

Ethical problems related to Euthanasia

Executive Summary

The purpose of this study is to analyse the ethical issues of euthanasia by perceiving this action through various theories related to ethics and morality. This case study is inspired by an article published in the BBC (“Ethical problems of euthanasia”). The major theories that have been considered in this case study are consequentialism, utilitarianism, egoism and the deontological perspective. By viewing the act of voluntary euthanasia through various ethical theories the researcher was able to learn that even though these theories do not necessarily prescribe voluntarily euthanasia but they do seem to support this act if it is at all required. The researcher has also highlighted another article published in the BBC which shows a terminally ill patient filing for voluntary euthanasia. The study revealed that many people all over the world do support the act of voluntary euthanasia and do not consider it as unethical. The underlying reason behind this fact is that this act provides freedom from pain to not only the sufferer but also the closed ones who are distressed by seeing the former wreathing in agonizing pain. Therefore, even though some might argue that voluntary euthanasia is equivalent to assisted killing and should not be legalized, there are many who perceive this action to be absolutely justified and ethical and therefore have given their verdict in favour of legalizing this action.

Introduction

Argument regarding the will to live and die has raged over the last decade since Dr. Kevorkian was convicted for assisting a lot of people to commit suicide by administering lethal injections (Johnson, 1999). The question regarding how ethical, physical assisted suicide is to the life of human beings is still debated by many. However, in each of those discussions everyone seemed to hit a dead end. After the development of technology and subsequent creation of organized websites, people have frequently discussed about the pros and cons of euthanasia (E. J. Emanuel, Fairclough and L. L. Emanuel, 2000). Such platforms have provided people with the opportunity to interact, learn, connect, and express their beliefs regarding this controversial issue on a global stage. Some believe that the practice of euthanasia should be made legal for the terminally ill patients whereas some question the ethical nature of this activity (Materstvedt, et al., 2003). This sets forth one and only question and that is, should euthanasia be legalized? It is with regards to this question that the researcher will attempt to analyze the ethical issues of euthanasia, inspired from an article published in BBC ("**Ethical problems of euthanasia**") (BBC, 2014a), by taking standpoints of several ethical philosophies.

Discussion

Euthanasia as a topic has not been discussed much by philosophers up until recently when this topic has grabbed the attention of major proportion of the global population. Up until this point, what have been discussed very often are cases related to suicide, which as an action raises similar ethical issues as euthanasia. The moral identicalness between suicide and voluntary euthanasia allows researchers and academic scholars to make a sensible guess about the perceptions of famous philosophers regarding voluntary euthanasia.

Conventional theories have always aimed to identify the appropriate criterion that defines morally correct action. Such theories can be classified into two separate groups: the ones which state that the right action is always the one that provides the best output and the others which state that the right actions are not always the ones that provide the best result (Shultz and Brender-Ilan, 2004). The former theory is consequentialist while the latter is deontological. Consequentialist theories can be further classified into egoistic theories and universalistic theories. While the former sees those consequences that matter morally as involving only

consequences for the active person, the latter sees consequences for the ones who are affected (Jacobson, 2008).

The first question that may prompt one's thought process is what defines a good consequence. This question introduced a robust concept called utilitarianism consequences which are referred to as the feeling of simple happiness which is characterized by pleasure of liberty from bodily pain and suffering of various sorts (Mulgan, 2001). The researcher in this case will study the ethical issue of euthanasia by taking standpoints of the ethical or morality of action theories defined above.

Consequentialism & Utilitarianism perspective

Both ideal utilitarian and hedonist theory will argue that voluntary euthanasia is a justified action. The hedonistic utilitarian would state that circumstances may crop up when a person's life or rather the existence of the body brings more pain when compared to pleasure to not only the person suffering from existence as well as those who are distraught by their pain (Vallentyne, 2006). Maintaining the existence of the sufferer costs many resources which would have otherwise yielded pleasure had it been used in a different manner. The ideal theory of utilitarianism is in complete alignment with the perspective of those people who are in favour of the opportunity of death with stateliness with the help of voluntary euthanasia (Singer, 2003). This is because people who follow the ideal utilitarianism theory have the prowess to counter the known oppositions to this voluntary action.

