



## Kant's Perspective on Euthanasia in the Light of Autonomy, Dignity and Rationality of Human Being

• Zannat Nisha • Shivangi • Aditi Bhushan  
• Ameeta Jaiswal

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Corresponding Author : Ameeta Jaiswal

**Abstract:** Euthanasia or mercy killing is one of the most pressing and profound problems of medical ethics. It is a highly debatable topic though recently there appears a tremendous change in the opinion of people who have become more aware and receptive towards the act of euthanasia. This research work has been undertaken with the objective of examining Kant's perspective on euthanasia in the light of his views on autonomy, dignity and rationality of human being. In order to attain this objective, literature on Kant's ethical perspective was studied, survey was conducted both in the online and offline modes. In the online mode survey was conducted through Google form and in the offline mode the views of some doctors were taken through the interview schedule. Altogether 110 respondents shared their views. After observing and

analyzing the responses of the survey and the studies conducted it was found that Euthanasia is still a debatable ethical issue and that rationality and autonomy of the patient are the most important factors in the practice of Euthanasia. From Kant's perspective autonomy, dignity and rationality are superior to life itself, and he also believes that in some circumstances life can be sacrificed for the sake of these values. It was also found that human being has the right to choose a good death for himself provided he is in a rational state. Hence the conclusion arrived at is that Immanuel Kant has given too much importance to the intrinsic values of human existence rather than to life itself. Thus, human being as a rational animal has the autonomy to choose a good death instead of unbearable sufferings in order to preserve his dignity of life.

**Keywords:** Euthanasia, Autonomy, Dignity, Rationality.

### Zannat Nisha

B.A. III year, Philosophy (Hons.), Session: 2019-2022,  
Patna Women's College (Autonomous),  
Patna University, Patna, Bihar, India

### Shivangi

B.A. III year, Philosophy (Hons.), Session: 2019-2022,  
Patna Women's College (Autonomous),  
Patna University, Patna, Bihar, India

### Aditi Bhushan

B.A. III year, Philosophy (Hons.), Session: 2019-2022,  
Patna Women's College (Autonomous),  
Patna University, Patna, Bihar, India

### Ameeta Jaiswal

Head, Department of Philosophy,  
Patna Women's College (Autonomous),  
Bailey Road, Patna-800 001, Bihar, India  
E-mail : ameeta.phil@patnawomenscollege.in

### Introduction:

Euthanasia or mercy-killing is an act of hastening the death of the patient who is suffering from non-terminating disease through a lethal injection, or withdrawing the life supporting devices. The idea is that rather than inculcating somebody to slow, painful or silly death one can be given euthanasia. It is imperative to point out in all cases of euthanasia death should be caused for the welfare of the patient. The act of euthanasia raises certain significant philosophical and moral obligations that "Is it a morally permissible act?" or "Can biological life be destroyed in order to preserve

moral life?” or “Euthanasia is an act of depriving human values?” These are some very thought provoking questions which are being discussed in several places, whereas some countries like Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain, Canada etc. have legalized this practice. A central concern of all the debates have been to search for some fundamental values of human existence to undergrid the morality of assisted suicide.

Many thinkers all over the world have engaged themselves in discussing the significant issues of euthanasia and one such philosopher is Immanuel Kant. He is one of the most influential thinkers of late 18th century. Quoting the words of Immanuel Kant “A rational being must always regard himself as giving laws either as member or as sovereign in a kingdom of ends which is rendered possible by the freedom of will” (Kant: 1785). The moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant provides insightful contribution to this field of study. In essence, Kant has given a pivotal role to autonomy, dignity and rationality in matters concerning one's own life and death. Dignity reflects rational being's ability to legislate the moral law for himself without relying on external factors. Some of the challenges related to the Euthanasia which Kant has also discussed about are self love, honor, autonomy, rationality. Hence, these issues have been taken up in this work in the light of autonomy, dignity and rationality of human beings where Kant emphasizes on moral and dignified life.

**Significance of the Study** – This study is significant because even though Kant's perspective is a 18th century concept, its relevance can also be seen in modern times as it relates to the challenges of human values which are being faced today or will continue to be faced in the coming future. Kant has emphasized on human values rather than human life. He talks about the moral sentient being and their intrinsic values. Kant has shown the path to this modern world for the legalization of the act of Euthanasia.

#### **Objectives:**

The following are the objectives.

- To know the Kantian perspective on the act of Euthanasia.
- To highlight the importance of human values.

- To examine whether the human values- autonomy, dignity and rationality is above human life.
- To figure out what modern world thinks about Kant's concept on euthanasia.
- To find out the solution to the problem concerning Euthanasia.

#### **Methodology:**

These are the methods used:

- Study of various books, articles and lectures on Kant's Ethics.
- Data collection through online Questionnaire and survey through interview schedule from people belonging to various age groups and professions.
- Different audio and visual documents and internet have been accessed.
- Study of lectures, various commentaries, books treaties, notes comments and writing to incorporate the views of Kant, with the intention of presenting a holistic view.

