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UTILITARIANISM AND THE ETHICAL JUSTIFICATION OF EUTHANASIA

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Abstract

Euthanasia, or “good death” has emerged as a deeply controversial and ethically complex issue in contemporary medical and philosophical discourse. This paper examines the ethical justification of euthanasia through the lens of utilitarianism—a consequentialist moral theory that evaluates actions based on their outcomes, particularly the maximization of happiness and minimization of suffering. Drawing on the works of classical thinkers such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, as well as modern scholars like Peter Singer and L.W. Sumner, the study explores both voluntary and non-voluntary euthanasia within a utilitarian framework. A review of literature from 2016 to 2024 highlights key debates on autonomy, dignity, legal safeguards, and societal implications. The study finds that voluntary euthanasia, when rooted in informed consent and aimed at relieving unrelievable suffering, is ethically justifiable under utilitarian principles. Rule utilitarianism is found to provide a more consistent foundation for public policy than act utilitarianism, particularly in regulated settings. However, the application of utilitarian ethics becomes more problematic in non-voluntary cases and in contexts shaped by cultural diversity, technological advancements, and relational ethics. The study concludes that while utilitarianism offers a compelling rationale for euthanasia, it must be applied with sensitivity to legal, social, and moral complexities to ensure ethical integrity and human dignity in end-of-life care.

Keywords: Euthanasia, Utilitarianism, Ethical Justification, Voluntary Euthanasia, Rule Utilitarianism, Suffering, End-of-Life Ethics

1. INTRODUCTION

Euthanasia, derived from the Greek words *eu* (good) and *thanatos* (death), literally translates to “good death.” It refers to the deliberate act of ending a person’s life in order to alleviate intractable pain and suffering, typically in cases involving terminal illness or irreversible medical conditions. Across the world, the practice of euthanasia has become one of the most ethically, legally, and emotionally charged issues in contemporary discourse. Its implications stretch across multiple domains—including law, medicine, theology, and moral philosophy—raising profound questions about the value of life, the limits of personal autonomy, the responsibilities of caregivers, and the role of the state in regulating death.

Among the various ethical theories that seek to address these questions, **utilitarianism** stands out as one of the most influential and pragmatic approaches. Developed primarily by philosophers **Jeremy Bentham** and **John Stuart Mill**, utilitarianism is a form of consequentialism, a moral philosophy that evaluates actions based on their outcomes. At its core, utilitarianism holds that the morally right action is the one that produces the greatest amount of happiness or the least amount of suffering for the greatest number of people. This theory offers a powerful framework for evaluating morally contentious practices like euthanasia by shifting focus away from rigid moral codes or abstract principles and toward the tangible consequences of human actions.

From a utilitarian perspective, euthanasia—particularly **voluntary euthanasia**, where a competent individual requests assistance in dying—may be seen as ethically justifiable. If a patient is enduring unbearable pain, loss of dignity, or diminished quality of life, and if death offers the only escape from this suffering, then assisting in ending that life could be considered a compassionate and morally appropriate act. The relief of suffering, especially when recovery is no longer possible, aligns with the utilitarian principle of minimizing harm and maximizing well-being. In this sense, euthanasia does not represent the negation of life’s value, but rather a reasoned and humane response to its unbearable diminishment.



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However, the utilitarian justification of euthanasia is not without ethical complexities and practical concerns. While the theory emphasizes outcomes, it often requires predictions about the future—such as whether the patient's condition will improve, whether their request for euthanasia is truly autonomous, or what impact the decision might have on families, healthcare professionals, and society at large. There are also broader questions about the consequences of legalizing euthanasia: Would it lead to a "slippery slope" in which vulnerable individuals feel pressured to end their lives? Could it erode trust in the medical profession, whose traditional role has been to preserve life?

Additionally, different strands of utilitarianism offer varied interpretations of euthanasia. **Act utilitarianism** considers each instance in isolation, evaluating whether the individual act leads to the best outcome. In contrast, **rule utilitarianism** examines whether adopting a general rule—such as permitting euthanasia under specific conditions—would produce better results overall. These internal distinctions further complicate the utilitarian evaluation of euthanasia and highlight the need for careful moral reasoning in practice.

