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EUTHANASIA.

AN ABSTRACT OF THE ARGUMENTS FOR AND
AGAINST IT.



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EUTHANASIA.

IT may be well to explain that the publication of this pamphlet has arisen under the following circumstances. In the London correspondence of the *Western Morning News* of November 13, 1874, there appeared the following paragraph:—"It is a serious question which ought to be faced, if in cases where there is mortal disease a patient should not be at liberty to demand his order of release from the burden of the flesh at the hands of authorised functionaries of the State. The relief would accrue not only to the sufferer, but also to those weary and agonised watchers who have to wait round the bed of pain, and feel that they are helpless. If we may put a murderer out of existence for the benefit of society, why may we not put a saint out of existence for his own unspeakable benefit—involving, as it would, the exchange of prolonged torture for the joys of Paradise? In both cases life would be taken by properly constituted officials; but in the one case death would be an execution, in the other a euthanasia."

This paragraph excited a good deal of comment, chiefly of an unfavourable character. It has been thought desirable to treat the subject somewhat more fully, and the following pages will contain an abstract of the arguments used against "Euthanasia," and the replies to them.

Two things, however, should be premised. First, that by the term "Euthanasia" suicide is not intended

second, that the writer thinks it is quite possible arguments may be brought forward which would be so strong as to counterbalance those in favour of "Euthanasia." He has not met with any such arguments hitherto, but as they may exist he wishes this pamphlet to be considered as a contribution towards a discussion rather than as a final and conclusive decision.

By the term "Euthanasia" is meant a putting to death with the full consent of the person concerned, any one who, being in entire possession of his mental faculties, and stricken by a mortal and painful disease, knows that his days are numbered, and desires to avoid the period of agony that in the ordinary course of nature lies between him and dissolution. Under certain circumstances even suicide is deemed lawful. For instance, when a woman has taken her life rather than lose her honour, as happened at Cawnpore. Other cases are conceivable. For example, if a criminal (much more a righteous man) were about to be put to a horrible death, such as used to be inflicted in the middle ages, such as is still inflicted by savage tribes, no one would blame him if he anticipated his end by a few minutes, and escaped intolerable torture by a dose of laudanum. Or take another case—one that too often happens—in which a shipwrecked crew without food are compelled, in order that they may not all perish, to cast lots as to which of them shall die and be eaten. In such a case no one would condemn as a murderer the man who put the victim to death. Supposing, in order to spare his friend that terrible office, the victim put himself to death, should we not think that he had displayed the very highest kind of self-sacrifice? Should we not say that he had laid down his life for his friends?

This much is said, not to argue in favour of the right of suicide, which, however admissible in some cases, could not be sanctioned as a general proposition without opening the door to very grave inconvenience and

mischievous, but by way of supporting the argument that it is lawful under the conditions stated above to take the life of another. In a word, if, under certain conditions, a man may take his own life, *a fortiori*, he may have it taken *for* him with his consent.

It has been urged, however, that there is no real parallel between the cases cited. The Cawnpore case is admitted to be doubtful and very difficult to decide. But it is argued that a martyr certainly would not anticipate his death, and that in the case of the shipwrecked crew the prime object would be to save life, not to destroy it. To this it may be replied that the martyr was not intended. It is probable that his testimony at the stake may be of so great service to the truth, and therefore to mankind, that it would be worth while for him to encounter the severer kind of death. But if we take the case of a white man falling into the hands of savages, and knowing that he has a death of horrible torment before him, and that he has the means of escaping it by inflicting upon himself a painless death, we can hardly do otherwise than admit that he would be right to resort to such means. The other objection is little to the point. There is no such antagonism as it suggested. *Ex hypothesi* there is no possibility of "saving" life. The terms of the proposition imply that death is certainly and indisputably at hand, and the only question at issue is, if death shall be accelerated in order to save the agony of dying.

