Euthanasia: A Moral Dilemma

Prakash Mondal, Philosophy, Katwa College, W.B., India

Abstract

Of late, euthanasia is a moral problem in medical science as well as applied ethics. Medical science has tried to solve the problem of euthanasia in various ways. In the present article we have discussed elaborately about euthanasia and tried to show that now-a-days euthanasia is an ethical issue in not only our country but also in the world. In the second part of the article we have tried to define the word ‘euthanasia’. Thirdly we have introduced different types of euthanasia in details. Finally we have discussed about the morality of euthanasia. The article concludes that all countries must consider legalizing euthanasia because it can save millions of patients around the globe hours of grueling pain and suffering instead of dying a peaceful death.

Key words: Euthanasia, assisted suicide, meaning of life, autonomy, and non-maleficence

1. Introduction

Traditionally physicians have been able to rely almost exclusively on their own judgment when making decisions about their patient’s needs, but health care is increasingly being confronted with patients who demand to make independent judgments about their own fate. As a reflection of this general trend the topic of euthanasia has received increasing attention in recent year and has been the focus of much debate. There is now a growing drive to review the current laws on euthanasia and assisted suicide and it has been reported that 75% of a sample of British public agreed that the law should allow adults to receive help towards an immediate peaceful, if they suffer from an intolerable physical illness (Dawson, 1986).

2. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the proposed study are as follows:

1. To investigate knowledge about the definition of euthanasia.
2. To investigate different types of euthanasia and draw a conclusion about the morality of euthanasia.

3. What is euthanasia?

Sir Francis Bacon coined the phrase “euthanasia”. It is also called as ‘mercy killing’. The term “euthanasia” has been derived from the two Greek words ‘eu’ and ‘thanotos’, which literally mean ‘good death’.

Stedman Medical Dictionary defines euthanasia as ‘a quiet, painless death’, and ‘the intentional putting to death by artificial means of persons with incurable painful disease’. Collins English
Dictionary suggests that euthanasia is ‘the act of killing someone painlessly, especially to relieve suffering from an incurable illness’ and the terms ‘mercy killing’ and ‘assisted suicide’ are commonly used to describe the phenomenon. In general, euthanasia implies measures deliberately taken by a physician to curtail pain and suffering, in agonizing terminal and definitely fatal chronic conditions by the merciful infliction of death. This concept has been enlarged to include such action in incurable disease, particularly those in which the patient must endure torment, and extreme pain. On the other hand euthanasia enters the field of eugenics in the form of infanticide, which aims to improve the race by the elimination of children born with irreparable defects, or those grotesques known as teratological anomalies (Cowell & MacMillan, 1970).

4. Kinds of Euthanasia

Euthanasia is generally classified as either “active” or “passive”, and as either “voluntary” or “involuntary” or “non-voluntary”. In connection with this point I do say that I do not support any form of suicide for mental health or emotional reasons. But I do say that there is a second form of suicide – justifiable suicide, that is, rational and planned self-deliverance from a painful and hopeless disease, which will shortly end in death.

4.1 Active vs Passive

“Active euthanasia” is taking specific steps to cause the patient’s death, such as injecting the patient with poison. In practice, this is usually an overdose of pain-killers or sleeping pills. “Passive euthanasia” is usually defined as withdrawing medical treatment with the deliberate intention of causing the patient’s death. For example, if a patient requires kidney dialysis to survive, and the doctors disconnect the dialysis machine, the patient will presumably die fairly soon. Normally if a patient has a heart attack or similar sudden interruption in life functions, medical staff will attempt to revive them. If they make no such effort but simply stand and watch as the patient dies, this is passive euthanasia. In other words, the difference between “active” and “passive” euthanasia is that in active euthanasia, something is done to end the patient’s life; in passive euthanasia, something is not done that would have preserved the patient’s life (Singer, 1986).

The distinction between active and passive euthanasia is thought to be crucial for medical ethics. The idea is that it is permissible, at least in some cases, to withhold treatment and allow a patient to die, but it is never permissible to take any direct action designed to kill the patient. This doctrine seems to be accepted by most doctors, and it is endorsed in a statement adopted by the House of Delegates of the American Medical Association on 4th December 1973:

The intentional termination of the life of one human being by another—mercy killing—is contrary to that for which the medical profession stands and is contrary to the policy of the American Medical Association.

The cessation of the employment of extraordinary means to prolong the life of the body when there is irrefutable evidence that biological death is imminent is the decision of the patient and/or his immediate family. The advice and judgment of the physician should be freely available to the patient and/or his immediate family (American Medical Association, 1973).

