

**A Short History of Euthanasia - A Brief Look into  
the Centuries Old Debate over an Individual's Right to Die**

Mark Earle  
Memorial University of Newfoundland  
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## Introduction

“In all cases of hopeless and painful illness it should be the recognized duty of the medical attendant, whenever so desired by the patient, to administer chloroform—or such other anesthetic as may by and by supersede chloroform—so as to destroy consciousness at once, and put the sufferer to a quick and painless death; all needful precautions being adopted to prevent any possible abuse of such duty, and means being taken to establish beyond the possibility of doubt or question, that the remedy was applied at the express”.<sup>1</sup>

In 1873, Samuel D. Williams, a member of the well-known Birmingham Speculative Club, published an article entitled “Euthanasia”. In it, Williams, an otherwise unknown businessman by trade, proposes his solution to a common medical issue—approaching dying patients suffering from incurable disease or unbearable pain. At the time, Williams’ proposal to this issue represented the first true advocacy efforts in favour of euthanasia, or the medical hastening of death, during the modern age.<sup>2</sup>

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, euthanasia was generally unaccepted by the medical establishment, as well as the public in general. As such, there was a swift response to Williams’ proposal. Strong opposition to the idea emerged, and the medical community disregarded any notion that hinted at a possibility that physicians would help shorten the life of their patients. In addition to the moral grounds on which euthanasia was dismissed, this practice challenged one of the most fundamental principals of medicine, to prolong life. The American Medical Association shot down any such proposal, stating that it was insulting to suggest that they require “the physician to don the robes of an executioner”.<sup>3</sup>

While the majority of the response to Williams’ proposal was negative, physicians were all too aware of the issue for which Williams proposed a solution. Even before the idea of euthanasia was presented, the topic of the terminally ill was one of growing concern within the medical community.<sup>2</sup> In time, several leading physicians came to the support of William’s and offered their support for legalization of euthanasia. Slowly, the opinions and ideas surrounding euthanasia began to change, and the euthanasia movement had truly begun.

It is common to think of euthanasia as a modern day issue given the publicity it currently receives. However, long before advancements in medical technology that have contributed to our ability to prolong life, the topic of the suffering patient was of concern. The topic of euthanasia dates back to ancient times, and its definition has been shaped throughout history.

## Euthanasia in the Ancient World

The term “euthanasia”, in its origins, is a combination of the Greek words “*eu*” and “*thanos*”, together signifying a “good death” or an “easy death”.<sup>4</sup> For centuries, the literal meaning conveyed by the word was the only one known. Historians point out,

however, that a “good death” or “easy death” was not one of human control, but that of divine providence. For many during these times, it was a death which one could hope for but never truly achieve.<sup>1</sup>

Hippocrates, one of the founding fathers of medicine and proposed creator of the Hippocratic Oath, was one of the first individuals to write about euthanasia around 400BC. Hippocrates has written against the act of euthanasia, once writing, “I will not prescribe a deadly drug to please someone, nor give advice that may cause his death.”<sup>5</sup> In ancient times, however, opinions regarding death were vastly different than they are today. Old age was perceived as a weakness in ancient Greece, and it only acted to deprive them of the posthumous fame for which they longed.<sup>6</sup> This idea is expressed by Plato around 400BC, when he wrote, “When we are going to die, the things that have been said about us are not going to be lost too.”<sup>7</sup> Plato also lent support to the concept of euthanasia as in the *Republic* (374BC), Plato argues that those whose body and souls are not healthy should be abandoned to die, and also argues that medicine should only be given if it contributes to the improvement of a patient’s life, not simply the prolongation of a life.<sup>8</sup>

By the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, Christianity had begun to have a profound effect on the general population’s opinions regarding euthanasia. It was around this time that legal reforms in Athens favoured Christian beliefs rather than Pagan beliefs. Christian views functioned by linking suffering with spiritual growth and the Catholic Church declared that suicide or attempted suicide was a sin, and grounds for excommunication.<sup>9</sup> For Christians, the decision of death was never one to be made by mankind, but exclusively God—since life was considered a gift from God, death was regarded to occur only at His will. Because of this, euthanasia was considered murder.<sup>7</sup>

The Renaissance Period, 14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries, brought with it newfound opinions regarding euthanasia. It was during this period where leaps in scientific discovery were made. Scientists, and medical professionals, finally began to understand the human body to a certain degree, which gave rise to new discussions regarding euthanasia.<sup>3</sup> Francis Bacon (1562-1626), a well known English philosopher at the time, became the first to speak openly about euthanasia since the ancient Greeks and his discussions were in favour of the practice when used to avoid pain or to end an “excruciating and miserable life”.<sup>10</sup> Although Catholic and Protestant churches remained steadfast in their beliefs to fight back against euthanasia, it was during this era that people began to realize that euthanasia may be helpful after all.

