

**When**

**Can**

**I die?**

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When we ask, “When can I die?” we are not asking so much a time as under what circumstances. Today, largely because of advancements in medical science, people are living longer. However, we are finding as we live longer the extra years are not necessarily enjoyable years. What good is ten more years of life if one must live in constant pain and agony? So people are *beginning*, in *increasing* numbers, to consider ending their lives prior to a natural death.

When we say *beginning*, it is important to realize euthanasia that euthanasia is not a new phenomenon. Arguments against suicide are nothing new. St. Thomas Aquinas, in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, condemned all forms of suicide regardless of reason or intent because life is a gift from God, not ours to control. One of the arguments used by Aquinas is suicide was wrong because it harmed those left behind. Neither are arguments in favor of euthanasia anything new, for Michel de Montaigne in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century was one of the first to write in favor of euthanasia. The issue at hand is the attempt today to make it morally acceptable and hence legally permissible.

Cultures have developed varying views on euthanasia. For example, in Hindu culture (passive) euthanasia is encouraged.

A person who senses that *death is approaching* should inform family members, refuse further nourishment, and be *lifted from the bed* to a spot on the ground that has been ritually purified for the purpose (Spiro, 123).

Hindus believe in dying a good death. A good death is defined as when the person is in full possession of their mental and physical faculties, and cognizant of what is going on. One should emphasize the phrases from above, *death is approaching* and *lifted from the bed*, indicating that the person should already be near death. The Hindus are not referring to the *active* taking of one’s life, such as lethal injection. Their attitude seems to be one of not delaying the inevitable. This is part of the argument over euthanasia, when is euthanasia justified if we do make it legal?

This notion of *good death* for Hindus is actually a key component of the argument over euthanasia. In fact, the word euthanasia comes from Eu, which is Greek means good, and Thanatos, which means death (Robinson, Introduction<sup>1</sup>). Therefore, euthanasia means good death.

Both the legal and moral issue of euthanasia center on one thing, is it murder? Murder, the willful taking of a human life, has been identified as a crime for centuries. In religions that accept the Hebrew Scriptures of the Jewish People, murder as a wrongful act dates back to the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4.

Further complicating the issue is the prominence of individualism today. Society believes one of our most important principles is the freedom of the individual. Based on individualism, the proponents of legalizing euthanasia can say, “It’s my body, I’ll die if I want to.” To which, many believe the government’s only legal recourse is to prove that other lives are affected, it is not just about one life. Therefore, life must continue so that the good of the many prevails over the needs of the one, a utilitarian philosophy. Indeed, the recuperations go beyond the one who is dying. What about family and friends? We will revisit the issue of the victims shortly. Our freedom is an intrinsic part of American thought but it is our right to life, not death that is guaranteed in our “Declaration of Independence.”

To further identify the issue of euthanasia, some definitions should be established.

Harper Collins Encyclopedia of Catholicism borrows a definition of euthanasia from the Vatican “Declaration on Euthanasia (1980)”.

An action or an omission, which of itself or by intention causes death, in order that all suffering may in this way be eliminated (491).

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<sup>1</sup> There are two articles by Robinson, taken from the Internet, with nearly identical titles. In order to distinguish them, I will cite them by his name and the last word (s) of the article title.

Robinson (Introduction)<sup>2</sup> establishes four basic classifications of euthanasia. First, passive euthanasia is the removal of life support, the ending of medical procedures or medications, not providing food and liquids for nourishment, and not attempting to use CPR to allow the person to die. Later, an important distinction for passive euthanasia will be what is a reasonable effort to maintain life.

The second classification is active euthanasia. This is the pro-active action to end a human life taken by another at the person's request. An example of this is a lethal injection of a substance ending the person's life.

The second and third classifications are closely related. The difference being, in the third classification, physician assisted suicide, the doctor provides the patient with the means to end their own lives. So, the patient is the one who actually performs the act that ends their life, making it a suicide rather than a murder.

The fourth classification, involuntary euthanasia, is the easiest to argue against the issue of choice on. Involuntary euthanasia is the termination of a life where the patient has not specifically requested it. This type is generally cases of the patient being comatose or otherwise unable to articulate their wishes whereas the doctors or family members make the decision.

