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## **THOUGHT PAPER: SHOULD WE HAVE THE RIGHT TO DIE?**

### **Introduction:**

The idea of suicide has always carried the notion of tragedy with itself. Dealing with a rather gruesome subject, i.e death, it is a topic of concern. Ideologies come with different beliefs about suicide, largely holding it unacceptable: it is understood by religion as a demeaning act of going against God's will, while the modern institutions of mental health and psychiatry bring with them ideas of intervention and institutionalizing patients in need of 'caretaking' for being at risk of attempting suicide. There are terms like physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia, meaning 'good death' used when referring to the subject -though both refer to the same thing but the difference lies in the execution of the 'final' act and drug administration. Euthanasia is categorized into passive (withdrawing treatment) and active (taking a drug to end life) further branching into 'voluntary', 'non-voluntary' and 'involuntary' euthanasia. Likewise, when it comes to legalization of its practice, complication of the subject is attributed to how it falls along moral lines in context of the value of human life, with passive euthanasia having some acceptability. While concerning active voluntary euthanasia in particular, the morality of the subject is quite conflicted, and it is discussed in relation to individual autonomy, rationalization of suicide, the unintentional consequences of it and is of concern to religion and culture, politics, medicine and physicians, the person going under the act itself, and their families.

The paper discusses some of these ideas related to active voluntary euthanasia/assisted suicide.

Zahid was a 35 year old man suffering from a schizoaffective disorder, who committed suicide assisted by his physician. The following dialogue takes place in a hallucinatory situation where Zahid visits his mother from the afterlife.

*It is Zahid's funeral night and his mother sits in the chair, tears flowing down her cheeks.*

*Mother:* 'It was wrong James. You didn't have to do that; he shouldn't have let you do that. This was wrong.'

*She shuts her eyes, a tear rolls down her cheek as she dozes off.*

*Zahid:* 'Mother! Mum!'

*She wakes up to James standing by her.*

*Zahid:* Hello!

*Mother:* Oh Zahid! How are you here? I missed you, you shouldn't have left me.

*Zahid:* I know you miss me. I am sorry for not allowing you to prepare for it; I feared you wouldn't have understood.

*Mother:* You know what you did was wrong, right?

*Zahid:* Why, mother? I in fact find myself immensely relieved.

### **Suicide is against Nature**

*Mother:* No, that was wrong. You have transgressed against nature.

*Zahid:* You know I was in pain. I could hold nature very much responsible for that.

*Mother:* I know you had a difficult life, but doing that (killing yourself), I would not want to say the word, is against the will of God!

*Zahid:* You do know I never believed in God when I was alive. But now that I am here and actually met God, let me ask him about it.

'Hey God did you mind that I killed myself?'

*God:* Well, it was your life and yours only.

Mother: But death is in your hands, isn't it?

*God:* Such responsibility! See, there are a lot of ways people transgressing against my will any way, but that hasn't been much of an issue, has it? What about that you have there in the glass, the wine? That certainly is forbidden in the Book. Is that not a transgression against my will now?

### **Suicide is Murder**

*Mother:* Suicide is akin to taking a life. It is a much greater a sin, a crime.

*God:* Suicide does sound synonymous to ending one's own life. But if you are comparing it to murder, the latter is contrary: it refers to taking *another* life and that is a crime certainly and so because in such a case there is a 'victim', a person disadvantaged, hurt and deprived of a life he wanted to live. That is a moral wrong. While suicide, is in accordance to one's will and rather respectful towards it, and nobody is hurt. Why would that be a wrong?

*Mother:* Because human life is sacred.

*God:* How is that so at all?

*Mother:* Well, humans are creatures with consciousness and hence above all other creation.

*God:* Yes, humans are ones with consciousness, but how does that make their life 'sacred' to say so, rather than just different? Or even if so, how does dying make it any less sacred, or reduce the importance of human life.

*Mother:* Umm well, killing one self would mean that the person does not value his life.

*Zahid nods at God to thank him.*

*Zahid:* Mum, ending my life did not at all mean that. I valued life which is exactly why I had lived for as long as I did, but the quality of life matters, doesn't it? Rather than dragging myself through a painful life, I chose a dignified death.

*An echoing voice interrupts the atmosphere.*

*Kant:* I am sorry to jump in; I overheard Zahid while passing by. Just in his defense let me add something that it is from self-love to shorten one's life when by longer term it threatens more ill than it promises agreeableness. To choose to die in face of endless pain is to value oneself and their time on earth.

### **Would be a relief to medicine**

*Mother:* I understand you, dying relieved you of pain. But I have a reservation: is the physician who helped you, not guilty here?

*Zahid:* How so?

*Mother:* He was involved in ending a life.

*Zahid:* Certainly. But calling him guilty would imply that he had done a moral wrong.

*Mother:* Yes, I suppose he has.

*Zahid:* He was incredibly understanding towards me, and with his help allowed me to eliminate my suffering which otherwise would have been life-long. I'd say he was kind to do that for me.

*Mother:* Well what he did is quite contrary to the job of a medical practitioner.

*Zahid:* Traditionally, one might say so. But does that make his involvement in my death morally wrong?

*Mother:* Yes it does. It is irresponsibility on his part to not come to up to his job, i.e saving lives, being in a field of medicine.

*Zahid:* It is true; medicine's moral codes are based on saving lives. However in case of a patient who is bound to live a sufferable life and wills to not live it instead, what about them? Is it fair to force them to live?

*Mother:* That does not sound quite fair though.

*Zahid:* Likewise, is morality not about being considerate and empathetic towards another human being? That is what my physician did.

