

Is Euthanasia Ethical?

In 2018, Aurelia Bowers voluntarily drank poison to end her life. This is a form of euthanasia, which is the medical practice of intentionally ending one's life to alleviate suffering. Unlike traditional euthanasia cases, Bowers was not terminally ill. Bowers explained, "I'm 29 years old and I've chosen to be voluntarily euthanized. I've chosen this because I have a lot of mental health issues. I suffer unbearably and hopelessly. Every breath I take is torture." Cases like this lead many to question the ethics of euthanasia and to ask whether it should be legalized.

Proponents of euthanasia often advocate for it under the banner of "death with dignity," asserting that it offers a humane release from excruciating suffering. They contend that in certain situations, death might be a more merciful alternative to prolonged agony. Euthanasia can also be seen as a potential solution for families grappling with huge medical costs, offering a means to alleviate financial stress while sparing the terminally ill individual from enduring further pain. Additionally, many claim that an individual should have the freedom to choose when and how their life ends, citing principles of personal autonomy. In fact, many argue that it would be immoral to force people to continue living in pain, rather than dying peacefully, if they are clearly expressing the desire to end their lives. For proponents of euthanasia, adhering to a patient's request to die might be seen as the ultimate fulfillment of the Hippocratic Oath, ensuring the well-being and autonomy of the individual.

By contrast, opponents of euthanasia caution against the normalization of assisted suicide, fearing that it may inadvertently encourage a sense of hopelessness and lead to a failure to seek help. They argue that cases like Bowers demonstrate how euthanasia encourages death for those without terminal illnesses. They also caution against the potential for financial considerations to overshadow human life, dubbing the practice as placing "dignity in death" rather than "death with dignity." The debate extends to concerns of potential abuse, with euthanasia opponents highlighting the risk of involuntary euthanasia where individuals might be coerced, or their wishes misinterpreted. A doctor might end up helping to euthanize a patient even if the individual wants to continue living. The very autonomy supported by proponents, they argue, might lead to a slippery slope that ends up including involuntary decisions.

Discussion Questions

1. Under what circumstances can euthanasia be ethically justifiable, if at all?
2. Is it ever ethically permissible to end the life of a patient who is not terminally ill but is undergoing severe mental pain and suffering?
3. Is there a moral difference between killing someone and letting them die?