#### **Hypotheses:**

The following are the hypotheses:

- It is likely that this research will help in outlining the challenges related to Euthanasia.
- It is likely that this study will throw light on the human being's Autonomy of thinking, Dignity and Rationality.
- It is likely that this work will present a clear perception of Kant as so whether the Euthanasia is ethically right or wrong.
- It is likely that this research will present a clear idea to every individual to figure out the issues of euthanasia and its matter of legalization.

#### **Review of the Literature:**

The following books have been reviewed:

- The book “An Introduction to Kant's Ethics” by ROGER J. SULLIVAN has covered ethical theories and doctrines of Immanuel Kant.
- The book “Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals” by IMMANUEL KANT deals with the analysis of human values and morality.

- The book “Social, Ethical and Legal issues related to Euthanasia edited by DR. AMEETA JAISWAL has discussed about the act of euthanasia and its ethical issues.
- The book “ETHICS theory and practice” by Y.V. Satyanarayana has covered the ethical concepts and works of Immanuel Kant.
- The book “ETHICS IN APPLICATION” by Dr. KakoliBasak and Dr. Sanjay Kumar covered the concept of Euthanasia and its ethical questions.

### **Euthanasia and Its Ethical Perspective:**

Euthanasia is stated as good death. The act of euthanasia means hastening the death of the patient who is suffering from non-terminating disease through a lethal injection, or withdrawing the life supporting devices. The idea is that rather than inculcating somebody to slow, painful or silly death, mercy killing would permit the patient to expedite a comparatively “Good Death”. For a proper understanding about euthanasia, it is necessary to differentiate its types. There are four types in which we can differentiate Euthanasia:- Voluntary Euthanasia, Involuntary Euthanasia, Active Euthanasia, Passive Euthanasia. The act of euthanasia raises certain significant philosophical and moral obligations as it is contrary to natural law: Does the act of euthanasia violate human dignity? Or Do human beings have autonomy to choose death and refuse to prolong treatment? Or Is it a death with dignity? These problems have become more crucial now-a-days because recently, SARCO the suicidal pod got legalized in Switzerland and many more countries have considered mercy-killing as a legal act whereas on the other hand many people protest against its legalization.

### **Kant on Autonomy, Dignity and Rationality**

**Autonomy** - Kant introduces the concept of autonomy as “property of the will by which it is a law to itself”. It is the basis of dignity which permits someone to act freely, and acting freely is the foundation of morality. Kant writes: 'Autonomy is the basis of dignity in human nature'. He says that human beings are autonomous beings and they have the ability to decide what is right and what must be done. He dismisses what he calls 'heteronomy' which means morals determined by

external factors, as totally irrelevant. Each person should determine his own destiny. With reference to one's autonomy Kant justifies voluntary euthanasia and at the same time criticizes involuntary euthanasia. Kant introduces the concept that human beings are free to think and decide for their betterment by following their rational will not by any other external influence.

**Dignity** – Immanuel Kant restricts his construct of human dignity solely to rational beings. He believes that human beings occupy a special place in creation and have an intrinsic worth, or dignity which makes them valuable above all else. So they must be treated with respect. He discusses human dignity as having intrinsic value in the light of his categorical imperative that he discerned in the rational being, –“ACT IN SUCH A WAY THAT YOU TREAT HUMANITY, WHETHER IN YOUR OWN PERSON OR IN THAT OF ANOTHER, ALWAYS AS AN END AND NEVER AS A MEANS ONLY”<sup>2</sup> (Kant, 1785). Thus, once we treat others as mere means, we tend to compromise with their dignity. According to Kant, human dignity is an intrinsic value and is priceless. According to Kant, since dignity has an absolute value and as rational beings we have a duty to respect the dignity inherent in us – it follows that no amount of pain or suffering can morally legitimate any act which leads to the termination of dignity.

**Rationality** - Kant observes the moral requirements as requirements of practical reason. The 'rational agent' is the primary subject in Kant's concept of how moral conduct emerges. 'Rational being' points to the human ability to understand and reason, which leads to action or conduct. Human beings as rational beings are authors of moral rules. He considered that reason is the same for all persons and all will discover the same rules. Kant further assumes that since human conscience is rationally formed then everyone should follow the dictates of their conscience. Kant argues that irrational agents have physical lives, however no ethical lives. The one who lost its rationality hence lost its ethical life can be treated as a mere object. Kant asserts that the ethical life has greater value than the physical life.

