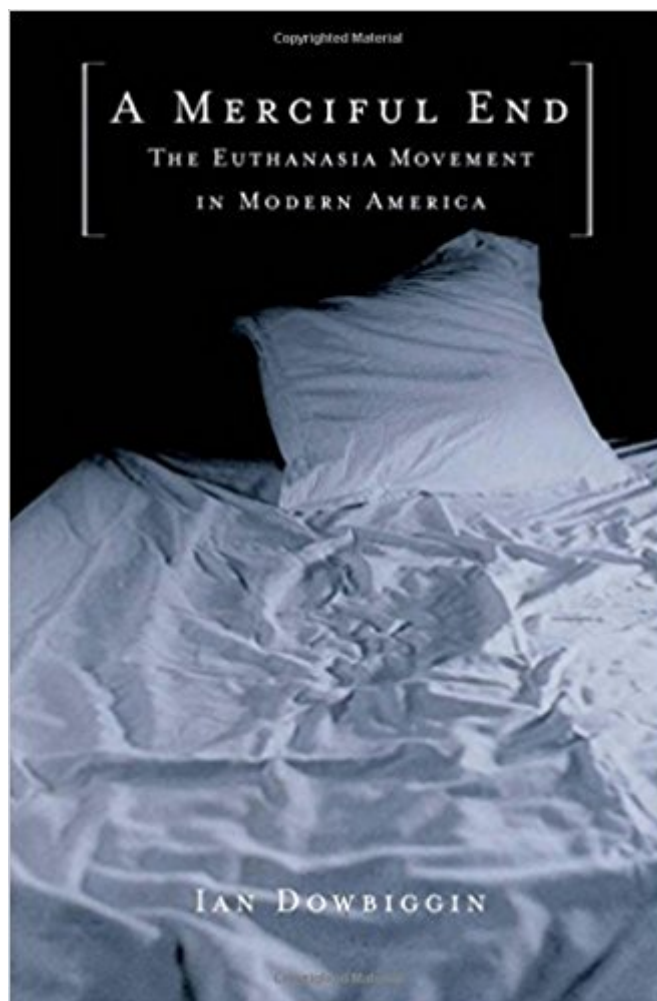


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# A Merciful End: The Euthanasia Movement In Modern America



