An Approach to Applied Ethics: Kantian view on Bio-ethical issues with Special Reference to Euthanasia

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ABSTRACT

Purpose:
The most striking development in the study of ethics during the 2\textsuperscript{nd} half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century has been the growing interest in the field of applied ethics. In this paper an attempt has been made how ethical principles are required to be applied to solve practical moral problems in a society. Essentially it is a claim about how to perform applied ethics – about the appropriate way to solve moral disputes that people actually face in their lives.

Methodology:
The study is based on secondary sources like books, journals and internet surfing.

Findings:
Ethical issues are taking on a greater importance in society and in our lives. Thus, in applied ethics ethical principles are required to be applied to solve practical moral problems. When there is confusion or conflict about what ought to be done, then Kantian ethics is applied to solve moral disputes.

Research Imitation:
The study is limited in time and space.

Practical Implication:
Today there is a growing awareness of many moral and social issue and certain bio-ethical issues like Euthanasia. The process of bio-ethics consists of critical reflection on the moral science. Kantian ethics discuss how we, as human, should pursue our lives and how one views the right and wrongs of Euthanasia.

**Value:-**

Problems of Bio-ethical issues are especially urgent in the present day. They are rather the problems of human beings in situations in which not only medical care is needed but also ethical decision is necessary for every moments of our life. Thus as the field of bio-ethics continues to evolve the philosophical and moral confidence in the foundations of ethical theory are being challenged as never before in our life time.

**Key Words:**
Applied ethics, Kantian ethics, Bio-ethics, Euthanasia.

**Introduction: Ethics:**

In the age of globalization all human beings are busy to attain material comfort or happiness due to rapid technological advancement and modernization of the society, but it seems that they feel insecure in every sphere of life. As a result they are unable to lead a meaningful life which is termed as good life. To preserve social harmony and integration, morality and moral codes are very essential.

Ethics is the branch of philosophy that deals with values relating to human conduct, with respect to the rightness and wrongness of certain actions and wrongness and badness of the motives and ends of such actions.

According to Mahatma Gandhi ‘Ethics shape character and character shapes man’. A man without character is a man with flesh and bones and nothing more than that.

Philosophers today usually divide ethical theories into three general subject areas: Meta-ethics, Normative ethics and Applied ethics.
An approach to Applied Ethics:

Applied ethics is the branch of ethics which consists of the analysis of specific, controversial moral issues such as abortion, euthanasia etc. In recent years applied ethics issues have been subdivided into convenient groups such as medical ethics, business ethics, environmental ethics etc. Thus, applied ethics is a growing interdisciplinary field dealing with ethical problems in different areas of society.

While the term ‘applied ethics’ gained currency only a few decades ago, it is not a new idea. Philosophy has traditionally concerned itself with questions of personal morality (what should I do?) and public morality (what is the good for society?). While these questions are fundamental to applied ethics, they also characterize ethics in general. It gives particular and direct attention to specific issues and controversies in private and public life. In the private sphere ethics issues can include matters relating to the family and in the public sphere applied ethics may involve assessing policy in the light of the impact of advances in biomedical and genetics example, life and death, Risk Technology and ethics or it could mean duties to future generations in the light of environmental problems. Thus, applied ethics is the art or science of reflecting on moral dilemmas and moral problems in different social contexts. One of the influential philosopher in the field of applied ethics is Jamer Childress defines applied ethics as follows:-

“The term ‘applied ethics’ and ‘practical ethics’ are used interchangeable to indicate the application of ethics to special arenas of human activity, such as business, politics and medicine and to particular problems such as abortion, euthanasia”1 (Childress, 1986).

Let us now look at the field of bio- ethics.

Bio- ethics:-

The term ‘Bio- ethics’ is the combination of “bio” representing biological knowledge and ‘ethics’ which refers to knowledge of human value systems. The term ‘Bi- ethics’ is for the first time used by Van Ransselaer Potter of Winsconsin University in 1970 in his book ‘Bio- ethics a Bridge to Future’.
The issues of medical ethics come within the domain of bio-ethics. Although ethical issues have been raised in medical and biology since ancient times. The large scale introduction of biomedical and other technologies in second half of the 20th century has intensified old problems and added new ones such as issue over the definition of death and withdraw of life sustaining medical treatment, abortion, the use of human, animal tissue for scientific research etc.

