EUTHANASIA: AN IGWEBUIKE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Euthanasia in Igwebuike Ethical Perspective. It investigated the understanding of people regarding the euthanasia for African bioethics in Igwebuike perspective. The aim of this paper is to analyze the philosophical position of euthanasia, which the study further strengthens, through a critical appraisal, the danger of decriminalizing the practice in Igwebuike philosophical stance. The study also employed analytic and social survey methods of inquiry and made the findings that when pronounced the euthanasia, the two separate camps of irreconcilable proponents and opponents are drawn up. Although it is widely accepted that murder is crime under any law, a clearly defined stand has not been taken on euthanasia. In fact, the debate over euthanasia is not a recent phenomenon. Over the years, public opinion, decisions of courts, legal and medical approaches to the issue of euthanasia in Igbo-African society have been conflicting. The problem of the

connection between right to life and right to die has been attempted in a few debates, and this necessitated this research on euthanasia in Igwebuike ethical perspective. This work submits that the Igwebuike populace sees euthanasia as an unnecessary paradox, murder in disguise, a situation where the supposed healer becomes a killer.

Keywords: Igwebuike, Moral, Euthanasia, Right to Life, Human Life, Bioethics, Philosophy.

Introduction

Today more than ever, there is a growing trend in support of one form of euthanasia or assisted suicide. The discussion of euthanasia in the Western philosophical tradition generally hinges on the principle of individual autonomy as the basic element which defined the nature of person. Here, Igwebuike bioethics traditionally is at the heart of interconnection or interaction, which "Igwebuike philosophy is based on the Igbo-African worldview of complementarily, that is, the manner of being in African ontology[1]." Some contemporary philosophers in line with Igwebuike philosophy have challenged the absolute inviolability of innocent human life and argued that euthanasia is morally defensible. Thus it is seen in different ways

[1] A. I. Kanu, "Sources of Igwebuike Philosophy: Towards A Socio-Cultural Foundation," *International Journal of Religion and Human Relations,* Vol. 9, no. 1 (June, 2017), 1.

by different people. Some see it as an end to intolerable suffering or a hopeless situation. Others see it as a way of easing a transition that is already occurring. Still others see it as anticipating the inevitable.

Euthanasia is viewed also as a right or an entitlement, a person's last expression of human dignity. Other people view it as homicide[2], Laws around the world vary greatly with regard to euthanasia and are constantly subject to changes as cultural values shift and better palliative care or treatment becomes available. It is legal in some traditions, while in others it may be criminalized. Due to the gravity of the issues, strict restrictions and proceedings are enforced regardless of legal status. Euthanasia is a controversial issue because of conflicting moral feelings both for the individuals and between different cultures, ethnicities, religions and other groups.

Nevertheless, there are factors responsible for the growing support for euthanasia which include among other things, the process of secularization, the crisis of religious values, the prioritization of freedom of the individual and the lack of proper

[2] T. A. Shannon, *An Introduction to Bioethics* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1997), 102.

concern for the patients on the part of the family members or relations.

Definition of Euthanasia

According to *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, euthanasia, broadly, is the beneficent timing or negotiation of the death of a sick person; more narrowly, the killing of a human being (igbu mmadu) on the grounds that he is better off dead.[3] Etymologically, the term euthanasia is a combination of two Greek words *eu* and *thanatos* which literally mean a good death or well death and "which in English is more meaningfully rendered as "mercy killing" an expression of the desire to help bring about death of a patient by denying him or her every treatment which could prolong his/her life but not…guarantee recovery from the ailment[4]." It is understood to be any act of killing or allowing the hopelessly ill and suffering patients to die painlessly for reasons of mercy. It is the practice of terminating the life of a person in a presumably painless or minimally painful way, usually by lethal injection. This is to say that euthanasia is an introduction of a painless death into the incurably ill out of a motive of compassion.

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[3] Robert Audi, *The Cambridge of Dictionary of Philosophy,* Second Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 292.

[4] A. O. Echekwube, *Contemporary Ethics: History, Theories and Issues* (Lagos: Spero Books Limited, 1999), 228.

