



Philosophy

Explore—Journal of Research for UG and PG Students

ISSN 2278 – 0297 (Print)

ISSN 2278 – 6414 (Online)

© Patna Women's College, Patna, India

<http://www.patnawomenscollege.in/journal>

Euthanasia: An Ethical Perspective

- **Medha Bharti • Soni Kumari • Gita Kumari**
- **Ameeta Jaiswal**

Received : November 2011
Accepted : March 2012
Corresponding Author : Ameeta Jaiswal

Abstract : *The ethical issue of Euthanasia or the right to death is posing a challenge to the entire human civilization. Literally, the word "Euthanasia" refers to the painless or mercy killing of a person who is either terminally ill or is suffering from an incurable disease. Euthanasia primarily concerns whether death is a right of every individual or not and involves several moral themes like the intrinsic value of human life and dignity, human freedom, right of choice, etc. With the objective of discussing these moral questions involved in euthanasia, a survey was conducted through interface*

discussions and questionnaire with fifty persons belonging to different strata of society. In the course of investigation it was found that majority of people were of the opinion that euthanasia could be allowed in exceptional cases where there is no hope of recovery but under certain guarded conditions.

Key words – *Euthanasia, terminally ill, human freedom, intrinsic value.*

Medha Bharti

B.A. III year, Philosophy (Hons.), Session: 2009-2012,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Soni Kumari

B.A. III year, Philosophy (Hons.), Session: 2009-2012,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Gita Kumari

B.A. III year, Philosophy (Hons.), Session: 2009-2012,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Ameeta Jaiswal

Head, Department of Philosophy,
Patna Women's College, Bailey Road,
Patna – 800 001, Bihar, India
E-mail : ajphilpwc@gmail.com

Introduction :

Euthanasia or the ethical issue of 'Right to Death' is posing a challenge to the entire world. There is an extensive debate on this issue mainly to discuss whether it should be legalized or not and whether the doctors be legally allowed to deliver a person troubled by severe pain or suffering from incurable disease. Moreover, the subject of Euthanasia is being discussed openly. Some of the practices that were controversial five years ago in the care of the dying patient have become accepted and routine. For example, Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) orders, non-existent, only a few years ago, are now common. Many physicians and ethicists have come to the opinion that it is ethical to

withdraw nutrition and hydration from certain dying, hopelessly ill or permanently unconscious patients. The public and the courts have tended to accept this principle. The apex court of India, in its landmark judgement on 7th March, 2011, allowed the withdrawal of life support system from patients living in a vegetative state, allowing them to end a life of misery. Most important there has been an increase in sensitivity to the desires of dying patients on the part of doctors, philosophers and public.

Taking into account the above considerations, the issue of euthanasia becomes important for profound study. It demands serious contemplation especially from the ethical perspective. The issue of euthanasia centres around the question of permitting doctors in assisting terminally ill patients in dying and involves, several moral themes like the intrinsic value of human life and dignity, human freedom, the right of choice, care of human life, etc. Such questions, will be dealt in this paper within the context of euthanasia under the umbrella of applied ethics.

Meaning of Euthanasia: Euthanasia is derived from the Greek word “euthanatos” meaning “good death”. ‘Eu’ means well or good and ‘thanatos’ means death, Hence, Euthanasia refers to the practice of ending a life in a painless manner. According to the House of Lords select committee on Medical Ethics, the precise definition of euthanasia is ‘a deliberate intervention undertaken with the express intention of ending a life to relieve him of intractable suffering.’

Euthanasia is, thus, merciful killing of a terminally ill patient to relieve him from intractable pain or someone who is in an irreversible coma. It is commonly known as “mercy killing” in which the death of a terminally ill patient is hastened either by giving him a lethal injection or by withdrawing medical support that prolong his life.

Euthanasia and Suicide: Suicide in Latin means self killing or deliberate taking of one’s own life. Euthanasia or mercy killing is often confused with suicide. The problem of euthanasia and suicide has been approached from different angles. The cases of suicide are many and varying in as much as they are in origin to sentiments of exasperation, fury, frustration and revolution.

