

## Euthanasia: Western Perspectives

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### ABSTRACT

The Western civilization, emphasizing health, accepted the inevitable end of even the strongest and healthiest individuals. The objective of this study is to demonstrate the shifting perspectives on euthanasia held by western thinkers throughout the course of our culture's history. It will expand on the fact that there was no consensus on the question of euthanasia in this society. Instead, they had many different beliefs, some of which were diametrically opposed to one another, somewhat unlike our own community now. In this study, it will focus mainly on how different western philosophers have viewed euthanasia at other moments in history. For the sake of brevity, it will provide a broad outline of some fundamental philosophical intellectuals whose work has the potential to elevate western culture and morality.

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### INTRODUCTION

There has been a lot of debate over the morality of euthanasia since it is such a sensitive issue. Despite its widespread coverage in both scholarly and mainstream media, it is unclear which concepts and semantics are used in the debate. The moral ramifications of euthanasia revolve around the question of whether or not euthanasia performed at the patient's request is morally acceptable. The antique Greeks did not necessarily associate the word "euthanasia" with a means of expediting or speeding the process of dying. In contrast, "euthanasia" was frequently employed to describe suicides using fast-acting and typically painless medicines like hemlock. It is a common misconception that Francis Bacon was the first person to advocate for the practice of euthanasia. The ancient Greeks laid the groundwork for the development of Western philosophy. The debate over the ethics of euthanasia goes back more than three thousand years (Cooper, 1989). While the idea of euthanasia dates back to ancient times, interest in the subject has waxed and gone throughout the ages. The Greeks' contributions were critical to forming western philosophical thought and practice. During the course of the last three thousand years, people have debated the ethical implications of assisted suicide (Cooper, 1989). Even though the idea

of euthanasia has been present since ancient times, there has been a consistent ebb and flow of interest in the subject throughout the course of history.

### Euthanasia: Western Perspective

In ancient Greece, the city of Sparta was home to a medical community that conducted postmortem examinations on newborn boys or girls to determine whether or not the infants had any physical deformities that warranted the child's death. Plato, a philosopher from ancient Greece, was quoted as saying at one point that those who were mentally and physically sick should be allowed to die since they did not have the right to life. Pythagoras, another Greek philosopher, was vehemently opposed to the act of suicide because it relieved the person of duty for the upkeep of life on Earth. Pythagoras believed that suicide was immoral. Since Hippocrates disapproved of deliberately taking one's own life, he devised the idea for this oath. In ancient Rome, assisted suicide, also known as euthanasia, was a punishable crime and was equated to murder. Despite this, the records reveal that sick neonates are often left outside overnight to die. So, there were contexts in which assisting another people's suicide or triggering their death was considered acceptable in antique Greek and Roman civilization.

There is no equivalent to our idea of “mercy-killing” in either Greek or Latin. There is no name in either Greek or Latin for the premeditated death of another person to end their suffering from an incurable, extremely severe, or agonizing ailment. Similarly, it seems that none of the Greek schools of philosophical ethics picked out this kind of action for the intent of examination or critique. Part of this is because, with the limited scientific expertise of the time, primitive people must have been conscious of the unpredictability of any judgment of incurability or premature death. Hence, it is possible that euthanasia was either not practiced often or was seen as an outlier because of how seldom the conditions were met in which it was seen as permissible or even required. This is probably because primitive people must have been aware of ambiguity. There is little doubt that the environmental concerns surrounding the offenders of individual murder added weight to the injunctions of many faiths condemning such murder (Cooper, 1989).

The medical and ethical literature has been addressing euthanasia at the same time as the public discussion, even if, in many respects, it has been operating separately from it. Some people taking part in the conversation think that euthanasia is never moral and an acceptable option for patients, regardless of the circumstances surrounding the individual patient. Others contend that euthanasia is ethically permissible in particular scenarios but that we need not change professional standards or the law to make it lawful. Last but not least, there are those people who think that euthanasia should be legalized because they consider it to be a morally acceptable method of treating people who are terminally ill or dying.

For millennia, thinkers and leaders in religious communities have argued over whether or not suicide is a moral act. These conversations have centered on fundamental questions about the value of human life and broad ideas of an individual’s responsibilities to themselves and society. Antiquity thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, and Hippocrates, mediaeval thinkers like Augustine, Aquinas, and contemporary thinkers like Hume, and Kant all contributed significantly to this debate.

Nonetheless, certain ancient Greek philosophers believed that there were circumstances under which suicide may be acceptable. For instance, Plato believed that suicide was dishonorable in the majority of circumstances but that it could be justifiable in the case of a person who possessed a sinful and unchangeable nature, who had committed an infamous crime, or who had lost all sense of self-control as a result of extreme emotional distress. Plato

thought that the freedom to choose whether or not to live should have nothing to do with determining whether or not suicide is morally acceptable. However, current proponents of euthanasia put a priority on the right of a person to choose whether or not to live. It was more necessary to objectively appraise the individual's moral worth than for the person to make their own determination about the value of their own life.

