

The Socio-Ethical Implications of Euthanasia on the Contemporary Nigerian Society

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Abstract

It is not uncommon to hear some people argue and conclude that a life that is full of or characterized by suffering, pain, anguish and sorrow is one that is not worth living. For this group, suffering, pain, anguish and sorrow all obviate the very meaning, essence and worth of life. For them, the individual or person is better dead than 'living' in regret and pain and will eventually end up dead as death is a final end to all suffering and also part of human existence. This stream of thought unequivocally supports the practice called and known as "Euthanasia" i.e. mercy killing. It is the aim of this paper to attempt an analysis of the justification or otherwise of resorting to Euthanasia as a justifiable means of escape from suffering, pain, sorrow and anguish. If Euthanasia were to be freely practiced or legalized, would there be any social and ethical implications for the contemporary world and if it proves to be the better way out of meaninglessness, then how best can it be practiced?

Introduction

Many scholars, especially philosophers (thinkers) have often asked what life is and what its purpose is. Put differently, what is man, where is he from and what is his purpose here on earth? The debate led, in many quarters, to the conclusion that there is a distinction between living and existing. That is, between living and existing, one is much more meaningful and purposeful than the other. A school of thought has it that to 'live' is much more meaningful and worthwhile than to exist. To live, therefore, means to enjoy life to the fullest in every sense of living: comfort, impact, significance etc. Another school of thought hold that to 'exist' means to have breath, sleep every night and wake up the next day but finds no meaning or purpose for doing this every day. To merely exist imply not having access to any, some of, or all of the basic necessities of life. For instance Heidegger conclude that although man finds himself in a world not of his own design he must nevertheless set out to find meaning and purpose to his existence otherwise despair and anguish overtakes him. (Heidegger, M: 1973) It is worthy, in other to foster a good comprehension and appreciation of this paper, to delve in to an in-depth conceptual clarification of the term or word "Euthanasia". Thereafter, it would be pertinent to attempt to draw a nexus between Human life and Euthanasia. It would also be necessary to consider the implications and challenges if Euthanasia were to be legalized and practiced in our society, e.g. Nigeria and other human societies.

Meaning of Euthanasia

Euthanasia is a very controversial issue in ethics (morality) due to the end result of the action and the situation surrounding the decision of the act of euthanasia. A school of thought support euthanasia while another school of thought vehemently opposes it. So what is euthanasia? Many scholars and moralists thinkers have given numerous definitions of the term basically owing to their belief, disposition, orientation or personal experiences. Etymologically, euthanasia is referred to as "a good death". This definition is obtained from two Latin words "eu" meaning "well or good" and "thanatos" meaning "death". Put together, therefore, i.e. "euthatanos", means "good death", "well death or dying well" (Echekwube, A: 1996)

The implication here is that there is a good as well as a bad death, and this raises the question what is a good and what is a bad death? Can there be a good death when death is the end of it all? Some conclude that death is death no matter what

The oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary of current English refers to euthanasia "as a mercifully easy and painless death for persons suffering from incurable and painful diseases". (Hornby, A.S: 2000) It is also known as a gentle and easy death. Agidigbi, attempts to furnish a working definition of euthanasia as follows:

...the willful, direct or indirect killing of the incurably sick, be it at their request or the request of the parents, guardians or any other representatives in the case of incurables who are incapable of deciding for themselves, e.g. infants, the irrevocable comatose and mental defectives. (Agidigbi, 2005)

Singer, himself interprets euthanasia as the killing of those who are incurably ill and in great pain or distress, for the sake of those killed, and in order to spare them from further suffering or distress. (Singer, 1993)

Predominant Features of Euthanasia

An examination of the various definitions of Euthanasia furnished above will reveal certain facts which are obvious.

1. There is a willful intention to kill, end life (*mens rea*).
2. The individual here who can be referred to as the victim experiences irrevocable pain and distress which amounts to untold sufferings
3. There is a kind or benevolent intention or desire to end further pain and sufferings.
4. There is often consent from the person to be killed to escape from horror and helplessness.
5. It is often the case that the victim is unable to carry out the act/conduct himself/herself
6. The victim is often helpless and hapless.