This paper aims to examine how utilitarianism, as a consequentialist moral framework, provides a rationale for the ethical justification of euthanasia. It will explore the strengths of this justification, such as its focus on reducing suffering and promoting individual well-being, as well as its limitations, including potential risks, uncertainties, and societal consequences. By engaging with both classical utilitarian texts and contemporary debates, this inquiry seeks to offer a balanced, nuanced understanding of one of the most morally significant issues in end-of-life ethics.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The ethical justification of euthanasia has been the subject of extensive philosophical and bioethical discourse in recent years, with utilitarianism serving as a dominant framework for assessing its moral legitimacy. Between 2016 and 2024, a significant body of scholarly literature has emerged that explores euthanasia from various utilitarian perspectives, incorporating both classical theory and contemporary challenges.

Singer (2016) revisits the utilitarian foundation for voluntary euthanasia by expanding upon his earlier work in *Practical Ethics*. He argues that from a preference utilitarian standpoint, respecting the informed and voluntary choice of a suffering individual is not only ethically acceptable but morally necessary. Singer defends the position that ending life, when it no longer aligns with a person's rational preferences due to pain or loss of dignity, is a compassionate response consistent with utilitarian ethics.

Sumner (2017) in *Assisted Death: A Study in Ethics and Law*, takes a nuanced position combining utilitarian and liberal individualist approaches. He emphasizes the importance of both subjective well-being and personal autonomy in evaluating end-of-life decisions. Sumner's analysis supports legal frameworks that permit euthanasia under strict conditions, suggesting that such laws can lead to better overall outcomes for patients, families, and society.

Keown (2018) provides a critical evaluation of utilitarian arguments in favor of euthanasia, cautioning against their overreliance on measurable suffering and utility. Keown argues that utilitarianism may inadvertently ignore vulnerable populations or lead to a weakening of moral safeguards, potentially resulting in coercive practices. His work challenges the sufficiency of utilitarian reasoning in complex clinical and emotional realities.

Savulescu and Schuklenk (2019) defend a liberal utilitarian position on euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide (PAS), particularly in cases of psychiatric illness and existential suffering. They argue that if mental anguish results in a level of suffering comparable to physical illness, then denying euthanasia solely based on non-physical pain is inconsistent with utilitarian ethics. Their controversial stance invites critical reflection on how utilitarianism accounts for subjective states of distress and long-term psychological suffering.



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Varelius (2020) examines whether utilitarian principles can justify euthanasia in non-voluntary cases, such as patients in persistent vegetative states or with advanced dementia. He suggests that in situations where the possibility of future positive experiences is virtually nonexistent, euthanasia might reduce overall suffering without violating moral principles, especially when caregivers and family are also profoundly affected. His argument introduces a broader utilitarian calculus that incorporates indirect harms and societal burdens.

Lewis et al. (2021), who studied jurisdictions such as Belgium, the Netherlands, and Canada where euthanasia is legally regulated. Their findings indicate that clear guidelines, public oversight, and respect for patient autonomy contribute to positive societal outcomes, aligning with rule utilitarian principles. Their work supports the idea that utilitarian ethics can underpin practical and humane legislation without resulting in the feared “slippery slope.”

Coggon and Miola (2022) offer a legal-philosophical perspective, suggesting that utilitarian arguments have been instrumental in shaping modern legal reforms on end-of-life decisions. However, they warn that an overemphasis on outcome-based reasoning may marginalize relational and contextual factors, such as family dynamics and social inequality, which also bear ethical significance.

Tan and Yip (2023) explore cross-cultural applications of utilitarian euthanasia debates, particularly in Asian societies where collectivist values and familial obligations shape moral reasoning. They argue that while utilitarianism provides a universalizable structure, it must be adapted to reflect cultural attitudes toward death, care, and interdependence.

