

# I am not in principle against killing people, but talk of the 'right to die' is humbug

MATTHEW PARRIS

Sometimes one's creed points logically where one is intuitively reluctant to go. The flesh is willing but the spirit is weak. *Item:* we should not give money to women begging with babies as this only encourages them. *Item:* this is a beggar and she is carrying a baby. *Conclusion:* . . . er . . . fumble in pockets for change. (She just looked so wretched.)

One settles such conflicts by following a hunch. This is not necessarily the triumph of unreason. We should never question the primacy of reason, but we cannot always be sure what reason dictates. Sometimes the heart may guess early at reasons which the brain proves slower to recognise. Sound argument should be paramount, yes, but sometimes intuition is early warning of an argument that is not as sound as it seems.

And so it happened that, libertarian to my boots, I thought I would be in favour of what euthanasia campaigners call the Right to Die until this week BBC 1's *The Morning Show* asked me to do a turn on their sofa to discuss Mr Reginald Crew's plan (he is now the late Mr Reginald Crew) to travel to Switzerland where he could be assisted to kill himself. Mr Crew, who was 74, had been suffering for four years from motor neurone disease; there was no cure, his deterioration was remorseless, and life had become (he said) no longer worth living.

An action which causes another person's death, even at his request, is unlawful in Switzerland as it is here, but the Swiss have been more flexible in their prosecution policy and tend to turn a blind eye to the work of reputable and humane organisations such as Dignitas, the group that assisted Mr Crew by giving him poison to drink through a straw. Though his impunity in Switzerland was assured, it is not clear to me that this would have been a crime even here in Britain where we adhere as unbendingly as we can to the distinction between failing to resuscitate or prolong life, which is not usually a crime, and actively taking life, which usually is. This is a blurred and difficult frontier to police; prosecution is not the invariable rule, conviction does not always follow, and, if it does, sentences are usually lenient or even derisory. But the line is more or less held.

After agreeing to appear on *The Morning Show*, I sat down quietly and thought my libertarianism through. I knew intuitively that I admired Mr Crew and might well have done the same were I in his dilemma.

But should he have had to go to Switzerland to face it?

It appeared to me that if we sought the kind of reform which would have assisted Mr Crew, two alternative means were available. We could make 'He asked me to' a defence to murder and have done with it, leaving judges and juries to determine case by case whether the accused really had satisfied himself that his victim was of sound mind and had formed the settled desire to have himself killed. But I saw, too, that, appealingly simple though (to a libertarian) this might be, it would never do. We cannot go around killing anyone who asks us to, however emphatically. The law would additionally want to know that the accused had made a reasonable attempt to satisfy himself that the victim's wish was well founded, that the accused had no ulterior motive, that he knew and understood the victim, that the victim had had all that was needful drawn to his attention, that. . . .

And I could see where, in Britain at least, the case for reform must tend: to the alternative of setting up a Euthanasia Commission composed of expert persons competent to decide applications for death. Killing people cannot be left to private initiative, the killer subsequently making the best defence he can to any putative murder charge. The proposal would have to be considered in advance by some sort of adjudicating body.

For let us be clear that killing people is what is under discussion. The late Mr Crew went to Switzerland to have poison poured

down his throat. It is not quite honest to call this 'assisted suicide' and disingenuous to speak, as the euthanasia lobby do, of 'the right to die'. We already have the right to die. Suicide has not been a crime for some half a century. The need for euthanasia arises when the victim lacks the means or power to take his own life and can only request (on the instant or in advance by some sort of letter of intent) that someone else take his life. The euthanasia lobby wish to give that person the right to kill.

If you hand me a dagger and say, 'I am too weak to do it; here, plunge this between my ribs,' I take it you are asking me to kill you. If I comply, and am discovered, my discoverer will cry, 'You killed him!' and I will reply, 'Yes, but he asked me to.' What difference in principle is there between this and the less bloody alternative in which (say) you indicate a phial of poison and say, 'I am too weak to drink this; here, raise it to my lips and pour it down,' or, 'Inject me with this'? No question about it: you ask me to kill you.

I am not in principle against killing people. In a just war, in self-defence, as a means of preventing greater killing, or even (at times) in overwhelming sympathy for another's suffering, it is something we may contemplate. But to take another's life in peacetime is an enormous step, perhaps the most enormous. If there is anything which should not be done lightly or without anguish, this is it. For those who contemplate such an action, to be forced — at least — to contemplate losing the law's protection may not be an inappropriate hurdle to expect them to clear. I can think of worse tests of good faith than to ask that the killer love his victim enough to risk arrest for killing him.

I will kill myself if I ever have to, and I may. I would break the law and kill a friend if I ever had to — and face the consequences. But what I cannot stomach is the idea of applying to the state for a licence, to be issued upon the determination of an appointed regulatory body, to kill or be killed. If one man's Right to Die gives another the Right to Kill, and if the Right to Kill means giving the government the right to withdraw Permission to Live, then give me prison.



'There's £7,239.27 still owing on your student loan.'

Matthew Parris is a political columnist of the *Times*.