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From “dying well” to “inducing a good death”: Euthanasia in the British press (1864-1949)

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ABSTRACT

Proposed here is a terminological review of the term *euthanasia* and the concepts related to a practice that has been in use since the dawn of history, in order to see what changes have occurred in the 1850-1950 ca. period, and what social and historical events prompted them. The timeline ideally follows the four Geneva Conventions of 1864, 1907, 1929 and 1949, a period in which a reflection on death as a mass phenomenon emerged due to unprecedented large-scale wars, and spurred the adoption of humanitarian standards as laid out in the Geneva treaties. The study adopts the perspective of Western culture and draws materials from the British newspapers *The Times* and *The Manchester Guardian* from the years 1864-1949. This paper offers a critical reflection on the changes which the term and concept of euthanasia underwent, in light of the historical moment, the social and ideological context, and the role of the media.

Keywords: euthanasia, discourse analysis, medical terminology, news media, popularisation.

1. Background

1.1 Euthanasia: The term and concept in history

End-of-life related practices have been in use, legally or illegally, approved of or disapproved of, since the dawn of humanity. Indeed, while there is widespread agreement about the term ‘euthanasia’ having changed its meaning in the course of history, the concept that lies behind it, even in its current acceptance, remains more than elusive.

The 'good death' referred to in classical times had nothing to do with terminating one's life by means of removing vital support or injecting a lethal drug, to report a rough but realistic idea of what most laypeople in Western societies would picture when faced with the notion of euthanasia. It literally denoted a quiet and calm death, and often one that fulfilled a person's (good) life, such as employed by Suetonius in *De Vita Caesarum* (A.D. 121, book 2, chapter 99), when describing Augustus's passing, reportedly the first use of the word in ancient literature: "Nam fere quotiens audisset cito ac nullo cruciatu defunctum quempiam, sibi et suis *εὐθανασίαν* similem – hoc enim et verbo uti solebat – precabatur" (Schuckburg 1896: 171).

This notion remained unchanged throughout the decline of the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages, although of course the advent of Christianity moved the general attitude on suicide and mercy-killing, which "were common acts in classical antiquity because fundamentally they did not conflict with the moral beliefs of the time" (Dowbiggin 2005: 8), toward steady resistance to and condemnation of suicide as a form of self-murder, a new attitude supported by Church Fathers such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

During medieval times, the meaning of 'euthanasia' persisted as that of setting the right context for a peaceful passing, to the point that a whole "devotional literature known as the *ars moriendi*" (Dowbiggin 2005: 18) was developed for that purpose.

It was only much later, in the early modern era, that the term became associated with medical practice. Popular sources usually quote Francis Bacon as the first author to have used the term in such a way, in his *De dignitate et augmentis scientiarum* (1623, book 4, chapter 2): "Hanc autem Partem, Inquisitionem de *Euthanasia exteriori* (ad differentiam eius *Euthanasiae*, quae Animae praeparationem respicit) appellamus, eamque inter *Desiderata* reponimus" (Bacon 1623 [1624: 201]). This is possibly correct, with the caveats that he did so in one of his Latin-language writings, and that, "albeit with a physician now at the centre of the picture[,] Bacon's use of the term in this new sense seems to have been completely isolated" (Kemp 2002: 7). To see the word used in the English vernacular, one has to wait until Joseph Hall employed it in 1646, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED); however, the acceptation was still the classical one of a calm and peaceful death.

The age of Enlightenment, with its renewed focus on rationalism and on the individual, started to bring back the debate about suicide as an expression of personal freedom. David Hume was possibly the most notable

intellectual supporting this position, which he exposed in his essay *Of suicide* of 1777, published posthumously two years later (Hume 1779).

It was not until the end of the nineteenth century, however, that the current meaning of ‘euthanasia’ was introduced, according to the *OED*, s.v. EUTHANASIA, n. 3, by William E.H. Lecky in his *History of European morals* (1869). Since the inception of the current acceptance of euthanasia in the late 1860s, this has become the most prominent, supplanting the first two *OED* meanings except as regards classical usage.¹ This should not be surprising, considered that the Victorian era saw a significant combination of improvements in medicine, such as the introduction of antiseptics, anaesthesia, the stethoscope and X-ray; the change of hospitals from places where one went to die to institutions where one received care and compassion and possibly left in a healthier state; and the founding of occupational organizations of physicians, with journals and common standards for medical schools (Dowbiggin 2005: 42-43). All these were only the first among the recent scientific and technological developments that made it possible for humans to improve their chances of prolonging life, but concurrently raised the question of whether, in certain circumstances, to end it.

1.2 The contemporary acceptance

Kemp (2002), still an excellent and very specific resource on the history of euthanasia in Britain, begins his account precisely in the 1870s, when the term acquired its contemporary meaning of mercy-(self) killing. After its

¹ The current entry for EUTHANASIA in the *OED* includes three acceptations: 1. “A gentle and easy death”, first attested in 1646, with five further illustrative quotations up to 1875, and two figurative uses dated 1813 and 1844; 2. “The means of bringing about a gentle and easy death. Also *transferred* and *figurative*”, first attested in 1742, with four further quotations up to 1851; and 3. “In recent use: The action of inducing a gentle and easy death. Used *esp.* with reference to a proposal that the law should sanction the putting painlessly to death of those suffering from incurable and extremely painful diseases”, whose first quotation “An euthanasia, an abridgement of the pangs of disease” is from the above mentioned Lecky’s book (1869) and is followed by two excerpts from as many newspaper articles by L.A. Tollemache.