## **The Euthanasia Movement**

Early in the euthanasia movement it became overwhelmingly clear that the main obstacle in the fight towards euthanasia was the law. Late in the 1800’s, one of the leading medical journals at the time concluded that according to any known code in civilized society, the law was clear in saying “thou shalt not kill”.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of public support, or physician ideology of euthanasia changing, there was no hope of making any change in practice until there was a change in law.

By the 1930's, the actions of two individuals shaped the euthanasia movement. The first was Dr. Charles Potter, an American minister, theologian and author. Dr. Potter was known nationally for his humanitarian work. In 1928, he founded the First Humanist Society of New York who stated as their philosophy, "a faith in the supreme value and self-predictability of human personality."<sup>2</sup> Including notable members such as Julian Huxley, Albert Einstein and Thomas Mann, the society served as a catalyst for humanist movement.

The second individual was Mrs. R. L. Mitchell. An extremely wealthy individual, Mitchell had been hospitalized from 1934-1936 as a mental patient. This experience shaped her views on euthanasia. In her eyes, psychiatrists were of no help in treating those with mental illness and the most reasonable thing to do was to legalize euthanasia so that these patient may "find peace and not live in that intolerable hell that we lived in before, with the bars enclosing us in our torture and a nurse guarding us day and night so that we cannot escape to peace."<sup>11</sup>

Although their personalities differed greatly, in 1936, with Mitchell's finances and Potter's political sway, these two individuals formed the Euthanasia Society of America (ESA). The formation of the ESA is arguably the most important step forward in history towards changing the general public's view of euthanasia. Memberships within the society quickly grew and opinions began to change towards euthanasia. Dr. Potter spoke of euthanasia no longer as a religious, medical or legal concern, but first and foremost as a social concern.<sup>2</sup>

By 1940, euthanasia was rapidly emerging as a topic of extreme societal importance, reaching levels of publicity that rivaled the birth control and eugenics movements.<sup>4</sup> Members of the ESA were hopeful that, in time, the euthanasia movement would realize the same victories as these other movements. However, while the ESA could only hope for its momentum to continue, history was about to present an unwelcome and unanticipated challenge which would alter the public's view of euthanasia forever.

## **Nazi Germany and the Euthanasia Programme**

Beginning in the winter of 1938 and continuing throughout the war until 1945, Nazi Germany, under the command of Hitler, organized the murder of more than 200,000 children, psychiatric patients, camp inmates who had fallen ill, people suffering from major depression and nonconformists.<sup>12</sup> This state-organized killing, operating under the codename "Operation T-4", but more commonly known today as the "Euthanasia Programme" first started in response to a petition from the father of a handicapped child. Hitler forever changed the meaning of euthanasia when he instructed Karl Brandt, his personal physician, and Phillip Bouhler, the head of the Chancellery of the Fuhrer, to authorize a group of doctors whose duties would be to terminate the lives of handicapped babies.<sup>13</sup> Brandt recalled these instructions after the war, stating:

"He [Hitler] gave me general directives on how he imagined it, and the fundamentals were that insane persons who were in such a condition that

they could no longer take any conscious part in life were to be given relief through death”<sup>14</sup>

The Euthanasia Programme initially focused only on children, and resulted in the deaths of 5200 children, mostly with Downs Syndrome. However, in 1939, Hitler instructed that a program be commenced for adults.<sup>13</sup> The program underwent many changes throughout the war—first, only the mentally ill and the “incurables” were targeted. Over time, due to widespread public disgust, the program was adapted, moved into the concentration camps and code names were developed to hide the process from the public eye.<sup>15</sup> While more than one million Jewish individuals were killed throughout the war, it is estimated that 70,000-200,000 were directly killed under the Euthanasia Programme. Hitler never achieved his goal of eliminating the Jewish race, however he forever changed the meaning of the word “euthanasia”.

## **Conclusion**

After the war, it took decades for the ESA to regain public trust, and to initiate another change in public perceptions surround euthanasia. The ESA made many unsuccessful attempts at policy changes and brought their arguments to all levels of government including the Supreme Court of the United States.

Today, the debate surrounding euthanasia is as strong as ever. Many high-profile legal cases, combined with continued change in public perception have provided valuable support for the euthanasia movement. In recent years, medical communities have begun to accept euthanasia as a valuable tool and, in the shift of views toward patient autonomy, many of those with insufferable pain are starting to receive the treatment they always longed for. Political and legal communities have also supported this change in perception, and new laws support this idea. A strong opposition to euthanasia will continue to persist. As such, it is impossible to determine how euthanasia will be portrayed as we move throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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