Murphy and Ahmed (2024) address the integration of AI and predictive analytics in euthanasia decisions, highlighting how future technologies may influence utilitarian assessments. They raise concerns about algorithmic bias and the potential for misjudging suffering, urging caution when applying utilitarian principles in technologically mediated clinical settings.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aims to critically explore the ethical justification of euthanasia through the lens of utilitarianism, a consequentialist moral theory that evaluates actions based on their ability to maximize happiness and minimize suffering. The central objective is to analyze how utilitarian principles—both classical and contemporary—can support or challenge the practice of euthanasia in its various forms. The study also seeks to assess the strengths, limitations, and real-world implications of applying utilitarian ethics to end-of-life decision-making.

The specific objectives are as follows:

1. **To examine the foundational principles of utilitarianism in relation to ethical decision-making**, with particular attention to the works of Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and modern utilitarian thinkers.
2. **To analyze how utilitarianism ethically justifies voluntary, non-voluntary, and physician-assisted forms of euthanasia**, by focusing on concepts such as relief from suffering, autonomy, quality of life, and the balance of consequences.
3. **To evaluate key contemporary scholarly debates (2016–2024) surrounding the application of utilitarian ethics to euthanasia**, including supportive and critical perspectives from bioethics, legal theory, and medical practice.
4. **To differentiate between act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism** in the context of euthanasia, and to explore how these variations may yield different moral conclusions or policy implications.
5. **To investigate potential risks and ethical concerns raised by utilitarian justifications**, such as the “slippery slope,” societal pressures, the protection of vulnerable populations, and the possibility of coercion or misuse.



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6. **To explore cross-cultural and technological dimensions**—including the influence of cultural norms on utilitarian reasoning in euthanasia debates and the emerging role of AI and predictive analytics in clinical decisions about suffering and death.
7. **To contribute to a balanced and context-sensitive ethical framework** that integrates utilitarian reasoning with legal safeguards, clinical ethics, and respect for human dignity in end-of-life care.

Through these objectives, the study aims not only to articulate the utilitarian rationale behind euthanasia but also to critically assess whether this framework can provide an ethically robust and socially responsible guide for policy and practice in contemporary healthcare systems.

4. HYPOTHESIS

This study is grounded in the philosophical premise that **utilitarianism, as a consequentialist ethical theory, provides a morally valid framework for justifying euthanasia** under certain conditions. Drawing from both classical and contemporary interpretations, the research investigates whether the application of utilitarian principles—such as maximizing well-being and minimizing suffering—can ethically support voluntary and non-voluntary euthanasia in modern medical contexts.

Accordingly, the hypotheses of this study are as follows:

1. **H1:** *Euthanasia, when performed to relieve unbearable suffering and when aligned with the patient's informed consent or best interest, is ethically justifiable within a utilitarian framework.*
2. **H2:** *Rule utilitarianism offers a more socially responsible and ethically consistent justification for the legalization and regulation of euthanasia than act utilitarianism.*
3. **H3:** *Contemporary applications of utilitarian reasoning—when combined with legal safeguards and respect for individual autonomy—can prevent ethical risks such as coercion, abuse, or the erosion of trust in medical institutions.*
4. **H4:** *Utilitarianism fails to provide a sufficient ethical justification for euthanasia due to its potential to overlook individual rights, subjective experiences, and long-term societal consequences.*

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical research approach rooted in philosophical inquiry. The aim is to critically evaluate the ethical justification of euthanasia using the utilitarian framework, drawing on both classical theory and contemporary scholarly debates from 2015 to 2024. This methodology is suitable for normative ethical analysis, as it allows for in-depth examination of abstract principles and their application in real-world ethical dilemmas.

5.1 Research Design

The research follows a **conceptual and normative design**, which is common in philosophical and ethical studies. It involves the interpretation, evaluation, and comparison of theoretical concepts, supported by empirical findings where appropriate. The study is exploratory in nature and is not intended to produce statistically generalizable results but rather to offer reasoned ethical conclusions.



