

Euthanasia and the end of life. A critical reflection

La eutanasia y el final de la vida. Una reflexión crítica

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First, it could be said that the book is an excellent summary about euthanasia. Although the author points out that it is a popularization book, it has methodological precision and academic rigor. Secondly, it enables an interdisciplinary approach to the subject. In terms of its structure, the book consists of eight chapters that address the different social, conceptual, and historical elements of the object of study.

In the first chapter, entitled “Definitions” (13-25), the author argues that the meaning of euthanasia should focus on the so-called active euthanasia, and not on the so-called passive euthanasia, given that the latter usually refers, for example, to the abandonment of extraordinary or disproportionate measures in the care of terminally ill patients. Thus, euthanasia can be characterized as follows: “1) deliberate, voluntary, express and repeated request; 2) it is applied by the health professional, carried out painlessly and in the person’s

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best interest; 3) in an irreversible illness” (pp. 17-18). It is not entirely clear why “passive euthanasia”, understood as a deliberate omission of medical care in a terminally ill patient resulting in death, cannot be considered ethically equivalent to active euthanasia.

Likewise, the chapter distinguishes in detail and with precise examples assisted suicide, therapeutic obstinacy, homicide, professional negligence, limitation/adequacy of therapeutic effort, among other factors that are no less relevant.

In chapter 2, entitled “A brief historical overview” (pp. 7-32), the author briefly explains how in ancient times the term was not very precise in terms of what it is understood today as euthanasia. As history progresses, the concept is delimited up to the present day, where many precise denominations arise around euthanasia such as cacoethanasia, dysthanasia, indirect euthanasia (terminal sedation) and the term euthanasia (direct active euthanasia).

In Chapter 3, entitled “Cultural changes in the well-dying” (pp. 33-47), De la Torre analyzes the historical changes in the treatment of the elderly, the changes in the attitudes before dying, both persons who are dying and the attitudes of physicians towards death. In this sense, the author emphasizes the denial and concealment of death in contemporary society. This theme is certainly accurate: death has become a taboo in our times. However, it is true that also in contemporary times it has been recognized that technical interventions should not be carried out at any cost to maintain the life of patients. The chapter also presents some cultural prejudices that prevent an adequate dialogue on these issues, for example, confusing euthanasia with dignified death. On the other hand, the chapter discusses changes in the processes of dying and the way of dying, such as the fact that most deaths occur in a hospital setting. Finally, the chapter closes with a suggestion to dismantle cultural prejudices that impede or distort the social and legal debate on euthanasia.

In Chapter 4, entitled “Euthanasia in the world” (49-68), the author provides an excellent summary of the status (up to 2019) of approved euthanasia legislation. To that extent, statistical data from

different countries (Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Canada, Colombia, Switzerland, the United States and Australia) are compared, as well as the criteria for access to euthanasia in the countries mentioned; that is, a comparison is established between these on the use and understanding of the subject indicated. These countries are also compared with other (European) countries that reject euthanasia, such as France and Germany.

In Chapter 5, “Euthanasia in Spain” (pp. 69-89), De la Torre explains the regulations in force in Spain at that time, i.e., 2019 (before the legalization of euthanasia in March 2021). The most interesting and illustrative part of this chapter consists of the description of the cases that had (and have) media impact, such as the case of Ramón Sampedro, María José Carrasco, the case of Andrea, among others. Likewise, the author reviews the position of political parties, the Catholic Church, and some civil associations such as the Association for the Right to Die with Dignity.

Regarding chapter 6, “Euthanasia in the Christian tradition” (pp. 91-112), a historical comparison throughout Christianity shows the unanimity of Christian thought in its rejection of euthanasia. Nevertheless, the author shows how the right to die in peace and the legitimate right to refuse disproportionate treatment took shape. Consequently, a review of the Magisterium of the Church from Pius XII to Pope Francis is presented. Most notable is the brief explanation of the debate on artificial hydration and nutrition, as well as the position of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2007 on this issue.

Likewise, Chapter 7, entitled “Arguments for and against euthanasia” (pp. 113-131), the author outlines the arguments regarding euthanasia. In doing so, emphasis is given to the opponents of euthanasia. For this reason, the author analyzes the slippery slope argument, the social consequences for the vulnerable in the case of decriminalization, the impact on physicians, the neglect that could be generated around palliative care, the question of whether there is a right to die, the existence of an authentic autonomy and the inability to face old age and death in contemporary society.

On the other hand, in chapter 8, called “Euthanasia in other religious traditions” (pp. 133-146), the positions of Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam on euthanasia are presented; thus, it is concluded that all of them are opposed to euthanasia, although in Hinduism certain suicides are permitted in a religious context. Likewise, religions are opposed to therapeutic incarnation.

The book closes with conclusions about the importance of clarifying concepts and recognizing, at the same time, that the answers to this problem are not black and white, but that there is a gray area where it is not always possible to find an unquestionable ethical answer.

In short, the book is an excellent summary of the problem of euthanasia, written in clear and precise language. On the other hand, one of its valuable elements is that in the different chapters there are tables that highlight the main ideas. This text, likewise, does not present “leftovers”. It makes some repetitions, but without being excessive. It is also complete and covers the subject of euthanasia in a substantial way, which makes for a pleasant read. Finally, it has many examples of the main concepts, making it a useful text for teaching.

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