On the other hand, Aristotle held that suicide was never acceptable since it deprives society of a contributing member. In the past, a succession of oaths and ethical standards have been used to outline not just the obligations of a doctor but also their behavior and the rights of their patients. The Hippocratic oath is one of the cornerstones of contemporary medical practice. The Hippocratic Oath was written in 400 B.C. when both Plato and Aristotle were still alive and kicking. This commitment has been made by the medical community in order to express the moral compass that directs their work. Hippocrates shows his disapproval of the practice of euthanasia by taking this oath and adhering to its tenets. His oath requires him to prioritize the requirements of patients above those of other physicians. He swore, “I will give no deadly medicine to anyone if he asks, or suggest any such counsel” (Carrick, 1985).

In contrast to Plato, later Hellenistic and Roman Stoics placed a higher value on the individual's pleasure than they did the group's well-being. Even though these individuals encouraged savoring every moment of life to the fullest, they also believed suicide to be a viable alternative in extreme circumstances, such as when a “natural” lifestyle was no longer feasible owing to conditions like as terminal illness or great poverty. Nevertheless, the Stoics did not think having suicidal thoughts was permissible in all circumstances. In contrast to current defenders of a person's right to get assistance in committing suicide, the Stoics believed that one should only be allowed to contemplate suicide if they had lost the desire to live the life that God had created them for. Annaeus Seneca, who lived from 4 B.C.E. to 65 C.E., was among the Roman Stoics who believed that individuals ought to have a great deal of freedom in determining the moment at which they should end their own life. Seneca is known for his philosophy that places a higher value on pleasure than on continued existence. As a result, he promotes the idea that one should have the option to die with honor.

From the time the concept was first created, both Jewish and Christian theologians have been adamant

in their rejection of suicide because it is antagonistic to the common good and a breach of one's responsibilities before God. Aquinas propounded Catholic theology on suicide. His arguments affected Christian thought for decades after their first presentation. Suicide, in Aquinas's view, violates not only the rights of other people and the society of which the person is a part, but also God's rule over life and the person's commitment to himself and his natural impulse to reproduce himself. This approach, which was reflective of the prevalent thinking on the topic of suicide during the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Reformation, may be said to have been exemplified by the following: During the Renaissance period, Thomas More, who lived from 1478 to 1535, was a proponent of assisted suicide. He thinks that those enduring extreme pain and nearing the end of their life should be offered the option of either starving themselves or using opiates to terminate their lives. David Hume provided the most comprehensive and unqualified argument of suicide's appropriateness. He argued that it was justified based on individual liberty and society's welfare. Hume is credited with being the first person to do so. Even though the person's death would make the community more fragile, he claimed that suicide might be morally justified if the individual's benefits outweighed society's costs. In addition, if the person's passing would be helpful to society as well as the individual, then suicide would be approved of in this case. While Hume did not advocate for the legalization of suicide in all circumstances, he did believe it was acceptable to end one's life in some dire circumstances. Several prominent philosophers who were active during the Enlightenment period, such as Immanuel Kant, fought against the practice of suicide. According to Kant, the ultimate act of disobedience to a moral responsibility was to take one's own life. Since Kant believed that the ultimate ideal for rational individuals was to preserve their own life, he saw suicide as incompatible with the human experience's dignity. Kant, like some current opponents of euthanasia, thought that self-mutilation was incompatible with the idea of autonomy when understood in its proper context. Kant contends that to exercise one's autonomy, rather than just acting following their whims and desires, one voluntarily subjects their impulses and inclinations to their rational understanding of objective moral truths.

### Conclusion

From the beginning of human civilization, people have struggled to come up with a morally justifiable definition of what constitutes a "good death" for a person who has reached the end of their life. It should

come as no surprise that ancient religious thinkers opposed the practice of assisted suicide. This is consistent with the philosophical perspective that every life is holy since it is a gift from the gods, and this gift must be honored. Despite this, evidence shows that people in ancient Greece practiced euthanasia. Acceptance of death owing to factors once seen to constitute divine retribution, like disease or old age, is referred to as *ars moriendi* (the art of dying). Ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Seneca were among those who admitted that euthanasia, sometimes known as the acceleration of death on purpose, was practiced in ancient Greece. It seems that Socrates intentionally ended his life by poisoning himself with hemlock. Even in Plato's writings, the practice of hastening the death of the physically deformed, the terminally sick, and those deemed to be of no service to the state is represented. Hippocrates is only one of many medical professionals throughout history who have opposed the practice of physician-assisted suicide. Because, in fact, the Pythagoreans were the only school of thought in Greek philosophy to categorically prohibit the act of suicide.

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