However, euthanasia or the right to die in case of terminal illness requires the assistance of doctors in most of the cases. According to some, Euthanasia which is physician assisted suicide (PAS) and suicide, though conceptually different, are species of the same genre. However, distinguishing euthanasia from suicide, **Lodha J. in NareshMarotraoSakhreVs. Union of India**, observed “**Suicide** by its very nature is an act of self killing or self-destruction, an act of terminating one’s own life without the aid or assistance of any other human agency.”

Euthanasia or mercy killing, on the other hand, means and implies the intervention of other human agency to end one’s life. The attempt at mercy killing is not covered by the provision of section 309. The two concepts are both factually and legally distinct.”

Ethical acceptability of euthanasia: There are two different view points concerning the ethical acceptability of euthanasia.

1. The conservationists argue that euthanasia is morally wrong because it is contrary to natural law or against the commandment of God. It violates God’s absolute dominion over human life. They appeal to the principle of sanctity of human life and say that the intentional termination of innocent human life is always immoral. Moreover, it leads to disrespect for the sanctity of human life. This view is represented by thinkers such as St. Thomas Aquinas, Gay William, Joseph V. Sullivan,

Joseph Fletcher, Tom L. Beauchamp and others.

2. The liberals maintain that euthanasia is morally acceptable for the reason that it provides an end to the horrible pain and suffering of terminally ill patients. They argue that it is cruel and inhuman to refuse the plea of a terminally ill patient that his or her life be mercifully and peacefully ended to avoid further suffering and indignity. Voluntary euthanasia is both rational and morally acceptable on the grounds of individual autonomy and rights of the terminally ill patients to determine their own destiny. The liberals claim that individuals should be free to do so as long as their actions do not harm others.

Objectives:

The study has been undertaken with the following objectives.

1. To discuss the moral questions involved in euthanasia.
2. To find out the views of people belonging to different strata regarding euthanasia.
3. To analyze the repercussions of euthanasia on the society.
4. To find a solution that shall be acceptable to all.

Hypothesis:

1. It is likely that some people may favour euthanasia to a vegetative state.
2. It is also likely that some people may be against euthanasia as it may be both morally and legally wrong according to them.

Methodology:

1. Area of study : Patna-Bihar.
2. Sample and sampling : 50 persons belonging to different strata of society like doctors, teachers, lawyers and common people.

3. Tools for data collection: interface discussion based on questionnaire
4. Data analysis : Analysis based on questionnaire was done and findings reported.

Keeping in mind the above moral questions a questionnaire was framed which was filled up by fifty people belonging to different strata of society. Interface discussions with them were also held. Their views are presented in the following findings.

Findings :

The respondents were of the age-group of 18-78 years. Their educational qualification varied from under graduation to post graduation and they belonged to different occupations such as advocates, doctors, teachers etc. In the course of investigation it was found that regarding the first question, "Do you think that a person should be granted the Right to die," 23 out of fifty respondents were of the opinion that right to death should be granted while 27 were not in favour of it. Regarding the second question, "Is this desire unnatural and abnormal," 13 respondents were of the opinion that this desire is unnatural and abnormal but 37 answered in the negative way. In reply to the third question, "If a person is terminally ill or is in coma should he be given death if he so desires to get relief from his pain and suffering," 35 respondents were of the opinion that if a person is terminally ill or in coma he should be given death if he so desires but 15 answered in the negative way. Regarding the fourth question, "Should life continue even in a vegetative state or should dignified death be given," 31 respondents were of the opinion that life should continue even in a vegetative state but 17 answered in the negative and 2 did not reply.

In reply to the fifth question, "If a terminally ill patient is unconscious should the relatives of the patient take decision on his/her behalf," 22

respondents were of the opinion that if a terminally ill patient is unconscious then the relatives of the patient can take decision on his/her behalf but 28 answered negatively. Regarding the sixth question, "If the doctors are of the opinion that there is no hope of patient's recovery then should Euthanasia be granted," 37 respondents were of the opinion that if there is no hope of patients recovery, then Euthanasia should be granted but 13 answered in the negative way. In reply to the seventh question, "Do you think the age of a terminally ill patient matters while deciding mercy killing," 17 respondents were of the opinion that the age of a terminally ill patient matters but 33 were against this opinion. In reply to the eighth question that sex of a person is an important determinant while deciding for Euthanasia, 44 respondents disagreed that sex is an important factor for determining euthanasia but 6 of them accepted this. Responding to the ninth question, "If a child is born with severe deformities and disabilities should he be given death if his parents demand" 15 accepted that child birth with severe deformities should be given euthanasia but 35 respondents avoided this.

