

Ancient euthanasia: ‘good death’ and the doctor in the graeco-Roman world

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Abstract

This article maps the concept of ‘good death’ (*euthanasia*) in the ancient world and explores the marginal role of the doctor at a ‘good dying’. His assistance was not needed when the Homeric warrior died as a hero and was expected to accept death with resignation. Later the city-state regarded as heroes the men fallen for the cause of the community, honouring these model citizens as those who died well. In the more individualistic age of Hellenism and the Roman Empire, a death in luxury or without suffering could be styled *euthanasia*. The doctor had neither a place in those acts of dying nor in cases of natural death. He shunned death as a failure of his art. Sometimes a doctor was called in to assist in voluntary death, a role that was not forbidden by the Hippocratic oath. An appeal to this oath by opponents of *euthanasia* in the modern sense of the word therefore is mistaken.

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The ancient word euthanasia

From 1 April 2002, a new law regulates euthanasia in the Netherlands. After calling in a second opinion, a doctor is permitted to end the life of a patient whose suffering he/she regards as intolerable as well as incurable, provided the patient has explicitly expressed the wish to die. The new law constitutes a major victory for the Dutch Association for Voluntary Euthanasia (Nederlandse Vereniging voor Vrijwillige Euthanasie) that for decades has pleaded for adequate legal rulings. It is to be noticed that in the modern concept of euthanasia the presence of a doctor is taken for granted. In the ancient idea of *euthanasia*, good dying, there was no place for the doctor.

The noun *euthanasia*, the adjective *euthanatos*, the adverb *euthanatôs* and the verb (*ap*)*euthanat(iz)ein* made their appearance in the fourth and third century BCE. It seems that they were first used by Greek comedy writers, such as Menander, Posidippus and Cratinus, in scenes in which a glutton enjoys the good things of life so much

that he wishes to die on the spot. Thus, Menander has the tyrant Dionysius say

One thing for my own self I desire—and this seems to me the only death (*monos thanatos*) that is a one ‘well died’ (*euthanatos*)—to lie on my back with its many rolls of fat, scarce uttering a word, gasping for breath, while I eat and say: ‘I am rotting away in pleasure.’¹

An astrologer from the second century CE, Vettius Valens, describes a (physically) good death: those who are born under a certain constellation ‘die well’ (*euthanatousin*) falling asleep from food, satiety, wine, intercourse or apoplexy.² It is this kind of sudden, gentle death that the emperor Augustus wished for himself, according to his biographer Suetonius: ‘For always when he heard that somebody had died fast and without pain he bade for himself and his family a similar *euthanasia*, for this is the word he used.’ Interestingly, the Roman emperor used the Greek term that obviously by his time had acquired a specific meaning.

¹ Menander frg. 23 Edmonds (1961).

² Anthologiarum libri ix 126.

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The idea of good dying was not limited to a painless exit. The word *euthanasia* and its derivatives were also used to indicate a happy end that crowned a good life. In his instructions on how to praise somebody in a speech, the orator Aelius Theon sums up the various personal conditions that deserve acclamation: education, friendship, respect, political position, richness, being blessed with children (*euteknia*) and last but not least *euthanasia*.³ ‘Who does not know that a good old age (*eugèria*) and *euthanasia* are the highest of human goods?’ so the Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria says—only to mark the difference with God whose ‘old-age-less’ and immortal (*athanatos*) nature has nothing to do with these human goods.⁴ The Christian Clemens (c. 150–211/212 CE) echoes this idea of a God who is in no way to be compared with humans. The early Christian theologian revels in the paradoxes of faith. God has given us humans innumerable blessings in which He Himself does not participate: ‘He by birth unborn, as to food in want of naught, in growth remaining the same, as to good old age and *euthanasia* immortal and undecaying.’⁵