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Key elements of the design include:

- **Theoretical analysis** of classical utilitarianism (Bentham and Mill) and its modern extensions (e.g., preference and rule utilitarianism).
- **Critical review of academic literature** from 2016–2024 focused on euthanasia and utilitarian ethics, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and relevant legal-ethical documents.
- **Case-based reasoning** that uses real-world examples (e.g., from Belgium, the Netherlands, and Canada) to apply utilitarian principles to contemporary euthanasia practices.

5.2 Data Collection

This study relies on **secondary data sources** to collect relevant philosophical and empirical information.

- **Philosophical texts:** Primary sources by Bentham, Mill, and other foundational utilitarian thinkers form the theoretical base.
- **Scholarly literature (2016–2024):** Academic journal articles, monographs, edited volumes, and ethics case studies are selected using databases such as JSTOR, PubMed, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar.
- **Legal and policy documents:** National and international reports on euthanasia laws and medical ethics codes from jurisdictions where euthanasia is legal are examined to understand real-world implications.
- **Inclusion criteria:** Only sources that explicitly engage with euthanasia from a utilitarian or related ethical perspective are considered. Works focusing solely on religious, deontological, or political perspectives are referenced only for comparative purposes.

5.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis employs a **normative ethical framework**, focusing on utilitarianism as both a theory of moral justification and a tool for evaluating ethical policy.

- **Consequentialist analysis:** Each case or position is examined based on its projected or observed outcomes in terms of suffering, well-being, and utility.
- **Comparison of act vs. rule utilitarianism:** Distinctions between these approaches are applied to key ethical scenarios to determine which better supports euthanasia in practice.
- **Critical evaluation:** Counterarguments (e.g., from deontological, virtue ethics, and rights-based perspectives) are acknowledged and analyzed to test the coherence and limitations of utilitarian justification.
- **Contextual integration:** Cultural, psychological, and legal dimensions are integrated to assess whether utilitarian reasoning holds across different societal contexts.

6. FINDINGS

The analysis conducted through utilitarian theory, contemporary literature (2016–2024), and ethical case evaluation has yielded several key findings. These findings reveal how utilitarianism can provide a structured, albeit complex, justification for euthanasia under specific conditions. The results reflect both the strengths and limitations of this ethical framework in real-world applications.



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6.1 Utilitarianism Offers a Clear Rationale for Voluntary Euthanasia

The study finds that **voluntary euthanasia**, when based on informed consent and motivated by the relief of intolerable suffering, aligns well with core utilitarian principles. Most scholars reviewed (e.g., Singer, Sumner, Savulescu) agree that when a terminally ill person chooses death to avoid ongoing pain, the act of euthanasia increases overall utility by reducing suffering. This supports the Hypothesis-1 that euthanasia can be ethically justified when it leads to a better balance of happiness and harm.

6.2 Rule Utilitarianism Provides a More Stable Ethical Basis

The analysis shows that **rule utilitarianism**, which focuses on the long-term effects of adopting certain moral rules, provides a more stable and socially acceptable foundation for legalizing euthanasia. Evidence from Lewis et al. (2021) suggests that regulated euthanasia laws in countries like the Netherlands and Canada promote autonomy and dignity while maintaining safeguards. This Hypothesis-2, indicating that rule utilitarianism is better suited than act utilitarianism for shaping public policy and preventing potential misuse.

6.3 Application of Utilitarianism Requires Caution in Non-Voluntary Cases

The study finds that the use of utilitarian reasoning in **non-voluntary euthanasia** (e.g., in cases involving patients with dementia or in persistent vegetative states) is ethically contentious. Scholars such as Varelius (2020) argue that euthanasia may still be justifiable in such cases based on reduced quality of life and the suffering of caregivers. However, this application requires a broader calculation of indirect harm and benefit, and carries higher risks of moral error and abuse. Thus, while utilitarianism provides theoretical support, implementation must be cautious and highly regulated.

