

From the concept of “good death” in the ancient world to the modern concept of “euthanasia”

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Abstract. *Introduction:* This article was born with the intention of analyzing the concept of “good death” and more specifically that of “euthanasia” within classical literature and early Christianity, in order to understand the term’s evolution during the course of history and how it is understood today. *Methods:* The first part of this article will analyze the concept of “good death” in epic poetry and respectively the ideal of *Kalokagathia* in epic poetry and in historiography. This research will cover many centuries. The focus of the central section of this research will be on the concept of “good death” in Plato, as well as in two of the most important philosophical schools of antiquity: Epicureanism and Stoicism. Related to this last aspect, our attention is directed to Seneca, the representative of Roman Stoicism under the emperor Nero. An interesting article on the comparison between the Gospel of Paul, Stoicism and the fourth book of the Maccabees about the concept of “good death” gave me the incentive to deepen an agonistic metaphor deriving from the sporting environment in the ancient world. The study of “good death” conducted by the Church Fathers allows a better understanding of how the treated concept has assumed a value from Christianity through many changes. The third and final part analyzes how the concept of death is used in our day and starting from when the term “euthanasia” appeared. *Objective:* This study aims to clarify how some modern concepts are often linked to the ancient world; for example, the concept of today’s euthanasia and of assisted death did not exist in antiquity in the same sense as modern interpretation. *Conclusions:* The end of life analysis reveals a variety of values about the concept of “good death” in different time periods and cultures. The research on “good death” and on assisted death is well linked to the theme concerning the quality of life. This is one of the most important topics in palliative medicine, a field that is becoming increasingly important and is related to the well-being of the patient.

Key words: good death, euthanasia, graeco-roman times, palliative medicine, spiritual care

The concept of death in the ancient Greek culture was deeply connected to the ideal of *kalokagathia* as a mix of beauty and solidity, an inner firmness which had to characterize every Greek fighter.

The Greek hero struggled for his own country, his community and his glory yearning for the death in the battle as the best destiny he could have (1).

The defense of one’s homeland represented the primary aim of the Homeric warrior as the examples

of heroes like Hector, Sarpedonte and Achilles show – with the exception of the last one being demigod – feature that marks him considerably from others.

The figure of the warrior who fights moving with a cry of struggle clashes with the figure of the dead fighter, whose body, static, lies lacerated in the shadow, deprived of his role and identity.

Both epic poetry and elegy, a form of lyric poetry, enhance the ideal of *kalokagathia* as an ideal of physi-

cal and interior perfection of the hero or of the warrior who, handsome (καλὸς) and brave/virtuous (ἀγαθός), meets his death on the battlefield.

The burial ritual plays a big role because it allows the fighter to retrieve his figure restoring him his “*physiche du rôle*” (1).

This aspect emerges clearly in a passage of the *Iliad* in which Priam goes in Achilles’ tent imploring to give him the body of his son Hector back.

The scenery reveals a deep humanity and shows how in the burial ritual it was of fundamental importance to give the dead body its brightness of living back (1).

The ancient ideal of *good death* as a death in battle is also traceable in historiography, which begins with Herodotus.

In the speech between Croesus and Solon, Herodotus shows how only those who lead and conclude life in a good way can be defined lucky.

What emerges is the concept according to which a *good death* is equal to a good life. The two aspects are closely related – life and death merge with one another.

To Croesus’ questions about who can be considered lucky, Solon answers with three examples, two of them come from myths: the one of Tello of Athens and the one of the brothers Kleobis and Biton.

The first had a good spawn, which he saw grow, and he found a good death – that of a hero killed in battle – on the contrary, the two brothers died out of drudgery, carrying their mother for 25 stadium and giving proof of great vigor and strength.

Solon concludes his speech to Croesus telling him that a man can be defined fortunate when he is in good health, feels no pain, has descendants and has a good death.

Good death is intended as fulfilling, the *exitus* of a life marked by health and vigor (2).

A more specific definition of death can be found in Plato’s *Phaidrus*, in which the philosopher describes this event as the separation or detachment of the soul from the body, incorporating the consideration of a *good death* in the State’s interest (3).

In a society that rewarded vigor and strength, sick people weren’t given any regard or respect (4).