## Synopsis

While it may seem that debates over euthanasia began with Jack Kervorkian, the practice of mercy killing extends back to Ancient Greece and beyond. In America, the debate has raged for well over a century. Now, in *A Merciful End*, Ian Dowbiggin offers the first full-scale historical account of one of the most controversial reform movements in America. Drawing on unprecedented access to the archives of the Euthanasia Society of America, interviews with important figures in the movement today, and flashpoint cases such as the tragic fate of Karen Ann Quinlan, Dowbiggin tells the dramatic story of the men and women who struggled throughout the twentieth century to change the nation's attitude--and its laws--regarding mercy killing. In tracing the history of the euthanasia movement, he documents its intersection with other progressive social causes: women's suffrage, birth control, abortion rights, as well as its uneasy pre-WWII alliance with eugenics. Such links brought euthanasia activists into fierce conflict with Judeo-Christian institutions who worried that "the right to die" might become a "duty to die." Indeed, Dowbiggin argues that by joining a sometimes overzealous quest to maximize human freedom with a desire to "improve" society, the euthanasia movement has been dogged by the fear that mercy killing could be extended to persons with disabilities, handicapped newborns, unconscious geriatric patients, lifelong criminals, and even the poor. Justified or not, such fears have stalled the movement, as more and more Americans now prefer better end-of-life care than wholesale changes in euthanasia laws. For anyone trying to decide whether euthanasia offers a humane alternative to prolonged suffering or violates the "sanctity of life," *A Merciful End* provides fascinating and much-needed historical context.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Before the 20th century, "few Americans... felt that there was a need to legalize euthanasia," writes Dowbiggin, a professor of history at Canada's University of Prince Edward Island. But as the 20th century progressed, the impact of such scientific thinkers as Darwin and Spencer led to popular endorsements of various theories of eugenics that undercut religious beliefs about the sacredness of human life and promoted popular support not only for a right to die, but for the killing of the feeble-minded and infirm. By 1939 "roughly 40 percent of all Americans polled said they supported legalizing government-supervised mercy-killing of the terminally ill." Dowbiggin has brought together a wealth of social history, medical knowledge and political analysis to elucidate the complex history of U.S. movements that endorsed mercy killing and the ever-shifting public sentiments that they engendered. It was the horrendous misuse of euthanasia under Nazism that shifted both the tone and the content of public discourse. Dowbiggin's clear, nuanced prose untangles the complicated interweaving of these arguments, and he is not afraid to fault the morally dubious arguments of some euthanasia partisans, who made little distinction between mercy killing and the harshest forms of eugenics. Most of Dowbiggin's arguments are illustrated through a history of the Euthanasia Society of America (founded in 1938) and chronicles its evolving positions and high profile cases such as the 1976 New Jersey Supreme Court decision to let Karen Ann Quinlin's parents remove her from a respirator. The final two chapters cover Kevorkian and AIDS-related issues, among other pivot points. Without shying away from making his own ethical judgments, Dowbiggin offers an intellectual and moral approach to a cultural flash point. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Euthanasia is one of the most controversial bioethical issues in many Western societies. The Netherlands and Belgium have recently legalized euthanasia as a medical act under specific conditions, particularly the persistent voluntary request of the patient. In other countries, the question of what physicians are allowed to do in caring for people at the end of their lives is a recurrent theme on the moral agenda of public and political debate. In *A Merciful End*, Dowbiggin shows that at least since the late 19th century, active euthanasia or mercy killing has been advocated as an acceptable policy. He carefully outlines how, from the start, diverse motives and approaches have been at work. History can therefore explain some of the complexities and ambiguities of the recent debate. In the early decades of the 20th century, euthanasia emerged as a public health measure in the broader context of Progressivism. Euthanasia was advocated as an individual right and, at the same time, as a socially beneficial practice. In this respect, it was closely

intertwined with the eugenics movement. The freedom to choose death coincided with the evolutionary duty to die. Dowbiggin describes the 1915 Bollinger case, in which a handicapped newborn did not receive surgery, to demonstrate the connection among mercy killing, social reformation, and utilitarian goals. Between 1920 and 1940, social support for euthanasia increased in American society, with growing media attention and frequent mercy-killing trials, and culminated in the 1938 establishment of the Euthanasia Society of America. In this period, euthanasia was associated not only with eugenics and sterilization laws but also with early advocates of birth control and the women's movement. It was part of the broader agenda against traditional ethics and organized religion of humanism, an ideology that developed in the 1940s. Dowbiggin shows how this agenda combines the argument in favor of individual autonomy with the argument that euthanasia saves taxes and satisfies biologic requirements for social engineering. Voluntary and involuntary euthanasia were necessarily connected, and it was exactly this connection that discredited the movement in the subsequent period (1940 to 1960) when the Nazi atrocities became known. In the 1960s, the use of life-prolonging medical technology instigated a new cultural interest in death, terminal illness, and relief of suffering. Euthanasia again began to dominate the public agenda, but this time, as expressed in catchphrases like the "right to die" and "death with dignity," the emphasis was primarily on patient autonomy and individual rights. However, the focus was ambiguous: for many, euthanasia referred to the right to refuse treatment; but for proponents of the euthanasia movement there was no distinction between passive and active euthanasia. Dowbiggin describes the resulting change of tactics: if "letting die" was ethically permissible and in need of legalization, the logical next step should be legalizing active euthanasia. But even within the euthanasia movement itself, the historic legacy continued to be divisive. The focus on individual choice, as exemplified in the advocacy of living wills, was often combined with social justifications, such as the need to eliminate "accidents of nature." This double focus finally destroyed the unity of the movement and led to the founding of new organizations (e.g., the Hemlock Society in 1980) and the emergence of palliative care. Dowbiggin's book is a lively and readable demonstration that the commitment to relieve human suffering has a long history and that the issue of euthanasia tends to reduce the complexities involved. Nobody will reject the notion of death with dignity, but disagreement will persist over what it entails. Is it active or passive euthanasia or both? Is euthanasia voluntary, nonvoluntary, or involuntary -- or all three? Such disagreement is not accidental but intrinsic, as this book shows. Self and society, individual freedom and the common good, are necessarily related. Henk A.M.J. ten Have, M.D., Ph.D. Copyright © 2003 Massachusetts Medical Society. All rights reserved. The New England Journal of Medicine is a registered

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Didn't hold my interest. And I'm interested in the subject.