Euthanasia also comes to its extreme or exaggerated sense when it is taken also to mean the use of death-dealing expedients in the case of those persons who cannot lead a full human life like the cripples, the deformed, the mental defectives, the aged etc. However, this sense seems extraneous to the term. C. H. Peschke remarks that "this extreme is the exception, and it would be unjust to attribute this kind of outrage to the usual defenders of mercy killing[5]." The Doctrine of the faith declaration on Euthanasia defines it as "an action or an omission which of itself or by intention causes death, in order that all suffering may in this way be eliminated. Euthanasia's terms of reference, then, are to be found in the intention of the will and of the methods used[6]." Thus, the word euthanasia should be used to describe not only positive actions but also decision not to carry out normal but necessary proportionate health care which could save life. However, euthanasia must not be confused with the necessary treatment designed to eliminate, alleviate or prevent pain, which may well have the secondary effect of accelerating death. This should never be called euthanasia. Again, a refusal to accept, or passive withholding of some artificial means of prolongation of life should not be described as euthanasia.

[5] C. H. Peschke, *Christian Ethics,* Vol. 11 (Alcester and Dublin: C. Goodliffe Neale, 1978), 351.

[6] Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on Euthanasia,* AAS 72 (1980), 351.

Kinds of Euthanasia

Different kinds of euthanasia could be distinguished. It could be active or passive, voluntary or non-voluntary.

1. **Active Euthanasia**: This is also called positive or direct euthanasia. It involves the intentional killing of a person suffering from an incurable or agonizing illness. Here, an act is purposefully done to hasten or cause death. In other words, the end of the action is to cause death. This can be done by means of overdose of drugs or any other lethal agent or means[7].

2. **Passive Euthanasia**: This form of euthanasia is also called negative or indirect euthanasia. It involves the outright denial of the necessary treatment to the patient in order to die or quicken his/her death. Here, the patient is allowed to die by withholding or withdrawing life-sustaining treatment because his/her suffering is excruciating and there is no hope of survival. In other words, the death of the patient is willed but no direct action is taken in bringing it about[8]. Nevertheless, euthanasia, be it active or passive, could be voluntary, involuntary or non-voluntary.

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[7] C. M. Ekwutosi, *Bioethics: History and Contemporary Issues* (Nimo: Rex Charles & Patrick Limited, [2008]), [73].

[8] Ibid., [74].

(a) **Voluntary Euthanasia**:
This type of euthanasia is had when the patient's life is terminated at his/her own request. The killing of the patient is done by another person but with the free consent of the patient himself/herself. Voluntary euthanasia is at times called *Mercy Death*[9]. Here, Igwebuike believes as Igbo says, *chi nwe ndu* (God owns life) and that no one even the patient has no monopoly of right to take his/her life no matter the deplorable situation he/she is facing. In other words, it is only the rightful being "God" that has the obligation at his own time to end life and not even the free will or consent of the patient himself/herself is needed.

(b) **Involuntary Euthanasia**:
This is the case where the patient is killed or allowed to die by those around him/her against his/her will or wish to live. In other words, euthanasia is involuntary when done to a patient who refuses to give free and informed consent to being killed mercifully, but who nonetheless is so killed. Involuntary euthanasia is also called *Mercy Killing*[10]. Here, is where Igwebuike call for respect for patient's life and allow him/her to live as a proverbial saying in Igbo has it that *mkpomkpo ndu ka onwu mma*. Literally interpreted, it means the worst health is better than death.

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., 75.

(c) **Non-voluntary Euthanasia:**
This is where a patient's life is terminated out of compassion without the patient's consent. The patient never gives nor refuses to do so because he/she is incompetent. This is to say that euthanasia is non-voluntary when performed on a patient who is not capable of giving free and informed consent to being killed mercifully[11]. Here, Igwebuike opines malfeasance which simply means active wrongdoing or hurt to a patient due to his/her incapacitated condition. For them to say that a person's life is of no more use is to measure the value of human life according to its practical utility. It is to treat human life as a means to another end. Kant's categorical imperative is against treating human beings as a means to an end. Human life is an end in itself and not a means to an end. In Igwebuike, nobody can say for sure that the patient must surely die because there have been cases of miraculous healing for incurable illness like cancer or AIDS.