Interestingly, the *OED* entry mentions two derivatives, both of them labelled as “*rare* or *nonce-words*” and semantically related to the third acceptance, i.e. EUTHANASIAN “*adj.* of or pertaining to euthanasia”) and EUTHANASIAST “*n.* one who advocates euthanasia”, with illustrative quotations dated 1873 and 1884 respectively.

It is to be highlighted that a note in the *OEDOnline* webpage for EUTHANASIA says that “This entry has not yet been fully updated (first published 1891)”. It was in 1891 that the fascicle including the entry under scrutiny here was published.

insurgence at the end of the nineteenth century, the public debate on the issue remained in the background until the 1920s. The First World War, with its tragic count of deaths, especially among the younger members of society, was possibly one reason for the discussion of euthanasia having subsided during that period, although for the same reason the notion of mercy-killing might similarly have been very topical. In 1920, Karl Binding and Alfred Hoche's notorious book *Permitting the Destruction of Life not Worthy of Life* was published in Germany, giving voice to the eugenics movement that was also to inform the Third Reich. The decade that it inaugurated was for Germany one of "economic vicissitudes [...] [that] had fostered a considerable increase in the asylum population, which in turn placed a heavier burden upon the state" (Kemp 2002: 125). Even in Britain, eugenic claims "were instrumental in providing the basis for the campaign to legalise voluntary sterilisation for mental defectives" (Dowbiggin 2005: 72) and, "while most experts in the field of mental deficiency felt unable to support the mercy-killing of hopeless defectives, there were occasional exceptions" (Dowbiggin 2005: 73). Moreover, "in Europe secularizing trends that predated the outbreak of World War I gathered momentum in the 1920s. In Britain and Germany, secularization helped pave the way for the first signs of an organized euthanasia movement" (Dowbiggin 2005: 76-77). This promptly emerged, in Britain, in 1935, with the foundation of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society (VES). Whereas the VES's motives often flirted dangerously with eugenic ideals during the 1930s (Kemp 2002: 73-79), the uncovering in the following decade of the horrors perpetrated by Nazi racial programmes caused the VES to distance itself expressly from that dubious association, although the toll of the Second World War also made the public consider any notion of killing, even if motivated by mercy, in a much colder way. As a consequence, the debate on voluntary euthanasia in Britain did not begin to gain momentum again until the 1960s. In the period considered here (ca. mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century), two attempts were made at legislating on euthanasia in the UK. The first was the 1936 Voluntary Euthanasia (Legalisation) Bill, proposed by Lord Ponsonby and defeated in the House of Lords 35 to 14; the second was a motion to discuss the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia, put forth in 1950 and withdrawn without a division by its proponent, Lord Chorley, due to fierce opposition.

The change in the commonly understood meaning of the term *euthanasia* that occurred starting from the 1870s is clearly evidenced in a number of specialised lexicographic sources published around the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century period. For example, both Douglinson's

Medical Lexicon, from 1842, and Gould’s *Illustrated Dictionary of Medicine*, from 1894, still define euthanasia as “An easy death” (Douglinson 1842) and “An easy or calm death” Gould (1894), i.e. in ways consistent with the classical notion thereof. Stedman’s very popular *Practical Medical Dictionary*, however, starting from its 1911 first edition, features a much longer and more complex entry, stating it to be, firstly “A quiet, painless death”, but then also “A popular term for the alleged practice of putting an end to life by artificial means in cases of incurable and painful disease” (Stedman 1911). This shows how it was not until scientific discoveries and their applications in technology made life supporting systems dramatically more efficient, especially nearing the end of the twentieth century, that euthanasia started to acquire a layered meaning depending on its realisation, becoming a word heavily pre- and post-modified accordingly (cf. Grego – Vicentini 2019). Indeed, contemporary lexicographic resources, such as ten Have’s *Encyclopedia of Global Bioethics* (2016), acknowledge the existence of different types of euthanasia, based for instance on the type (inward / outward, voluntary / involuntary / nonvoluntary, direct / indirect, active / passive), or on the procedure (withholding [treatment], withdrawing [treatment], sedating, administering [a lethal drug]). Other sources may employ slightly different definitions, but the multi-layered understanding of the current idea of euthanasia is the same: as the possibilities of prolonging life offered by contemporary medicine develop, so does the notion of how to voluntarily put an end to it.