So, the killing involved is not that of just any individual but of one who is suffering irrevocably or terminally in endless discomfort and express willingness or readiness to end the pain and anguish. Ultimately, there is good intention in the act even if it involves the killing or taking of life. The point is that the conduct is not done out of malicious intentions. Hence, it is commonly referred to as “mercy killing”. (Ofei, O.S: 1987) *Actus Reus*. Some human practical experiences have revealed some terrible situations where and when dying is most preferred by and for the person in distress. There have been situations when the distressed individual expresses his/her desire to die rather than continue to live in excruciating pains and discomfort but it turns out that he/she is not capable of personally carrying out the act owing to the unimaginable agony he/she is passing through, thus he/she may ask for help from relations, close friends or experts (e.g. doctors). This is the reason why many refer to it as “assisted suicide” or “assisted dying.” (Bryant, J: 1969) These concepts are resultant phenomena owing to the approval and consent of the incurably sick person.

There have also been situations where the individual involved would have willingly and readily consented to assistance in ending his/her own life but cannot give such consent due to comatose or inability to do so. This could be due to incapacitation or comatose over a prolonged period which is characterized with rapid deterioration in health condition. James Rachels illustrates with a life example of one Matthew Donnelly who found himself in a horrific situation.

Matthew Donnelly was a physicist who had worked with X-rays for Thirty years. Perhaps as a result of too much exposure, he contracted cancer and lost part of his jaw, his upper lip, his nose, and his left hand, as well as two fingers from the right hand. He was also left blind. Mr. Donnelly’s physician told Him that he had about a year left to live, but he decided he did not want to go on living in such a state. He was in constant pain- one writer said that “at its worst, he could be seen lying in bed with teeth clinched and beads of perspiration standing out on his fore head.” Knowing that he was going to die eventually anyway, and wanting to escape this misery, Mr. Donnelly begged his three brothers to kill him. Two refused, but one did not. The youngest brother, 36yrs-old Harold Donnelly, carried a .30 caliber pistol into the hospital and shot Matthew to death. (Rachels, J. 1993)

As far as the law is concerned Harold Donnelly has committed murder by shooting his brother (Matthew Donnelly) even at his request. The argument is that neither Harold nor Matthew own or created the life that has been taken. In other words, nobody save the state reserve the right to take human life. From the above account it is very clear that Matthew Donnelly was suffering from excruciating pains and anguish endlessly without the hope or possibility of ever getting better. In practical life no human being would want to endure what Matthew Donnelly endured before he wished to end it.

There was another case where a group of friends who are professional war mercenaries went on a mission and upon pursuit by their enemies; they got hold of a plane which was their only means of escape as the enemies were hot on their heels. However, one of the friends was caught by a bullet in the leg in his attempt to escape with his friends and colleagues and so he couldn’t run as fast as others and therefore couldn’t get in the plane like others. When he looked back he discovered that the enemies were almost catching up with him and there was no way the plane would stop otherwise they will all die if they did. So he called out to his best friend to shoot him. He made this request so as to escape capture and unimaginable torture and torment from the enemies. At first, his friend loathed the idea but when his friend begged him further, reminding him of their friendship and his refusal to betray the trust of friendship and thus amount to wickedness as the enemies would slowly and painfully killing him by possibly cutting him to tiny little pieces, his friend gave in and turned the gun on him (his best friend) and killed him knowing it was his best friend’s sincere desire in his helpless and hapless situation.

Singer supports this position. He doesn't see any reason for life to continue if it has no meaning and worth. When Singer juxtaposes the sanctity of human alongside that of suffering and pain he prefers euthanasia if the situation is irreversible. However, there are dire implications for any society if Euthanasia were to be supported and legalized as a necessity or as a phenomenon without punishment or sanction. One implication is that the worth or value of human life would have been seriously compromised if Euthanasia were to be adopted as an acceptable social norm.