Young or old, every person in America needs to read this book. It will give you cause for great thought and think about the one subject no one ever wants to broach.

Dishonestly titled, Dowbiggin's "A Merciful End" is a biased work by an anti-euthanasia ideologue. He's a privileged slippery sloper, just as mendacious as all the other slippery slopers who flatter religious bigotry by invoking the specters of past abuses to justify enormous current oppression (see same-sex slippery slopers). Eugenics dominated social science in the first part of the 20th century, including in the religions like the Catholic Church that Dowbiggin so clearly allies himself with. That euthanasia/eugenics alliance is dead, though not to Dowbiggin. Medical care in the US, and across the world, reflects the inequities of class and race, yet not to Dowbiggin - he is fine with the status quo, except when he can pretend to have sympathy for poor/minority victims of the alleged slippery slope. He sees a principled slippery slope anti-euthanasia stance in the AMA, whose members derive great billable hours and procedures from keeping prolonged intensive suffering going from rich white people. Care for the terminally suffering appeals to religions, who exploit the vulnerability of sick people and their relatives to further their societal holds. The US medical system must have universal, single-payer coverage. The US medical system must include Physician-Assisted Suicide. Any other outcome, such as the one Dowbiggin has hitched his horse to, denies the civil rights of people to humane medical care in living and dying.

This book doesn't simply recount a dry record of various episodes of euthanasia but rather addresses the real history of euthanasia through a host of issues (ideological origins, concepts, etc.) that demand our attention when dealing with the subject. The author does an excellent job of maintaining an objective stance for the most part. This isn't intended as an argument for or against but rather how and why euthanasia and similar issues should remain at the top of our priorities. However, for the record, upon learning the ideological origins and history of the euthanasia movement, its direct link to eugenics, its connection with various unscrupulous individuals as founders and instigators, etc., reasonable people will find it very difficult to support euthanasia. In short, the author traces the origins of euthanasia, both ideological as well as geographical and cultural. We find that although various forms of euthanasia have existed probably since our

beginning, in terms of a formal movement or social agenda the modern idea finds its roots firmly planted in the fairly recent history having its earliest beginnings in the Enlightenment (at least with certain individuals during the Enlightenment) but not materializing until Darwin. Just the discussions concerning euthanasia and its connection with Darwinist ideology and Humanism more than merit anyone's serious attention. The author truly deserves credit for the research involved in writing this book. The bibliography and notes comprise almost a quarter of the books bulk. He takes you all the way to the bedrock principles that drive euthanasia and where they came from with all the proof any reasonable person could want for his conclusions concerning euthanasia's history. He is insightful without being biased, complete but brief, factual and detailed while not boring or cumbersome. In my view, the greatest value of this little book lies on two fronts: First, its unsaid and indirect prompting of any rational person to seriously question why you would support or not support euthanasia. Second, it forces a reflective individual to delve into much deeper philosophical water concerning the existence of God, human life and its value or lack thereof, and the direction we as human beings should take in the future concerning these and other such issues. In short, this book prompts us to think. I can think of no higher compliment to give.

This book is extremely interesting about ideas which have caused great debate, not only in the US but in other countries around the world. Sadly, it is almost unreadable on Kindle. Apparently it was scanned in from a manuscript with a horrible font and no matter what I did, I could barely make out words. Which is sad, from a book of this quality. I downloaded a sample, which btw is very large so it gives you a good start on the book. But I won't buy the Kindle version; I will attempt to find the hard copy in the library. Whatever you think about these issues, reading this book will certainly enlarge your viewpoint and equip you with a more thorough understanding of the history of these ideas.

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