

A Wrong Assumption: Statement in Response to Jonathan Sumption

Recent comments made by former supreme court judge ‘Lord’ Jonathan Sumption have been circulated on social media wildly. After telling **Deborah James**, a writer and activist with Stage 4 Bowel Cancer, that her life was “**less valuable**” than other people’s, Sumption continued to reinstate his position that the lives of disabled, chronically ill and elderly people have less value than everyone else’s.

We’d like to reinforce what is not only our position, but the position of the **Equality Act 2010**, a fundamental premise of all human rights legislation & activism, and the founding principle of the UK’s **National Health Service**: that all human life has equal value. A life does not become ‘less than’ because it is judged by an individual to be of lesser ‘quality’ or ‘economic value’, nor does it become ‘less than’ because it requires more support from the NHS.

Black Lives Matter became the slogan of last year’s anti-racist protests precisely because institutions have operated for hundreds of years under a pretext that certain lives are worth more than others. It is 2021, and still governments are having to be reminded that those lives which they with their power have previously prioritised – e.g. white, cis-gendered, non-disabled – are not the only lives that matter, and that whilst lip-service may have been paid to this effect, societal and structural change has not.

Sumption’s statements come from a mix of Utilitarian, ableist and Eugenicist ideologies and frameworks. This is particularly terrifying because although a lot of people would be horrified by his statements, evidence of these ideologies is everywhere. They are found, for example, in the prevalence of people saying they aren’t too concerned about Covid-19 because it’s only fatal in the sick or elderly (which is wrong anyway). It speaks to this same kind of ideology; that certain people’s lives are worth less as well as, more specifically, that people have the right to make decisions based on the assumption that a shorter life or a life with sickness or disability is less valuable. This is such bullshit.

It also comes from a weird and unhealthy obsession with quality and quantity. Sumption mentioned that **Quality Adjusted Life Years** was a ‘standard’ term in health economics, presuming that this justified his views. QALY has been challenged, debated and adapted constantly by statisticians, economists and ethicists, due to its dubious quantification of certain aspects of life and its lack of flexibility around the relationships between these variants. QALY is utilised as one of many calculative tools in very specific end-of-life care discussions as well as by NICE to measure efficacy and value for money of medical interventions – it is **not fit for use (nor is it used) to determine the value of an individual’s life**.

The quality of a sick or disabled person’s life is deemed ‘less’ through this ableist lens. The quantity is deemed less, because a sick or disabled or elderly person may have less time to live and therefore are assumed to produce less, and thus contribute less, to capitalist society. The lives which are believed to “contribute” more to society through wealth creation and physical production are seen as worth more. The lives which are longer and healthier are, though the ableist lens, seen as more valuable because they are assumed to contribute more to the system of production and for longer.

There’s also an element to this which, of course, has nothing to do with production and is purely ableist and Eugenicist; the idea that there is a default perfect human and any deviation from that is broken and worth less. This perspective espoused most recently and publicly by Sumption is a grave threat to the lives of all minority groups, and is a perspective that does not deserve a place in our society.

The irony is that ill and disabled people actually have an incredibly valuable perspective to offer at this time. We are used to adapting our lives around health concerns and maintaining connections when communicating or meeting in person is difficult. We have to be. But this means we are uniquely positioned right now. As the pandemic, and its aftereffects, are likely to linger for years (if not decades) to come, we could be extremely useful in advising on how to make life alongside it more manageable on a wider scale. We should not have to justify our existence, of course, but society apparently expects us to do just that. It therefore seems important to foreground how productive our contributions to plans for the future could be, if we are allowed to propose them.

Signed,

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