Nevertheless, people encounter several problems while defending the practice of voluntary euthanasia by following the ideal utilitarianism theory. The first and foremost problem is that this theory tends to over justify voluntary euthanasia (Shaw, 2001). Some might even perceive this theory to be a justification for involuntary euthanasia. The second problem is the standpoint that utilitarian has to take in order to modulate the law in favour of voluntary euthanasia (Singer, 2003). It is appropriate for one to assume that if an action is correct then it should be permitted. However, for a person who follows utilitarianism, an act is only right if it is useful. In other words an action can only be legalized if it yields better results (Vallentyne, 2006).

While some who believe in utilitarianism may think that legalizing voluntary euthanasia will actually do a lot of good to the sociality, a more vigilant utilitarian might think that existence of a

law that favours voluntary euthanasia would not yield the best possible results (Vallentyne, 2006). For example, enactment of a law that favours voluntary euthanasia may increase distress as people who are terminally ill would feel like asking for euthanasia even if they do not want to die voluntarily. From the point of view of a cautious utilitarian, a law that does not yield the best result should not be enacted and therefore the individual would always fight in favour of illegalizing voluntary euthanasia (Shaw, 2001).

Deontological perspective

The deontological theory on ethics was introduced by Immanuel Kant which is also sometimes referred to as the deontological ethical theory (Tännsjö, 2005). The deontological theory states that some or all actions are characterized as being right or wrong just because of the nature of the action and not because of the consequences they produce (Bowen, 2004). Taking the standpoint of this theory one can add that the opinion of an obligation not to kill, rules out any possibility of permitting euthanasia. Nonetheless in actuality those who are against euthanasia feel that all they have got to do to stop euthanasia is to say ‘thou shalt not kill’ (Burgess-Jackson, 2003). However, people often do not consider the banning of killing as absolute. They tend to perceive killing in self defence and capital punishment is to be justified. Even in this case, it would be considerably easier to justify voluntary euthanasia when compared to the other forms of killings mentioned above with the help of deontological theory (Tännsjö, 2005).

In case of capital punishment or self defence killings, a person dies even if the individual does not choose to be in that state. Therefore it must be set forth that human beings choose not to kill because life is ones most valuable possession, therefore this reason can only be reversed if the person is not willing to live any more or rather the person chooses death above life willingly (Duguet, 2001).

Egoism: Consequentialism Revisited

Egoists normally perceive that an action is only justified if it yields the right consequences for the agent (also sometimes classified as the doer of the action) and as far as utilitarianism is concerned, there are several different variants of this doctrine which are based upon the characteristics or measurement parameters of the good consequences (measures in terms of parameters such as minimum pain and maximum pleasure or in terms of other benefits fetched

by the agent) (Singer, 2003). Hedonistic egoism apparently prescribes a life that one spends crushing others who gets in the way thereby disqualifying everything that is normally perceived to be right. Nonetheless, philosophers such as Plato have appreciated that human beings cannot derive the optimal pleasure in that way (Shaw, 2001).

In order to survive, human being needs support, cooperation and friendship as in all these achievements they will find happiness – the ultimate means to survival. This is one of the major reasons why hedonistic egoism should not be dismissed so hurriedly (Singer, 2003). However, there are certain situations where hedonistic egoism requires people to take ruthless action just like hedonistic utilitarianism (Burgess-Jackson, 2003). For example, these perspectives might encourage a doctor to exercise involuntary euthanasia on a person if the former derives some sort of benefits from the death of the latter. The doctor would only be involved in this act if he/she believes it to be right and knows that the act can be concealed from everyone. In such cases, people like these do not have any feeling of guilt for they perceive their action to be justified or rational (Vallentyne, 2006).

Therefore, a doctrine or principle that prescribes people to take such actions due to a particular set of circumstances (although rare) diverges considerably from the ordinary idea of morality to be believable.

Personal opinion and conclusion

In this essay, I have attempted to provide a brief explanation of the theories related to philosophy, morality and ethics that are applicable to the debate regarding whether or not to permit death with stateliness. My argument was that none of the theories that I have discussed in this study needs to be interpreted as ones that either encourage or restrict the exercise of voluntary euthanasia. However, what I understood is that these theories in some way or the other provide a convincing justification in favour of legalizing voluntary euthanasia. In fact I have found another case study which also shows people's acceptance towards voluntary euthanasia. The article published in BBC highlights that a dying bill has been passed by a terminally ill patient. The approval of this bill will allow doctors to prescribe a life ending drug to the patient upon the latter's approval (BBC, 2014b). This goes to show that people who are suffering agonising pain as well as their closed ones are giving their verdict in favour of voluntary