Another distinction that must be made is between direct and indirect euthanasia. In direct euthanasia the death of the individual is intentional and hence "murder." Murder is clearly defined as wrong for Judeo-Christians by the Fifth Commandment from Exodus 20. Paragraph 2277 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church says

Whatever its motives and means, direct euthanasia consists in putting an end to the lives of the handicapped, sick, or dying persons. It is morally unacceptable. Thus an act or omission, which, of itself or by intention, causes death in order to eliminate suffering constitutes a murder gravely contrary to the dignity of the human person and to the respect due to the living God, his Creator.

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<sup>2</sup> Similar definitions for passive and active euthanasia are found in Harper Collins Encyclopedia of Catholicism.

stressing the importance of death as the goal. In indirect euthanasia, the death is a consequence of an action meant to keep the person comfortable. The most common example is the use of morphine for pain. Over time the morphine can actually cause the person to stop breathing, resulting in death. However, this is generally acceptable because the goal is comfort, not termination of life. For the Church, comfort of the patient is of the utmost importance. St. Thomas Aquinas said, “Moral acts are classified on the basis of what is intended, not of what happens outside of our intention since that is incidental to it” (Aquinas, 70), an idea deemed still cited by the Catholic Church today (Catechism, paragraph 2263).

The Catholic Church considers abortion, death penalty, euthanasia, and social justice issues as one issue – Consistent Life Ethic (CLE). The victim in murder is clear. The *primary* victim of the death penalty is as clear. With abortion, the *primary* victim is the unborn child but one can ask who is the victim of *voluntary* euthanasia? One can question the word voluntary. Most people who choose euthanasia are depressed and are not thinking completely rationally. Therefore, the patient can be a victim to their own despair or of a society who longer wants them. If we, as a society, lose the value of life we are all victims because the value of life is not just about life and death. It also affects how we treat one another. While proponents of euthanasia claim it is victimless, it can be clearly seen that euthanasia is an issue that has the potential to affect every single person in the world. Everyone dies, but do we have a right to choose when? And each of us has family and friends who are left behind.

Groups such as the Hemlock Society (Harper Collins, 492) say yes, it is up to the individual? The most unified groups against euthanasia are conservative religious groups.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us in paragraph 2258 that God is the Lord of

Life; no one can claim right to destroy human life. However, Catholicism is not the only religion that objects to euthanasia. Table I shows the position of several churches.

TABLE I  
POSITION OF VARIOUS CHURCHES ON EUTHANASIA<sup>3</sup>.

CHURCH	POSITION
<i>GROUPS AGAINST EUTHANSIA</i>	
Christian Reformed Church in North America	1971 Synod, “condemn the wanton or arbitrary destruction of any human being at any state of its development from the point of conception to the point of death.” <i>The question is what constitutes point of death? It is generally refers to the point of natural death.</i>
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	1992 Statement supports passive euthanasia but opposed to active euthanasia as, “deliberately destroying life created in the image of God is contrary to our Christian conscience.”
Islam	“The Qu’ran says ‘Do not kill (or destroy) yourselves.’”
Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod	1979 – Commission on Theology and Church Relations condemns euthanasia as contrary to God’s Law.
Mennonites	1995 – Conference of Mennonites in Canada, “the state should not facilitate suicide, but rather control physical and emotional pain and support the dying within a caring community setting.” The focus needs to be on comfort for the patient.
Orthodox Christianity	Condemns Euthanasia along with all forms of murder
Orthodox Judaism	See euthanasia as being against the sanctity of life.
Roman Catholicism	Catechism Paragraph 2280 “We are stewards, not owners, of the life god has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of.”
Salvation Army	People do not have the right to choose to die. It is God’s Will.

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<sup>3</sup> Paraphrased from Robinson, Further Information.

