Letter

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The core notion of euthanasia in its primordial beginnings

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Abstract

This article provides a brief review of the history of euthanasia, which has always been an ethical, social, legal and medical issue. Euthanasia, meaning "good death" refers to the practice of ending a life to relieve pain and distress. The term was already known in ancient Greece, from the time of Plato, who advocated the suppression of those who were not healthy "of body and soul". Completely different was the thinking of Hippocrates, who mentioned it in his oath, laying the foundation for modern medical ethics based on absolute respect for the person and human life. Recognizing the growing interest in the topic, this writing succinctly outlines the historical evolution of the concept of euthanasia limited to its origins. ***Clin Ter 2023; 174 (2):146-147 doi: 10.7417/CT.2023.2511***

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Dear Editor,

The term "euthanasia", from the Greek words "eu" and "thànatos", which in Italian translate as "well" and "death", respectively, is used today to denote the quick and painless death of a patient who expressly requests it (voluntary euthanasia) and is normally caused by a lethal drug (active euthanasia) or by the discontinuation of life-support (passive euthanasia). The obligation to use ordinary means should be related to the state of knowledge, organizational possibilities that vary from place to place, time to time, according to cultural orientation (1). Contrary to the modern meaning, from the very dawn of civilization, the "good death" has consisted in the realization of a social interest that prevented the development of individuals considered unsustainable for themselves and useless for their communities. The physical elimination, however, of such individuals who could presumably be a burden on society (e.g. sick people, individuals with disabilities and malformations or children deemed to be underdeveloped, also known as social euthanasia), never came to constitute a moral issue, since they were not allowed, by a decision certainly intolerable to us today, to proceed in development. In this sense, noteworthy instances are the Roman Tarpean cliff, from which sick children were thrown, or the routine abandonment, in ancient Sparta, of infants affected by such limitations as to prevent the elevation of their rank even to mere hoplites. Such examples cannot be referred to as euthanasia, since the very notion of end of life entails a decision-making stage that an infant certainly cannot have. We speak of euthanasia, whether active or passive, when the subject has already consciously expressed a desire to "reasonably" end their lives. The earliest forms of euthanasia, then, were meant to eliminate sick individuals as harmful to the social progress of their communities or, in a purely eugenic sense, for the preservation of public health, hence the very survival of the community, understood as a race. In that regard, Plato left several written accounts, in which he advocated for the suppression of those who were not healthy "of body and soul". In his work "The Republic", the Greek philosopher wrote, in fact, that medicine and justice should treat only "those who are naturally healthy of body and soul. As for those who are not, doctors will let those who are physically ill die, judges will have those whose souls are naturally bad and incurable killed". A radically opposed viewpoint is laid out in Hippocratic thought; in his work "Oath", Hippocrates lays the foundations of a modern medical ethics based on absolute respect for the person and human life: "I will regulate the standard of living for the good of the sick according to my strength and judgment, I will refrain from causing harm and offense. I will not administer to any person, even if requested, a deadly medicine, nor will I suggest such advice; similarly, to no woman will I give an abortifacient medicine. With innocence and purity I will guard my life and my art". With the advent of Christianity, human life strengthened its sacred and inviolable aspect, so that throughout the Middle Ages and until at least the 15th century AD, any form of voluntary suppression of one's life was regarded as a very serious sin against God, since one was thereby depriving oneself of the greatest and most precious gift from God to human beings (2). Finally, in the modern age, euthanasia continues to be treated from an ethical rather than a medical-existential perspective, that is, in relation to the concept of social permissibility in administering death to a sick person who requests it, to end

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their sufferings (3). The only exception, from this point of view and within the framework of modernity, is the English philosopher Francis Bacon, who was the first to introduce the term euthanasia into modern medical language, thus profoundly renewing the traditional religious mentality; following his thought, science and the technology connected with it is no longer an enemy of faith, but an ally that must be conceived in function of the regnum hominis, but at the same time of the regnum Dei and ad majorem gloriam Dei. Within such a framework, the purposes of faith cannot fail to coincide also with certain purposes of great human relevance, among which the duty of medical science to bring relief to suffering patients, who must therefore be treated as persons rather than mere expressions of a clinical case with abstract ethical implications at that point. In this sense, Bacon writes, physicians must acquire precise specialized knowledge that will enable them not only to treat diseases in broad terms or from a mostly theoretical perspective, but to treat them as human beings in need by "scrupulously applying the particular remedies which, according to their property, agree now to one, now to another of the diseases" (4). Medicine, Bacon observes, must be concerned not only with restoring health, but also with mitigating pain, where, however, "this mitigation of pain is not only needed when it, by the elimination of a dangerous symptom, may help to lead to convalescence, but is also needed when all hope of cure is lacking, to give a more serene and placid death", so it is wrong for physicians to "abandon the sick when they have reached their extremes, whereas, in my judgment, if they were consistent with their office and humanity, they should learn the art of helping the dying to leave this world with more gentleness and serenity, and practice it diligently" (5). For the English philosopher, the doctor's primary objective must be not to shorten the patient's life, but only to ensure that natural death does not occur painfully or occurs as painlessly as possible, an inkling of today's compassionate medicine. The scientific and religious modernity of this position consists in the fact that the Christian tradition of agapic love toward God and neighbor is not abandoned, but renewed with unprecedented awareness. Until then, science was in fact considered substantially subordinate to theology, almost a "*pure*" intellectual activity, and as such disjointed from any practical life endeavors. In Bacon are contained, in germ, the terms of the complex, bitter and contradictory contemporary debate on euthanasia, which not unlike beginning-of-life issues such as abortion or contraception, calls for well-balanced approach in order to accommodate conflicting views (6-9). In that regard, it is worth reporting what Postman, a scholar of the philosopher, writes about Bacon's extraordinary modernity: "With his utilitarian vision of knowledge, Bacon was the principal architect of a new edifice of thought, from which resignation was banished and in which God was accorded a special place. The name of this edifice was progress and power...Although in his time others were aware of the repercussions of practical inventions on the conditions of life, Bacon was the first to think about it in deep and systematic terms. Reading him today, Bacon continues to surprise us with his modernity. We are never far from the concept that science is a source of power and progress" (10).

Conflict of interest: The author declares that he has no conflict of interest regarding this manuscript

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