Voluntary Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide: Any Difference?
Voluntary euthanasia is called physician-assisted suicide by some people. But many moralists disagree with this. Those who disagree hold that even though there may be some similarity between voluntary euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide, the

[11] Ibid.

difference is clear enough. Therefore, it is wrong to identify the two, they opine. In euthanasia, the one killed is suffering from incurable or unbearable sickness and sees death as the only way out. But in the case of assisted suicide, one may not be suffering terribly[12].

Moral Consideration of Euthanasia

A lot of arguments have been advanced either in support or against the moral justification of euthanasia. Let us briefly examine some of the common ones.

Arguments for Euthanasia

(1) **Human Person is Autonomous:** One of the arguments in support of euthanasia holds that voluntary euthanasia is justified by the principle of personal autonomy, or on the right of persons to be in control of their own life and death. According to Singer, "the most important aspect of having a right to life is that one can choose whether or not to invoke it[13]." Here, respect for the person's integrity and autonomy to be killed gives free and informed consent to being killed, no injustice will be done by killing him/her requires one to honour his/her request to die.

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[12] Ibid., 76.

[13] C. H. Peschke, *Christian Ethics,* 352.

(2) **Poor Quality of Life:** The basic argument here is simply this: one can determine that an individual's quality of life is so poor that continued existence is for that person not a benefit but a burden. It is better to die with dignity than to live as vegetable. After all, there is no ethical value in living any sort of life. Thus, killing that person is an act of benevolence or kindness, for by killing that person, whose life has been judged to be no longer worth living, one is doing something good. Therefore, they are of the opinion that there is such a thing as a life not worth living, a life that lacks dignity, whether by reason of distress, illness, physical or mental handicaps, or even sheer despair or whatever reason[14].

(3) **Reduction or Elimination of Pain and Misery:** The defenders of this view-point hold that when the only way to minimize or eliminate the patient's pain and suffering is to keep him/her unconscious and if he/she is in an irreversible coma, then why not end his/her misery? This is a patient for whom nothing can be done anymore. Intervening directly to end his/her life will no doubt end his or her misery. In fact, "the essentially and generally only reason for euthanasia among those defend it in the more cautious form of mercy killing of the incurably

[14] For most people what counts is the quality of life and not the quantity of the days lived.

suffering is the view-point that destruction of life is preferable to pain and senseless misery[15]."

Arguments against Euthanasia

(1) **The Limitation of Human Autonomy**: Human, no doubt have autonomy, freedom of choice (self-determination) but this is by no means unlimited[16]. In Igwebuike undertone, this is to say that the requirement that we do not deny equal human dignity and respect for the sanctity of human life should not be sacrificed at the altar of human autonomy.

(2) **Good Care and Love Needed**: There is no doubt that in certain situations, patients may feel it is better to die and so demand to be helped to do just that instead of enduring excruciating pain. However, Igwebuike made us to understand here that what the patients are asking for is good care which will enable them to go through the agony and death. According to J. Olen and V. Barry, "they cannot be thinking clearly enough to understand the full impact of what they are consenting to. And that hardly counts as rational free choice[17]." Therefore, mercy often does not mean being helped to die. It can simply mean

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15 Ibid.

16 C. M. Ekwutosi, *Bioethics: History and Contemporary Issues*, 80.

17 J. Olen and V. Barry, *Applying Ethics: A Text with Readings* (California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1992), 220.

relief of pain.

(3) **Social Support and Relief of Depression:** To say that many people with advanced illness experience severe depression is to state the obvious. So, the desire for death among some terminally ill patients is not unconnected with depression. Lack of social support is a serious contributing factor to this depression. Studies have shown that people stop asking for help to die when they are adequately supported and their depression efficiently managed[18]. When the patient is suffering, the answer is not to kill him/her but to show compassion and support.

Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to offer an Igwebuike ethical perspective on euthanasia. Until then, let us consider first the meaning of Igwebuike philosophy.

Igwebuike as a Philosophical Approach

Igwebuike approach towards the understanding of euthanasia adopts a holistic indigenous approach. Igwebuike is a combination of three words: Igwe bu ike. Literally, Igwe is a noun which means number or multitude, usually a large number or population. The number or population in perspective are entities

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18 The New York State Task Force on Life and the Law, *when Death is Sought: Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia in the Medical Context (*Albany: Health Education Services, 1996*)*, x, 178-181.

with ontological identities and significances, however, part of an existential order in which every entity is in relation to the other. Bu is a verb, which means is. Ike is a noun, which means strength or power[19]. Igwe, bu and ike put together, means 'number is strength' or 'number is power[20].' However, beyond the literal sense of Igwebuike, it means *otu obi* (one heart and one soul) – *cor unum et anima una*, guided by the principles of solidarity, identifying with others, empathy, communion, complementarity, etc., in our relationship with others. Igwebuike ethical theory grows out from an indigenous understanding of life which is applicable in our modern time for the promotion of individual and common good.

The Underlying Principle of Igwebuike Philosophy in Brief

The underlying principle of Igwebuike philosophy is the principle of Complementarity. To complement means to bring together or to sum up distinct or similar things or words to make a new meaning or to form or produce a new outlook or phenomenon…It

[19] A. I. Kanu, "Igwebuike as the Consummate Foundation of African Bioethical Principles," *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities,* 2. 2 (2016), 54.

[20] A. I. Kanu, "Igwebuike as the Hermeneutic of Individuality and Communality in African Ontology," *NAJOP: Nasara Journal of Philosophy,* Vol. 2. No. 1 (2017), 168.

understands reality as being interrelated in all its segments, which works in mutual complementation and eventually lead to general well being of common good. Igwebuike is a school of thought that argues that a whole is greater, than any it's corresponding parts. It is also a view that maintains that by the coming together of the individual or parts, a viable and sustainable whole will emerge, and by this, the parts will get to the brim purpose of their existence… Thus, to be is to be in mutual complementary relationship[21].

Igwebuike and the Hermeneutic of Human Rights to Life

Igwebuike philosophy sees the other as a part of me, and together, in our peculiarities, we make up the whole. If together we make up the whole, it then means that the other is a part of me and what affects the other affects me. To alienate the other is to alienate myself. Ewulu, therefore, writes that:

> If the other is my part or a piece of me, it means that I need him for me to be complete, for me to be what I really am. The other completes rather than diminishes me. His language and culture make my own stand out and at the same time, they enrich and complement my own. In the presence of his

[21] A. I. Kanu, Igwebuike Philosophy and Human Rights Violation in Africa,"*Agora: Journal of Philosophical & Theological Studies,* Vol. 2 (2017),283-284.

> language and culture, the riches and poverty of my language and culture become clear and I see that his own and my own when put together form a richer whole when compared to any of them in isolation[22].

Ekwulu further opines that the self is not only completed in relating with the other, but that it attains self-realization in the other: "I realize myself in the other because it is in the 'Thou-ness' of the Thou that my 'Is-ness' is realized. I am 'I' because you are 'You'. Without Thou there is no I. We are 'We' because they are 'They', and without 'They', there is no 'We[23].'" Thus, the Igbo would refer to the 'Other' as *Ibe*, which means 'a piece of' or 'a part of', as in *ibe anu* (a piece of meat) or *ibe ede* (a piece of cocoyam). The Igbo would, therefore, refer to the 'other person' as *ibem* which means 'my piece' or *mmadu ibem* (my fellow human being). This is the concept also employed in reference to relationships and reciprocity: love one another (hunu ibe unu n'anya), help one another (nyere nu ibe unu aka), respect one another (sopuru nu ibe unu), etc. Since the 'other' refers to my own piece, it would, therefore, mean that to love the other is to love oneself, to help the other is to help oneself and to respect the other is to respect oneself. Put the other way round, to hate the other is to hate oneself, to refuse help to the other is to

refuse help to oneself and to disrespect the other is to disrespect oneself[24].

