

HARE'S POSITION

Remember Hare's position:

- (1) When we try to decide what the moral thing to do is, we should do what's in the best interest of *everyone affected*.
- (2) Among those affected are not only *actual* but also *possible* people.

Again, this is why Hare wanted to say that we have to take the interests of Andrew—the future child that came about since the parents opted for not operating on the handicapped child—into consideration. Remember, this was the case:

The Operation

A couple gave 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.

Parfit suggests that Hare's position is problematic. The idea is supposed to be that, by not going ahead and having Andrew, the parents are, somehow, harming him. But is it really possible to harm people by preventing their conception? Let's look at an example:

Having Healthy Kids

A couple, living before the age of over-population, are wondering whether to have children. If they do have children, those children will live healthy lives that are well worth living. Does that imply that it would be *morally wrong* for them to not have children?

On Hare's view, that would seem to follow; by not going ahead and having children, the parents are depriving certain possible people from a set of lives worth living. But that seems weird. Can there really be anything wrong in deciding to remain childless?

POSSIBLE AND FUTURE PEOPLE

According to Parfit, the answer is 'No.' But why? Let's return to Hare's position. (1) seems perfectly fine. (2) seems to be the culprit here. Can *possible* people really be affected by our actions? Well, perhaps some. Parfit makes a distinction:

Possible people: People who will exist if we act in one way, but who won't exist if we act in another way.

Future people: People who will exist whichever way we act.

It seems that we may affect future people with our actions. Future people are, in a sense, particular people, and how we act will affect their particular (future) lives. Not so for possible people. For them, the options aren't a good life or a bad life, but a life or *no life at all*.

Hare's position might seem reasonable if we think in terms of future people. But Hare isn't thinking about future people; he is thinking about possible people. Remember, Andrew will only exist if we act in one way rather than in another, i.e., specifically if we do *not* operate on the handicapped child. Hence, he's a *possible* person.

DROPPING (2)

So what about if we simply drop (2), while holding on to (1)? That is, what if we accept that we should do what's in the best interest of those affected, but deny that possible people (as opposed to future and actual people) count? Consider the following case:

Two Women

Assume that we have two women. The first woman, Anna, is one month pregnant and is told by her doctor that unless she takes a simple treatment her child will develop a handicap. The second woman, Beth, is about to stop taking birth-control pills so that she can have another child, and is told by her doctor that she has a temporary condition such that any child she conceives now will be handicapped, but if she waits three months she will be able to conceive a non-handicapped baby again.

Three questions:

- (a) Is it wrong for Anna to reject the treatment?
- (b) Is it wrong for Beth to try to have a baby without waiting three months first?
- (c) If so, is it equally wrong for Anna and Beth?

If we answer 'Yes' to all three questions, it seems that we can't simply give up (2). After all, Beth's child is a *possible* person. (Remember, it will *only* exist if Beth doesn't listen to her doctor.) So, in so far as she's doing something wrong, it would seem that she's doing something wrong against a possible person, as per (2).

TWO ASPECTS OF MORALITY

But we just rejected this principle! This, of course, brings us straight back to square one. So what should we do? Parfit suggests that we drop (2), and reformulate (1) as follows:

- (1*) When we try to decide what the moral thing to do is, we should do both (a) what's in the best interest of *everyone affected*, and (b) what doesn't realize a scenario that is worse than we could've realized.

What this amounts to is saying that there are two aspects to morality:

- (a) Giving what we owe to others (as in: our actual, fellow human beings).
- (b) Contributing to the good of the world by not realizing a worse scenario than necessary.

The second aspect provides an explanation of why it might be wrong for Beth to have a baby before three months have passed. It's not that she's hurting the handicapped baby; again, that baby wouldn't exist if it weren't for Beth not listening to her doctor. So she's not failing to give what she owes to anyone. However, by not listening to her doctor, Beth is realizing a scenario that is worse than it has to be (i.e., that includes a handicapped rather than a healthy child).

The same thing may be said about Hare's original case involving the operation: If the parents go ahead with the operation and save the handicapped child, it's not that they are *harming* Andrew. *Qua* possible being, they don't owe him anything. However, by going ahead with the operation they are realizing a scenario that is worse than it has to be (i.e., that includes a handicapped child rather than a healthy child).