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HISTORICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON  
EUTHANASIA IN THE MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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Abstract: The history of life and death involves two subjects that have been at-length debated by the current research. These two aspects have always stirred great interest to many social and professional groups and social categories, which is understandable, especially considering that one only has one life, as well as one death, which is eternal. Thus, death is a very important subject to society, although as interesting as it may be, it is often avoided and kept in the dark. The same goes for historians, since they were the first researchers of death in humanity's past, as well as its causes and forms, for the lawmakers, since they were the ones responsible for ensuring the necessary frameworks, and of course for priests, since they were considered to be the ones who hold the spiritual bonds between them. We cannot overlook the importance and interest in this event for doctors, since they are present in almost all cases, in a direct connection to death, to life, to its salvation or prolonging, as well as to its shortening or suppression.

Returning to the historians and their implication regarding death, I believe that the studies in this field play an important role in the present, in society, in legislation and in the collective mentality. The reason for which I believe these aspects to be so important is that their understanding, one way or another, also implies the understanding of the arguments and causes that led to one practice or another, to the changes in the stances on death and euthanasia, the social, economic and political context of each time period, and, after this analysis, the conclusions can contribute to the understanding of the current situation, of the current mentality and the current practices. Thus, we must learn from the past if we are to contribute to the present since, as they say, those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it; the same idea can be applied in the case of the practices and stances on death in general and on euthanasia or assisted death in particular.

Therefore, I believe that a particular challenge is represented by the history of the medically induced death, at the request of the victim or patient, seen as a medical act, a judicial act, not as a murder or a suicide. I believe that this research is challenging, since, in today's world, in which the technology and medicine are continuously progressing and the legislation must constantly adapt to the new

possibilities and realities, it is difficult for the collective mentality to keep up with the new reality.

Besides the preservation of life, its prolonging and the respect for the right to life, the reality is that today, medicine, law and theology, together with the whole society, must debate, protect or prohibit the right to die, depending on the evolution of each situation. The right to die is increasingly more requested and invoked by all those who wish to benefit from it or who support the legalisation of euthanasia and of assisted death.

The present study approaches this subject, the dilemmas raised by the legalisation of death on request, the issues regarding ethics and responsibility, as well as honouring certain requests and rights that often contradict certain laws and directives.

As a practice, euthanasia, the death and assisted death of those considered to be undesirable, or who simply no longer wish to live or who consider that they have become a burden on society and on those around them, is an old, even ancient practice, although the term in itself, defined as such, only came into existence in 1623, when Francis Bacon used it in one of his works. From that point on, euthanasia, as a concept and as a practice, has been defined as a good death.

The history of euthanasia, of assisted death on request, is certainly not a sterile subject, since there are numerous studies that have approached it. Moreover, the greater part of these studies does not treat it as an occurrence or a practice, but we must note that there are studies that trace its evolution from legal, medical, demographic viewpoints, among other things.

However, most studies treat euthanasia strictly from certain perspectives, or taking into account only certain implications, without considering other aspects, implications or consequences in other spheres. For instance, there are studies that treat these issues strictly from moral, medical, ethical, social or religious standpoints, by implicating the divine origins of life but, in such cases, the conclusions may differ from one field to another. Thus, euthanasia can be considered to be natural, normal and worthy of legalisation according to a legal expert or a doctor, or it can be condemned or stigmatised by a priest or a sociologist.

The present study aims to present all of these aspects together and to confront several fields in which this subject has implications. Thus, in the present

research I aimed to present the current situation of the practice of euthanasia in the countries in which it is legal, the requests and the circumstances of those who ask for its permission in the countries in which it is illegal, as is the case of Romania, as well as the stances taken by society, facing the church, the legislation and, of course, medicine.

The reason for which I deemed it necessary to approach and treat the subject from all its perspectives, as well as its presentation and confrontation in all fields is that the conclusions drawn individually and independently were often contradictory, which is quite undesirable with respect to an aspect connected to life and death. In other words, in the present study I aimed to not only present euthanasia and all its implications, but also to raise an issue regarding its approach, as well as the fact that its true importance or severity is not fully acknowledged.