Euthanasia and the State

In the case of Harold Donnelly, we are told that he was charged with the crime of committing murder even when it was obvious that it was the last wish of his brother on his dying bed. Does the law reserve the right to condemn Harold's conduct as criminal and inhuman considering the prevalent situation and circumstances at the time? If the law condemns his actions as criminal, he would possibly face the hangman's noose. The question is would the law be justified if it condemns and eventually kill Harold for killing his brother who persistently requested to be killed. Would killing Harold be the best way of correcting him or the society?

On the other hand, the tacit consent (Appadorai, A.A: 1982) explicitly declares that only the state reserves the right to take life. If others are not justified to take life, what justification does the state have in taking life? If it is established that the state is the only one justified in taking life then Socrates was right ab initio when he conceded and allowed the Athenian authorities to condemn him to death for the crime of 'corrupting' the Athenian youths. Thus he willingly drank the hemlock. (Cahn, K. 1987) If the state is the only one justified to take life then a school of thought argue that it also makes sense for one to cut off his head if he has headache as a cure for the ailment. Another school of thought contends and asks why the state should take life at all?

Euthanasia and the Elements of Actus Reus and Mens Rea

No action or conduct can be actualized without the existence of the elements of the Actus Reus and that of the Mens Rea. (Ofei, O. 1987) In other words, there is always the presence of the Actus Reus in every human deed. The Actus is simply the conduct, action or deed which is overt in nature i.e. it is open to observation, verification and personal experience. Therefore, the Actus Reus is those overt conducts which can be seen, heard, observation, verified or personally experienced.

On the other hand, the element of the mens rea simply means the intention or motive behind every action or conduct. For example, if a man pick up a gun and goes into the bush/forest and comes back with a dead/shot bush-pig. It is clear that the elements of actus reus and mens rea is present. The actus reus is the shooting of the bush-pig and the mens reus is the purpose for which the man killed it. He could have killed it for meat or for sale or for any other reason.

In the case of Euthanasia, the mens rea is always colored to appear as if it were a favor, hence it is considered as mercy killing or assisted killing. Does it matter what kind of favor it is, is a favor not a favor? Helping one out of misery and pain is a favor.

Socio-Ethical implications of Euthanasia on the Contemporary Nigerian Society.

It is customary for Nigerians to stay close to their loved ones who are terminally or incurably sick. It does not matter whether it is known that the unfortunate person is going to die or not. The family members would prefer to continue with the hope that one day a miracle will happen and their patient will receive healing. It does not also matter to them whether or not they are wasting the merger resources on the sick one when the healthy living ones in the family will suffer lack and want at the end of the day. This commitment and love for relatives and family is predicated on the fact that Africa is a communitarian society and therefore the communitarian spirit exists among Nigerians as Africans. In traditional Nigeria it is "I am because we are and we are because I am" (Mbiti, J: 1980). Everyone is everyone's keeper and brother. It is one big (happy) family. No man is an island as far as traditional Nigeria is concerned.

Sequel, it simply means that euthanasia is a not a customary practice among Nigerians, in particular, and Africans in general. Human life as far as traditional Nigeria is concerned is sacred and priceless. It is believed that life should be protected and preserved by all means possible. It is a taboo and a crime for anyone to take another's life or his own life. No illness can devalue the worth of human life among traditional Nigerians. The only reason where and when euthanasia is practiced in Nigeria is due to economic or financial reasons. Owing to the poor economic situation in Nigeria, family and relatives of individuals may out of helplessness watch their sick loved one die but their financial helplessness does not stop them from caring for the victim until death comes. In other words poverty has led to the practice of euthanasia in Nigeria and leaders are to be blamed to a large extent for this problem. The traditional Nigerian believes that life is a precious gift. Traditional Nigerians would loathe Peter Singer when he argues that human life shouldn't be held sacrosanct.

Things are, however, changing in the contemporary world especially in the area of norms and values. Thinkers like Joseph Fletcher contend that the situation and circumstances prevalent at the time determine that

which is morally justifiably or otherwise. Therefore, for Fletcher, if the situation is confirmed and pronounced hopeless for the sick individual then there is no need to continue to waste time and resources. Allowing the person to die would not be a sin or crime. (Evereth, C.K: 1980).

