



d Dying Bill, which will be debate in the House of Lords next week, is

The text of the article can be read [here](#) (£) or below:

The Assisted Dying Bill will be debated in the House of Lords next week. This bill suggests that it is the only truly compassionate response that a civilised society can make to those who are terminally ill and who wish to end their own lives. This opinion is sincerely held and well-intentioned, but it is both mistaken and dangerous; quite literally, lethally so.

The compassion argument, as presented by proponents of the bill, runs something like this:

1 It is always right to act in a compassionate way;

2 Some terminally ill people face unbearable suffering and wish to have help in ending this suffering by bringing their lives to an end;

3 It is compassionate to provide

this help;

4 The law ought to be changed to allow this to happen.

Even if we leave to one side major difficulties in determining what legally constitutes “unbearable suffering” and “terminal illness”, the above argument is deeply flawed. Were it to be presented by a candidate in a GSCE religious education exam, I should expect an examiner to take a dim view of it.

The matter is, however, of more than academic interest; it is, in truth, a matter of life and death.

Few people would take exception to the first two points in the argument and I know that in many (though by no means all) cases, compassion is the primary motive for participating in assisted suicide. The main problem lies in the conclusion that on this basis the current law ought to be changed.

Compassion literally means “to suffer with”. The problem with the argument above is not that it fails to show compassion, but that it fails to show enough compassion. It restricts compassion to the immediate and the personal instead of extending it to everyone. It fails to recognise the truth contained in the parable of the Good Samaritan: every person is my neighbour; every person deserves my compassion.

It is entirely understandable that when we see someone we love suffering we will suffer along with them and we will want to do almost anything to alleviate their suffering.

All of us will have had some experience of that — some of us in extreme and terrible ways.

In the last few weeks I have sat by the bedside of someone dying while unnecessary treatment was given. I have sat by the bedside of one of my own children, having to agree to treatment ending.

Even in the face of such agony, I would make a plea that the deep personal demands of one situation do not blind us to the wider needs of others.

There are many people whom we will never meet who face suffering every day of their lives. Among these are vulnerable people, often elderly or living with severe disabilities. Action on Elder Abuse, for example, states that more than 500,000 elderly people are abused every year in the United Kingdom. Sadly, the majority of such abuse and neglect is perpetrated by friends and relatives, very often with financial gain as the main motive.

Compassion must be extended to these people when we consider changing the law to accommodate the smaller number of people who wish for help in ending their lives. If we are showing compassion only to those we know and love, there is a danger that it becomes a self-centred sentiment. True compassion suffers with all, including those whom we do not know or might never meet.

It would be very naive to think that many of the elderly people who are abused and neglected each year, as well as many severely disabled individuals, would not be put under pressure to end their lives if assisted suicide were permitted by law.

It would be equally naive to believe, as the Assisted Dying Bill suggests, that such pressure could be recognised in every instance by doctors given the task of assessing requests for assisted suicide. Abuse, coercion and intimidation can be slow instruments in the hands of the unscrupulous, creating pressure on vulnerable people who are encouraged to “do the decent thing”. Even where such pressure is not overt, the very presence of a law that permits assisted suicide on the terms proposed by Lord Falconer of Thoroton is bound to lead to sensitive individuals feeling that they ought to stop “being a burden to others”. What sort of society would we be creating if we were to allow this sword of Damocles to hang over the head of every vulnerable, terminally ill person in the country?

This is a moral decision: it is not compassion if in voting for my companion I expose others to danger. This is precisely what would happen if the Assisted Dying Bill became law.

This is not scaremongering. I know of health professionals who are already concerned by the ways in which their clients have suggestions “to go to Switzerland” whispered in their ears by relatives weary of caring for them and exasperated by seeing their inheritances dwindle through care costs. I have received letters from both disabled individuals and their carers, deeply concerned by the pressure that Lord Falconer’s bill could put them under if it became law.

Compassion is not simply a feeling; it is a commitment to sharing in the suffering of others while trying to alleviate it. True compassion can be shown through care, through expending time and resources on those suffering and through offering hope even in the darkest of circumstances.

The recent Supreme Court judgment has suggested that parliament might wish to discuss the possibility of finessing the current law to take greater account of the small number of individuals who are the exclusive focus of Lord Falconer’s bill, but not in the manner that his bill proposes.

That is an invitation to careful discussion, with proper compassion at its centre. What is certain is that compassion cannot be shown through the sort of discrimination that elevates one person’s experience, however dear he or she might be to me, above the experience of many others. That is not only my personal view; it is also the long-established view of the Church of England and almost all other churches and major faith traditions, as well as numerous groups representing the vulnerable.

5 min read

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