Acting in the State’s interest was a fundamental aspect of the Greek *poleis*’ societies in the fifth cen-

tury B.C., aspect which is well outlined in the written works of Plato as in those of Aristotle and that can be also underlined when speaking about suicide.

Regarding suicide, Plato and Aristotle submit different ideas: while the first accepts it only in case of an incurable disease, the second sees it as a weakness which would take away from the State its wealth and of its valid citizens – and therefore he doesn’t accept it (5, 6).

The concept of “*good death*” is widely faced by two philosophical movements: that of Epicureism and that of Stoicism.

The epicurean maximum “as long as we exist, death is not here and once it does come, we no longer exist” shows how life and death are two conditions which cannot coexist.

According to Epicurus, only what shall be experienced can be terrible or bad, so death, as a condition that is experimented only when it happens, cannot be defined *per se* neither good or bad (7).

The concept of death in Epicurus’ philosophy, as a non-negative condition *per se*, does not differ too much from stoic concept: a liberation and relief from all evil.

In Crisippus’ fragments we read that a wise stoic man keeps away from his friends and his homeland, even when he is victim of serious pain, disabilities or terminal diseases because he does not fear death (8).

Greek Stoicism’s conception of death finds its own continuation in roman Stoicism, of which Seneca is the main exponent.

According to this philosopher, also known as emperor Nero’s preceptor, death represents a true *exitus*, a necessary way to “get out of life”, especially when life has become a prison or a chain, that prevents the subject to conduct a life of virtue.

The connection between virtue and happiness represents the core around which Stoicism spins: only by being virtuous a precondition of happiness can be assumed, and when one cannot achieve virtue, one should give up on life. Therefore, suicide is right, as we can read in Seneca’s works regarding the topic.

With the coming of Christianity, the concept of *good death* shifts from the concept of dying in battle and becomes that of dying for God and in God.

An interesting article that shows a comparison between Paul’s gospel (in particular, the Second Let-

ters to the Corinthians), Stoicism and the Maccabees' fourth book— a text included in the Apocrypha —using a metaphor taken from the world of sportive competition (the Greek *agon*) shows how the concept has endured a radical change from the development of Jesus' *euaggelion* and moreover from the birth and diffusion of the first Christian communities.

As a matter of fact, if such a metaphor is conceived by Stoicism only towards virtue and knowledge, in Paul's gospel it is pictured as a difficult battle, full of pain, in which an apostle feels supported by God's power, then indicating, in the Maccabees' fourth book, "agonizing pain" which is pain related to martyrdom and death (1).

The Maccabees' fourth book represents the perfect synthesis between Hellenistic philosophy and Jewish beliefs and is focalized on martyrs that find death under Antiochus' persecution and under the Hellenistic aristocracy before the first success of their military compatriots (as de Silvia has pointed out) (9).

Compared to the considerations expressed by Epicureanism and Stoicism, a new aspect emerges: Christians, that were condemned to death and fed to ferocious beasts in an arena, accepted their fate as "good", perceiving it insight of a life in the kingdom of the heavens.

This concept finds its theorization in the thought of the Fathers of the Church, among which I will talk about Ignatius and Origen.

According to Ignatius, Jesus' Christ duo of death and *true life*, only true life triumphs over death: a believer must follow the example of Jesus as the one who exceeded death by conquering it forever.

Birth on this earth coincides with the beginning of dying and because of this, according to Origen, death represents the opposite of life, a "type of darkness" in relation to light (10).

The philosopher of Alexandria distinguishes three types of death: the death of sin that coincides with true life, a full and total communion with God – this is God's friendly death; death by sin which is configured as hell and is a condition of distance and separation from God, Logos' enemy par excellence; biological or physical death also defined as median death, which can be good or bad according to the moral point of view (10).

Death's inescapability is, according to Origen, a good thing because it allows us to achieve true life.

All three of these deaths can be organized as follows: bodily death, indicating a separation of the soul from the body; spiritual death as a separation of the soul from God and the Holy Spirit; and finally blessed death, true abandonment of sin "to live in God" (10).

The advent of Christianity radically changes the way of understanding death and, consequently, voluntary death, as we can see in Augustine – one of the main Christian intellectuals of the first millennium (11) – whose suicide stance contrasts with that of Seneca described above.