6.4 Utilitarian Ethics Faces Challenges from Contextual and Relational Ethics

The review also finds that **overemphasis on outcome-based reasoning**, a hallmark of utilitarian ethics, can risk neglecting essential relational and contextual aspects of euthanasia decisions. As noted by Coggon and Miola (2022), ethical decision-making in end-of-life care often involves emotional, familial, and cultural factors that may not fit neatly into a utilitarian calculus. This finding reflects a limitation of utilitarianism and partially supports the hypothesis-4, especially in multicultural or emotionally complex settings.

6.5 Emerging Technologies Complicate Utilitarian Assessments

Murphy and Ahmed (2024) highlight the influence of **AI and predictive analytics** in modern euthanasia debates. The findings indicate that while technology can enhance diagnostic accuracy and predict suffering trajectories, it also introduces new ethical risks such as algorithmic bias and loss of human empathy. These developments challenge utilitarian reasoning by making it harder to ensure that outcomes truly reflect the patient's best interest.

6.6 Cultural Adaptability of Utilitarian Reasoning Is Crucial

The study finds that utilitarian arguments are most effective when **adapted to local cultural values**. Tan and Yip (2023) demonstrate how collectivist societies may interpret suffering and dignity differently than individualist cultures. This suggests that a universal application of utilitarianism must be sensitive to diverse moral and social contexts, further refining its practical scope.



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7. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that **utilitarianism provides a morally compelling yet contextually sensitive framework for justifying euthanasia**, particularly when it involves voluntary, informed consent and aims to alleviate unbearable suffering. However, applying utilitarian reasoning to end-of-life decisions also brings to light several ethical dilemmas, theoretical tensions, and practical challenges that must be critically evaluated.

7.1 Utilitarianism and the Moral Weight of Suffering

At the heart of utilitarian ethics is the **principle of utility**—the moral imperative to maximize happiness and minimize suffering. In this context, euthanasia appears ethically justified when it terminates life only to relieve intractable pain or irreversible loss of dignity. This interpretation aligns closely with **preference utilitarianism**, as articulated by Peter Singer, which emphasizes respect for an individual's rational preferences. Voluntary euthanasia, when performed with informed consent and in response to intolerable suffering, thus becomes not a moral failure, but a compassionate and ethically sound decision.

Moreover, the utilitarian justification gains strength when considering the suffering not only of the patient but also of families, caregivers, and healthcare professionals who witness prolonged agony. The **broader consequentialist analysis**, which includes indirect effects, adds moral weight to the argument in favor of euthanasia, supporting the idea that it can reduce cumulative suffering in a more holistic sense.

7.2 Rule Utilitarianism and Public Policy

While **act utilitarianism** assesses euthanasia case-by-case, **rule utilitarianism** evaluates whether the overall adoption of a policy permitting euthanasia would yield greater benefits. The findings from jurisdictions like Belgium and Canada suggest that when legal frameworks are built around transparency, patient autonomy, and oversight, euthanasia can be safely and ethically practiced. This supports the hypothesis that **rule utilitarianism offers a more consistent and socially responsible approach**, especially in policymaking, where consistency, predictability, and protection of vulnerable individuals are crucial.

Nevertheless, the fear of a “slippery slope” remains a significant ethical and legal concern. Critics argue that normalizing euthanasia might erode societal respect for life or increase subtle pressures on the elderly, disabled, or economically burdened to end their lives prematurely. While these concerns may be speculative, they are legitimate from a utilitarian standpoint, which must always account for **long-term and cumulative consequences**, both positive and negative.

7.3 Ethical Tensions in Non-Voluntary Cases

The application of utilitarian reasoning becomes ethically problematic in **non-voluntary euthanasia**, such as with patients in vegetative states or advanced dementia. While some utilitarian scholars like Varelius argue that euthanasia in such cases may minimize suffering for both patient and family, the lack of explicit consent raises serious moral questions. There is a risk of paternalism, where others decide what constitutes suffering or a life not worth living.

Furthermore, there is difficulty in **quantifying subjective well-being or suffering** in patients who cannot express preferences. Utilitarianism's reliance on such calculations exposes a significant limitation—its dependence on assumptions about internal states, which may be unknowable or misinterpreted. Thus, in these scenarios, utilitarianism risks oversimplifying ethically complex decisions.



