

EUTHANASIA

a study by Ken Chant

“Ungodly people say, ‘Let us rid ourselves of the elderly. Let might be right! So away with those who are feeble, for they are good for nothing!’” (Wisdom 2:10-11)

Euthanasia is the **intentional** ending of the life of a dependent human being, whether by a direct act or by omission of care, especially when this is done on compassionate grounds. The word comes from Greek, and means “a good death”.

There are two kinds of euthanasia – *active* and *passive*. The first must be rejected; the other seems to be more in agreement with Christian ethics –

(A) ACTIVE

Active euthanasia describes the deliberate termination of someone’s life, usually by a physician and usually on the ground that the person is –

(1) ***suffering intolerable pain***

- But pain is an inescapable part of both life and death, and while there is deep mystery here, we cannot deny the place that pain has in the larger purposes of God.
- We are certainly entitled to take what measures we can to alleviate pain, but destroying life altogether goes beyond any divine mandate.
- Pain has been sanctified by the immense suffering of Jesus, whose voluntary embrace of anguish precludes us from accusing God of unfeeling tyranny.

(2) no longer capable of enjoying a meaningful life

- Several arguments are commonly raised –

“The comatose victim is no longer truly human; he is, in effect, ‘dead’ already.” But this equates human identity with a particular level of visible awareness; yet we have many levels of consciousness, and some of those that are most hidden are closer to the wellsprings of our being.

“To be truly alive, one must be self-supporting; to be wholly dependent upon others is to strip life of all worth.” But are we not all largely dependent upon each other, from the day of our birth onwards? Even the Son of God was willing to make himself utterly dependent upon a lowly maiden.

“Life is not worth living when one has lost all control over oneself and one’s destiny.” But human dignity does not depend upon freedom of choice (cp. Jn 21:18-19).

In the end, we simply cannot allow the proposition that *“there is a life that has become unworthy of being lived,”* for while the value of life may not be absolute, it is nonetheless so high that it is not seriously diminished by the mere loss of certain bodily and mental functions.

- So even though the main aim in active euthanasia is the end of the patient’s suffering through his/her death, we still cannot allow that it is acceptable for physicians to assist people to die even if their death is inevitable and their future holds irremediable suffering.
- There is always something that can be done to ease pain even if it cannot be altogether removed.

No matter how the act is camouflaged, euthanasia remains a violation of the Sixth Commandment – *“Thou shalt not kill!”* It is also a violation of the Hippocratic Oath, which has undergirded medical ethics for more than twenty-four centuries and which says in part – *“To please no one will I prescribe a deadly drug nor give advice which may cause his death.”*

- The breath of life is the gift of God; the prerogative of withdrawing it belongs solely in the divine hand (Ge 9:5-6; Ec 12:7).

A sufferer who consents to being put to death violates the ethical prohibition against suicide. On this matter, note –

(a) There is no specific prohibition of suicide in the Bible, and there have been and are several cultures in which suicide has been approved.

(b) Nonetheless, suicide is indicted by the biblical doctrine that we are both created and redeemed by God, hence we are "*not our own, but are bought with a price.*" (1 Co 6:20; 7:23)

- Suicide becomes morally an act of *lese majesty*, an injury done to the King, an offence against his sovereignty, an act of treason.
- Notice that there is no example of either active euthanasia nor of suicide in the Bible, not even where either act might have seemed desirable; e.g. Job; and Jesus (who could easily have escaped the cross, but refused even a pain-diminishing drug, Mt 27:34 etc.).
- So we cannot allow that anyone has an inherent right to choose their own moment of death, nor the right to deliberately end a life that is still viable.

(c) However, as I have said, we are fully entitled to take whatever action we can to relieve pain as much as possible (cp. Pr 31:6; 17:22).

(B) PASSIVE

Passive euthanasia means that the dying are offered whatever comfort and relief is available while allowing death to occur naturally. This may include a decision not to use extraordinary means to prolong the life of the body when there is irrefutable evidence that biological death is imminent. Such a decision, however, should be the prerogative of the patient and or his immediate family.

(1) There is an undoubted peril here; but the crossover is at the point where actions to prolong life become instead a protraction of death.

- To refrain from extending the trauma of *death* is not a violation of the Hippocratic Oath; but avoidance of the trauma of *dying* conforms neither to the Oath nor to biblical morality.
- There is plainly a difference between truly extending life against holding back an inevitable and imminent death.

(2) Our goal should therefore be to help people to die with as much peace, grace, and dignity as the circumstances permit; that is, as much as possible to ease the pain of dying, but not to hasten death itself. Four rules could be suggested –

- strive first to preserve and prolong life
- prevent or ease pain as much as possible
- do nothing to deliberately shorten viable life
- do not prolong a death that has naturally begun.

(3) Death is an essential part of human experience; its mystery is an important component of our identity and of the ultimate purpose of God for our lives.

(4) Note that under our existing common law, anyone has the right to refuse any and all medical treatment.

- The main problem arises when a sufferer becomes mentally incompetent to express his or her will.
- Therefore it would seem wise to make prior arrangements, while still in good health, to put the decision into the hands of a trusted executor.
- Thus it is a good idea not only to make an ordinary *Will* but also to add a document that provides instruction about the actions your nearest relatives and/or executors should take if your death is prolonged or excessively painful.
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