In response to the tenth question, "Is Euthanasia ethical or morally right." 18 respondents accepted that euthanasia is ethically and morally right while 32 did not accept it. Regarding eleventh question "Does Indian culture and tradition favour Euthanasia" 07 respondents answered in the affirmative but 43 answered in the negative. In reply to the twelfth question, 'Do you think that Right to Death has the same importance as right to life "18 respondents gave equal importance to both, but 32 respondents were against this. In reply to the thirteenth question 'should the person be given the right to choose the method of death for oneself' 14 respondents agreed but 36 did not. Regarding the fourteenth question "If the patient continuously

insists for mercy killing should the doctor yield to his demand." 29 respondents agreed to fulfill the demand of mercy killing, but 21 did not agree. In response to the fifteenth question "Do you think this decision depends on several factors like emotional, social, economic and medical" 47 respondents accepted that this decision depends on several factors like emotional, social, economic and medical but it was not accepted by 03 of them. Responding to the sixteenth question "should euthanasia be legalized" 17 respondents insisted on legalizing euthanasia but 33 did not. Regarding the seventeenth question "Is there any possibility of misuse if the right to death" is legalised, 48 respondents accepted the possibility of misuse after its legalization but 02 did not. In reply to the eighteenth question "should the patients be allowed to die every moment with their illness" 44 respondents did not support the view to allow patients to die every moment with the illness but 06 respondents had a negative opinion. Regarding the nineteenth question "do you think the society will benefit in any way if such a patient is allowed to continue with his life" 21 respondents answered affirmatively but 29 respondents were against this view. Regarding the twentieth question "Is Euthanasia the need of the hour," 23 respondents affirmed that euthanasia is the need of the hour but 27 did not agree.

Conclusion and Suggestions :

- (i) For a terminally ill patient there are no aspirations and goals in life at that stage, except for a peaceful and dignified death. Just as every person desires to have a happy and pleasant life, so also he/she desires an easy and dignified death.
- (ii) Human life is intrinsically valuable, no doubt, but when pain and the quality of life becomes unbearable, willful death can be condoned.

- (iii) Euthanasia could be allowed, keeping in mind the following considerations:-
- The request must be made entirely of the patient's own free will and not under pressure from others.
 - The patient must be terminally ill, he must be experiencing unbearable pain and suffering. Also, there should be no hope of recovery.
 - He must be given alternatives to euthanasia and adequate time to consider these alternatives.
 - Doctors must consult a team of doctors on the issue of euthanasia.
- (iv) Since the decision is determined by various factors, it has to be carried out very carefully; otherwise the Right to Die may become an expectation and a duty to Die. Hence, the intention of those taking the decision is to be taken into consideration.
- (v) There should be restrictions on physician assisted suicide or active euthanasia. There should be a proper statute to control and restrict this misuse.
- (vi) There should be safeguards that minimize abuse but not prove so overtly restrictive that suffering patients cannot find an escape.
- (vii) Government should make provisions for the health insurance of its citizens, especially for the poor and the economically deprived ones.

References :

- Baird, Robert M. & Rosenbaum Stuart E. (1989). Euthanasia, **The Moral Issue**, Prometheus Books, Buffalo, New York.
- Beauchamp, Tom, ed. (1996). **Intending Death** (Englewood, cliffs, N.J. Prentice-Hall).
- Biggar, Nigel. (2004). **Aiming to kill** - The Ethics of suicide and Euthanasia, The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, Ohio.
- Downing, A.B. (ed.) (1969). **Euthanasia and the Right to Death**, Nash, Los Angeles.
- Gorsuch, Neil M. (2006). **The future of Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia**, Princeton University Press, U.S.A.

Website :

- Legality of Euthanasia. Accessed at www.wikipedia.org
- Euthanasia. Accessed at www.wikipedia.org
- Risk of misusing euthanasia large : Experts. Accessed at www.timesofindia.com
- Health Infrastructure. Accessed at www.shsbihar.org
- Should India allow Euthanasia ? Accessed at www.timesofindia.com