This acceleration is described by an adverse critic as the act of "a rebel rushing unbidden into the world of spirits." But there is no rebellion; on the contrary, there is entire submission. The doomed man knows that sentence of death has been passed upon him by his Maker, and he submits to it without murmuring. He has received his call to another world, and he hastens to obey it. It may, indeed, be said that he makes too much haste; and that is the point under discussion. But certainly too great eagerness to comply cannot be

called rebellion. There are some diseases of a very formidable character, concerning which a surgeon will admit that it is an equal chance if an operation will cure or kill. The disease will slay (say) in three months; the operation may slay in a week. No one would say that the patient had been guilty of "rebellion" because he chose to have the operation performed, and died under it, even though he thereby shortened his life by eleven weeks. Why, then, when there is no chance of a cure, should not the fatal issue be anticipated? If it be said that, in the first case, the object is the preservation of life, while, in the second, it is the destruction of life, the answer is, that in the second case the destruction is the will of God, and that it cannot be "rebellion" to act in accordance with that will. Moreover, if we admit disease to be the servant of God's will, if cancer or any other agonizing disease is his minister, why should we not count opium to be?

Here the argument is used that euthanasia is unlawful, because it frustrates the purposes of God, who has "corrective ends" in view when he sends affliction, and who intends it as a "disciplinary process." In other words, pain is discipline, and therefore ought not to be evaded. If this argument is true, it is difficult to understand how it can be right to alleviate pain. Why should it be unlawful to escape from the "discipline" by one large dose of narcotic, and yet lawful to escape it by repeated small doses? At present, in cases of cancer, a doctor keeps his patient during the last stages of the disease perpetually under the influence of opiates, and thinks himself and the sufferer fortunate if he can retain him in a narcotized condition until the end comes. Yet no one accuses the doctor of evading the "disciplinary" process; on the contrary, he would be thought to fail in duty if he did not carry out this treatment. It is difficult to see how there can be any disciplinary process or corrective ends here for anybody, whether the patient or the friends who watch by his

bedside. In some cases the pain is too great to yield to opiates. Then patient and watchers alike endure agony; and the question arises if it be lawful for a man to sacrifice his life in the battle-field, while full of vigour, for the good of his country, is it not lawful for him also to sacrifice a few weeks of wretched existence on his death-bed for the sake of his family?

Something has been said about the possibility of doctors making mistakes, and giving up as hopeless patients who have actually recovered. But there are certain diseases in which there can be no doubt; and it is only with regard to such, and only with regard to those of them which are peculiarly painful, that the question of euthanasia arises. We may be quite sure that the patient himself will be in no hurry to die. The tenacity with which men cling to life under the most desperate circumstances will always tend to prevent any premature death of this kind. But even supposing that the worst does happen, that a patient is hastened out of life who might have recovered, he has, if there be any truth in the Christianity we profess, but exchanged a poor, miserable existence for one of glory and bliss. When we lose anyone dear to us, we say that we would not have him back again, because it would be to bring him back from the joys of Paradise to the troubles, and trials, and temptations of earth. Bearing this in mind, it seems strange that men should be ready to put a poor, burnt moth out of its misery, believing, as they do, that it has no other life in store, yet should think it wrong to put a cancer-eaten fellow-being out of his misery, though for him there is reserved an exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

Here, however, the theological idea comes in. Perhaps it is not endless happiness, but endless misery, which is in store for him. Without discussing here the existence of hell and eternal punishment, assuming indeed that those ideas have an answering reality, we

would ask if a man would not be much more fitted to pass into the more immediate presence of his Judge with the full consciousness that he was about to die, and with every opportunity offered him of repentance and "making his peace with God," than if he were to pass away in a state of unconsciousness, whether through the ravages of disease or under the influence of opiates? A condemned criminal, unless he be wholly and irreclaimably hardened, usually shows sufficient contrition during the days which elapse between his sentence and execution to justify the chaplain in admitting him to the most solemn rite of the Christian religion. Surely there would be much more likelihood that a less grievous offender would be able to make confession of sin, restitution wherever possible, and in other ways prepare himself for his future state, if he could choose his own time for entering it.

