

Morality of active voluntary euthanasia philosophy essay

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Medical advancements are increasing and have been playing a vital role in prolonging human life. On one side where medicine is gaining victory in providing quality and improved lives to the patients, similarly on the other hand, issues related to termination of human life are creating a state of dilemma for all health care professionals, patients and their family members. The decisions related to termination of life issues, that is, Euthanasia has been well debated since very long as it involves moral, ethical and social dilemmas. Euthanasia is being supported and encouraged by many, but there are philosophies which strongly oppose and question its morality. The notion of enforcing Euthanasia puts forward the concepts of autonomy and respect for life. However, there arises a question that, who has the authority to terminate a human life? Is it the person himself, his family members, health care professionals or God who can take a human life? The final question that need to be answered is that, does a human have the authority to end other human's life on the basis of either his own opinion or merely on that patient's will? This paper aims to analyze the dilemma of the morality of " active voluntary euthanasia" in Utilitarian and Kantian perspective.

Active voluntary euthanasia is when deliberate actions are being taken to kill a terminally ill patient on his/her own request. John Stuart Mill and Kant have put forward various view points in the light of which the morality of active voluntary euthanasia could be judged. Whenever the dilemma is debated in context of different philosophies, euthanasia has always lied in the grey zone of morality. Mill's utilitarianism which puts forward the greatest happiness principle admits that the dignity itself is the form of higher pleasure.

According to Jane Maj, The death with dignity Act also offers the compassion

with great respect to end the suffering of a patient when all other measures are exhausted. This means that when the ultimate result is just the suffering for the terminally ill patient then it is better to end that person's life with dignity because then it would be the source of higher pleasure for the person, if he or she requests so.

Utilitarianism evaluates actions in many perspectives of which act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism will be taken into account. According to Vincent Barry, in act utilitarian point of view "each situation is considered unique; each new set of circumstances calls for a fresh evaluation." So, if the consequence of terminating a person's life in a particular situation results in good consequences, that is, greatest good for the majority in that case then it would be the correct act to follow. Maj also supports this point by pointing to a particular case when "the final consequence will bring happiness and peace to the patient, but also to family members and friends who wish for the physical pain of their loved one to cease..." ending the person's life in this situation is a good action as it also eliminates a person's pain. On the other hand Rule utilitarianism, according to Barry, "asserts that we should not consider the consequences of a particular action but rather the consequences of the rule under which the action falls." Furthermore, Frank Collins also explains about rule utilitarianism that, it is the rule that needs to be followed whether it lead to greater pleasure for an individual in a particular situation or not at a particular time. The focus is that the rule should be followed which could bring greater good to the community. Thus, in the case of euthanasia if a person is deliberately killed then it might create

happiness for the person himself but on the other hand, it might create fear and uncertainty amongst the family members, neighbors or in the community at large. The fear and uncertainty of getting killed in the future when they would get terminally ill and that when no cure is available for them in the future. From the above given points it could be concluded that the act would create greater good to the individual but not to the community which in the light of rule utilitarian concept, would not allow voluntary euthanasia. But, Peter Singer has replied to this case of becoming uncertain and fearful by putting forward the argument that, " the fact that killing can lead to fear and insecurity in those who learn of the risk to their own lives, is transformed into a reason in favour of permitting killing, when people are killed only on their request. For then killing poses no threat." Through this argument it could be finally concluded that, as far as active voluntary euthanasia is concerned then according to rule utilitarianism the act could be allowed and would be appropriate to be followed as it is being done with the person's own wish without creating the feeling of uncertainty in the community and thus produce greater good to the community as well.

Moreover, when a person is given autonomy to make his/her own decisions, it creates greatest happiness for him/her and thus any person who is fully capable of taking decisions must be free to decide. As, Singer also says that, " If beings are capable of making choices, we should, other things being equal, allow them to decide whether or not their lives are worth living." On the contrary according to Singer, " A consequentialist might initially answer: whatever goods life holds, killing ends them. So if happiness is a good, as

classical hedonistic utilitarians hold, then killing is bad because when one is dead one is no longer happy." In the same way it could be analyzed that once a person is dead, his autonomy also remains no more. So, it would be a bad or immoral action to kill someone with or without request because killing ends a person's autonomy. Thus, preservation of one's life results in the preservation of his/her autonomy.

Kant also puts forward many propositions to judge the morality of an action which could help in determining the morality of active voluntary euthanasia. In Kantian perspective a moral action and duty have biconditional relationship with each other. Albert Denise Peterfreund explains Kant's first ethical proposition that, " human actions have moral worth only if they are performed from duty." He furthermore says that, " For example, a man who preserves his life in routine conformity to duty is acting from an inclination which is according to duty, but not from duty. On the other hand, to preserve life when it has become a burden, only because duty requires it, is morally correct." It thus could be concluded that, killing a person on his own request at the time when he is in a great suffering and has no cure for his disease is an immoral and wrong act, as the act is not done from duty, so, it does not have any moral worth. In addition to this, it is a duty to preserve life no matter how painful and difficult it is to survive.

Kant's supreme principle or the law of morality lies in categorical imperative, which says that, one should act only on those maxims which could be universalized. Hence, the universal law is that it is always wrong to kill an innocent human being. In addition to this, according to Kant, as said by

Peterfreund that human being must be treated as end in himself and not merely as means to an end. Similarly, it is wrong to treat a person as mere means for an end, and this is what a person does when he aims to put himself to death in order to get rid of his pain. So, a person should understand that it is his life and his own self which are the ends and not the means that is killing himself which serves the ends. I. Brassington also affirms the above statement when he says that, "in acceding to a request for euthanasia, it is possible that I am treating a person as means to an end and thereby undermining the personhood in him." Paul Jewell refers to a situation in which a patient asks for active euthanasia, Jewell says that, "... even if a competent rational patient requests euthanasia, and even if both the patient's and doctor's judgement is that any benefit from remaining alive is far outweighed by the actual distress of the illness, nonetheless, the doctor should not assist the patient to die."

The theories given by Kant and Mill are both subjective in nature and thus are highly debatable. On one hand some of the utilitarian perspectives would consider active voluntary euthanasia as moral. While, on the other hand Kantian propositions and perspectives would consider the act as immoral, as, in Kantian view point the preservation of life in every circumstance is considered as one's duty and this duty must be followed with due respect in order to make it highly moral. Proponents of active voluntary euthanasia maintains that it is the autonomy and right of a person to decide for his own life, while, the opponents of this act assert that it is the duty of a person to live the life that is given to him and it is always wrong to kill any human

being. No human have any authority over the decision to terminate his life or the life of any other human being.