Igwebuike and the Practice of Euthanasia

From the foregoing, Igwebuike employ the holistic method of interpreting the reality of the meaning of life as regard to euthanasia; and this interpretation will mediate between the super-naturalistic concept of the meaning of life, which understands the meaning of life from the angle of engaging in the right way with God and the naturalistic perspective, which holds that the human life is meaningful in a world that is merely physical. In other words, the Igwebuike perspective is an eclectic perspective of both positions. Hence, it discovered that from the Igbo-African perspective that the human life has meaning, and that this meaning is not detachable from the nature of the Igbo-African worldview.

Relating the principle of Igwebuike philosophy to the interpretation of the termination of human life shows that silence at the face of the termination of human life is the greatest disservice to humanity and yourself. To be quiet, is to be quiet about what affects

[24] A. I. Kanu, "Igwebuike as an Igbo-African Response to the Problem of Personal Identity and Alterity," *A Paper Presented at the 14th Annual Conference of the Igbo Studies Association*, held at the Dominican University, River Forest, Illinois, USA, from May 12th to 14th, 2016.

you indirectly- fundamental human rights to life. If a person keeps quiet at the termination of another's life, instead of being the voice of the oppressed, he is quiet at the termination of his own life. In Igwebuike philosophy, the person who speaks for the other, speaks for humanity of which he is a part; for if humanity is destroyed, the individual is also destroyed. Since every part plays a fundamental role in the universal human scheme, it then means that every part, no matter the condition or circumstance, needs to be protected for the preservation of the whole.

The Igwebuike ethical principles that are relevant for the evaluation of right and wrong include respect for persons, beneficence, and non-maleficence[25]." These portray how far Igwebuike respect human life and would like to be treated with patient without hurting of whatever reason or condition the person's life situation seem to be. More still, euthanasia or assisted suicide has no place in Igbo-African lifestyle because like every typical African customary laws, suicide and deliberate killing of the one who is ill is a taboo and an abomination in the Igbo-African.

In furtherance to Igwebubike ethical values that reflected on the human dignity, human equality and universal brotherhood/sisterhood, where "life is

[25] A. I. Kanu, "Igwebuike Ethics: Towards the Unity of Ethical Traditions in Africa," *AMAMIHE: Journal of Applied Philosophy,* Vol. 21, no. 2 (2023), 6.

understood as coming from God. This makes the human person a theomorphic being and explains why the Igbo say, *ndu sina chi* (life is from God)[26]. These mean that human life demands to be treated with the totality of dignity and respect. However, respect for the dignity of human person implies that love should be shown to person suffering from agonizing ailment. The sense of equality and brotherhood/sisterhood calls for love, care, cooperation, solidarity and promotion of mutual concern to the patient.

The Igwebuike theory of happiness also adopts a hostilic approach to understanding happiness, evaluating not only a person's current emotional state but their overall life satisfaction. This ontologically links happiness with the nature of the human person. The human person among the Igbo is called *Mmadu*, which has been interpreted, among other perspectives as there is beauty. Beauty is by its very nature attractive- it attracts the other to itself. If every human being is an embodiment of beauty, it then means that each human person attracts the other to himself or herself. The purpose of this attraction is to relate with the patient happily.

Nevertheless, a hermeneutic of Igwebuike ethical theory, it is from this perspective, therefore, that this

[26] Ibid., 6-7.

work attempts at understanding the termination of the life of the other as carrying resounding consequences on the humanity of all. This is because the being of one is ontologically linked to the being of the other. It is from this ontological relation that this piece, using the hermeneutic method of inquiry and indigenous wholistic theory, establishes the need for a more sympathetic approach towards the human life of the other, since the other's human life is my own human rights, thus, the termination of the human life of the other is the termination of my human life.

