

Harmonizing Euthanasia and Environmental Ethics: A Multifaceted Moral Conundrum

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Abstract:

Euthanasia, the intentional end of an individual's life, is a contentious ethical issue. This article delves into the intricate relationship between euthanasia and environmental ethics, focusing on the deep reverence for human life and the ecological consequences of decisions made at the end of one's life. It examines the complex ethical landscape where ecosystem preservation and life protection intersect, offering new perspectives on a longstanding moral dilemma. The article emphasizes the intrinsic value of every living being and the interdependence between organisms in ecosystems.

Keywords: Euthanasia, Environmental Ethics, Intrinsic Value, Respect for Life, Morality

Introduction

The act of voluntarily ending the life of another person in order to alleviate their suffering, known as euthanasia, has been the subject of heated controversy for a very long time. Environmental ethics, which emphasizes the intrinsic importance of all life and the interconnection of all organisms within an ecosystem, is one approach that adds extra complexity to this argument. Environmental ethics views all life as having equal value. In this piece, we will investigate the complex relationship that exists between euthanasia and environmental ethics, with a particular emphasis on the value placed on life and the repercussions that end-of-life choices can have on the natural world.

Environmental Ethics: The Respect for Life

Environmental ethics is a philosophical perspective that is frequently based on notions like biocentrism and ecocentrism. It is characterized by its emphasis on recognizing the intrinsic/inherent value of all living and non-living beings, regardless of their cognitive or emotional abilities. This ethical paradigm surpasses anthropocentrism, a perspective that prioritizes humans in moral deliberation. Sarah E. Boslaugh (1956 –Till date) written about anthropocentrism as “Anthropocentrism regards humans as separate from and superior to

nature and holds that human life has intrinsic value while other entities (including animals, plants, mineral resources, and so on) are resources that may justifiably be exploited for the benefit of humankind” (Boslaugh, 2016). Ecocentrism overcome the narrow anthropocentric worldview and asserting all living organisms contain intrinsic value. From this particular standpoint, it is acknowledged that every entity, ranging from the tiny microbes to the most intricate organisms, possesses an entitlement to both survival and prosperity within its inherent environment.

Biocentrism, a core tenet of environmental ethics, posits that every living organism possesses an innate entitlement to existence, irrespective of its usefulness to humans or any other species. The term 'Biocentrism' originates from the Greek words 'βίος' (bio), which translates to 'life', and 'κέντρον' (kentron), which means 'center'. It pertains to the life-centered perspective on nature within the environmental worldview. The evolutionary interpretation of biocentrism posits that the moral value and well-being of all living organisms are equivalent, including humans. It is argued that each organism fulfils a vital function within the complex network of life, hence making significant contributions to the overall well-being and equilibrium of ecosystems. This viewpoint encompasses not just individual creatures but also entire species and the habitats in which they reside. All organisms possess an inherent worth in and of themselves, with no individual being superior or possessing greater value than other constituents within the biotic community. In the given context, it is relevant to consider the perspective of Paul W. Taylor (1923-2015), who posits, “All living beings have goods. There are no grounds for thinking that the good of one being should count for more than the good of another. We must therefore consider all living beings to have equal moral significance” (Agar, 1997, p.149).

Ecocentrism, an essential approach of environmental ethics, expands the moral framework to include entire ecosystems within its sphere of assessment. The proposition suggests that ecosystems are comprehensive entities possessing intrinsic/inherent value and entitlements. Ecocentrism highlights the interconnectedness of all organisms within ecological systems, highlighting the mutual dependency between the welfare of individual organisms and

¹ Boslaugh, S. E. (2016). Anthropocentrism. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Encyclopaedia Britannica, inc. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/anthropocentrism>.

² Agar, N. (1997). Biocentrism and the concept of life. *Ethics*, Vol. 108, No. 1, Oct. 147-168. Published by: The University of Chicago Press Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2382092>.