In this argument, Clemens still holds to a rather concrete meaning of *euthanasia*. However, to ancient philosophers dying a good death was more than having a painless or happy end. It meant dying in moral perfection. One fragment of the Stoic Chrysippus (281–208 BCE) says ‘*euthanatein* is ending life by whatever death in perfection.’⁶ This idea is developed by the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180), who recently became familiar to a world audience through the film *Gladiator*, in which he appeared as the wise emperor. This reputation is based on the philosophical diary he composed during his reign, *Exhortations to Myself*. In this unique piece of writing, he admonishes himself to be nice to common people. Of course, the wise man shall not be dragged away unwillingly from such people when the end is near, but rather ‘as the soul shall easily slip from the body of a person that dies well (*euthanatountos*), the departure from such persons has to be of such easy nature in order to die well (*euthanatèsontes*).’⁷

Finally and most importantly, *euthanatein* could mean dying nobly. Thus the historian Polybius (c. 200–c. 120 BCE) describes the death of Cleomenes, a former king of Sparta who, being imprisoned by king Ptolemy Philopator of Egypt, in the winter of 220/219 made a dash for freedom, ‘not that he really believed that he could recover it [...] but rather because he was resolved to die nobly (*euthanèsai*).’ When the attempt was thwarted he and his companions ‘turned their weapons upon

themselves, and died like brave men and Spartans.’⁸ Such an end befitted this king ‘who was, in one word, formed by nature both to lead and to rule’, but even a despicable person like Lykiskos who had caused much misery for his fellow-Aetolians, died so nobly (160/59 BCE) that he was an example how Fortune grants to the worst men the fine death, *euthanasia*, which is the guerdon due to the good and brave.⁹

The heroic connotation of *euthanasia* is still used with respect to Jewish and Christian martyrs. In Book 2 of *Maccabees*, the aged Eleazar declares that by his death he will leave a noble example to the young of how to die well (*apeuthanatizein*) in accordance with the revered and holy laws of the Jews.¹⁰ This Bible passage is quoted by Origenes (184/5–254/5) in his *Exhortation to Martyrdom*.¹¹ He expects Christians when they have to give proof of their faith to die nobly (*euthanatizein*) as Eleazar did.

Although the Greek *euthanasia* as a euphemism for gentle death was not unknown to the Romans as we have seen with regard to Augustus, a prominent Roman like Cicero who was more versed in Greek literature used it in the more common sense of a noble death. In the chaotic situation after the murder of Caesar on March 15th 44 BCE, he had left Rome on the advice of Atticus. Now this same close friend urged him only a few months later to come back. Cicero is surprised about this change of mind and shows some irritation about Atticus’ arguments: ‘What did astonish me beyond measure was that you should use the words: ‘A fine thing for you, who talk of a noble death (*euthanasia*), a fine thing, ífaith. Go desert your country.’¹²

Our linguistic exploration has shown that *euthanasia* and its derivatives conveyed the idea of a comfortable, happy and noble end. Medically assisted gentle death, which is the primary connotation of modern *euthanasia*, was not covered by the Greek terms. Presumably, *euthanasia* became a popular euphemism in modern times because of its technical undertones. For the Greek root of the word makes it look like the verbal constructs of which medical terminology is full. At the end of this paper, we shall see that ancient doctors did sometimes assisted in self-killing, however not to ensure a gentle, but rather a noble death. So already the exploration of the word suggests that the ancient paradigm of *euthanasia* was quite different from the modern concept. The difference can only be fully understood against the background of the ancients’ view of life and death. It may seem daring to cover many centuries in sketching

³Progymnasmata 110.

⁴On the sacrifices of Abel and Cain 100.

⁵Stromata 5,68,2–3.

⁶Moral Fragments 601.

⁷Ta eis heauton 10,36.

⁸Histories 5, 38–39.

⁹Histories 32,4,3.

¹⁰Macc.2:6,28.

¹¹Chapter 22.

¹²Letters to Atticus 16,7,3.

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