4.2 Voluntary euthanasia
‘Voluntary euthanasia’ is when the patient requests that action be taken to end his life, or that life-saving treatment be stopped, with full knowledge that this will lead to his death. This includes cases of:

- Asking for help with dying
- Refusing burdensome medical treatment
- Asking for medical treatment to be stopped, or life support machines to be switched off
- Refusing to eat
- Simply deciding to die

### 4.3 Non-voluntary euthanasia

If a human being is not capable of understanding the choice between life and death, euthanasia would be neither voluntary nor involuntary, but non-voluntary (Singer, 1993). This includes cases where:

- The person is in a coma
- The person is too young
- The person is senile
- The person is mentally retarded to a very severe extent
- The person is severely brain damaged
- The person is mentally disturbed in such a way that they should be protected from themselves

### 4.4 Involuntary euthanasia

The person wants to live but is killed anyway. This is usually murder but not always. Consider the following examples:

- A soldier has their stomach blown open by a shell burst. They are in great pain and screaming in agony. They beg the army doctor to save their life. The doctor knows that they will die in ten minutes whatever happens. As he has no painkilling drugs with him he decides to spare the soldier further pain and shoot them dead.
- A person is seen at a 10th floor window of a burning building. Their clothes are on fire and fire brigade has not yet arrived. The person is screaming for help. A passerby nearby realizes that within seconds the person will suffer an agonizing death from burns. He has a rifle with him and shoots the screaming person dead.
- A man and a woman are fleeing from a horde of alien monsters notorious for torturing human beings that they capture. They fall into a pit dug to catch them. As the monsters lower their tentacles into the pit to drag the man out he begs the woman to do something to save him. She shoots him, and then kills herself.

The morality of these and similar cases is left for the reader to think about.

### 5. Argumentative Euthanasia

There are many arguments for and against euthanasia. Arguments for euthanasia include: we should respect people’s wishes, we should let people end their life amongst loved ones, and euthanasia is financially cheaper than prolonging life. Arguments against euthanasia include: we should preserve life and if legalized euthanasia will lead to other problems.

#### 5.1 Arguments for euthanasia
The first argument for euthanasia is that we, as humans, should respect other people’s wishes. If someone feels his or her life is not worth living anymore and has thought carefully about ending his or her life then we should respect this decision. People need to make decisions in their life according to their own conceptions, beliefs and feelings about where they want their lives to go. If someone plans the way they will die and they are comfortable with it then they should be allowed to do so (Duttagupta, 2008).

The second argument for euthanasia is that people should be able to end their lives surrounded by loved ones. As said in the first argument, many people worry about how their lives will end. If someone feels their life is not worth living anymore then they should be able to end their lives with their loved ones around. If a person had a terminal illness and could die at any time there may not be anyone around to say goodbye to, it would be a terribly lonely death. Surely if someone had planned their death with loved ones around to say final words and goodbye it would be a much better way to die. If the ‘love one’ did not have a problem with the person doing so then who else could it affect and make such a big issue about.

The final argument for euthanasia is that it is cheaper. What this means is that the cost of keeping a person alive against their will would be more expensive than letting them die. The financial cost of long term medical and nursing care is very expensive. Legalizing euthanasia would remove the need to spend money on this type of care and free up money that can be spent elsewhere. This is rather heartless argument, but when you are arguing such a strong case these arguments can be needed.

5.2 Arguments against euthanasia

The first argument against euthanasia is that we should preserve life. This argument is mainly to do with religious beliefs. Many Christians believe that God should be the only one to take life away, since he gave life to us. It is felt that euthanasia would remove the act of taking a life from God to humanity. In Christian religion any form of suicide is considered immoral. The fifth commandment states that ‘thou shall not kill’ this sums up the Christian argument quite well.

The second and final argument against euthanasia is that if euthanasia is legalized many people will make the wrong decision. It is feared that unscrupulous family members or doctors will persuade the person in question to take their life against their will. Some people believe there is nothing logically inconsistent in supporting voluntary euthanasia but rejecting non-voluntary euthanasia is morally inappropriate. For example if someone is in a persistent vegetative state and their life is considered not worth living, but they have never expressed the wish die, then non-voluntary euthanasia should not be enacted (Howarth, & Margot, 1996).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion the euthanasia debate is very large one with many arguments, both for and against. This argument will not probably be solved for many years and even then a lot of people will be displeased with the decision made. New Zealand and Netherlands are perfect examples for those points, the two countries are exact opposites in their stand regarding euthanasia and both countries have their own reasons. As a final note, all countries must consider legalizing euthanasia because it can save millions of patients around the globe hours of grueling pain and suffering instead of dying a peaceful death. We think euthanasia should be legalized if and only if:

- It is carried out by a physician.
The patient has explicitly requested euthanasia in a manner that leaves no doubt of the patient’s desire to die.

- The patient’s decision is well informed, free and durable.
- The patient has an irreversible condition causing protracted physical or mental suffering that the patient finds unbearable.
- There is no reasonable alternative to alleviate the patient’s suffering.
- The doctor has consulted another independent professional who agrees with his or her judgment.

Euthanasia in these circumstances is strongly supported by the Royal Dutch Medical Association and the general public in the Netherlands also.

References