I had no intention to take any side, because life and death are not issues that can be classified or placed between parentheses; they cannot be part of a conclusion drawn on little experience and knowledge, but I believe that it is necessary for us to know what euthanasia and the assisted death imply, what requesting and begging for death imply, as well as the arguments on which the requests are based and on which those who support it rely – who, in most cases, are physicians. Naturally, this should not come as a surprise, especially considering the fact that, as mentioned above, they are the ones who are constantly in connection with death. Thus, they are the ones who are able to understand such requests, who more easily accept this type of requests, since they are capable of understanding what truly happens to those people, the patients.

The subject of this thesis aims to expose these issues and the importance of understanding the historical stances taken by people and by society when faced with death.

The first part of the thesis argues for the necessity of such a research and of a subject that is more difficult to approach, perhaps due to people's reluctance, and it presents the reasons behind the interest in this subject. Thus, as we have already mentioned, considering the fact that today this theme stirs more and more disputes and people's attitudes are contradictory, their arguments must be understood, as well as the way in which the issue or the act manifests at the level of the ideas and perceptions.

The thesis naturally contains a chapter of historiography, since the debate is not sterile and it is not unknown to the historians, doctors or lawmakers. Even if sometimes it was on a lower level, there has always been an interest in euthanasia, assisted death and the gently and non-aggressively induced death. Throughout the years, many studies have been written about the attitude towards death and life, as well as the attitude towards the dying, the ones who requested that their life be terminated for different reasons. In this situation, people's behaviour always represented a dispute between those who pleaded for assisted death and those who argued for leaving everything in the hands of the deity. Another aspect that can be noted is the fact that the frequency of the publication of the works that pleaded for the preservation of life and its divine origins was directly proportionate with the ones that supported the legalisation of euthanasia. Naturally, the former were much more numerous, but one must also consider that they represented a form of multiple responses to a work that appealed to the practice of assisted death.

The third chapter presents the history of death and of the attitudes towards death. Euthanasia is by no means a new practice or a new, modern concept, but one that has been practiced since the dawn of time. The ancient peoples often resorted to euthanasia for different reasons – economic, social or even moral reasons. Furthermore, at that time, it was neither reprobated nor hidden – on the contrary, it was even supported by the laws of that period. Thus, we can assess that euthanasia and its practice debuted as a natural and heroic act. Its freedom was, however, not permanent and with the rise of Christianity and of the ideas that promoted the sanctity of life, of its divine origins, the induced, assisted death, suicide, no matter the reasons behind it, started to be seen differently and were then reprimanded, hidden, even prohibited. The church began to take measures against the suicidal people, no matter the reasons on which their choices were based. Gradually, the laws began to change in this sense. The modern age came with a strict legislation against those who killed, even for mercy, and against those who assisted a suicide. Meanwhile, together with the development and expansion of the medical and healthcare system, life started to be more and more cherished and preserved. More and more means and arguments to prevent death were sought, but this does not mean that those who supported euthanasia and assisted death faded away. On the contrary, the disputes continued. The situation evolved in the same manner during the contemporary times until the present day in which the medical and

technological advancements can artificially support life, but there are increasingly more voices that request the freedom of voluntary euthanasia, of assisted death. Moreover, at an international level, there are already numerous states that changed their legislations in this sense and that support these pleas.