Today, the ethics of life covers a very wide field including surrogacy, abortion, organ transplantation, cloning etc. Thus solving bio-ethical issues is a complex one.

Here, in this paper, I like to discuss one bio-ethical issue ‘the issue of Euthanasia’.

**Euthanasia:**

Medical ethics is an important area of applied ethics and Euthanasia is one of the items of it. Originally, the word ‘Euthanasia’ was derived from two Greek roots meaning ‘a good death’². Generally euthanasia is defined as a ‘gentle’ and ‘easy death’ to a person who suffers from incurable and painful disease. Euthanasia can take three forms:

1. **Voluntary Euthanasia:** this type of euthanasia is carried out by a doctor at the request of hopelessly ill patient of patients legal representatives for the sake of the patient himself/ herself.
2. **Non-voluntary Euthanasia**
3. **Involuntary Euthanasia**

1. **Voluntary Euthanasia:** This type of euthanasia occurs when the person is unconscious or otherwise unable to make meaningful choice between living or actually dying, and an appropriate person takes the decision on his/her behalf.
2. **Involuntary euthanasia:** This type of euthanasia is done against the wishes of the patient and would clearly count as murder. However involuntary euthanasia is universally condemned and plays no role in current moral controversies.

Generally it is considered that taking of one’s life is morally wrong. Medical ethics states that a doctor’s duty is to save the life of his/her patient. But some form of euthanasia is
not morally wrong from the viewpoint of mercy for a hopelessly ill and suffering patient. So it is debatable whether killing is morally justified or not?

In this context, we may refer to Peter Singer’s observations that naturally each self-conscious being has the fear of death. Secondly, all self-conscious beings have will to live. Thirdly, all human beings have right to live of their own. Finally, life of self-conscious being is self-controlled. If we have any respect for this self-controlled life of man then killing will be not morally tenable.

Again, let us see from another angle observation given by Peter Singer. Firstly, voluntary euthanasia is applied only at the request of or consent of the patient. Secondly, though man morally desires to live yet unbearable painful disease compels man to desire death, which is compatible to the plan of mercy killing. Thirdly, one of the characteristics of rights is that man can sacrifice his rights at his own will. A hopeless ill patient may sacrifice his right to live. Finally, a self-conscious being indicates that whether he will live or die. So to respect the power of self-control of human being, mercy killing can be supported as it does not ignore the right of self-controlled humans. Peter Singer says, ‘if rational agent autonomously choose to die, then respect for autonomy would lead us to assist them to do as they choose.’

**Kantian Perspectives regarding Euthanasia:**

Kant was a German philosopher, whose philosophy shook the foundations of western philosophy. This contribution to morality and to ethics cannot be taken for granted as they were of vital importance to those who came across them. In this paper, I like to employ Kantian arguments regarding Euthanasia.

Immanuel Kant is generally credited with much of the foundational thought in the evolution of deontology and deontological perspectives. Kant viewed the ability of human beings to ‘reason’ as the basis of our status as moral agents. In his ‘The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals’, he presents an account of moral duty. For an action to have moral worth, for it reflect a good will, the action must be undertaken for duty’s sake.
Thus, every action is based on reason alone and reason can be revealed in the basic principles of morality. These principles are good will, duty and categorical imperative.

Moral worth can only be derived from our actions when we act from duty. Without duty our moral worth is inconsequential. Thus we cannot have any moral worth if we act out of feelings, emotions and self-interest. Actions have true moral worth only when they spring from recognition of duty. Thus, duty, good will and categorical imperative goes hand in hand.

Now, the question arise – ‘what makes euthanasia morally right?’ or ‘is it morally permissible?’

Regarding these question arguments may be forwarded by Kant for and against euthanasia.

**Arguments for Euthanasia:**

Arguments may be put forwarded in support of euthanasia from Kant’s standpoint through argument from ‘Golden Rule’. Kantian philosophy asserts that what rational beings should wish is more important. One who become incompetent and has lost his moral life has severe dementia becomes relegated to the status of an animal choose to be discarded through euthanasia. Kant and most others agree that moral life has greater value than the physical life.

