

THE ETHICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PRAXIS OF EUTHANASIA: A SOCIO-CULTURAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL ARGUMENT FOR “LIFE-SUPPORT”

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Abstract

The sanctity of life has remained a sustained debate amid varied arguments for and against the absolute right to life as discussed in applied ethics, medical ethics, and other sociological discourses. Like abortion and suicide, so deliberated when taking about of the sacredness of life, euthanasia appears to generate the most of concerns among scholars probably because it does not just require the consent of the patient, but also involves the participating engagements of a medical practitioner and those of the families of the patient, which gives it a "Tripod of consents". To engage the various arguments for and against, legality or illegality of its praxis, this paper is aimed at using philosophical analysis and expository method to clarify terms and concepts related to euthanasia. The study posits that euthanasia is not just illegal owing to the argument in favor of protecting the sacredness of life, but also a brand of ethical and psychological egoism aimed at satisfying patients' self-interest and happiness, making it egoistical utilitarianism as popularized by Matthew McConaughy, which combines self-interest and maximization of overall good to benefit the individual.

Keywords: Euthanasia, right to life, incurable, ethical egoism, psychological egoism.

Introduction

The right to life is one of the core aspects of fundamental human rights. The right to life is a natural right because fundamental rights are founded on it. The right to life is recognized in various countries' constitution. In section 33 (1) of the Nigerian constitution; and international laws such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) Article (3), the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Section (6), American Convention on Human Rights Article (4), all provide that everyone has the right to live his life, and that no one shall be deprived of his life. This right entails that no one including oneself shall deprive one of his life intentionally. The intentional deprivation, taking of life could come either in form of murder which is

the killing of someone or suicide which is the killing of oneself or euthanasia which is assisted death or mercy killing. These three aspects or means of termination of life are some of the controversial issues in medical ethics, applied ethics and bioethics. This paper is divided into five sections: the concept of euthanasia, the arguments for euthanasia, the arguments against euthanasia, the legality of euthanasia and the view that euthanasia is a brand of egoism.

Euthanasia and its practices

The issue of euthanasia has been a very controversial and sensitive issue of debate in medical ethics, applied ethics and bioethics reason, because of its connections with series of moral, religious, cultural and humanistic implications. A ten years old boy was crushed by a lorry while returning from an errand. He was disfigured and the brain was damaged; and upon medical diagnosis and examinations, medical expert declared his case hopeless. But the medical expert advised the parents to lean on fate to decide. Similarly, a young adult of twenty-two (22) years old has been without his senses from birth due to brain damage. He works naked at home assisted to the rest room otherwise litters everywhere with faeces; all medical care and faith clinics have not yielded any positive results. An acquaintance of the mother suggested an assisted death, but the mother rejected the advice.

Euthanasia is of Greek root derived from the words "Eu" meaning good and "Thanatos" meaning death. (Bangbose, 2004, 48). Euthanasia literally means good death (Barbara, 1999, 124) or mercy killing. Euthanasia is the willful causing of the death of a patient either by using causing death drug/device or withdrawal/omission of treatment from a patient so as to quicken his/her death. It is the painless quickening to death of patients of incurable terminal illness with their consent (Ndubuisi, 1998 32).

The practice of euthanasia is mainly opted for in a situation where the patient leaves only with the assistance of a life support machine. Euthanasia is the direct intentional purposeful taking of life of a patient who may want this kind of immediate death as a way out of his medical impasse (Adaigbo, 1988, 2). Euthanasia is parochially a means to an end. British House of Lords' Selected committee on Medical Ethics defines euthanasia as a deliberate intentional undertaken with the express intention offending a life to relieve an intractable suffering. (Kurma et al, 2021, 96).

