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Euthanasia – the Right to a Dignified Death

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Abstract

In the contemporary society, ethical issues raise more and more controversial debates. This has also emerged regarding the concept of euthanasia, given that it involves the decision of the patient who is facing the last phase of his life. Since this issue raises more and more debates, we consider it appropriate to bring into discussion the ethical aspects involved by the decision of dying a dignified death.

In this article, we consider it would be appropriate to bring into discussion the ethical aspects involved by the decision of dying a dignified death. The aim of this article is to analyze the concept of euthanasia starting from the idea that a person in the terminal phase of an illness should have the right to decide about his own death. Researchers' opinions are divided, the euthanasia being interpreted as involving different areas such as medicine, philosophy, Law and theology.

In the context where the question of the individual quality of life is raised, is there the right to choose a dignified death? The Romanian legal framework has not regularized this practice yet, but countries such as Switzerland have reached the conclusion that the dignity of the individual and his right to die a dignified death should be among the privileges granted within the individual freedoms. Because it is a rather old practice, in the contemporary society euthanasia has drawn the attention of all the fields, and various researchers have expressed their views regarding the end of life; hence the problematic relation between euthanasia and the freedoms and rights provided by democracy. What delimitates the particularity of this practice is exactly the trans-disciplinary dimension, the analytical coordinates that we intend to picture in this approach which we consider it to be closely related to the social reality.

Keywords:

Euthanasia, morality, human rights, freedom, dignity.

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Preliminary aspects

Defined as the action of ending a person's life in a painless way, euthanasia is better known under the term of beautiful death. Being called the right to a dignified death, euthanasia is mainly a problem of the contemporary society, which has drawn the attention of the entire world; the vast majority have a favourable opinion regarding this concept. The current controversy over the issue arises because, on the one hand, the Church categorically opposes such practices and medicine, on the other hand, seeks to provide an alternative to the suffering of terminally ill patients. In today's society the term euthanasia is rather identified with suicide or murder, while in countries such as Belgium or Holland this aspect has been legalized; it is believed that in the case of a person whose death is inevitable, the alleviation of suffering is a human action. The term euthanasia has been given multiple definitions; Daniel Behar believes that it means an action by which painless death is provided to a person suffering from an incurable and painful disease; this is actually mercy killing, or mercy death (Behar, D., 2007). Specific literature provides a classification of euthanasia: active or positive, passive or negative, direct and indirect euthanasia, voluntary and involuntary euthanasia (Behar, D., 2007). In the current context, the term euthanasia takes different forms, such as: dysthanasia, a word derived from *discare*, which means barrier, and *thanatos*, which means death (Behar, D., 2007), anti-dysthanasia or let him die in peace (Behar, D., 2007), orthothanasia, a term which was firstly used by doctor Boskan in Belgium (Higuera, 1977).

Euthanasia or the right to life and death

The law generally aims at regularizing the individual's life. Whether we speak about political freedoms or economic freedoms, the freedom to choose between life and death (Damian, et al., 2013) is given by the legal framework in force in a specific country. In this context, developed countries have adopted a pro euthanasia stance as a result of the decision of the individual suffering from a terminal illness. However, controversy arises in third world countries and in countries where the religious aspect has an impact on the consciousness of the individual; in this context, as medical practice, euthanasia contradicts the Christian values, often being considered suicide or murder. In medical practice, however, euthanasia is viewed in a totally different manner: they raise the

question of the patient's suffering, especially in the case of terminally ill patients. Nevertheless, anthropological studies have highlighted euthanasia practices, especially in the primitive communities; given that they were unable to continue their life normally, euthanasia was considered a humanitarian act (Pascucci del Ponte, E., 2003). In the Middle Ages, under the influence of Christianity, such practices were forbidden, but not completely suppressed, due to the fact that, in certain circumstances, euthanasia was considered an act of mercy towards the incurably ill (Pascucci del Ponte, E., 2003). The Renaissance era brought with it a change of mentality and the modern era had to face this aspect under different forms and with different results (Pascucci del Ponte, E., 2003). In this context, the Euthanasia Society was founded during the early twentieth century, specifically in 1925; it helped with the creation of a favourable public opinion regarding the concept of euthanasia.