## THOSE IN FAVOR OF EUTHANASIA

Unitarian Universalist	1998 Statement supporting euthanasia if proper safeguards against abuse are in place
Mainline and Liberal Christian denominations United Church of Christ, Methodist Church on the West Coast, The Episcopalian (Anglican) Unitarian, Methodist, Presbyterian and Quaker Movements.	Allow active euthanasia as long as the individual chooses it himself or herself.  <i>Here lies one of the problems of allowing euthanasia. A check system must be created to prevent abuses.</i>

Within groups that are in support of euthanasia the main problem of legalizing euthanasia is the creation of a slippery slope of what justifies euthanasia. The slippery slope starts with a person whose death is eminent and can be extended to the perfectly healthy person being allowed to commit suicide. In the Netherlands (Assisted Suicide), where euthanasia has been legal for several years, it has now been extended from the desperately ill with unbearable suffering to the disabled and the mentally ill. In Columbia, a judge must decide each case if it meets the standards for an *acceptable* euthanasia (Malcolm). The solution of Columbia, which has the potential to “bog” up the court system, to prevent the slippery slope is to make a judge decide each individual case. In reality, the best this does is slow down the slippery slope progression because even a judge needs standards to follow. And many patients have been “killed” by their doctors without their consent, showing the need for protection against abuses (Assisted Suicide).

One of the issues that comes up in this slippery slope is reasonable effort. What level of treatment are people obligated to try? Paragraph 2278 of the Catechism attempts to define the position

Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate; it is the refusal of the “over-zealous” treatment. Here one does not will to cause death; one’s inability to impede it is merely accepted.

The Harpers Collins Encyclopedia of Catholicism distinguished between ordinary and extraordinary by defining the ordinary as that which has a reasonable chance of sustaining life without undue burden. Certainly, one is not expected to spend millions of dollars on treatment that provides little hope of recovery. Food and liquids are ordinary means, which should not be denied. However, living on a respiratory for the rest of one's life can place undue burden on one's life and quality of life. Yet the question remains, what is a reasonable chance (probability) of benefit.

So how are we to respond to the issue of euthanasia in today's society? The Catechism tells us that it is our duty to defend the right to life not just for ourselves but others as well (paragraph 2265). We are called to prevent the slippery slope of euthanasia before it ever gets started and proceeds to the point of mandatory *euthanasia* where the government decides when we are to die (Assisted Suicide)? If euthanasia is allowed one could make an argument that the foreseeable end is mandatory death for poor, disabled, frail, and those without health insurance to carry the burden of cost.

The Church<sup>4</sup> responds in two ways to arguments involving euthanasia. First, it must become actively involved in court cases and legislative battles over the issue to its moral position. Secondly, it seeks to teach by first, making people aware of its stance on euthanasia, and secondly by explaining the faults of the pro-euthanasia arguments.

How has the Church attempted to present its stance on Euthanasia? Table I above lists some of the Synods and Statements regarding the issue of euthanasia. But the Roman Catholic Church also issued in 1980 its "Declaration on Euthanasia" to put forth its position on Euthanasia. Stating its position as that portrayed by the Second Vatican Council, it condemns

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<sup>4</sup> The Church, unless otherwise indicated, focuses on the actions of the Roman Catholic Church but may include actions of other Churches.



crimes against life, including euthanasia. The Catholic Church says the issue must be revisited because,

cultural change exercises an influence upon the way of looking at suffering and death; moreover, medicine has increased its capacity to cure and to prolong life in particular circumstances, which sometime give rise to moral problems (Sacred Congregation).

So why does the Church consider all crimes against life wrong? To paraphrase the 'Declaration on Euthanasia', no one can take a life without opposing God's love or his plan. The act of suicide is describes as, "a refusal of love for self, the denial of a natural instinct to live."

The Doctrine also reiterates an earlier declaration by Pope Pius XII written in response to doctors questioning the use of narcotics to alleviate pain knowing the use of the narcotic could result in death. Pius XII responded, "If no other means exist, and if, in the given circumstances, this does not prevent the carrying out of other religious and moral duties: Yes." The answer is yes because death is not sought. The treatment seeks only comfort, and every patient has the right to comfort. Death occurs only as a secondary consequence of that treatment.

And finally the "Declaration on Euthanasia" teaches that only ordinary measures are required to fulfill the teaching on euthanasia. No one is ever obligated to seek treatment that has little hope of helping the patient without undo burden.

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