

Moral Justification of Euthanasia

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Euthanasia is one of the topics of Medical Ethics. The term 'Euthanasia' is derived from two Greek words 'Eu' and 'Thanatos'. The literal meaning of the term is good and peaceful death. But now the term has been translated as mercy killing in which killing of person say A by another person say B makes the death peaceful and such killing is not to be considered as murder, because B takes the life of A for the sake of A. This understanding of euthanasia emphasizes two features: 1) it deliberately takes the life of a person, 2) the life taken for the sake of that person who has been suffering incurable painful disease and there is no hope for his life. Generally such type of death is desired by the patient himself or his/her family members. So it is called desired death.

Regarding the moral significance of euthanasia it may be mentioned that in 4th century B.C. doctors took oath to Hippocrates, the father of Medicine that in any situation they would never give medicine to their patients that might take the life of their patients. So the physicians who took Hippocratic oath did not support euthanasia.

It is generally believed that euthanasia started in Greece and Rome around 5th century B.C. Socrates, Plato, Stoic philosophers accepted moral permissibility of euthanasia. Plato was sympathetic to the process of euthanasia. For him if a person becomes inefficient to serve the state due to his disease, mercy killing should be applied to him. Similarly the stoic philosophers also accepted euthanasia in which there is no hope for life. For them a quality life is better than simply a life. Utilitarian thinkers Mill and Bentham also supported euthanasia while Immanuel Kant strongly opposed it. The term 'Euthanasia' was first used in a medical context by Francis Bacon in 17th century that refers to an easy painless death.

Generally there are three forms of euthanasia: 1) Voluntary

Euthanasia 2) Non Voluntary Euthanasia and 3) Involuntary Euthanasia

Voluntary euthanasia is carried out by a doctor at the request of hopelessly ill patient or patient's legal representatives for the patient himself/herself. When a patient knows that there is no hope for his/her life due to incurable painful disease then he/she may ask his/her doctor to end his/her life. After consulting the family members and the members of health care team the doctor may kill the patient by administering lethal injection or overdose drugs or by withdrawing life-sustaining systems. The features of such type of euthanasia are 1) killing of a hopelessly ill patient for the sake of the patient. 2) It has been done at the request of the patient himself/herself.

Non-Voluntary euthanasia is applied to a handicapped infant who cannot choose between life and death. This type of euthanasia is also applied to a person who may not be handicapped but due to severe illness or due to unconscious state he fails to understand the distinction between life and death. Here mercy killing is not requested by the patient because of his/her unconscious state or too young to speak.

Involuntary euthanasia is a very rare form of euthanasia. Such type of euthanasia is applied to a person without taking his/her consent or against his/her will. It is known as involuntary as there is no scope to take consent of the patient. It is assumed that the patient would request for mercy killing if he/she would be able to get the scope to give consent about the matter.

From the standpoint of methods adopted for practicing euthanasia, it may be divided into active and passive. When a doctor brings about the death of a patient by administering lethal injection or gives overdose drugs it will be active euthanasia. When a doctor allows the patient to die by withdrawing life-sustaining treatment then it will be passive euthanasia. In case of active euthanasia the doctor actively brings about death, so it is an action. Here death is directly intended, so it is a case of killing. In case of passive euthanasia death occurs, so it is not an action but an omission. Withdrawing life-sustaining treatment from a patient is not killing but letting die. Here death is not directly intended but merely foreseen.

Many thinkers make distinction between active and passive euthanasia. For them to kill a patient by putting lethal injection or overdose

drugs is worse than allowing a patient to die by withdrawing life-sustaining system. But these are only two methods to relieve a patient from his/her painful state. A doctor can take any one of them to perform his responsibility. So from moral standpoint there is no distinction between active and passive euthanasia. Besides these two there are two more types of euthanasia.

- a) Indirect form: In this form of euthanasia a doctor may provide treatment to reduce pain of the patient. Such treatment may have side effects that may lead to speedy death of the patient. It is not a murder, but euthanasia as the intention of the doctor is not to kill but to relieve him/her from painful state.
- b) Assisted suicide: In this type of euthanasia a patient who is going to die needs help to kill himself/herself and ask for it. At his/her request the required drugs may be kept within his/her reach.

The motive behind all these forms of euthanasia is to save the patient from his/her unbearable pain.

The problem of euthanasia concerns with the notion of rights and liberty. The patient has right to live and right to die. He/she has also liberty to make decision whether to continue treatment or not. In case of non-voluntary euthanasia, the patient is incapable of making any rational judgment as he/she has no self-consciousness. But in case of voluntary euthanasia the patient is self-conscious rational being. So it is debatable whether mercy killing is morally justified or not. In this context, Peter Singer observes certain arguments against mercy killing. i) Naturally each self-conscious being has fear of death. ii) All self-conscious beings have will to live. They may not want to end their existence iii) All self-conscious beings have right to live of their own. iv) The life of self-conscious being is self-controlled. If we have any respect for this self-controlled life of man then killing will be not morally tenable. However, Peter Singer tries to refute these arguments from another standpoint. a) Voluntary euthanasia is applied only at the request or consent of the patient. b) Though man normally desires to live, due to unbearable painful disease compels man to desire death. In case mercy killing may be applied. c) One of the characteristics of rights is that man can sacrifice his rights at his own will. A hopelessly ill patient may sacrifice his/her right to live. Finally, self-controlled life of a self-conscious being indicates that he/she may decide

himself/herself whether he/she will live or die. So to respect the power of self-control of human being mercy killing may be supported. But before practicing euthanasia we are to look whether the life of patient is hopeful or not. Mercy killing may be supported only if there is no hope for life. If there is any chance of recovery from the disease extreme care should be taken to the patient. If there is any doubt regarding recovery mercy killing should not be carried out.

In the context of moral justification of euthanasia we are to consider certain criteria under which it can be applied:

1. There must be unbearable suffering, incurable disease and no hope for recovery on the part of the patient.
2. Request for euthanasia should be voluntary.
3. Euthanasia should be practiced only by a doctor as a last resort.

Regarding the legalization of euthanasia it may be said that voluntary euthanasia is legal in some countries of the world. Non-voluntary euthanasia is illegal in all countries. Involuntary euthanasia is usually considered as murder and it is also illegal in all countries.

The courts of Netherland legalized euthanasia on the following grounds:

- 1) It should be carried out by a physician
- 2) The patient has to explicitly request for euthanasia.
- 3) There must be unbearable condition on the part of the patient and no reasonable alternative to save the patient from his/her unbearable part of the doctor.
- 4) The physician has to consult with another independent professional who agrees with his judgment.

Legalization of euthanasia in India:

On March, 2018, the Supreme Court of India legalized passive euthanasia by means of withdrawal of life support to patient in a permanent vegetative state.

It is generally believed that a doctor as a human being should not take the life of other person, because he is not able to give life. But from the standpoint of mercy for the hopelessly ill patient euthanasia is not unjustified killing. Actually it helps those who have been suffering from incurable disease for a long time. Prolonging the life of a patient suffering

from incurable painful disease may cause suffering to the patient, patient's family and ultimately to the society. In such a situation euthanasia is morally justified and in expert hands of a skilled doctor it may be a means to relieve a severely ill patient from his/her unbearable painful life.

References:

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5. Ibid, p 365
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