



Study about Euthanasia, Historical background and reason of Euthanasia

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The word ‘Euthanasia’ is a derivative from the Greek words ‘eu’ and ‘thanotos’ which literally mean “good death”. It is otherwise described as mercy killing. The death of a terminally ill patient is accelerated through active or passive means in order to relieve such patient of pain or suffering. It appears that the word was used in the

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17th Century by Francis Bacon to refer to an easy, painless and happy death for which it was the physician’s duty and responsibility to alleviate the physical suffering of the body of the patient. The House of Lords Select Committee on ‘Medical Ethics’ in England defined Euthanasia as “a deliberate intervention undertaken with the express intention of ending a life to relieve intractable suffering”. The European Association of Palliative Care (EPAC) Ethics Task Force, in a discussion on

Euthanasia in 2003, clarified that “medicalised killing of a person without the person’s consent, whether non-voluntary (where the person is unable to consent) or involuntary (against the person’s will) is not euthanasia: it is a murder. Hence, euthanasia can be only voluntary”.

Thus it amounts to killing a person by a positive act in order to end suffering of a person in a state of terminal illness. It is considered to be a crime all over the world (irrespective of the will of the patient) except where permitted by legislation, as observed earlier by the Supreme Court. In India too, active euthanasia is illegal and a crime under Section 302 or 304 of the IPC.

Euthanasia is mainly associated with people with terminal illness or who have become incapacitated and don’t want to go through the rest of their life suffering. A severely handicapped or terminally ill person supposed to have the right to choose between life and death. This right of a patient with terminal illness can not be equated with an able bodied, sane person’s



right. Euthanasia is a controversial issue which encompasses the morals, values and beliefs of our society.

Reasons for Euthanasia

Euthanasia is the intentional death caused by act or omission of a dependent human being for his or her alleged benefit. There are certain reasons behind advocating euthanasia. People under circumstances justify its use. There are various reasons for euthanasia. Some of them are:

- (a) Unbearable pain.
- (b) Demand of "right to commit suicide"
- (c) Should people be forced to stay alive?

Historical background of euthanasia

Well known historian N.D.A. Kemp talks about euthanasia's origin. He says that the contemporary debate on euthanasia stated in 1870. The topic was discussed and practiced long before that. Euthanasia was practiced in Ancient Greece and Rome: on the island of Kea, hemlock a poisonous plant was in use as a means for quickening death, a technique also followed in Marseilles. The Greek philosophers Socrates and Plato supported euthanasia while Hippocrates disapproved it. He was against such practice which would lead to death of a person.

Euthanasia is not accepted in Judaism and Christian traditions. While criticizing the practice Thomas Aquinas says that it is against man's survival instinct. Mixed opinions on the matter demonstrate discord between arguing scholars. Protestantism supported suicide and euthanasia while it was an accepted practice during the Age of Enlightenment. Every culture identifies and recognizes these terms from different approaches. Sometimes they are equated to sins, while on some instances they are recognized as acts of valor.

In early 19th century this word came to be used in the sense of speeding up the process of dying and the destruction of so-called useless lives and today it is defined as deliberately ending the life of a person suffering from an incurable disease.



Some are supportive of right to die. The argument against euthanasia states that it is against ethical, moral and legal norms of our culture. All forms of euthanasia are considered homicide. It is difficult to show distinction between homicides and murder in complex cases. Ending one's life is not recognized as an abnormal practice in Ancient India. Hindu mythology describes the suicide by Lord Rama as Jal Samadhi. In the times of Lord Buddha it was called Maharparinirvaan. Similar was the case of Lord Mahaveer. Swatantraveer Savarkar and Acharya Vinoba Bhave renounced their lives resorting to Prayopavesa. It literally means resolving to die through fasting. Mahatma Gandhi also supported the idea of willful death. Scholars like these approved death by peaceful means. Religions like Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism recognize willful death. The concept has philosophical background. It talks about an endless circle of life and death and attaining salvation. The notion of ending the life after the purpose of the birth is fulfilled was accepted by these schools of thought. Hindu saint Dnyaneshwar concluded his mortal life after his work was over.

Thus, trace of right to die existed in earlier times. The western religion has always viewed euthanasia as dishonest exercise of divine privilege. Right from 5th century B.C. it has been the belief of Christians that every human owes his existence to the persons who have graciously brought him or her into this world. Birth and death are part of the process of life which God has created. So, humans should respect them and, therefore, no human being has the authority to choose the time and manner of his death. Islam does not accept any kind of justification for the killing of person and thus euthanasia and suicide are prohibited in Islam.

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