The following chapter is structured into two parts that present the way in which the two sides are organised, namely the side of those who support the legalisation and practice of euthanasia and the side of those who oppose it, together with the arguments of each side. Thus, the first part contains the theories of those who support euthanasia and assisted death. It presents their arguments and the ideas on which their choices are based – both those who suffer and request it, and those who support them, those who agree with the practice and who take the necessary steps for its legalisation. The foreign laws of the countries in which the practice takes place legally cannot be overlooked. One can thus note that the decisions are not based on indifference, helplessness or cowardice, but on courage, compassion and love. Behind such decisions lie the common suffering and the pain caused by a loved one's suffering, the suffering of the patients and of the helpless lawmakers, caught between technology and medicine on the one hand and the society and the church on the other hand. Furthermore, one must not ignore people's desire to choose and to make decisions regarding their own lives and the way in which they desire to live it or not.

The second part properly presents the arguments that condemn any type of induced death, namely euthanasia, the medically assisted suicide or even taking someone off life support. Thus, the church, together with a large segment of the society, once again bring into discussion the divine origin of life, as well as God's absolute power of giving or taking someone's life. The presentation contains the reasons why neither death in general nor euthanasia in particular brings anything good, neither to the victim nor to their family or to society. Basically, through any death, a link in the chain is broken, a sudden change is forced, a deviation from the natural and proper course of things. Besides this rupture, this shock, the worst thing that can happen is the negation of the divine origin of life and of God's almighty power.

The fifth chapter exclusively treats the issue of taking someone off life support. This subject received its own separate chapter in the thesis due to the fact that this practice is somewhat on the borderline between what is considered to be

euthanasia on the one hand, and natural death on the other hand. Thus, even the ecclesiastic spheres are often at an impasse when it comes to what this act actually is, whether it is a death caused by the divinity, or one induced by man. In this situation, it can be understood in the opposite way as well, namely that it is a death given by the divinity and a life forced by man.

Chapter six is dedicated to society's stance on euthanasia and assisted death. It is structured into seven parts and it begins with a presentation of the issues and general stance on euthanasia. Thus, as expected, what this medical act implies is often not truly understood, it is mistaken for a form of economic or racial murder, or it is seen as a means to dispose of the weaker among us. The chapter continues by explaining the dependency between man and society, as well as the impossibility of one's existence without the other. Therefore, we must understand that a death does not affect only the victim, but the entire environment in which it takes place. In order to better understand this interdependency, we undoubtedly must look to the past, in the history of humanity, in the social history and the history of human groups, and to the way in which people acted and behaved as individuals and as parts of larger groups each time the issues of induced death, natural death and euthanasia were brought into discussion.

The history of these thoughts and stances reveal the first disputes regarding euthanasia and the first arguments used and invoked by people of the ancient times in order to be allowed to die or to be killed, especially when they suffered of incurable illnesses. Besides their requests, their right to die, beginning with the modernisation and with the changes in legislations, the issue of the responsibility of those who requested such a death arose. People were often required to explain the reasons behind their wishes and the acts that would lead to their deaths.

The chapter continues with a part dedicated to the Romanian society and the way in which euthanasia and assisted death are seen in the Romanian space. Thus, since it is prohibited here, there is a great rupture between the physicians, lawmakers, society and the church, in a situation in which it is relatively often requested; more and more physicians are willing to help the patients suffering from mental illnesses and terrible pains. The end of the chapter represents a tribute to this tempting, easy and often attractive death.

The chapter dedicated to theology has three subchapters and it begins with general issues, explanations for the divine origin of life, for what life is, where it

comes from and the role played by suffering, by disease and why it is important to the entire Christian sphere, regardless of the confession. Furthermore, it also contains an explanation for why a premature death can also mean the interruption of the course of a challenge issued by God, an intervention in the fulfilment of His plan. The chapter then discusses the sanctity of life on the one hand and the desacralisation of the societies on the other hand. The origins of people's attitude towards death are thus explained, as well as the technological advancement's great influence on the collective mentality. In other words, it is no surprise that the freedom of euthanasia comes almost simultaneously with the medical and technical advancement – as man holds more and more power over survival, he believes that he holds the power of decision when it comes to death. Naturally, the end of the chapter presents the attitude of the Romanian Orthodox Church regarding euthanasia – it reprimands this practice and it brings numerous arguments that support its opposition. Moreover, for this chapter, I decided to use not only published works, but also a discussion, an interview with a man of the cloth.