The concept of euthanasia involves fields such as medicine, law (Ignătescu, 2013), philosophy or religion, etc., fields that support a particular point of view in relation to the rights and freedoms of the individual. In this context, Tomás Requena Lopez believes that man does not come into the world of his own will and in most cases does not leave the world of his own desire (Requena Lopez, T., 2009); Death is not opposite to life; death is identified as the act of dying and not a state or a sequence of acts (Requena Lopez, T., 2009). For the medical field, euthanasia is a sequence of acts; Enrique Bonete Perales has identified the Decalogue of the ten ethical issues at the end of the existence:

1. Deadly phase or anthropologically a priori
2. Healing the sick or the doctor's main mission
3. Nursing the sick or a new palliative mission of medicine
4. Communication or the right to know the truth
5. Therapeutic obstinacy or the limits to medicine
6. Sedation in the event of agony or the consciousness of the dying
7. Assisted suicide and euthanasia or the limits of autonomy
8. Objection or the doctor's right
9. Organ transplantation or the noble act of donating
10. Anticipated will or the issues regarding death (Bonete Perales, E., 2008).

The Declaration of Venice, adopted in October 1983, includes the moral criteria:

"The health care professional may alleviate the suffering of a terminally ill patient by withholding the treatment with the patient's consent or the family's consent if the patient cannot express his desire. The doctor should avoid any extraordinary measure that does not benefit the patient".

Controversy regarding euthanasia is quite broad involving, on the one hand, issues such as the end of life, the dignity of the person and the role of medicine, and on the other hand the self-determination of the persons (Royes A., 2008). Albert Royes believes that in the societies where pluralism is an important value, people's opinion and attitude towards the command of their own lives is more and more frequently understood as an exercise of freedom and personal dignity (Royes A., 2008).

Among the senses of euthanasia, social and neonatal euthanasia came to prominence. Neonatal euthanasia regards children who suffer from mental illness or physical deficiencies and involve considerable physical pain or the decline in the mental abilities (Pascucci Ponte, Enrico, 2003). Due to the fact that in the case of children no distinction is made between euthanasia and eugenics, Manuel Cuyas believes that in order to give a specific meaning to the term euthanasia this issue should not involve suicide or mercy killing. In such cases, one appeals to death in order to end a life which is not appreciated (Cuyas, M., 1991).

Practicing euthanasia entails different views, depending on the field. In this article, I will refer strictly to the values promoted in the democratic societies. From the moral point of view, opinions are divided: it is raised the question that life is sacred and no one besides God has the right to decide on this. On the other hand, the proponents of euthanasia argue that the human life is not absolute and there are circumstances where we must give way to other values; and for this reason we must take into account the quality of life (Pascucci Ponte, E., 2003). In relation to the quality of life, it is understood that it is not life that is sacred, but what the subject is satisfied with from the qualitative perspective. Because the quality of life is more subjective, welfare and happiness are the criteria for assessing and justifying the human acts in different contexts. As a result, happiness is the justification of the human acts (Pascucci Ponte, E., 2003). Regarding human dignity - a ground rule

- Jorge Mehan Price believes that since life existed before the individual, then the individual cannot have power over the biological fact of his life (Mehan Price, J., 2008). The author argues that euthanasia contradicts ethics; however, this does not prevent the doctor from respecting the patient's desire to let the natural process of death continue its course in the terminal phase of the disease (Mehan Price, J., 2008).

Regarding the controversial discussions on this subject, philosopher Julian Săvulescu, together with Dominic Wilkinson, believes that euthanasia accompanied by organ donation is a rational practice, because the individual has the ability to do well post mortem by saving a life (Sandu, A., 2012).

Conclusions

Regardless of the legal meaning of this practice, the individual is the master of his own acts. The situation in which the quality of life is deteriorating because of illness must draw the attention of the authorities to form a legal framework for such practices. Although in relation with the legislation such actions are condemned, the physical suffering of the terminally ill individual should be alleviated if drugs are no longer effective. It's not about suicide or eugenics, but the right to die a dignified death, to have the opportunity of choosing between death in agonies and painless death.

In this article we have brought into consideration the euthanasia, highlighting that persons with incurable diseases in terminally phase of illness may have the right to decide of his own death. Defined to be a beautiful death, euthanasia involves different sectors applauded with the question of whether it is an act of killing or an exercise of freedom and personal dignity.

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