In the analysis of euthanasia, two of each broad types are pointed out which are positive euthanasia and negative euthanasia. On the one hand, positive euthanasia is mercy killing because the intention here is the death of the patient (Ndubuisi, 1999, 32). Positive or active euthanasia (mercy killing) are cases in which we bring about death by our actions and instrument (Barbara, 1998, 125) through the application of drugs and

other death inducing devices. On the other hand, negative euthanasia is the omission or withdrawal of treatment which could lead to the termination of life that otherwise could have been saved (Ndubuisi, 1999, 32). Negative or passive euthanasia could be conducted by the patient (voluntary euthanasia) or others (involuntary euthanasia) who made decide to discontinue the use of life prolonging device like respirator because the chances of the treatment helping the person is slim (Barbara, 1998, 126).

In traditional African society among the Anioma ethnic group or the Igbos west of the Niger, there is a metaphysical, superstitious and trado-medical belief and practice of using life prolonging objects and or substance made of herbs; and with metaphysical and mystical powers (IDAYI), and among the Ika's known as IDEHI. The idayi is kept at the top corner in a village kitchen, and it is believed that the beneficiary or bearer of the idayi will not die except the object is brought down, or destroyed. The life of the bearer is sustained no matter his/her age or degree or nature of the sickness. But when the bearer becomes extremely old or sick and death refuses to come, the extremely aged or patient direct his/her children and relatives to bring the Idayi down. If the bearer is too sick or old to talk, the children or relatives adopt both physical and metaphysical methodologies to the search for it. Once this idayi is brought down, such patient gradually gives up the ghost. This culture phenomenon is a trado- cultural euthanasia for its believers.

The idayi practice of the Anioma ethnic group or the Igbos west of the Niger in Nigeria is likened to the mystical trap practice of the Shona people of Zimbabwe. Some communities among them were engaged in the ritual practice that involves setting up of a riva (mystical trap) at a hidden place on a mountain. The person involved would remain alive as long as the trap remains alive as long as the trap remains active. However, when the bearer becomes too old, they would ask their Vazu Kuru (nephew) to go and trigger the trap, only then would they die. (Mengen and Chitando, 2013,134).

Arguments that support for Euthanasia

Pro-life adherents or advocates consider the sanctity of life and adopts every legal frame work of both national and international standards to support their positions. Such legal frameworks include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 1948 and African Charter on Human and People's Right 1981. As obtainable in the world of opinions, the advocates of euthanasia or Self-murder argue that the individual is the owner of his body and should be allowed to do what he wants to do with it, and that it is wrong to allow individuals to live more than they want to live. This is viewed as an infringement on their personal freedom and human rights. The proponents of Euthanasia, argue that life of pain is not worth living and added that instead of a patient to be in permanent pain, that he should be allowed to end his agony. This is necessary if the pain is beyond what human can bear. It forgets here that pain is relative, and this

become one of the weaknesses of such position. One of the major reason for euthanasia is to end life and avoid needless pain, suffering and argument is predicated on medical reasons that euthanasia reduces suffering and pain caused by incurable diseases that is terminal. During famine, families would choose to starve those advanced in age in order to save the children. In war prone periods, members of families would run away from their families. This school of thought also argues that beside pains, other things are part of worthwhile life such as the ability to think and act. According to Hoche and Binding as cited by (Vecchnio, et al, 2021, 187), the theory of euthanasia is a remedy to the suffering patients and the social and economic cost of diseases. This position supports euthanasia on the basis of social stigma and economic wastage associated with prolonged sickness.

Arguments Against Euthanasia

The idea and practice of euthanasia which is the deliberate and intentioned killing of a prolonged sick person whose hope of survival is slim, has been supported by some scholars on the ground that it ends permanent pain and agony on the patient, but it cannot be said that it is a permissible practice. The practice of euthanasia is a violation of natural goal of survival. Human beings are naturally inclined to protecting life and runs away from immediate dangers and applied proactive measure against future dangers against human life. When he takes his life, he has acted against nature. It is a violent attack on nature with regards to life, “because all the processes of nature are bent towards the end of bodily survival (Gray, Williams, 2013, 137). When euthanasia is adopted as an instrument or violence against our nature, it places out natural dignity in jeopardy

Euthanasia violates the principle of divine will as God created man and gave him life when he breathed into his nostril and he became a living soul. God has natural authority and divine control over life and death. Euthanasia contradicts the divine principle that “God is the sole creator of life and sovereign authority over life and death (Mangena and Chitando, 2013, 128).