euthanasia. In a similar manner, my verdict has always been and will continue to be in favour of freewill of living and death with self respect. I would definitely not want to see my loved ones suffer in agonizing pain and therefore my conscious tells me that a more ethical thing to do in this case would be to help the person get his/her wishes unanswered if that means letting the person die peacefully by choice. When I consider my own life and I see it through the spectacles of the ethical theories that I have just reviewed, I would definitely not want my life to be prolonged if there is no quality left in it or if I think that my terminal level sufferings are proving to be distressful for my closed ones as well. Some might argue that our life is a gift given to us by God and therefore only the almighty has the right to take it from us. Nonetheless, I would like to say that even though the aforementioned fact is true, it is we who choose to live our life the way we want. We experience the happiness of someone cheering their success with us and at the same time it is we also share the feelings of a person who is suffering through an agonizing pain. If it was me, I would have definitely chosen to end my life and spare myself from the pain as well as spare my closed ones from suffering by seeing me wreathing in pain every single day.

Euthanasia as mentioned above is a highly sensitive issue and a topic that has been constantly debated over the last decade or so. While there is a group that has strongly condemned the use of voluntary euthanasia by criticizing people like Dr. Krevorkian, there is another group that has shown strong acceptance towards this action. Even the philosophical perspectives to euthanasia have provided a good justification for this action. The study revealed that an action is always right if it provides the best of the consequences. Therefore, from that point of view it can be said that voluntary euthanasia is a justified action. The underlying reason behind this fact is that life is the most precious possession of a human being and therefore a person has every right to decide to die with dignity when he/she feels that there is no quality left in it. No one has to suffer from agonizing pain which not only puts the life of the sufferer in distress but also affects the lives of others around the person.

Reference List

- BBC, 2014a. *Ethical problems of euthanasia*. [online] Available at: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/euthanasia/overview/problems.shtml>> [Accessed 14 March 2015].
- BBC, 2014b. *Assisted dying debate: the key questions*. [online] Available at: <<http://www.bbc.com/news/health-28310868>> [Accessed: 16 March 2015].
- Bowen, S. A., 2004. Expansion of ethics as the tenth generic principle of public relations excellence: A Kantian theory and model for managing ethical issues. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 16(1), pp. 65-92.
- Burgess-Jackson, K., 2003. Deontological egoism. *Social theory and practice*, 1(1), pp. 357-385.
- Duguet, A. M., 2001. Euthanasia and assistance to end of life legislation in France. *European Journal of Health Law*, 8(2), pp. 109-123.
- Emanuel, E. J., Fairclough, D. L., & Emanuel, L. L., 2000. Attitudes and desires related to euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide among terminally ill patients and their caregivers. *Jama*, 284(19), pp. 2460-2468.
- Jacobson, D., 2008. Utilitarianism without consequentialism: the case of John Stuart Mill. *Philosophical Review*, 117(2), pp. 159-191.
- Johnson, D., 1999. *Kevorkian Sentenced to 10 to 25 Years in Prison*. [online] Available at: <<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/14/us/kevorkian-sentenced-to-10-to-25-years-in-prison.html>> [Accessed 14 March 2015].
- Materstvedt, L. J., Clark, D., Ellershaw, J., Forde, R., Gravgaard, A. M. B., Muller-Busch, H. C., ... and Rapin, C. H., 2003. Euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide: a view from an EAPC Ethics Task Force. *Palliative Medicine*, 17(2), pp. 97-101.
- Mulgan, T., 2001. *The demands of consequentialism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Shaw, A. B., 2001. Intuitions, principles and consequences. *Journal of medical ethics*, 27(1), pp. 16-19.
- Shultz, T. and Brender-Ilan, Y., 2004. Beyond justice: Introducing personal moral philosophies to ethical evaluations of human resource practices. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 13(4), pp. 302-316.
- Singer, P., 2003. Voluntary euthanasia: a utilitarian perspective. *Bioethics*, 17(5-6), pp. 526-541.
- Tännsjö, T., 2005. Taking the Final Step: Changing the Law on Euthanasia and Physician Assisted Suicide: Moral dimensions. *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, 331(7518), p. 689.
- Vallentyne, P., 2006. Against Maximizing Act Consequentialism. *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*, pp. 21-37.