2. Aims

This is a study within a research project titled “The discourse of medically-assisted death”,² which looks at contemporary end-of-life issues from a discourse analysis perspective. Previous research within this project (Grego – Vicentini 2019) has found that, when analysing the use of terminology related to an end-of-life issue (such as *advance decision**, *assisted death*, *assisted dying*, *assisted suicide*, *end of life*, *euthan**, *mercy kill**, *resuscitat**, *refus* treatment*, *withdr* life*), the term *euthanasia* clearly stands out for its long history and eclectic usage. It seems only reasonable that even a contemporary review of the discourse of medically-assisted death should start from analysing the historical development of this term. As such, this paper, following the

² Funded in 2017 by the Department of Studies in Language Mediation and Intercultural Communication of the University of Milan.

perspective of Western cultures, aims to look at the term *euthanasia* in the British press from the mid-nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century (see § 1.2). The exact timeline set for reference follows the four Geneva Conventions of 1864, 1907, 1929 and 1949, a period in which a reflection on death as a mass phenomenon emerged due to unprecedented large-scale wars, and spurred the adoption of humanitarian standards as laid out in the Geneva treaties. Since the Second World War, reflection on the humanitarian aspects of death has continued to the present day, having adapted to a time of relative peace, wherein people enjoy longer life expectancy, yet fall victim to mass conditions such as cancers and neuro-degenerative diseases that often result in prolonged end-of-life spans. Specifically, this paper proposes a terminological review of the term *euthanasia*, to see what changes have occurred in the period considered and what social and historical events prompted them.

3. Corpus

Two quality British newspapers were considered for the study, *The Times* and *The Manchester Guardian*. *The Times*, founded in 1785 and soon turned into Britain's most influential source of information, with an educated, upper class, and tendentially traditional readership (Morison 1935-1952), had a circulation that went from 38,000 in 1850 to 210,000 in 1913 (Chalaby 1998: 38). *The Manchester Guardian*, started in 1821 as a weekly serving the North of England, became a daily in 1855 and opened offices in London in 1868; by the late 1880s, it sold about 40,000 copies a day, mostly to an educated, business readership (Ayerst 1971). A total of 327 articles from the 1 Jan. 1864–31 Dec. 1949 period³ was retrieved from *The Times Digital Archive* (1785-1985) and *The Guardian Digital Archive* (1821-2003), 161 and 166 texts respectively.

4. Methods

The subcorpora were qualitatively analysed to establish (a) when the recent acceptance of the term *euthanasia* was first employed and (b) when the

³ Although the First Geneva Convention took place in August, the event has been selected rather as a signpost for historical orientation than as a precise chronological indication; therefore, the search was set to calendar standards to include texts from 1 January that year till 31 December of the last year considered.

public debate on the concept began, as reported in the press. As references, the acceptations recorded in the *OED* and in the specialised dictionaries mentioned in § 1.2 were considered, to fill in gaps in the description of the concepts considered and evaluate the interaction between popular and specialised terminology, in the light of the social impact of these issues.

The findings were additionally interpreted from the perspective of Critical Discourse Studies. In particular, to place the diachronic variation in context, Reisigl’s Discourse-Historical Approach was followed, in its socio-diagnostic critique form, which is

both epistemic and deontic [...] aims at exposing manipulation in and by discourse, [...] [and] focusses on discrepancies between discursive and other social practices and functions as a form of social control [...] [relying] on social, historical and political background knowledge. (Reisigl 2018: 51)

The notion of class was also analysed, based on Block’s (2018) model for determining social stratification, heavily drawing from Bourdieu (1977, 1984), in turn inspired by Marx (1867 [1990]) and Weber (1922 [1968]). Although Bourdieu’s work focused on understanding class in the late 20th century, Block’s elaboration, which puts together

a constellation of interrelated dimensions model to capture the long list of dimensions that index class: in different ways in different contexts, cultures and societies [...] [and] consists of five general categories [...]: Economic resources, Sociocultural resources, Behaviour, Life conditions, Spatial conditions, (Block 2018: 349)

could also well apply to the British society from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, as considered in this study.

Media, finally, were considered in Phelan’s (2018) terms, especially the suggestions he makes about scope and ideology, e.g. that

critical discourse studies needs to clearly position itself as a field that addresses all four analytical tiers of the media studies totality of production, representation, distribution and reception, and extends its analysis to entertainment media and popular culture. (Phelan 2018: 290)

and that

media discourse researchers need to reinvigorate our commitment to ideology critique by reengaging with the concept of ideology in media studies (Phelan 2016) and the status of the 'critical' in critical discourse studies (van Dijk 2015). (Phelan 2018: 292)

5. Findings

5.1 *The Times*

The Times returned 161 texts mentioning *euthanasia* that appeared between 1 Jan. 1864 and 31 Dec. 1949. The qualitative analysis revealed that in this subcorpus, between 1864 and 1920, the search term was used almost exclusively in the classical sense featured in the acceptance recorded in the *OED* (s.v. EUTHANASIA, *n.1*), in Douglinson (1842), in Gould (1894) and in Stedman (1911) (s.v. EUTHANASIA, 1), unless when referring to animals, as in veterinary euthanasia. In this field, the idea of mercy-killing a beast when it was deemed necessary clearly did not pose any ethical problems or prove debatable in any respect, as it was described quite neutrally by Stedman (1911). This obviously goes back to the medieval notion that animals, although subject to suffering, do not possess a soul.