Much of the antagonism to euthanasia arises from the sharp distinction which is drawn between this life and the next. There are two possible theories about death—1st, that it is the end of all, and, 2nd, that it is the entrance into a new life. In the first case, it can make no difference to a man if he die three months sooner or later. He escapes so much agony at the cost of annihilation; but as when he is annihilated he knows nothing, he is not conscious of any loss, if indeed to escape three months' agony be loss. In the other case, which is the far more generally-accepted theory, it is difficult to see how a few weeks' earlier or later entrance into another life can alter the conditions of it. True, we know nothing of those conditions; and the great mystery which hangs over the next world will nearly always keep men back from entering it voluntarily. But the hypothesis we have all along supposed is that of a man compelled to enter at a very early date, and to whom is left no other choice than one of days.

Another argument used against "Euthanasia" is, that any one who has watched by the dying bed of a

loved relation, must know that the one desire of the survivors is not to hasten death, but to postpone it till the latest moment. No doubt this is so, and the feeling would always tend to limit Euthanasia, and it is desirable that it should be so limited, to those cases where the sufferings are very great and agonising, and the fatal issue beyond all doubt. So long as there is little pain, the parents of a dying child, for instance, will cling to the last hope of life as a shipwrecked man will cling to the one plank which is left him in mid-ocean. Ordinary death itself becomes a Euthanasia when it is simply a last sigh, and then eternal calm. But who can tell the agonies that mothers have endured when watching over a child stricken by one of those lingering, torturing, internal diseases which sometimes affect children, and which are known to be absolutely fatal? The case of children is, however, more difficult to determine, because it would not be easy to obtain from the patient that consent which has been mentioned as a necessary preliminary condition. In the case of adults, it would clearly be an act of selfishness if the relatives wished to prolong the sufferer's agonies when he had expressed his wish to end them.

Objectors to Euthanasia say broadly, that no man has the right to take his life. To this the reply is, that whether there be or be not a clear and definite canon against self-slaughter, it can have no bearing upon the case now in question. In this case, death, the act of dying has begun; and, the only question is, how long the terrible ordeal shall last. If there is any force in the objection, a criminal called upon to choose between the gallows and roasting to death over a slow fire, ought to choose the second because it takes longer, and gives so many more minutes of life. Similarly, if it could be shown that in the case of the cancer-tortured patient already described, the administration of opiates would shorten life even by only a single day, opiates ought not to be administered, for, if we may spare the

patient one day of anguish, there is no reason why we should not spare him ten days or a hundred. In any case, there is no parallel here between the conditions we are supposing and an ordinary suicide. The man who takes a dose of prussic acid because he has sustained a severe pecuniary loss, or is threatened with exposure to humiliation and shame, is a coward, and shows that he has no endurance or fortitude, and no courage to try and make the best of the many years of life which perchance might remain to him. But when sentence of death is passed, there can be no object in prolonging the act of dying. In a word, suicide means extinguishing life, Euthanasia means escaping from dying.

The statement which has been made, that Euthanasia is "atheistical," is scarcely worth noticing. To say that submission to God's will without murmuring, and an, at the worst, too great eagerness to obey it, are tantamount to denying the existence of God is a self-contradiction so flagrant, that it needs no further words to expose it. "Atheist" is a favourite term applied by theologians to all who differ from them. It has about the same meaning in their mouths as the word "bloody" has in the mouth of the London rough. It is an expletive, and no more.

Finally, a few words remain to be said as to the practical operation of Euthanasia. Manifestly, it would have to be guarded from abuse by the most rigid and jealous precautions. It must be carried out with the consent of the patient; that, as has been said, must be a primary condition. Death must be administered only by the hand, or in the presence of a public functionary, such as the coroner; and only after a most precise and unhesitating declaration on the part of two medical men that death is inevitable, and that it is likely to be attended with great suffering. Possibly, if these precautions were observed, even the good people who talk about "atheism," might in time learn to see that death so coming was as much the will and the act of a mer-

ciful God as the long-drawn agonies of malignant disease. At the same time, it should be clearly understood, as was stated at the outset, that there may be practical objections to Euthanasia which the present writer does not foresee, and that these pages are to be considered rather as a contribution to, than a settlement of, a discussion. In fact, it has dealt almost exclusively with the theological objections, and these the writer believes have no real foundation.