*Mother:* I get what you are saying. But if assisted suicides are accepted, then it would become an easier option to go for in cases of serious illnesses and medicine would not be motivated to come up with cures and treatments.

*Zahid:* If medicine fails to find treatments, it is very much a failure on its part and the weight of that failure falls solely on medicine and the people in that field isn't it?

Mother: Yes, I suppose.

*Zahid:* So how does that justified euthanasia as immoral? I cannot quite see the connection between the two.

### **Would legalizing euthanasia result in medicine being irresponsible?**

The aforementioned argument is posited as one of the major concerns regarding the debate about euthanasia, but as James picked upon, it is flawed. For one, it is based completely on an assumption that euthanasia would cause medicine to be negligent and the basis of that claim is not justified. One could argue quite contrarily that legalization of euthanasia might serve as a greater motivation for medical research and practice as to the purpose of medicine is to save lives

then the legalizations puts more of a moral responsibility on medicine to come up with cures so the people are not left with suicide as the only option to relieve themselves of suffering. Secondly, the argument holds euthanasia directly responsible for lack of responsibility completely on part of medicine: the connection made seems to be faulty.

### **Mentally ill people may make a wrong decision to die**

*Mother:* Well yes. But see, you did not have a terminal illness which would have made your decision a lot more convincing. What if it was a result of a wrong judgment on your part, and hence an immoral act for your physician to help you?

*Zahid:* So you say that it is understandable for someone with a physical ailment to wish to die but not for someone mentally ill? I feel you are undermining my pain.

*Mother:* No, I just am just not convinced that you were in the right state of mind to make such a decision.

*Zahid:* So you think I am incapable of making agreeable decisions?

*Mother:* That would not be the right way to put it, but how do I know for sure that it was a thoughtfully reached decision when you were you were going through mental disturbances?

*Zahid:* I understand your concern. Let me assure you, I made myself aware of all the other options available for me, and then explained the validity of my decision multiple times to my physician and psychiatrist who quite understood me. I suppose that would convince you, that the decision that I made was rational.

This is one of the main clashes over the acceptability of euthanasia, even in the countries where it is legal: the case of people with psychiatric illnesses. It is argued that such people are mentally

compromised and may think on the premises that are not entirely rational and their will to die might be a ‘suicidal thought’ ignited by their mental disturbance. Although the argument does take into consideration a valid concern, it is quite problematic. It renders understandable a desire to ‘not see the end’ for someone who might have ‘cancer’ or a terminal physical illness, but not so for people with psychiatric disorders, also deeming them incapable of making the right decisions at all. The argument basically is highly discriminative against patients of mental disorders. However, it is a fact to be considered that people with mental disturbances do go through thoughts of hopelessness that results in suicidal ideation; it does not imply they are completely inept to think rationally. The rationality of an argument can be judged by its analysis. Likewise to rule out any risk, the decision of people opting for euthanasia might be judged for its viability and the process of decision making be analyzed as a standard procedure to rule out

### **Will result in rampant killings and acceptance of involuntary euthanasia**

*Mother:* I see the flaw in the argument. However, the acceptance of assisted suicide or euthanasia for that matter pushes on moral boundaries and so if we feel okay with doing that right now, surely we can head into all that is immoral.

*Zahid:* What exactly do you mean to say?

*Mother:* I fear that gradually people will not find killing each other by the means of euthanasia problematic at all!

*Zahid:* I see what you are referring to, that is involuntary euthanasia, and that is in fact murder and quite the opposite to the idea of (voluntary) euthanasia which requires an explicit consent from the person undergoing the procedure, just as in my case.

Now do you think people would start thinking of murders as moral if euthanasia is legalized?

*Mother:* I now see, it appears unrealistic to say so.

*Zahid:* Yes your argument is quite a good example of the ‘slippery slope’.

### **Lives of certain people would be regarded as of less worth**

Another very considerable concern raised against euthanasia is that an acceptability of such a practice poses the implication that lives of certain set of people to be regarded as being of less worth. These people include those with terminal physical illnesses, mental disorders, or those with disabilities who find themselves to be dependent on other people. It is argued that these groups of people would fall vulnerable to pressure if euthanasia is legalized. It would increase the likelihood of them considering suicide under financial, social and emotional burdens, also deteriorating their sense of self .They might just as well be force into opting for death. Following this, a risk misusage of euthanasia is brought to attention.

The concern raised here is very valid as it highlights particular consequences and implications of legalization of euthanasia. However, the argument does not exactly justify the immorality of euthanasia as an act in itself, and does not make a point against an individual’s right to death –it rather brings to attention the state’s responsibility of carefully regulating euthanasia if and when it is legalized.

### **Conclusion:**

The subject of assisted suicide and euthanasia appears to be extremely complicated and not entirely black and white. With a number of opposing arguments that do hold viable moral concerns, with analysis it appears that they fail to exactly prove the immorality of the act of

euthanasia. It is a considerable option for people living through debilitating illnesses, lending them the right to relieve themselves of their suffering and die a dignified death. When individual autonomy is generally rooted for when it comes to medical treatments, then the same logical justification can be extended to the practice of active voluntary euthanasia. In case of psychiatric illnesses the morality of the act is based on differentiating between rational decision to die and a will to die triggered by the psychiatric illness itself, for example the suicidal thoughts that come with hopelessness associated with depression, which may be done with careful analysis of the process of decision making. Inwardly, with voluntary euthanasia and assisted suicide justified to be moral, the subject being as sensitive as it is particular considerations of individual groups of people would have to be made and a proper system of regulation of the procedure that comes with its legalization be devised to assure moral lines are not crossed.