For instance, the very first mention of the word in the subcorpus is found in a report of parliamentary notices, used by a Mr White to talk about discontented government officials, in a metaphorical way:

- (T1) Make a man a Government servant and you made him a discontented man for the rest of his life; and yet these places were such objects of ambition that people were always to be found struggling for what they thought the euthanasia of a Government employment. ("House of Commons, Friday, July, 22", 23 Jul. 1864, p. 9)

On the occasion of the assassination of US President Abraham Lincoln, *The Times* reports on a meeting of Americans to commemorate him. Here the word is used in the same classical acceptance, but figuratively and, for obvious reasons, not literally:

- (T2) [...] Abraham Lincoln fell. His euthanasia is complete. For him we ought not to mourn. His work was done; he had fought the good fight; he had finished his course. ("The assassination of President Lincoln", 2 May 1865, p. 7)

An interesting case is from 1874. In a letter-to-the-editor by a “medical man”, the writer comments on the tragic death of people in a fire, providing his opinion that at least the victims had probably not suffered, unconscious as they ought to have been when their end arrived:

- (T3) [...] in all probability, those deaths were really painless, and that a merciful unconsciousness to suffering attended the explosion of those casks of petroleum – an euthanasia even in the midst of that burning fiery furnace. (“Anaesthesia By Petroleum”, 16 Apr. 1874, p. 12)

Here, the usage is between the specialised and the figurative, since it is made in medical terms, although it by no means discusses a voluntary or even involuntary termination of a suffering person’s life. Also interesting is the use of the “an” allomorph of the indefinite article, as opposed to its alternative, which is the one currently employed.

A curiosity that emerged from the search was the frequent appearance (4 times) of the key term in 1884. A manual examination revealed that Euthanasia was the name of a female racing horse of the time.

The fifth mention of the term from 1884 was still to do with animals, though not with Mr Beaumont’s champion horse. It was also its first appearance in a headline, in 1884; in fact, it just features in the title, a single-word one, which was seemingly enough to explain all there was to it, at least as far as veterinary matters were concerned:

- (T4) Euthanasia – The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals may, in common with all humane persons, feel gratification that the long-continued experiments by Dr. Richardson for the painless extinction of animal life, have been brought to a successful termination. (“Euthanasia”, 20 Sept. 1884, p. 11)

The first occurrence of the term in the *OED*’s third and contemporary acceptance (the second one in Stedman’s 1911 dictionary) seems to be from 1889, and it is actually both a surprising and an interesting datum, worth discussing. On 14 January 1889, in the classified advertisements’ miscellaneous section, there appeared a notice of quite an enigmatic nature, which read:

- (T5) ROSE MARY CRAWSHAY, Bwlch, Breconshire, can still SUPPLY PRIZE ESSAYS (Byron, Shelley, Keats) with conditions of current

competition, 1 s.; On Lady-helps, 1 s.; Euthanasia, by S.D. Williams, with preface and thesis by R.M.C., 1 s. ("Miscellaneous", 14 Jan. 1889, p. 1)

The information condensed in these few lines is, however, vast and valuable for the subject at stake, for a variety of reasons. Firstly, this is because the Rose Mary Crawshay from Bwlch, Breconshire (Southern Wales), advertising in *The Times*, was the Rose Mary Yeates born in 1828, who married Robert T. Crawshay, the wealthy owner of a Welsh ironworks company, and who became a well-known educationist, supporter of the feminist cause and a philanthropist, who established her own literary prize fund.⁴ Secondly, the essay for sale for 1 shilling mentioned after the Byron, Shelley and Keats ones, *On Lady-helps*, is in all probability (*Portland Guardian* 1877) the abbreviated title of Mrs Crawshay's own pamphlet *Domestic Service for Gentlewomen* (1874), on the benefits of this type of female employment, which she supported personally by hiring such domestic helps at her own Welsh mansion, in a sort of social labour experiment. This adds to the understanding of the socio-political stance of the advertiser, and of the cultural and ideological circles in which she moved. The third and most intriguing aspect of the classified ad (T5) is, of course, the presence of the search term *euthanasia* itself. Here it appears as the title of the last essay for sale, authored by an S.D. Williams and prefaced, with a thesis, by an "R.M.C.". This happened to be not just one essay but the essay that

effectively introduced this ethical conundrum into popular discourse [in Britain], and was responsible for defining many of the parameters of the ensuing debate. Its significance is such that it deserves to be rehearsed in some detail. (Kemp 2002: 12)

It was the work of a middle class educator, Samuel D. Williams, belonging to the progressist Birmingham Speculative Club, "a small society of professionals and businessmen who met periodically in the British midland city to discuss the problems of the day" (Lavy 2005: 41); the reported author of its preface with a thesis, "R.M.C.", was none other than Rose Mary Crawshay herself (Williams 1870 [1873]). This 1870 document indeed inspired the creation of a pro-euthanasia movement and sparked the first public debate on the issue in Britain, perhaps precisely because the call came from representatives

⁴ "The Byron, Shelley, Keats In Memoriam Yearly Prize Fund", now the "Rose Mary Crawshay Prize", <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/rose-mary-crawshay-prize>.