species and the overall health of the environment. Ecocentrism was inspired by Aldo Leopold's (1887 –1948) holistic "land ethic." In this world view, advice for the human position in the ecosystem “changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it” (Leopold, 1959, 204). The Deep ecologist Arne Naess (1912 –2009), posits that the ecosystem and its constituents within the biosphere exhibit interdependence, interconnectedness, and inherent value. In the absence of a relationship, the entities in question cease to exist as distinct entities and become indistinguishable from one another. The significance of their existence lies in their interconnectedness with other organisms within the environment. This association is commonly referred to as an intrinsic relationship. According to Naess, an intrinsic relation refers to a connection between two entities, A and B, that is inherent to their definitions or fundamental compositions. Consequently, the absence of this relation would result in a fundamental alteration of A and B, rendering them distinct from their original states. Arne Naess asserted that the intricate interdependencies within the biosphere are vital for the sustenance and survival of all living beings. Deep ecology’s belief that equals treatment and distribution of resources among all living beings within the biosphere. The premise posits that every constituent of a biotic community has equal moral standing. All ecosystems, encompassing both living (biotic) and non-living (abiotic) components, possess an inherent entitlement to coexist and thrive on an equitable basis. About deep ecology Naess’ words, "Deep ecology is egalitarian in that everyone and everything is equally valuable as part of the whole. This transpersonal ecology calls on us to go beyond class, gender, and species and find our deepest fulfilment in harmony with nature" (Louis et al, 2017, p.216).

Environmental ethics, encompassing biocentrism and ecocentrism, advocates for the notion that all living entities possess inherent value and should be granted ethical attention, irrespective of their cognitive or emotional capacities. This statement emphasizes the significance of acknowledging and valuing the interdependence of all organisms in ecosystems, cultivating a deep reverence for the sacredness of life and the conservation of the complex network of life on Earth.

³ Leopold, A. (1959). *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There*. New York: Oxford University.

⁴ Louis P. P., & Paul P. (2017). *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application*. (ed). USA: Cengage Learning.

Euthanasia and Respect for Life

In the realm of environmental ethics, euthanasia poses a significant ethical dilemma since it involves a clash between the concepts of individual autonomy and dignity, and the basic principles of appreciating all life forms and maintaining the intricate interconnectedness of existence. The term "Euthanasia" is derived from the combination of two Greek words, namely "Eu" and "Thanatos." The term "Euthanasia" can be seen as a compound word derived from the Greek roots "Eu," meaning good, and "Thanatos," meaning death. Consequently, euthanasia can be defined as the concept of a "good death" or a death that is characterized by being kind and simple. Euthanasia refers to a form of dying characterized by its mild and painless nature, which is believed to bring benefits to the individual undergoing the process. In the book 'The Cambridge Textbook of Bioethics' defined 'euthanasia' as "a deliberate act undertaken by one person with the intention of ending the life of another person to relieve that person's suffering" (Dickens et al., 2008, p.72). Advocates of euthanasia argue that this practice upholds the principles of autonomy and dignity for those experiencing extreme suffering, granting them the option to terminate their lives calmly and respectfully. Nevertheless, detractors contend that euthanasia may conflict with the basic principle of upholding the sanctity of life, as it entails the intentional cessation of human existence.

Within this complex ethical quandary, advocates of euthanasia might present a persuasive argument that upholding an individual's autonomy to terminate their own life, particularly in the face of immense and unendurable suffering, can be perceived as an extension of the value assigned to human life. supporter of euthanasia argued "It is cruel and inhuman to refuse the plea of a terminally ill patient that his or her life be mercifully and peacefully ended it to avoid further suffering and dignity" (Satyanarayana, 2010, p.166).

It should be a shift in emphasis from solely preserving biological life to reducing suffering and maintaining human dignity. This viewpoint is consistent with the fundamental values of compassion and empathy that are intrinsic to the field of environmental ethics.

From an environmental ethics perspective, the focus extends beyond the mere presence of life to encompass the standard of living and the reduction of suffering. The statement affirms

⁵ Dickens, B. M., et al. (2008). Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide. *The Cambridge Textbook of Bioethics*. edited by Peter A. Singer and A. M Viens, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

⁶ Satyanarayana, y. v. (2010). *Ethics: theory and practice*. London: Pearson.

the intrinsic value of each human life and admits that extreme suffering can directly challenge the dignity of individuals. Advocates of euthanasia may contend that, under some conditions, granting individuals the autonomy to peacefully terminate their lives might be regarded as a sympathetic reaction to their distress, reminiscent of the compassion and empathy promoted in the realm of environmental ethics.

This perspective does not undermine the intrinsic value of life; rather, it redefines it to incorporate a comprehensive outlook that encompasses not only the preservation of life but also the mitigation of intense pain. The objective of this endeavour is to achieve a harmonious equilibrium between the autonomy of individuals and the broader ethical issues within the realm of environmental ethics. It ultimately recognizes that intricate ethical predicaments often necessitate nuanced and context-specific resolutions. By engaging in this practice, advocates of euthanasia within the context of environmental ethics seek to reconcile the values of upholding life and reducing suffering as they strive to make ethical choices.