In African moral philosophy, the basis for objective moral law is grounded in ontology. This means that what is considered to be good or evil is determined by the nature of reality itself. Actions that are deemed to be ontologically good are also considered morally good and legally just, while actions that are ontologically evil are regarded as morally evil and legally unjust. For instance, termination of human life is considered an ontological sacrilege and a conspiracy against God, who is seen as the giver and protector of all life. Thus, it is morally reprehensible and goes against the African ethical and legal principles that are founded on the ontological order. Gyekye writes that "just as the good is that action or pattern of behaviour which conduces to well-being and social harmony, so the evil is that which is

considered detrimental to the well-being of humanity and society[27]." The social order is founded on the ontological order; to renounce the ontological order is to renounce African ethics and law[28]. Moreover, family members, out of pity, may not wish to see the patient in agony. With the statutory penal laws in place, however, any act of terminating such patient's life would be regarded as murder.

Prior to this, there is a cultural dimension to the issue of euthanasia in Nigeria. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation with a diverse culture. Law is organic and functional in human societies; however, it functions differently from one society to the other. Under some Nigerian cultures and from a sociological perspective, euthanasia or suicide has not been recognized as a viable option. In some occasions, patients who are terminally ill and in an intolerable situation because of physical or mental incapacity will not wish to remain in a deplorable condition that will bring about shame and pity from a cultural perspective.

It is also gathered that the culture of the people plays

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[27] K. Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) , 133.

[28] A. I. Kanu, "Igwebuike Ethics: Towards the Unity of Ethical Traditions in Africa," 8.

important role on their end of life decisions. Therefore, the yardstick for dignity of human life depends on each individual cultural perspective. While the culture of Oregon sees assisted suicide as dying with dignity, the African culture, especially that of Igbo perceives same as suicide, which is recognized by the Igbo culture as a taboo. However, while the western culture particularly that of Oregon appreciates conscious death, seeing death as a result of protracted chronic sickness as offensive and degrading; Igbo people do not see anything degrading in such a death. Rather, they prefer worst health to death. It is therefore, a well known fact that it is only on rare circumstances it may be heard that a "pure" Igbo patient requests for death, as Igbos believe that tomorrow or future 'may carry better thing come.'

Nevertheless, there is fear that the legalization of euthanasia will have detrimental effect with regard to vulnerable population and to the fact that it will transform a healing profession into a killing profession. This is so because if euthanasia is legalized, people especially the physicians and family members or relations who may have certain interests in the death of the patient may take advantage of the legal framework in place to coax the patient into voluntary euthanasia. As noted, there are certain interests that infiltrate in the mind of the

decision makers of euthanasia which include: the relatives who may have a vested interest in the estate of the terminally ill person; the doctor who has lost interest in a protracted and difficult medical case; and the hospital administrator, who is short of beds. These factors play a secrete role when deciding on what becomes of the terminally ill patients. In view of this, no other person will bear witness as to what transpired between the family relatives and the physician except death.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, human life is fundamental of all the possible human values and man's right to life is most fundamental of all human rights. It is of great value in itself whether it is open to other values or not. Human life should not be destroyed except for the very highest good. Thus, Igwebuike bioethics moves that one has the obligation to protect and preserve one's life and the lives of others. One may sympathize with the sentiments of compassion and mercy expressed by the advocates of euthanasia, but morality is not based on mere sentiments. Sickness or pain does not reduce the value of life to nothingness. Apart from the fact that one could be cured, Igwebuike demands that the sick person can always be consoled by loving concern especially from the family members. Sickness or pain of whatever kind always calls out for love, and almost any suffering

can be endured in the context of loving relationship existing in the family bearing in mind that limitation including suffering and pains are part and parcel of man's life.

Euthanasia is morally unacceptable. It is an usurpation of the right over human life that is reserved to the creator alone. Thus, Igwebuike ethics is of view that nobody has right to terminate a person's life under the guise of a merciful action. "If carried out by oneself, euthanasia is suicide, if administered by another without the patient's consent, it is murder. If conducted with the patient's cooperation it becomes both suicide and murder[29]." However, as we mentioned earlier, no matter how bad the condition of a patient is he/she should never be abandoned. We should always continue to show him/her care and love. This, no doubt, helps the patient to endure his/her suffering and to die peacefully.

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