of a social class that was significantly developing not only in size but also in its wealth, education and new social awareness. This, combined with the emerging power of the press as the first mass medium of contemporary times, made the influence of Williams’s *Euthanasia* so immensely relevant for the issue that even historians leaning toward a more pro-life position – like Dowbiggin, in spite of calling him an “obscure schoolteacher” (2005: 49) and the society he belonged to “equally obscure” (2005: 50) – admit that “Williams’ article quickly became the most influential defense of active euthanasia or mercy killing since classical antiquity” (2005: 50). It seems relevant to underline that (a) news of the article, although “quoted at length and favorably reviewed in a variety of journals” (Dowbiggin 2005: 50) locally between 1870 and 1873, only reached a main national conservative newspaper almost twenty years after its publication; and that (b) when that happened it did so in an indirect, almost incidental way, hidden away in a miscellaneous section classified as advertising the sale of “prize essays”.

After a hiatus due to the First World War and its aftermath, in 1921 the term *euthanasia* was eventually first used to mean “mercy killing”, in a non-metaphorical, non-veterinary sense, and intended as performed on a human being:

(T6) The Coroner read a letter from the husband [...]. “I want you to know that although my dear wife had desired death above all things, yet she dies unwillingly. The doctor gives euthanasia to hopeless agony. The soldier spares a thrust or shot to a writhing comrade. Any decent man shoots his womenfolk to save them from dishonour. For two years now my wife has lived in hourly torment. Her condition grows daily worse. I am at the end of my resources. I can do nothing more for her. My will to live and win is broken. [...] However human law may regard the matter, my conscience justifies me”. (“Husband’s pity for mad wife”, 19 May 1921, p. 7)

Incidentally, the homicidal husband, who also took his own life afterwards, was, similarly to Samuel D. Williams, “a retired schoolmaster, aged 55”.

The first occurrence in a *Times* headline of the OED’s third and Stedman’s second acceptance of *euthanasia* had to wait for ten more years, when it appeared in the phrase “voluntary euthanasia”, as used by Dr C. Killick Millard, Medical Officer of Health for Leicester, in his presidential address to the Society of Medical Officers of Health (“Legal voluntary euthanasia”, 17 Oct. 1931, p. 9). Millard, who was the first medical professional to air his

pro-euthanasia opinion from the pages of *The Times*, was also to become the founder and secretary of the newly established Voluntary Euthanasia Legislation Society (VLES) in 1935. The event was duly reported on 11 Dec. 1935 (“The right to die. Aims of euthanasia society”, p. 18), and the account specified that a variety of figures, such as “clergymen, doctors, and social workers” spoke in favour of “easy death”.

Almost two years into the Second World War, after two decades of talks about eugenics, yet long before its horrific Nazi applications were to become publicly known, another curious if instructive use of the word was made in 1941, when *The Times*’s crossword puzzle featured, as clue number 29 down, the statement:

(T7) It finishes in euthanasia (4). (“Crossword puzzle”, 27 Aug. 1941, p. 6)

This proves that in 1941 the popularisation of the term – in either its classical or (more likely) its contemporary sense – was complete, at least for the educated middle-of-the-range readership that the newspaper had at the time.

The final mention of the term worth reporting, if only for the notoriety of the author, is from March 1945. On that day, *The Times* published George Bernard Shaw’s famous letter-to-the-editor, in which he advocated an unspecified form of euthanasia as a humane version of capital punishment for those sentenced to death:

(T8) Surely it is possible nowadays to derive some form of euthanasia more civilised than the rope, the drop, and the prison chaplain assuring the condemned that she has only to believe something she obviously does not believe, and she will go straight to eternal bliss in heaven. (“Sentence of death. The State and the murderer”, 5 Mar. 1945, p. 5)

At the same time, echoes of eugenics-supported views are quite evident in his words:

(T9) [...] as the necessary work of “weeding the garden” becomes better understood, the present restriction of liquidation to murder cases, and the exemption of dangerous lunatics (who should be liquidated as such, crime or no crime), will cease, and must be replaced by State-contrived euthanasia for all idiots and intolerable nuisances, not punitively, but as a necessary stroke of social economy. (“Sentence of death. The State and the murderer”, 5 Mar. 1945, p. 5)

As hinted in § 1.2, news of the Nazi eugenic programmes that were implemented during the Second World War would eventually dispel references to non-voluntary euthanasia from all moderate movements supporting end-of-life laws in Britain in future decades.

5.2 *The Manchester Guardian*

As regards *The Manchester Guardian*, 166 texts were retrieved and analysed. Again, some occurrences are definitely worth commenting upon, in chronological order.