Back here in Nigeria, corrupt government officials encourage and practice euthanasia by the sheer fact that they withhold or divert funds meant for purchasing drugs and other medical supplies for hospitals and clinics to private and personal account or personal use. For instance, if Mr. A was to withhold the inhaler from Mr. B. who is a known asthmatic patient and Mr. B eventually dies it implies that Mr. A contributed consciously to the death of Mr. B. The Nigerian government makes provision for drugs and other healthcare facilities in her yearly budget but what is prevalent in the country is the out-of-stock syndrome in government hospitals. Public officers who are charged with the responsibility of making these funds and facilities available out of selfishness and greed embezzles these funds without giving a thought as to what will happen to those who need them. They care the least because they do not seek and get medical attention here in Nigeria. They and their families are well provided for by the government as far as the best healthcare is concerned. (Omoregbe, J: 1993)

It should be noted that those who originated the concept of euthanasia did so with good intentions i.e. to end the misery and agony to helpless and hapless persons who were in pitiful situations. Euthanasia was optional owing to the inherent hopelessness and helplessness of certain conditions. When euthanasia began, attention was not on the conduct but on the intention of the conduct i.e. for a purpose or good end.

By and large, if euthanasia were to become a legalized practice in Nigeria then there will be serious problem for the society. The first place, morals and values have been so bastardized to the extent that the Nigerian society now worship and respect anyone and everyone who comes out successful materially. People would not need a reason to kill their perceived enemies. Since the society worship and regard material wealth then it provides room for people to take the lives of those who are sick all in the guise that they wouldn't want to waste the little resources available to the family. Allowing euthanasia would ultimately mean that the bond of love and care that once transverse among Nigerians will have to be cut with time.

Nigeria is not advanced enough to legalize euthanasia in every ramification of the word advancement. The level of enlightenment/education that the society requires for such practice to be allowed should be so high such that only a minute percentage of her population will lack it. At this time 85% and above of Nigerians do not know the meaning of euthanasia, they have to know what it means and when it becomes imperative to resort to it. If euthanasia is allowed in present day Nigeria then a lot of lives would be at risk. It will be an opportunity to eliminate anyone who is judged unproductive and resourceful. Those who are seen as obstacles to the performance of certain actions would have to go, thanks to euthanasia. This would amount to each individual deciding whether or not one is to live or to die. Man will thus become the measure just like Protagoras advocated. (Coplestein, F: 1975).

Even if professionals were to be given the prerogative of practicing euthanasia, then the possibility that carelessness on the part of the doctors can quickly be interpreted as resort to euthanasia and nothing can be done about it. The fact that some situations are helpless and hopeless cannot be gainsaid, so the question is do such people remain in hopelessness and helplessness until they eventually die or would it be fair out of love and concern to help them out of their misery.

CONCLUSION

Traditional ethics maintains that human life is sacrosanct and should be protected and preserved at all times and all cost. Now it has been contended that a life that is worthless and full of pain and suffering should not be preserved and protected at all cost, in lieu, it should be allowed to die since it lacks essence and meaning. (Cassell, E.J: 1991). Situations and circumstance have actually proven Singer and other scholars who argue along this line right because many of these victims have requested to be killed when the pains became unbearable. There have also been situations when some willfully take their own life because they feel they cannot continue with the pain and sufferings. It is more like people forget the possibility of miracles in their hurry to end the pain and anguish. They also forget that we are told by cosmologists that the universe is a teleological universe where things happen purposefully. Therefore it amounts to the fact that there are reasons for everything that goes on in the world-even suffering. Even if euthanasia were to be practiced then let it be that it is on record that every other possible means to restore peace and balance has failed hence the resort to euthanasia. For Nigeria, euthanasia should not pull down the tradition of care and love that exist among Nigerians. Let the bond of love and affection that transverse among the people be maintained. Staying close and with incurably sick relative is not senseless after all since the only thing that is constant is change (Maritain. J: 1994). The situation might change and change for the better. Existence is yet a process and until it gets to the zenith, nothing should be taken for granted. Permitting euthanasia in Nigeria at this time will further destroy the already bastardized norms and values of the people.

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