In the *De Civitate Dei* Augustine fights against suicide, claiming that whoever kills himself is killing a person and isn't less responsible than those who kill another man and therefore commits homicide (12, 13).

Since the beginning of time, fear of death has been of interest to human beings. Myths and legends have tried to give dying and the end of life an explanation, questioning the possibility of a *continuum* after life.

It's useful to remember Ovid's myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, which can be found in the tenth book of *Metamorphoses*: it is a metaphor regarding death's inevitability and how it marks in a definite way the passage from "*being*" to "*not-being*" from which there can be no return (14); the myth of Asclepius, handed down by Pindar, is also a symbol of the human desire for a return from death, "a resurrection" that comes from the profound suffering experienced by the loss of loved ones (15).

The two myths, though set on different stories, have a fundamental common teaching: death is a definitive condition that does not rule anyone out and from which nobody can return.

While in some cultures death is seen as an event that affects everyone's private and social life, in ours there is a privatization and regression of death as pure action, a real obstacle and a disturbance factor in a society filled with "have to" and "to do" (16).

Death has become the most scrupulously guarded taboo of our time, that creates anguish, especially in western society and for this reason it must be concealed (16).

The right to a *good life* is increasingly bound with the right to *good death*, which raises an increasing in-

terest to the theme of allowing death or, more broadly, “euthanasia” (16).

The lack of any record of the word “*euthanasia*” in antiquity as a technical term, indicating a voluntary death with the assistance of a physician, shows how such a concept only belongs to modern times and how, in common use, is falsely and unduly sought in the ancient world (17, 18).

Despite the examples seen for the ancient world, the use of the word euthanasia dates to the British philosopher Francis Bacon, which distinguishes between external euthanasia and internal euthanasia. With the first, he conceives practical relief and concrete help in the final phase of life, while with the second he means a true preparation for a *good death*.

This is the concept that will characterize the idea of *good death* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the dying must prepare in time to die, because this is the only way to access the Kingdom of the Heaves where they may live, eternally, in God.

Thus, for Francis Bacon, euthanasia is a way to help, both, the body and the soul to die (19, 20) and, above all, a way to make life more bearable (16), unlike today’s intense prolongation of life.

He does not accept any violent act, even if originated from an explicit request of death that is issued by expressed consent or pity, believing that a physician should not make judgments - which could be judged “tyrannical” - and should recognize the absolute value of the divine providence (16).

The analysis of the concept of “*good death*” from antiquity to our days, through various ages, draws attention to what is to be understood today with that expression.

This is why palliative medicine is such an important support.

Developed in the 1960s with the birth of the Hospice movement, it was recognized as a practice in 1987 seeing as its pioneer nurse, social worker and physician Dame Cicely Saunders; it is also defined as a “discipline” or philosophy that can heal through taking over a patient as a whole, even when something cannot be healed (21).

Since 1980 the pain relief principles that had been described by Cicely in her works, such as *Care of Dying* (1960), *The Management of Terminal Disease* (1978)

and *Living with Dying* (1983), have become standard principles in the care service and, in 1987, they contributed in the recognizing of palliative medicine as a real discipline (22).

Although there is no explicit example of *good death*, works regarding palliative care converge with some specific features that contribute in defining death as good: 1) controlling symptoms 2) careful consideration of the social and relational context in which the patients find themselves 3) preparation towards dying 4) existential well-being 5) dying in accordance with one’s own values, wishes and preferences (23, 24).

Therefore, healthcare should be centered on the patients’ choices and desires (25), an aspect that shows how palliative care is oriented towards the respect of the patient’s autonomy and how the concept of “*good death*” drives committed healthcare professionals to accept holistic and individual-oriented approaches, focused on autonomy and control towards terminal patients (26).

Conclusions

The article shows how the word *euthanasia* is often subject to undue references to the ancient world. As a matter of fact, the concept of “*good death*” (the etymological meaning of the word “euthanasia”) did not imply the current idea of the term, which is the request by a subject to a third person (usually a physician) to be helped to die in a worthy way, without pain; a good death was a heroic and valiant death in the battlefield whilst looking for one’s glory.

With the birth of the polis many things changed and the concept of “good death” is perceived as a noble death for ones’ homeland with the help of compatriots and not as the heroic death of one individual (27, 28).

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