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7.4 Cultural, Technological, and Relational Considerations

As noted by Tan and Yip (2023), utilitarian reasoning is not culturally neutral. In collectivist societies, decisions surrounding death are often shaped by family obligations, religious beliefs, and communal norms, which may conflict with a utilitarian focus on individual preference and outcome. This suggests the need for a **contextual adaptation of utilitarian ethics** that respects cultural diversity while maintaining core principles of minimizing harm.

Similarly, the rise of **AI and predictive analytics** in medical decision-making, as discussed by Murphy and Ahmed (2024), complicates utilitarian evaluations. While these technologies can assist in forecasting pain trajectories or quality-of-life outcomes, they also introduce concerns about algorithmic bias, misjudgment, and the depersonalization of care. Ethical decisions rooted in utility must remain fundamentally **human-centered**, taking into account compassion, empathy, and moral responsibility—not just data.

7.5 Balancing Ethical Clarity with Moral Uncertainty

Utilitarianism offers **clarity of principle**, but the complexity of euthanasia lies in moral **uncertainty**—about outcomes, intentions, and future consequences. The ethical justification of euthanasia cannot rest solely on theoretical grounds but must be accompanied by **robust legal safeguards**, clinical ethics protocols, and inclusive dialogue among stakeholders. While utilitarianism provides a persuasive justification, its successful application requires ongoing critical reflection, sensitivity to individual cases, and commitment to moral integrity.

8. CONCLUSION

The ethical justification of euthanasia remains one of the most complex and emotionally charged debates in contemporary moral philosophy and healthcare ethics. This study has examined euthanasia through the lens of **utilitarianism**, a consequentialist ethical framework that evaluates actions based on their ability to produce the greatest amount of happiness and reduce suffering. Drawing from classical utilitarian thinkers like Bentham and Mill, as well as modern scholars and real-world applications, the study has demonstrated that utilitarian ethics can provide a **strong theoretical foundation** for justifying euthanasia—particularly in cases involving voluntary, informed requests made by patients experiencing unrelievable suffering.

The analysis reveals that **voluntary euthanasia**, when guided by the patient's autonomous decision and motivated by the relief of profound pain or loss of dignity, aligns well with utilitarian principles. In such scenarios, euthanasia can be ethically defensible as it contributes to the reduction of suffering and enhances overall well-being—not only for the patient but also for families, caregivers, and medical professionals. **Rule utilitarianism**, in particular, provides a more stable and socially responsible model by emphasizing the importance of general rules and legal safeguards to ensure ethical consistency and protect vulnerable individuals.

However, the study also identifies important **ethical challenges**. In cases of **non-voluntary euthanasia**, where explicit consent is absent, the utilitarian justification becomes significantly more difficult to defend due to the risks of paternalism, error in assessing suffering, and potential abuse. Similarly, the utilitarian focus on outcomes may at times **overlook the importance of individual rights**, relational ethics, and cultural values, especially in non-Western societies where communal and spiritual dimensions of life and death are deeply significant.

Furthermore, the integration of **emerging technologies**—such as AI-driven predictive analytics—into end-of-life care introduces both opportunities and risks for utilitarian reasoning. While such tools may enhance medical decision-making, they also raise concerns about depersonalization, bias, and the ethical limits of algorithmic assessments of human suffering.



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In conclusion, **utilitarianism does offer a compelling ethical rationale for the practice of euthanasia**, particularly when deployed with care, contextual awareness, and strong regulatory oversight. It encourages compassionate responses to suffering, emphasizes human dignity, and supports policies that can adapt to complex clinical realities. However, utilitarianism must not be applied in isolation. For it to serve as a morally robust and socially acceptable foundation for euthanasia, it must be complemented by principles of justice, human rights, cultural sensitivity, and medical ethics.

Euthanasia, when grounded in both **ethical clarity and moral humility**, can become not merely a controversial choice but a humane option—guided by reason, empathy, and the well-being of those who suffer.

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