### **Kant's Perspective on Euthanasia:**

At the core of Kant's ethics is the idea that the “Nothing in this world... could be called good without

qualification, except a good will”<sup>3</sup> (Kant, 1785). The idea behind act of euthanasia is doctor's good will for welfare of the patient. The very first moral standard of Kant's theory of morality asserts- An action is morally right if and only if it has been done with a good intention. He emphasizes always on intention and says that the moral worth of an action does not lie in the effect expected from it, but depends on the intentions behind the action. Kant considered autonomy, dignity and rationality as intrinsic values of human beings which should be always kept high and superior to any condition even when it is the matter of life itself. For a person's autonomy, Kant accepts the voluntary euthanasia as individual's decision and shows the respect of his/her autonomy. Respect for autonomy is usually thought of a key reason for permitting doctor assisted suicide or mercy killing. A terminally ill person suffering from incurable and acute pain should be left alone to decide about the prolongation of his live. It is the independent choice of a patient to take an honorable exit from life. If we consider the rationality of a man, Kant's view is very clear, that is, he allows the practice of Euthanasia, as all humans are rational beings and can take their own decision. They have a rational mind that helps them to choose the right path for themselves. Incurable sickness like insanity could be a brain disease that ends up in the loss of this rationality, and thus, humanity, in line with Immanuel Kant. Kant has discussed that irrational beings have physical lives, however no ethical lives. Kant always denies the practice of Euthanasia in accordance with dignity and as a person we ought not to euthanize a fellow who possesses an intrinsic value that is beyond price (dignity). We have a duty to protect his dignity. According to these interpretations of Kant's thought, it follows that putting to death is immoral as a result of its being contrary to the self-love that was there within the initial place. If a situation so requires that a man has to choose between death or continue living an undignified life then he should choose the former. The stress on honor is important because for Kant there is nothing more honorable than to live one's life according to the fundamental principles of morality. In Kantian terms, life is worth living only if it can be lived in accordance with the fundamental principle of morality. Although human life is sacred, life alone is not sufficient, but the quality of

life is as important as the length of one's life. As many people suggests to keep the terminally ill patient alive in order to enable medical researchers to make the most of their ordeal for the benefit of medical science violates the most fundamental principles of ethics. As Immanuel Kant aptly said that human beings should not be treated as mere means or objects, even for the most beneficial purposes. People in general want to live with dignity and die with dignity and they should have right to lay down their lives just as they have the right to live.

### **Data and Findings of the Survey Conducted:**

For the purpose of finding the views of the respondents on the topic “KANT'S PERSPECTIVE ON EUTHANASIA IN THE LIGHT OF AUTONOMY, DIGNITY AND RATIONALITY OF HUMAN BEINGS”, a survey was conducted both in online and offline mode for which 27 questions were asked where 110 respondents have gave their views .

- Majority of respondents were of the view that a law should be made in favor of legalization of euthanasia.
- Some respondents considered that human values are superior to human life.
- Almost all respondents were of the view that individual should have right to die.
- In the survey it was found that the respondents have accepted the euthanasia as legal act in some way.
- Several respondents were of the view that patients should have autonomy to choose for death provided they should be in rational state.
- They were also of the view that terminally-ill patient burdens society both monetarily and emotionally.
- Many respondents do agree that mercy-killing is death with dignity.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions:**

Kant's ethical views should be taken into consideration. Though the Kantian concepts are of 18<sup>th</sup> century but it is very well relevant in this era too. Euthanasia is truly a very debatable topic. As now Switzerland had approved for the suicidal pod which really make this topic sensitive. If the medical field really



wants improvement, it needs both structural and technical revolution in strict association with Kantian ethics. Many a time, business sector tempts healthcare providers for promoting non-ethical practices. People should consider Immanuel Kant's perspective while dealing with the act of euthanasia. A doctor should consider autonomy, rationality and dignity of a patient before undergoing for the act of mercy-killing. An undignified life is worse than death and a doctor should safeguard his patient's intrinsic values. Debate regarding the legalization of euthanasia is the challenge in front of us, but few solid reforms can prove to be milestones in the field of medical profession. Every issue has a solution, the need is to find and practice it. Here are some suggestions which may turn the scenario for better and brighter.

#### **Suggestions:**

1. Kant's ethical views should be taken into consideration in the matter of legalization of mercy-killing.
2. We should focus on the good intention behind the act of euthanasia which is for the welfare of the patients.
3. Human intrinsic values should be kept superior to a human life. Euthanasia should be considered as legal act only for the terminally-ill patients, and they should have the autonomy to choose for a good death instead of deadly suffering provided they are in a rational state.
4. While considering Kant's views on rational being and dignified life, if a person loses his

rationality and all the rigorous treatment fails then for safeguarding the patient dignity, euthanasia should be granted to him.

5. We should always put emphasis on ethical and quality life rather than undignified physical life.
6. Right to death should be granted to people but only in the case when they are losing their intrinsic values and are just lying on a bed like an object and there is no sign of their betterment.
7. Medical Ethics should publish proper guidelines before permitting the act of euthanasia and should make strict rules for not misusing it by any selfish means.

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