

## Mahatma Gandhi and Euthanasia: A Comparative Approach

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### **Abstract**

*This paper strives to give an exposition of the Gandhian concept of Non-violence and its relation to Euthanasia. According to him, Non-violence is a way of life. It is both a means as well as an end. It has both negative and positive implications. Negatively, it means non-hatred or non-killing but in positive sense, it means love or service to living beings. However, Gandhi realized that violence, or ahimsa is sometimes unavoidable. Killing a living being might even be a form of nonviolence in some circumstances. In this article I have made a humble attempt to examine the Gandhian perspective of euthanasia and show how Gandhi's thoughts are connected with euthanasia. This paper has been divided into four sections for the purpose of clarity. Section one deals with the concept of euthanasia. The second section discusses Gandhi's view of Non-violence and the third section analyzes Gandhi's perspective of euthanasia. Finally, in the fourth section I have given my concluding remarks.*

### **Keywords**

*Euthanasia, Mahatma Gandhi, Mercy Killing, Non-violence, Violence.*

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## I

The word 'Euthanasia' is derived from the Greek words 'euthanatos'. Euthanatos is combination of 'eu+thantos'. 'Eu' means 'good' and 'thantos' means death. So, euthanasia etymologically signifies 'good death' or 'happy death'. According to the Dictionary, euthanasia means, 'a gentle and easy death', but in the modern context it means, "killing of those who are incurable ill and in great pain or distress, for the sake of those killed, and to spare them from further suffering or distress."<sup>1</sup> According to this definition, euthanasia is defined as the following situations in which a person is killed. First, the individual undergoing euthanasia needs to have an irreversible illness. Secondly, he or she needs to be in excruciating suffering physically or psychologically and lastly euthanasia must be used for the benefit of those for whom death is preferable to continuing to live to escape such individuals from further pain. Glanville Williams defines euthanasia as " Either an assisted suicide or killing by another for humanitarian reasons and by merciful means, generally with the consent of the person killed, in which case it is referred to especially as voluntary euthanasia."<sup>2</sup>

There are three types of euthanasia: Voluntary, Involuntary and Non-voluntary euthanasia. In the case of voluntary euthanasia the request for ending the life comes from the patient himself. But such a request is not a hasty decision. This is supposed to be rational and well-deliberated decision on the part of the patient. "Planned death is a rational system that honors self-determination and extracts from a purposeful, unavoidable death the maximum benefit for the subject, the subject's next of kin, and for all of humanity."<sup>3</sup> However, in cases of non-voluntary euthanasia, the sufferer is unable to distinguish between life and death. Therefore, the patient's parents and other family members have the responsibility for making such a dramatic choice. In the case of Involuntary euthanasia, the patient is self-conscious with that of rational, but doesn't decide in favor of ending his /her life. The patient's death should only be decided upon by the doctor and their family members or relatives. "In involuntary euthanasia the patient doesn't give consent despite his ability to do so. The consent is not given either because the patient purposely refrains from giving the consent to live on."<sup>4</sup> Both involuntary and non-voluntary euthanasia may take the form of active or passive euthanasia. In active euthanasia the doctor consciously attempts to end the patient's life by giving them a deadly medication. While in passive euthanasia the doctor or the treating organization just stops the treatment that would otherwise cause the patient's life to be prolonged. The basic difference between active and passive euthanasia boils down to the distinction between killing someone out of mercy and allowing someone to die because of one's compassion

for the sick. Normally active euthanasia is viewed as a positive action and passive euthanasia entails no action. The former is the act of doing and the latter is an act of refraining.

## II

Gandhi is a true karma yogin and a practical idealist. He applies non-violence to the life of the individual, to the nation and to the international sphere. He considered truth and non-violence as two living forces of thought and action. Truth (Satya) and non-violence (ahimsa) are inseparable. They are like the two sides of the same coin. Non-violence is the means and truth is the end. Again according to him, Non-violence is a way of life. It is a means as well as an end. "It is the means because it brings about universal love, compassion, fellow-feeling and a sense of justice. It is an end because absolute non-violence is the highest ideal, the attainment of which would convert a man to god."<sup>5</sup>

The Concept of non-violence has a glorious history of its own. The concept is as old as the Vedas. The Vedic interpretation of Ahimsa is 'Mahimsyat Sarva Bhutani' which means do not kill any living beings. In the wider sense ahimsa is conceived as non-injury. The Yoga sutra says, 'ahimsa pratisthayam tat sannidhamvairatyagah which means abstention from ill-will towards any creature in this world. We must control our passion, and appetites and bear no ill will against any human being, any creature on earth. Buddha stands for universal compassion and ahimsa or non-violence here means non-killing or non-hatred. The Jainatrithankaras regard it as the highest virtue. According to Jainism, non-violence means non-killing or non-hatred to all. Both Buddhism and Jainism considered non-violence as a supreme value of life. The difference between Jainism, Buddhism and Gandhi regarding non-violence is that both Jainism and Buddhism considered non-violence to be taken in a negative sense connoting non-hatred, for Gandhi, it has both negative and positive implications. Negatively, it means non-hatred or non-killing but in positive sense, it means love or service to living beings and doing something for others without any motive for any benefits in return.