Environmental Implications of Euthanasia

When examining euthanasia via an environmental ethical lens, the ramifications extend beyond the immediate action and encompass the wider framework of resource allocation and preservation. The issue of euthanasia, specifically in its physician-assisted variant, gives rise to apprehensions regarding the possible misallocation of important resources, including medical equipment, drugs, and energy. Critics contend that the endorsement of euthanasia may unwittingly result in the squandering of resources and inflict harm on the environment, as these resources may instead be allocated towards endeavours that promote the well-being of other organisms or ecological preservation.

A prominent issue highlighted by critics pertains to the potential burden on healthcare resources that may arise from the implementation of euthanasia. It is argued by proponents that the resources allocated to medical equipment, drugs, and energy for the purpose of euthanasia may be redirected towards life-prolonging treatments, medical research, or public health programs. These alternative uses are seen to have the potential to provide more favourable outcomes for human health and the environment.

Nevertheless, advocates of euthanasia refute this assertion by highlighting the prospective cost reductions that might be achieved when patients with incurable illnesses choose euthanasia

as an option. The euthanasia has the potential to enhance resource allocation efficiency by circumventing the prolonged and resource-intensive medical interventions frequently linked to end-of-life healthcare. In numerous instances, these interventions may not yield substantial enhancements in the individual's quality of life or materially prolong their lifetime. By opting for euthanasia, individuals have the potential to preserve significant resources that would have otherwise been allocated on useless and frequently distressing interventions.

This perspective is in accordance with the principle of limiting ecological harm through the more prudent utilization of resources, as viewed through the lens of environmental ethics. By choosing euthanasia in suitable instances, individuals have the potential to not only alleviate their own suffering but also contribute to a more sustainable distribution of resources. Consequently, this may result in the allocation of resources to activities that support ecological preservation or provide advantages to other organisms.

The discourse around euthanasia, when examined via an environmental ethical lens, encompasses a multifaceted interaction between the distribution of resources, the preservation of human dignity, and the maintenance of ecological sustainability. In 'South Yuba Canal Maintenance Project' mentioned ecological sustainability as "the maintenance or restoration of composition, structure, and processes of ecosystems over time and space. this includes the diversity of plant and animal communities, disturbance processes, soil productivity, water quality and quantity, and air quality" (Tahoe National Forest, 2006, p.102). Ecological sustainability makes us aware of the alarming activity of modern science and technological advancements, which have produced devastating nuclear weapons that exploit individuals and the environment and are the cause of scarcity of natural resources. So, we may say that humans' various activities against nature have created an unprecedented crisis. This phenomenon prompts significant inquiries into the optimal equilibrium between the individual's requirements and the overall well-being of the ecosystem. Advocates of euthanasia assert that, in specific situations, it can be consistent with the tenets of environmental ethics by facilitating effective resource allocation and reducing environmental harm.

Conversely, detractors maintain that euthanasia might redirect resources from endeavours that have the potential to yield benefits for both humanity and the natural environment.

⁷ Tahoe National Forest (N.F.). (2006). *South Yuba Canal: Environmental Impact Statement*. United States, New York Press.

Conclusion

The debate on euthanasia within the context of environmental ethics is complex and multifaceted, involving the intersection of personal autonomy, distress, and the intrinsic worth of all living beings. Environmental ethics, which emphasizes the interdependence and intrinsic value of all living entities, adds an additional layer of complexity to this discussion. It necessitates a thorough examination of the environmental consequences of end-of-life choices and their alignment with the core principles of honouring all living forms.

The discourse on euthanasia and environmental ethics highlights the conflict between respecting an individual's self-governance and the obligation to protect and appreciate the entire ecological system. Advocates argue that euthanasia can be a compassionate action that respects human dignity and reduces suffering, while critics argue that it could potentially compromise environmental ethics' principles, emphasizing the inherent worth of all living beings and the interdependence within ecological systems.

To address this ethical dilemma, a contemplative and intricate methodology is needed, considering the diverse viewpoints and unique conditions of end-of-life choices. Open and empathic discussions are crucial, as universal answers may not be suitable.

The discourse on euthanasia within the context of environmental ethics requires a nuanced equilibrium between personal agency, pain mitigation, and the inherent value of all living beings. Engaging in open dialogues can help seek mutual agreement and enhance understanding of the complex dynamics between human autonomy and biodiversity conservation within the ecosystem.

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