The following chapter, number eight, is dedicated to probably the most important side in the battle regarding the legalisation of euthanasia, namely medicine. It approaches the responsibility of the medical professionals, their attitude towards this practice, the legislation the physicians must abide by when carrying out their activity. The chapter also contains an explanation for the difference between active euthanasia and murder, from a medical viewpoint. The two final parts present the situation of the patients who request euthanasia in Romania, their rights to die and the violation of these rights. The physicians are often the tip of the spear in this dispute since, in the event of its practice and legalisation, they are the ones who carry it out. They are the ones responsible for the act and its execution, as well as for the patients' decision to resort to it because once the decision is made, the patient must also receive the opinion of a physician before making the request. In the countries in which euthanasia is legal, the legislation forces the physicians to confirm, in several sessions, both that the patient is dying and that he or she is of sound mind; the legislation also prohibits them to carry out the act, with the exception of certain circumstances. If it is prohibited, the physicians are not exempt from coming into contact with it, because they are often caught between the patients' request and the invocation of their rights and their obligations as doctors that prohibit them from carrying it out. The following part

contains the cause of the prohibition on euthanasia in many countries, namely that it is mistaken for murder. It thus explains why the two should not be confused and it once again brings into discussion each person's right to decide what to do with their own life.

The ninth chapter is the chapter of the legislations. After a general presentation of the necessity for certain laws on the protection and conservation of life, as part of prolonging a decent life, it presents the laws on the protection of life, from the ancient times to the present day, with a greater focus on the legislations of the modern period. The chapter then contains a presentation of certain policies of death, several ideas, draft laws that support and favour the practice of euthanasia and of assisted death. They must not be understood as an encouragement of this practice at a general uncontrolled level, but one must merely consider the fact that there are many situations and cases in which it should be practiced within a legal framework and with no restrictions. Thus, the reasons for which in some countries euthanasia was legalised are presented and explained – particularly due to the good education of the people, as well as, in the case of other countries, the reasons for which the people's lack of trust in the healthcare system or in other social structures, supported by a strong religiosity, makes it impossible to legalise euthanasia. The final part of this chapter focuses on the case of Romania and on the reasons for which, in this country, the possibility of legalising this practice seems to be nowhere in sight.

The part of the thesis dedicated to the case study brings forth two cases, one from the United States, which presents the anonymous testimony of a physician who granted the relentless requests of a patient and ended her life, and the second case of a young man from Romania, who requested euthanasia but was denied it, after which he died in agony. I have chosen these two cases due to the fact that both of them clearly show the reality of many hospitals. The difference between the two situations resides in the endings of the two cases, the ending that could have been the same for both people. Thus, in the United States, the patient's wellbeing was above the law, as was the physician's duty to honour her dignity and request, while in Romania the priority was held by the religious teachings and the authorities' lack of willingness to allow for the dying wish of an agonising patient to be granted. In the end, they both died, but while the woman died without suffering and humiliation, the young Romanian man was faced with an outdated medical and

administrative system, physical pain, helplessness, the humiliation of losing his dignity, his physical abilities and, in the end, his life. Things could have been much easier in his case as well, especially since that was his desire.

The annexes of the study are represented by testimonies from servants of the Romanian Orthodox Church regarding their attitude and view on euthanasia and assisted death, in the first part, followed by articles and press snippets on the two cases presented in the case study. Furthermore, I presented several disputes, opinions and public attitudes towards the legalisation of euthanasia in Romania. Naturally, the church could never condone suicide, the suppression of life or murder, regardless of the means in which it could be carried out. Life is of divine origin and therefore only God has the right to take one's life, as He is the only one who can give it. However, this viewpoint is not entirely shared by the people in Romania, a fact supported by the annexes of this thesis.

The bibliography contains the complete list of works, articles, testimonies and interviews that were used for this thesis.