Again "Non-violence is conceived as a gospel of action. It is not an attitude of indifference or passivity. Indeed, the seeds of non-violence lie deep down in the heart, but they are expressed and given shape in actions. Therefore, Non-violence is a dynamic process involving continuous and persistent deliberation, efforts, strains and actions. It is true that non-violence requires extreme patience on the part of one who is using this method, but this patience is not a sign of inactivity, it is an expression of a conscious and inner effort to force the so-called opponent to see and realize his

own mistake.”<sup>6</sup> However, Gandhi realized that violence, or ahimsa, is sometimes unavoidable. Killing a living being might even be a form of nonviolence in some circumstances. Gandhi’s thoughts in this context are related to the topic of euthanasia, which is discussed in session III.

### III

Gandhi understood that violence (ahimsa) would occasionally be unavoidable despite his strong advocacy of nonviolence. Under Gandhi’s view, using violence to defend one’s own life or the lives of others was justified under specific circumstances. He mentioned situations involving severe, uncontrollable suffering in this context.”He used the example of a rabid dog in this context, arguing that killing the animal out of compassion could be acceptable to save it from a prolonged death. He went on from there, saying that a child with rabies should be put to death if there was no way to lessen its agony.”<sup>7</sup>.

Another instance is the case of “a calf that was gravely damaged and in excruciating pain in 1928 at Gandhi’s ashram in Ahmedabad. Gandhi ultimately decided to end the suffering calf’s life with a fatal injection after consulting with the Goseva Sangh Management Committee and the ashram’s residents. Because the calf’s doctor had denied that there was any chance of a recovery.”<sup>8</sup> Gandhi explained this action as a manifestation of ahimsa and dharma. However, his detractors stood up and asked how he could declare himself to be a follower of ahimsa (non-violence) and yet permit the killing of the calf. Gandhi said that he was just doing his duty and said that it is one’s responsibility to perform a painless act of killing to alleviate a creature of its unbearable suffering. To justify such killings, he set three requirements for everyone. The illness that the individual or organism has to be terminal. In addition, there must be no other option or means of relieving the individual or animal from its suffering, and there must be no ulterior intention or self-interest in the killing.

Another case referred according to Gandhi “I remember I read about the Paris case in which an actress shot and killed her lover at his own importunate request, as he was excruciating pain from a disease from which there was no hope of recovery. The actress was tried for manslaughter, but acquitted on the jury’s verdict that no crime had been committed given the circumstances though there appears to be no law in France to justify such a verdict, I have read that in Denmark there has been actually a law passed making it no crime for certain authorized persons in case like the above to put an end to a human life with happy dispatch.”<sup>9</sup> In this instance, Gandhi believes that if a killing is carried out in good faith, it does not qualify as ahimsa.

One such instance involved “a soldier who was mortally injured on the battlefield. It was certain that the necessary medical care was out of reach, so killing him might be justified. For Gandhi, it would be better to kill such a soldier than to allow him to pass away carelessly.”<sup>10</sup> Additionally, “there were also other incidents at the Sabarmati Ashram. A threat from monkeys existed. The ashram’s fruit and vegetable trees suffer significant damage from the monkeys. The ashram’s members made numerous attempts, but they were unable to solve the issue. In this perspective Gandhi opines to kill those monkeys who damaged above things.”<sup>11</sup> The public strongly disagreed with Gandhi’s viewpoint when it was intensely discussed. Gandhi answered the critics that taking a person’s or a creature’s life is not always him (violence). It is not considered to be against the idea of ahimsa to end a life due to unavoidable circumstances that serve the larger good. . He used the fact that there was no other option in sight and that the killing of the monkey in the ashram was inevitable to justify it. Taking into consideration from the aforesaid incident it is assumed that Gandhi’s thoughts are connected with the practices of euthanasia.

#### IV

Mahatma Gandhi and non-violence have become integral to each other and one cannot think of Gandhi without non-violence. However, in some urgency Gandhi allows violence (ahimsa) where there seems no other possible alternative. His decisions are close to euthanasia though he does not use the word euthanasia explicitly. But the example of killing the monkeys seems to me to be inappropriate. Certain animals may harm human interests but they are part of the total ecosystem. Their harm to fruits and orchards might be doing some benefits to the ecosystem which we immediately cannot point out. So, even if monkeys damage the crops they should not be killed. The rest of the instances rendered by Gandhi are very close to euthanasia. So, in general, it can be said that Gandhi was pro-euthanasia in his thoughts.

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