Between 1864 and 1911, *euthanasia* was used almost exclusively as in the *OED*'s and Stedman's (1911) first acceptations, and as in Douglinson (1842) and Gould (1894), unless when referring to eugenics. The very first occurrence of the term, dated as early as 1873, well before the Nazi deeds, is indeed one such mention of eugenics:

(G1) The *Fortnightly Review* maintains its reputation for audacity by an article entitled “The New Cure for Incurables”, which advocates euthanasia, or in other words, the quiet extinction of incurable invalids whose continuance in life can only be burdensome to themselves and devoid of profit to others. Euthanasia, it is argued, is no more an interference with the natural course of events than are thousands of other contrivances for the alleviation of human misery. Life is indeed sacred, but only for the uses to which it may be put; and when those uses are over the life may be lawfully extinguished. [...] Again, physicians in cases where hope is abandoned often administer narcotics, which deafen the suffering of the patient, but at the same time make him succumb to his disease a little sooner than he otherwise would have done. What is this but a modified form of euthanasia? (“Literature. Principal articles in the magazine”, 5 Feb. 1873, p. 7)

This is a report of another publication's article, and not the *Manchester Guardian*'s own view. In fact, the magazine in which this article was published is said to have a “reputation for audacity”, and the doctrine of double effect – according to which, trying to alleviate a patient's pain may paradoxically shorten his or her life – is simply but effectively put forward as to be considered among the arguments for and against euthanasia. Interestingly, yet perhaps not too surprisingly, the author of the incriminated *Fortnightly Review* article was the rationalist philosopher Lionel Tollemache, who quoted Samuel D. Williams's essay in it and whose article “New Cure for

Incurables”, together with Williams’s *Euthanasia*, is acknowledged as having laid the foundations for the initial debate on the issue in the 1870s.

In May 1905, in a miscellaneous section, an anecdote was reported, one which described a terminological formation that history nonetheless did not prove viable, when an eminent Professor of Medicine from the US took up a position at Oxford and, during a public address, jokingly proposed that at sixty a man’s work is done and as such

(G2) he should be granted euthanasia by chloroform. This “proposal” was reported under scare heads and earnestly discussed by press and public. A new verb, “to oslerise,” nearly gained currency. At the farewell banquet this week Dr. Osler was very appropriately presented by his fellow-physicians with a copy of Cicero’s “De Senectute”. (“Miscellany”, 6 May 1905, p. 7)

The verb “to oslerise” may have suffered an early gentle death, but example (G2) provides a vibrant picture of the growing power and effect that the printed matter had on the public at the turn of the century, even in the United States and, especially, of the self-awareness that newspapers had of their own influence.

As stated, the first mention of the public debate over euthanasia in the *Manchester Guardian* is from a 1911 editorial by the Liberal politician and intellectual George W.E. Russell:

(G3) When the advocates of Euthanasia seek a justification for their doctrine, they generally look for it in the unbearableness of the pain. [...] Moral pain, such as the pain of despair or the pain of remorse – even perhaps the pain of shame, – is to a finely-touched nature far more terrible than anything which can befall the body; and yet the advocates of Euthanasia seem to hold that this kind of pain must be endured. (“Pain”, 19 Aug. 1911, p. 5)

The not-exactly-positive stance of the author about voluntarily ending a patient’s life may, however, be explained by the fact that this editorial was less concerned with the euthanasia debate than with the notion of pain in general, of which Russell apparently had good knowledge, suffering as he did from a debilitating disease such as myelitis (Russell 2018: 55). In any event, by mentioning the “advocates of Euthanasia”, Russell first reported in this newspaper on the existence of a movement in favour of the practice.

Like *The Times*, *The Manchester Guardian* (“Happy extinction”, 19 May 1921, p. 6) also first used the term *euthanasia* to mean “mercy killing”, as applied to humans and not animals, when referring to the same episode reported in *The Times* in 1921 (cf. T6 above), on the retired schoolmaster mercy-killing his sick wife. It nonetheless employed the word *euthanasia* in a headline two years before *The Times* did, i.e. on 14 Mar. 1929. Surprisingly, though, it is one of the few texts in both subcorpora openly arguing against the practice, one text having been penned by a doctor, i.e. an authoritative professional:

- (G4) Finally, there is the very curious class who believe in what one might term vicarious euthanasia: they cannot understand why we try to prolong the patient’s life. (“Patients never wish to die”, 14 Mar. 1929, p. 12)

Some significant space was, on the contrary, allowed to Dr Millard to plead in favour of euthanasia, although only ten years afterwards:

- (G5) “The very serious increase during recent years in the mortality from cancer has definitely increased the proportion of painful deaths.” he said. [...] I refer to voluntary euthanasia (easy death) [...] “This, we submit, should be regarded not merely as an act of mercy but as a matter of elementary human right. [...]” The procedure for administering euthanasia would be governed by regulations [...]. (“Incurables’ right to die”, 17 Oct. 1931, p. 14)

This occurrence is important not only in itself, but also for its mentioning the terms “human right” (previously reserved, until that moment, for the plights of people such as slaves) and “cancer”⁵ in connection to voluntary euthanasia, i.e. in terms that are still topical to this day.