From African cultural perspective, euthanasia is seen as a harm against oneself and the human community that such persons belong, because the community is an cluster of individual. The Anioma ethnic group or the Igbos west of the Niger through their belief and practice of Idayi; and the Shona people of Zimbabwe through their practice of mystical trap practice a kind of passive euthanasia; yet some members of the community still they frown at it because, it is against natural right to life. According to Mengano & Chitando 2013), culturally, the Shona people of Zimbabwe oppose euthanasia, and it is captured in Shona proverbs (Tsumo), Idioms (Madimikira) and folktales (Ngano). The opposition of euthanasia by the Shona People on cultural ground is in line with Thomas Aquinas' position against suicide and euthanasia built upon Aristotelian view, that every

part as such is of the whole. Now everyman is part of the community; and so, as such is the community. Hence, in the case that he kills himself, he causes injury to the community (Aristotle, 1985, 10). Some advocates of euthanasia argue that a life that is no longer worth living because of prolonged illness thereby rendering the patient passive in his/her responsibilities, must be taken care off by the strong.

The Legality of Euthanasia

The issue of the legality or otherwise of euthanasia has been another subject of discussion in addressing this phenomenon especially as the legality of any action does not supports it as being morally right of morally wrong. The Nigerian law does not support euthanasia but in respect of assisted dying / suicide, the position of law is objectively clear. Section 326(3) of Criminal code provides that anyone that terminates patient's life has committed murder and thus be treated as a murderer. This is captured by (Obi, 2024, 81), that “who aids another in killing himself is guilty of felony and is liable to imprisonment of life. Nevertheless, in Nigerian law, euthanasia is not clearly provided for but some judicial precedence at the apex court in Nigeria tends to give unclear suggestions, not written down to favor passive euthanasia with subtle and mild legal backing. In discussing the legality or otherwise of euthanasia in Nigeria, it is necessary to make reference to the Supreme court decision in medical and Dental Practitioners Disciplinary tribunal vs John Nicholas Okonkwo. In that case, the supreme court per Ayoola JSC held among other things that: “If a competent adult patient exercising his right to life rejects life-saving treatment on religious ground and chooses a path that may ultimately lead to his death, in the absence of judicial intervention overriding the patient decisions, what meaningful option is the practitioner left with, other, perhaps than to give the patient the comfort (Ayoola as cited by Obi, 2014, 80); and experiencing permanent pain, agony and anguish, that such life should be terminated via mercy killing. But contrary to this view, pro-life advocates argue strongly against such position and buttressed it with a proverbial saying in Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria that Mkpomkpo Ndu Ka Onwu Mma, which literally interpreted as worst health is better than death (Okonkwo is cited by Obi, 2014,81). It must be noted that whether euthanasia is active or passive, backed by legislation or not, it is an attempt to take human life; and it is morally impermissible, contravenes natural process of death and totals challenging God's will. The act though could be informed by the desire to terminate an unbearable pain on the desired patient whose illness is hopeless. This has made sole advocates of euthanasia to seek for its legalization

Currently in Australia, Western Australian Tasmanian and Southern Parliaments have introduced bills related to active or voluntary euthanasia (Zakaria, 2024, 23). Other countries like the Netherlands, Belgium, Canada, Luxemburg, Colombia have legalized euthanasia even before Australia in 2019. The west Australian Bill (2010) defines euthanasia as a gentle and peaceful death achieved through the deliberate

administration of a recognized drug to an applicant by that applicant's medical practitioner in concentration that will and intended to cause the death of the applicant, where the applicant knows and intends that what is done or omitted to be done will cause his or her death. This definition by the Bill captures the definition of euthanasia as the termination of life by physicians at the express will of the patient. The broad based definition of euthanasia by West-Australian Bill provides that for mercy killing to be termed euthanasia, it must contain three elements, namely; a request from the patient, conducted by a physician and administered by a drug (Zakaria, 2025, 24). The element of the patient's consent is a vital part of mercy killing. If it is conducted by a physician with the consent of the patient's family without his (Patient's) consent, it will amount to homicide. Euthanasia conducted on a patient can only be voluntary if the patient is an adult, with his right state of mind and facing incurable diseases; and it is conducted in the presence of his relations.

