

Jim's Moral Dilemma

Utilitarianism is an ethical theory that focuses on maximizing overall happiness or minimizing overall suffering. First proposed by Jeremy Bentham and later developed by John Stuart Mill, the theory suggests that the right action in any situation is the one that produces the greatest amount of happiness for the largest sum of people. This paper will apply the principles of utilitarianism to the moral dilemma faced by Jim, a botanist traveling in South America who encounters a public execution involving twenty Native Americans. By engaging with relevant objections, a well-ordered and persuasive argument that supports the utilitarian approach to Jim's dilemma will be presented.

In Jim's case, the military captain presents him with the choice to shoot one of the Native Americans, which would save the remaining nineteen from execution. To apply the utilitarian approach, we must compare the consequences of each option with the goal of maximizing overall happiness or minimizing overall suffering. When considering the first option, shooting one person would undoubtedly result in the death and suffering of that individual and their family. However, this choice would prevent the suffering of the other nineteen individuals and their families. In contrast, if Jim declines to participate and allows the execution of all twenty Native Americans to proceed, the suffering would be more widespread, affecting all twenty individuals and their families, therefore producing a greater amount of overall suffering.

Given these potential outcomes, a utilitarian would opt to shoot one person to save the lives of the remaining nineteen. This decision aligns with the greatest happiness principle, as it minimizes overall suffering and maximizes happiness for a larger number of people. Although making such a choice may be emotionally challenging and morally difficult for Jim, it adheres to

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the core principles of utilitarianism, which prioritize the consequences of actions and aim to reduce overall suffering.

Several objections may be raised against the utilitarian approach to Jim's dilemma. One such objection is that utilitarianism can justify morally questionable actions, such as killing an innocent person, in pursuit of a greater good. While this concern is valid, it is important to remember that the utilitarian approach focuses on minimizing overall suffering when faced with difficult choices. In Jim's situation, the alternative to shooting one person is allowing the execution of all twenty Native Americans, which would result in even greater suffering. Although the utilitarian choice is morally challenging, it serves to minimize harm in this specific circumstance.

The second objection is that the emotional and psychological burden on Jim for taking a life is not considered in the utilitarian analysis. It is crucial to acknowledge the emotional toll of such a decision on Jim. However, the utilitarian approach provides a rational framework for decision-making, which can help guide individuals through challenging moral dilemmas. In this case, the focus remains on minimizing suffering for the greatest number of people, even if it entails a personal emotional burden for Jim.

Jim's moral dilemma can be related to prior material covered in the course, such as the moral dilemma faced by the German grandfather in 1938 Munich, who must decide whether to hide his Jewish friends from Nazi officials or prioritize the well-being of his own family. Both situations involve difficult decisions that require weighing the consequences of actions and selecting the option that results in the least amount of harm. By applying the utilitarian approach to these dilemmas, we can assess the consequences of each choice and determine the option that minimizes overall suffering and maximizes happiness for the greatest number of people.

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Engaging with the utilitarian perspective and addressing relevant objections allows us to demonstrate the complexities of moral decision-making and the value of a rational, consequentialist approach to ethical dilemmas, such as those presented in both Jim's situation and the Munich scenario.

Taking everything into account, utilitarianism offers a clear framework for ethical decision-making in Jim's moral dilemma. By focusing on maximizing happiness or minimizing suffering for the greatest number of people, a utilitarian would choose to shoot one person to save the lives of the other nineteen Native Americans. Although this decision may be emotionally taxing, it aligns with the principles of utilitarianism, which aim to minimize overall suffering. It is crucial to consider both moral reasoning and emotional well-being in the decision-making process.

As we reflect on the moral complexities of Jim's dilemma, it is essential to consider the broader implications of utilitarianism in real-world scenarios. Utilitarianism encourages us to examine the consequences of our actions and to make decisions that minimize harm and maximize happiness for as many people as possible. This consequentialist approach, while not without its challenges, can provide valuable guidance in morally ambiguous situations and help us navigate difficult ethical dilemmas.

Moreover, engaging with objections to the utilitarian perspective allows us to deepen our understanding of the ethical theory and strengthen our moral reasoning. Acknowledging the emotional and psychological burden on individuals like Jim, as well as the potential for morally questionable actions, contributes to a more perceptive and empathetic approach to ethical decision-making, enriching our understanding of the complexities involved.

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In conclusion, examining Jim's moral dilemma through the lens of utilitarianism serves to illuminate the complexities of ethical decision-making and provides a useful framework for navigating challenging moral situations. By considering the greatest happiness principle and addressing relevant objections, we can better understand the value of a consequentialist approach to ethics and strive to make decisions that minimize suffering and maximize happiness in our own lives and the lives of others, even in the face of difficult choices.