The first mention of the Voluntary Euthanasia Legislation Society (VLES) in *The Manchester Guardian* is, like in *The Times*, from the year of its creation, 1935:

- (G6) The society for legalising euthanasia, which has already found distinguished support, should bring the question into the field of

⁵ “As the cause of death due to infectious diseases fell, the rate of mortality due to chronic diseases such as cancer rose sharply. In England and Wales, the incidence of deaths per millions [sic] from cancer went from 800 in 1900 to 1,376 in 1927” (Dowbiggin 2005: 66).

public discussion. The aims are simple: to make it lawful for an adult sufferer from an incurable and painful disease, after consultation with near relatives, to apply, under proper safeguards – chiefly the production of certificates from two medical men, one a Government referee, – for the administration of a swift and painless death. To give a chance for second thoughts a statutory period of delay between the receipt of permission and the carrying out of the euthanasia would be enforced. (“Merciful Death”, 26 Oct. 1935, p. 12)

A review of Dr Harry Roberts’s book *Euthanasia and Other Aspects of Life and Death* shows that the issue was dealt with in various genres, and that essays on euthanasia could become popular readings to be advertised and reviewed, if only for an educated audience:

- (G7) A Doctor’s Essays. *Euthanasia and Other Aspects of Life and Death*. By Harry Roberts. Constable. Pp. vii 278 7s. Gd. Dr. Harry Roberts is, it seems, a medical man and, like all good medical men, a pertinacious student of human nature. [...] The ethics of suicide, sex and population, crime and punishment, the education of children, eugenics and sterilisation, self-expression and self-control – these titles between them cover most of the substance of this book, which consists of over thirty short papers, reprinted mostly in substance from various periodicals. (“A doctor’s essays”, 6 Oct. 1936, p. 6)

In the same year, *The Manchester Guardian* granted emphasis to the rejection of the bill on the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia supported by the VLES:

- (G8) Lord Ponsonby moved the second reading of the Voluntary Euthanasia (Legalisation) Bill, which legalises, under certain conditions, the administration of euthanasia to persons desiring it and who are suffering from illness of a fatal and incurable character involving pain. (“Euthanasia bill rejected”, 2 Dec. 1936, p. 7)

It should be highlighted that the formulation of the bill provided only for voluntary requests of persons with fatal conditions and severe pain, i.e. in terms already very close to how similar bills are worded in the present day.⁶

⁶ The latest Assisted Dying Bill introduced by Robert Marris and defeated in the House of Lords in 2015 so defined the main actor of the proposed law: “a person

A short note of 1939, only a few months before Britain went to war against Germany, reports George Bernard Shaw as having been made one of the vice presidents of the VLES:

(G9) Mr. George Bernard Shaw is among the new made vice-presidents of the Voluntary Euthanasia Legalisation Society. (“Court and personal”, 21 Apr. 1939, p. 10)

A reference to Nazi eugenics eventually appeared in 1946, in a report straight from Nuremberg:

(G10) Who could doubt that the Reich Cabinet knew of the euthanasia used to conserve the physical resources of Germany for war? It was beyond question that the High Command and General Staff passed on those orders which were all reduced in the end to plain murder. (“Trade in murder”, 30 Aug. 1946, p. 8)

The words are a direct quote from a peroration by Sir David Maxwell Fyfe, British chief prosecutor. The shock at the discoveries made after the war must have still been great; the tone is stern and not in any way condoning of the killings carried out – in this case on the very German population, “to conserve the physical resources of Germany for war” – or their brutality.

On the other hand, several years after the end of the Second World War, not strictly related to euthanasia, but nonetheless coming up as a result when searching for *euthanasia* as a key term, an article on the bill proposing the suspension of the death penalty, rejected in 1948, mentioned the debate on mercy killing in relation to capital punishment (which was abolished only in 1965 and completely as late as 1998):

(G11) The Lord Chancellor (Lord Jowitt) moving that the House should agree with the Commons “compromise” amendment to clause one – on the death penalty – said that everybody in the House no doubt would adhere to the doctrine of the sanctity of human life. That was why suicide was regarded as wrong and why we were opposed to what were called mercy killings or euthanasia or the killing of idiots. (“Peers reject death penalty clause by 99-19”, 21 Jul. 1949)

who is terminally ill may request and lawfully be provided with assistance to end his or her own life.”, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/2015-2016/0007/cbill_2015-20160007_en_2.htm.

The final example worth mentioning is possibly one from 1949. Although, as specified above, hanging for murder was eliminated only in 1965, a debate about more humane conditions for executions had been ongoing, possibly also as the result of the huge death toll of the early 1940s and Europe's renewed view on matters of life and death. The Royal Commission's discussion of the issue was reported in *The Guardian*:

(G12) Sir Ernest: There is, I believe, in this country, a society called the Euthanasia Society, whose aim is to promote legislation so that people suffering from incurable disease who want to be lethally put away can be. If that came about, you not expect hanging to be the method adopted? – No.

In that case you would find some different and more appropriate method? – In that case the patient may wish for death.

Do you think that that makes all the difference? – Yes.

You attach value to the deterrent effect of the death penalty? – Yes. (“Prison doctors would raise age for execution”, p. 4, 5 Nov. 1949)

Again, the topic of the article – raising the age for execution from 18 to 21 – was not related to mercy killing, but the word (and the concept) nonetheless came up while discussing the various methods of execution, as if voluntary euthanasia could hardly be totally separated from its involuntary counterpart – hence the connection that Sir Ernest, the Commission's chairman, made with capital punishment and that he put to the doctors in the commission.