The legality question on euthanasia is that they may not be any legislation to eliminate all kind of abuse (Smith, 2007, 57), otherwise, the practice would be taken for granted. It is only when there is provision for the elimination of the abuse of legislation of euthanasia that the practice of mercy killing can be resorted to after all other remedies have been exhausted.

Euthanasia and Egoism

This section underscores the “**big why**” in the practice of euthanasia, the sincerity, the lies, the mischiefs, and all about it. Hence, egoism is best used to describe the act. Egoism is an ethical concept that implies a kind of self-interest-based ethics. As an ethical theory, egoism labels the involvement of a moral agent in thoughts and actions that suits the psychological state. This implies the selfish nature of man even in the practice of euthanasia. This explains essentially selfishness in the decision to opt for death, for any reason, as its end finally remains utilitarian. Hobbes maintains that man is naturally an egoist and a hedonist being. (Idike, 2001, 77). Naturally, everyone tries to do what brings satisfaction to him/her. Even in helping others, the self-satisfaction of the benefactor is primary while the satisfaction of the beneficiary is secondary. Egoism in this context is from the perspective of psychological egoism and ethical egoism. Psychological egoism is the view that every voluntary act emerges from agent's self-interest; while ethical egoism holds that if an agent is morally right, the right is because it maximizes the agent's self-interest (Tilley, 2002, 1). The self-interest seeking nature of man comprises psychological and ethical version of egoism because psychological egoism which holds that every intentional act of a moral agent (man) emanates from his self-interest while ethical egoism on the other hand holds that an action is morally right to an agent (man) if it maximizes his self-satisfaction.

The above analysis explains that psychological egoism implies ethical egoism; and both

revolve round the moral agent (man). They are deeply rooted in self-satisfaction motive in any action carried out by a moral agent. The ethical issue here is: does this egoistic nature of moral agent extends to his decision to die? When a moral agent decides to terminate his life through assisted suicide, it is obvious that he has decided to act out of self-interest. The self-interest consideration of moral agent opting for euthanasia is because he believes that, that is his best interest in that situation. He also opts for euthanasia because his condition is no longer giving him happiness. Happiness is one noticeable area of human existence where moral agent seeks self-satisfaction. Man pursues his personal happiness more than he seeks for the happiness of others. This informs the decision of a patient to opt for euthanasia the moment he knows that he is not likely to recover from the terminal sickness and that his happiness has eroded him.

Conclusion

The notion of the sacredness and sanctity of life is unequivocally not debatable given the accepted understanding that human life is sacred. This is true from the major discourses on human life namely abortion, suicide and euthanasia, as they are connected and concerned with the right to life, its sacredness and sanctity. At this time, in medical ethics, applied ethics, bioethics and sociological scholarship, euthanasia appears to be the most widely discussed among the three concepts probably because it involves the consent of the patient, the medical practitioner and the family of the patient. This could be aptly described as "tripod of consents".

On the one hand, euthanasia is viewed by its advocates as a means of ending unbearable pain in a terminally ill patient, exercise of right to life and a way of avoiding waste of financial resource on someone that illness has rendered unproductive. On the other hand, pro-life scholars hold that euthanasia is a violation of natural goal of survival and the outright interruption of the divine will, arguing that God created man and gave him life when He breathed on him and he became a living soul. Hence, it was contended by this paper following objectivity of natural principles that euthanasia is viewed in African culture as harm to oneself and the entire society. This, is supported too by Thomas Aquinas view following the Aristotelian, that everyman is part of the society, and a member of the whole.

The work concludes that despite the legality of euthanasia in some countries based on their relative interests, that euthanasia should not be accepted because, the act is aimed to the selfish fulfillment of the interest and happiness of either the patient, the patient and their doctors, or the family of the patient and not for the society, thus, it is best described as egoistical utilitarianism as popularized by Matthew McConaughey, which combines self interest and maximization of overall good to benefit the individual.

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