

## UNIVERSALIZATION

Richard Hare is concerned with making moral decisions about the fates of disabled children. What he wants to claim is that such decisions must be made by taking everyone affected in account. Some typical candidates are the child itself, the parents, the doctor, the nurses, the other patients, etc.

You might, of course, ask *why* everyone should be taken into account. Here Hare appeals to what he takes to be an intrinsic feature of moral language, namely that it is what he (in other places) has called *universalizable*. What does this mean? Take an example:

- (1) Murder is wrong.

What does it mean to say that murder is wrong. Here are a couple of things it does *not* mean:

- (2) Murdering me is wrong;
- (3) Murdering my family is wrong;
- (4) Murdering anyone with a name that starts with a “P” is wrong.

No, what it means is that murdering *anyone* is wrong. That is, when we claim (for example) that murder is wrong, we commit ourselves not to a particular but to a *universal* claim. We’re committing ourselves to a claim that is blind with respect to who is the perpetrator and who is the victim.

## ANDREW

So, if making a moral claim means making a universal claim, it goes without saying that we cannot make any arbitrary exceptions to our moral judgments; everyone affected must be taken into consideration. So let’s consider the particular kind of case that Hare discusses:

A couple gives birth to a severely handicapped baby. It had a substantial chance of survival given a surgical procedure, but even if it survived it had a large chance of being severely handicapped. So they didn’t operate, and what we now have is not that child but another child, Andrew, who was born two years later.

At this point, the question is not what they should *do*; everything is already done. Rather, the question is: What could they have *done* at the point where the handicapped child was born, particularly if they wanted to take everyone affected into consideration?

*The Parents:* Perhaps raising a handicapped child would make for a harder life for the parents than raising a healthy child. This suggests that, as far as the parents are concerned, doing what they did was the best thing to do. But, of course, the other parties must be taken into consideration too...

*Andrew:* We are assuming that Andrew exists only because the couple let the handicapped child die. Moreover, unlike the handicapped child, Andrew has good prospects for living a normal and reasonably happy life. This seems to suggest that the parents did the right thing, as far as Andrew’s interests are concerned. But other parties must be taken into consideration too...

*The Handicapped Child:* The handicapped child got the short end of the stick in the scenario imagined. If the parent’s had opted for operation, he would have gone on a live a life that might not have been as good as Andrew’s—assuming that handicaps make your life worse—but still worth living, we’re assuming.

So, here’s what the situation looks like for everyone:

	The Parents	Andrew	The Handicapped Child
<i>Operation</i>	Bad	Bad	Good
<i>No operation</i>	Good	Good	Bad

So, if Hare is right in that everyone's interests must be taken into account, it does seem that the parents did the right thing; not going ahead with the operation led to a preponderance of good for a preponderance of people.

#### POSSIBLE PEOPLE

At the same time, it is not so clear how this line of reasoning provides any form of moral guidance. After all, remember that the above scenario is *backward looking*, in that it has us ask a moral question from the privileged position of hindsight. Running through a similar line of reasoning with respect to the *future* seems much harder, one reason being that it's not clear exactly *who* will be affected.

Think about it: A family has a handicapped child, and can go ahead with the operation to save the child, or not. Whose interests should be factored into the decision that they make? Their own, for sure. And those of the handicapped child. But the *future* child?

It's not so clear that there is such a thing as *a* future child yet; if anything there seems to be millions of *potential* future children, corresponding to the millions of combinations of eggs and sperms that may reach syngamy over the next couple of years of the couple's life. But when we are weighing interests in the way that Hare wants us to, we are not weighing the interests of possible but of *particular* people. The problem just is that the only particular people that are around at this point are the parents and the handicapped child, which gives us the following table:

	The Parents	The Handicapped Child
<i>Operation</i>	Bad	Good
<i>No operation</i>	Good	Bad

But, clearly, this doesn't give us any guidance; it merely highlights (again) the dilemma.

#### WEIGHING CONCERNS

In this respect, it does not seem that Hare is really helping us out. Sure, we should factor in everyone affected; but then what? This doesn't seem to solve the dilemma. It just seems to bring us back to the same question we have had to ask several times at this point: When making decisions about life and death, what constitutes a grave concern, and what constitutes a concern that may be overridden?

Hare does say something about this, however:

“When I said that equal consideration ought to be given to all the interests affected, I did not mean that we should treat as equal the interest of the mother in continuing to live and that of the doctor in not being got out of bed in the middle of the night.”

What this suggests is that the above tables are a bit crude. Concerns need to be weighted by the extent to which they are grave or trivial. In other words, the table would need to look something like this:

	The Parents	The Handicapped Child	“Net good/bad”
<i>Operation</i>	Bad to degree <i>a</i> .	Good to degree <i>b</i> .	$b - a$
<i>No operation</i>	Good to degree <i>c</i> .	Bad to degree <i>d</i> .	$c - d$

So now the questions we have to ask are the following:

- How bad is having a handicapped child for the parents (*a*), rather than having another possibly healthy child later (*c*)?
- How bad is it for the child to live with its handicap (*b*), as opposed to being dead (*d*)?