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Euthanasia: Whose Right to Die?

Death defines the end of life. It exists as the terminating point of what we called life but no scientific study can ever explain what awaits after death. On one hand, life began as a mystery for religious believers but on the other, medical professionals have a concrete explanation that life or human existence started by the combination of two different cells from two different individuals. No matter how we believe life originated, its value is priceless especially when life is young. However, when life starts to go down from its peak and starts to deteriorate, some would call it a misery. They say that one’s life is a continuous cycle that goes around like a wheel. This may be true in some cases but others may face a dilemma when their wheel gets stuck at the bottom as if something is holding it. When this time comes and when the unimaginable options are only death or a life full of suffering, who should decide to choose life? Whose right is it to decide to die? Should the entitlement of the right to die be at the sole discretion of the bearer of that life?

Disagreement on euthanasia started many years ago and has continued through the generations. According to the article, “Introduction to Euthanasia” by Margaret Haerens on Opposing viewpoints, euthanasia was widely used during the ancient cultures particularly by the Romans and Greeks. The author noted in the article that Romans and Greeks drank lethal poisons when they became incapacitated due to injuries, faced with life-limiting illnesses or unbearable pain. On the other hand, Aristotle and Hippocrates, a philosopher and the latter a physician, were the two great oppositions of euthanasia during that time says the article. Aristotle believed that it was a cowardly death and an offense against the state while Hippocrates vowed “to do no harm” to any of his patients. These two anti-arguments are still being used to this very day in many political debates discussing the legalization of euthanasia although some public viewpoints on this issue have changed as the population ages and is actually confronted with these choices, life or death.

Euthanasia is a word that originates from Greek which means “a good death”. It is sometimes called mercy killing and others would call it assisted suicide where death is initiated by a third party. The medical definition of this term found in a dictionary, Merriam-Webster, denotes that it is the act or practice of causing or permitting death of hopelessly sick or injured individuals in a relatively painless way for reasons of mercy. Even though ancient Greeks called it “a good death” or even if there is mercy behind it, conservatives and some religious groups call it unethical due to the fact that life is sacred to them and they view sufferings as the counterpart of sins and a way for an individual to correct his misdeeds. On the other hand, liberals defined it as a way to show compassion to helpless individuals who are experiencing the unbearable pain where death is only the cure. Further definitions can be found in many sources and both sides can be equally correct depending on how an individual analyzes and accepts or denies the concepts of euthanasia.

Laws governing euthanasia vary widely from country to country where it has been legalized and particularly concerning how it is administered; active euthanasia where something is given to the patient to die or passive euthanasia where they let the terminally ill patient die without any health intervention. As of October 2015, European countries such as Netherlands, Belgium, Ireland, and Luxembourg and Columbia in South America had legalized human euthanasia according to Wikipedia. Furthermore, assisted suicide on one hand is fully implemented in countries like Switzerland, Germany, Japan, Albania, Canada (as of Feb 2015, euthanasia/assisted suicide has been approved by Canada’s Supreme Court pending drafting the laws and policies for its implementation) and some US States like Washington, Oregon, Vermont, New Mexico, Montana and California (effective January 1, 2016). Whether it is an assisted suicide or euthanasia (passive or active), the common denominator of those countries that have legalized it is that the patient is at his end-of-life stage with unbearable pain and most importantly gave consent. On the other hand, in conservative countries like the Philippines, euthanasia is forbidden and has a strong opposition for any legislation due to the active presence of the catholic church in this country. In contrast to the Philippines, India and Israel where religions are also strong but where no laws on euthanasia exist, passive euthanasia has not been criminalized as long as certain conditions are met like the patient is in a permanent vegetative state or the patient asks for it.

According to research conducted last 22 October 2015 by Statistics Brain Research Institute, 86% of public support euthanasia for patients who are in the final stage of their life due to incurable diseases and have no means of recovery or for patients on life support. In the same study, 54% of medical practitioners are in favor of giving their patients the right to die as the last medical option. In US alone, more Americans who participated in this study gave their approval for euthanasia at 42% while only 37% opposed it and the remaining 22% were unsure. According to this data alone, understanding the real issue of euthanasia is becoming clearer to most individuals and they seem to be starting to accept it more. On the other hand, the right to demand death is still a big issue for countries that do not recognize and legislate for euthanasia.

As death is irreversible, people would like to preserve the life of their loved ones no matter the cost. Individuals who oppose euthanasia always tend to argue the same principle as above or the one they call the value of life. They question the morality on how to justify the reason to end the life of one person. According to United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), an official organization of active and retired members of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, life is sacred regardless of its quality and it is a first gift from the Creator. Furthermore, life to them is the most fundamental element of human dignity and by hastening or facilitating death in order to end suffering is not preserving that dignity but is instead devaluing life with all its meaning. Christian moral traditions also consider that euthanasia violates one of the ten commandments of God, thou shall not kill. Physicians assisting suicide or permitting his patient to die is considered as medical murder by Christian teachings even though it is an obligation or duty to help patients overcome pain caused by any incurable illnesses. In addition, euthanasia is viewed also as a false compassion by the fact that you are inflicting death and not merely relieving any suffering of the patient. Opponents of euthanasia always view the negative impact on morality or ethics based on beliefs rather than the reality. What if life itself is no longer valued by the bearer and by choice that person asks to die, would that be considered immoral?

Despite strong opposition from religious societies, many liberals support euthanasia on grounds like right to life. They believe that the right to life includes the right to die or the freedom to choose how and when they want to end their life as long as it does not violate others rights. On the other hand, while Catholics value life as a gift from God, pro-euthanasians question if life still has value if it is full of pain and suffering and you can no longer function. “Is it better to go quickly not knowing the end is near or is it better to have extra time on earth but you and your family may have to endure an end full of potential suffering?”, asks by Marion Leary an Assistant Director for Center for Resuscitation Science and a blogger for Huffington Post. Many who believe in euthanasia also think that it may preserve human dignity by giving the patient the freedom to decide for himself. Alleviating the suffering and letting someone die in peace is more humane than keeping someone alive in pain and seeing himself deteriorate and degrading his remaining dignity as human being.

No matter what stand on euthanasia every individual has, the bottom line question is still whose right is it to die. Any state has the right or indeed the obligation to protect its people concerning public matters as governed by their constitution but that should not include the personal decisions of its citizens. The right to choose what an individual must believe in should not be dictated by any religious organizations or religious teachings should not interfere one’s judgement in making a decision. The freedom to choose what is appropriate for oneself is the right of that person so long as it does not affect the right of other individuals. Therefore, the right to die, to choose how and when to end life when the true meaning of life no longer really exists, must be freely in the sole discretion of the bearer of life.

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