According to Kant, duty requires a man who has been bitten by a rabid dog to end his life. This man face two poor alternatives: live as madman or commit suicide. The former choice not only compromise the man’s humanity, but also poses a danger to others. On the other hand, the latter choice allows the individual to retain his status as a moral person before he loses his dignity. In a similar way, patients who foresee severe dementia are innocent of wrong doing, but morally justified in adopting euthanasia in order not to burden others. Thus we must always act in ways that do not disrespect the dignity of own fellow human beings and in ourselves.

This bring us closer to the ‘Golden Rule’ which says, ‘Do unto others what you like done to you’. The idea behind this golden rule is that it is universal and hence it may be equally applicable to all. By the application of this rule to the sphere of euthanasia we may decide whether mercy killing is moral or immoral. It is true that we will die one day though
we do not know when and how. Let us suppose that we are to choose one out of two choices. Firstly, we may die quietly without pain from a fatal injection and secondly, we may die with painful, unbearable and incurable disease. In this circumstance we will choose the first option in which death would peacefully come by lethal injection, that is, we will meant euthanasia. So we should apply this to others also and from this standpoint euthanasia can be accepted.

**Arguments against Euthanasia:**

It may be argued against euthanasia from the standpoint of Immanual Kant’s observation that euthanasia is contrary to everyone’s natural urge to live. In all the natural processes of our body we can observe the urge of nature to help us to live. But euthanasia is against this urge of nature. He try to put forward an argument against euthanasia through his first and second formulation of the Categorical Imperative:

a) “Act in such a way that we can all will the maxim of our actions to become a Universal Law”.

b) “Act so that you treat humanity whether in your own person or in that of another always as an end and never as a means”.

Kant’s first formulation of categorical imperative talks about man being a rational being who has no right to formulate such a maxim like “if I am in a terrible condition, I have the right to take my life or reserve the right to doctor or my family members”. This kind of maxim will not form a universal law. Since it cannot form a universal law, then it should be removed and replaced with a more reasonable maxim. Thus when an action cannot be universalized, that action is absolutely prohibited.

Furthermore, Kant speaks of humanity as an end not a means to an end in his second formulation of Categorical Imperative. If humanity is an, end, no man has the right to take his life even in whatever condition he finds himself. We must thus act in ways that do not disrespect our fellow human being and ourselves. It will be disastrous if we act in such way as dehumanizing ourselves through euthanasia. Thus, according to Kant euthanasia is unethical because it is unable to be universalized and because it is simple using one’s body as a means to an end.

**Conclusion:**
From the above discussion it may be maintained that euthanasia is not a justified killing. Immanuel Kant no doubt is a unique scholar and his contribution to ethical issues and to euthanasia in particular is really satisfactory. He agrees that moral life has greater value than the physical life. Furthermore he speaks of humanity as an end in themselves not as a means to an end. Thus, according to Kant, an agent who takes his own life acts in violation of the moral law. Killing is wrong and voluntary euthanasia is also wrong.

Thus, it may be maintained that euthanasia is illogical and morally untenable from ethical and practical standpoint:

**Ethical Arguments:**
- Euthanasia weakens society’s respect for the sanctity of life.
- Euthanasia affects other people’s right, not just those of the patient.
- Accepting euthanasia lead some lives as worthless than others.

**Practical Arguments:**
- Allowing euthanasia will lead to less good care for the terminally ill.
- Allowing euthanasia undermines the commitment of doctors and nurses to saving lives.

Therefore, as human life is sacred and it’s a gift from God, all human beings are to be valued irrespective of age, sex, race & religion.

**Notes:**
1. Childress, James (1986), Applied Ethics
3. Singer Peter, Practical Ethics, P. 195
5. Ibid, P. 23
6. Kant Immanu, foundation of Metaphysics of Morals, P. 55
7. Ibid, P. 55
8. Ibid, P. 55
References:

4. Kant Immanuel, Foundation of Metaphysics of Morals
5. Rachal James, ‘The Morality of Euthanasia’