridge.org/core>.
- [4] "Euthanasia". *Wikipedia*. < <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euthanasia> > Accessed on August 7, 2022.
- [5] Hollad, Kimberly. "Euthanasia: Understanding of Facts." May 31, 2019.
- [6] Kerstein, Samuel. "Treating Persons as Means". *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edward N. Zalta (ed.) .Summer 2019 Edition. Accessed on August 5, 2022. < <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/persons-means/> >
- [7] McLachlan, Hugh. " Moral duties and Euthanasia:why to kill is not necessarily the same as to let die." *J Med Ethics*. June 27, 2011. doi:10.1136/jme.2011.044966
- [8] Nadeau R. Gentles, "Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide: The Current Debate." Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Co. Limited; 1995. Charting the Legal Trends; p. 727. [Google Scholar]
- [9] Nimbalkar, Namita. " Euthanasia: the Hindu Perspective." *National seminar on Bio-Ethics*. 24th and 25th Jan, 2007.
- [10] Rachels, James. " Active and Passive Euthanasia." *The New England Journal of Medicine*, Vol.292, 9 Jan, 1975, pp.78-80.
- [11] Smith, M.Wade. " The Ethical & Economic Concerns of physician Assisted Suicide". *Augustana Center for the study of Ethics Essay Contest*. 2017.
- [12] Vinod, K. Sinha. S, Basu. and S, Sarkhel. " Euthanasia: An Indian Perspective." *Indian J Psychiatry*, 2012 . pp. 177-183. doi: 10.4103/0019-5545.99537