6. Critical concluding remarks

6.1 Lexicographic development

This investigation proposed a terminological study of the term *euthanasia*, to observe the changes in acceptance it underwent between the mid-nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century, what historical and social events drove them and what social actors were involved. As regards the three acceptations of the term *euthanasia* recorded in the *OED*, the two listed in Stedman (1911) and those in Douglinson (1842) and Gould (1894), the selection of texts studied for this purpose confirms the shift in the word's meaning from the phenomenon (that of dying a natural “gentle and easy death”) to the practice (of “inducing a gentle and easy death”), thus from (medical) science to technology and the means to ease the passage from life

to death. It also shows how lexicographic resources might certainly have taken longer, at that time, than the media in picking up new connotations but, when these became stable enough, they were eventually willing to record them – although applying some cautious hedging, cf. Stedman using evaluative adjectives: “A *popular* term for the *alleged* practice [...]” Stedman (1911, emphasis added).

6.2 Discourse-historical and class considerations

Historically, the pro-euthanasia debate may be divided, from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, into three waves: the 1870s, the 1920s and the 1930s.

From the texts collected and considered for this study, the 1870s debate emerges as a bottom-up initiative, promoted by non-medical yet often professional proponents from the middle class, educated and frequently involved in other progressive causes such as female suffrage. These labels, however, should not be taken to be universally clear-cut. Block (2018: 346), according to whom “where CDA can help in class analysis is in the analyses of class as culture, as meaning-making, as (re)presented reality and so on”, suggests looking at descriptors like economic and sociocultural resources, behaviour, life and spatial conditions in order to determine “social class”; this refers to the present day, but can easily be applied to the British society of the period considered here. Using these descriptors, “class” would cease to appear such a monolithic concept, and a euthanasia supporter like Rose Mary Crawshay – rich but from entrepreneurial money, elite but from marriage, an upper middle class spokesperson but a woman, a feminist but a landowner and an employer, a national figure but acting from a peripheral country manor – could equally fit and not fit the label of “nationally-known middle-class feminist suffragette”. The 1870s debate also appears as overlooked by the press, or at least as if it did not reach the two publications considered, although it did reach others, cf. Tollemache (1873) in the *Fortnightly Review*, see (G1). It did filter through in *The Times*, however, in the 1889 classified ad by Rose Mary Crawshay (T5) discussed above.

After the WW1 hiatus, the 1920s debate was also bottom-up, but it had expanded to become a larger movement, which this time received the support of a number of medical professionals, e.g. as evidenced in (G4), and also did start to be backed at the political level, in a sort of beginning of the negotiations on the issue between various social groups.

The 1930s debate can be seen, from the perspective of Critical Discourse Studies, in the light of socio-diagnostic critique, which “aims at [...] revealing ethically problematic aspects of discursive practices [...] [and] includes the critique of [...] the ethos of social actors” (Reisgl 2018: 51). Indeed, by the 1930s, the debate had become political and academic, the initial bottom-up requests by mere citizens and later by professionals had been shaped into a bill, giving rise to a hybridised type of language containing elements typical of the medical, legal, political, philosophical, religious discourses – already impressively close, in many respects, to the contemporary debate on end-of-life issues, cf. (G8) and (G11).

6.3 Social actors in the media

Speaking of social aspects, the corpus of articles analysed here chronicles the process of popularisation and democratisation undergone by Britain and Western countries in general in the period considered. An example is the co-occurrence of the terms *euthanasia* and *human rights* (G5): the latter collocation initially used to refer to “others” from a Eurocentric, male and upper class viewpoint (i.e. slaves, “the cruel treatment of slaves in the south”, cf. (T2)); then, it began to indicate “closer” groups of others (e.g. women and children, with reference to the death penalty, as in (G12)); finally, it came to mean a generalised, all-inclusive “us”, e.g. when the focus turned to voluntary euthanasia for the suffering, and this was understood as a universal condition (G8).

The changing role of the media into a key social actor is also clearly evidenced in the articles from the corpus. In the period considered, not only scientific knowledge but even the debates surrounding it did start being spread among the masses by and through newspapers, which proved a very democratic and even economically accessible information tool: examples are the 1849 classified ad (T5), or the review of a book on what contemporaries would call “bioethical” issues (G7). The democratising function that newspapers enjoyed at the time did not have to be openly visible, as in propaganda press (cf. *The Fortnightly Review*, (G1)); in fact, a newspaper like *The Times* was and is to this day quite conservative and pro-establishment. However, the mere fact of chronicling a public debate on socially-relevant issues, even if with a negative or cautious approach, means to contribute to its popularisation, somehow confirming that, back in the late nineteenth century as in today’s world, the analysis of media discourse should be viewed as “a discursive category of political life – one equally

pertinent to the media politics of bringing a new social order into being as it is to critiquing the existing order” (Phelan 2018: 295).

Literacy, therefore, emerged as a medium for personal and social advancement and a privileged way to access knowledge and the freedom of decision – for example on one’s life and death options – that comes with it. Among the literate middle-class, women, in particular, and the suffrage movement that dominated the decades between the 19th and 20th centuries, stand out as especially active in spreading knowledge, and as powerful social actors in popularising, stirring and conducting a public debate – that on euthanasia in its contemporary declinations – which continues to arouse passionate views well into the present day.

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