Risky Moral Decisions

Faisal is an overseer at a large coal mine in West Virginia, where he oversees a group of 100 coal miners. One day, in the middle of a mining operation, a sudden, unexpected storm hits the area. The storm is far more severe than typical storms in the area, and an overwhelming amount of rain quickly accumulates. Because this level of rainfall is so rare, the coal mine is not designed to drain it all, and the mine begins to flood, trapping some miners. Faisal must act quickly in order to try to rescue the miners before it is too late. The way the mine is constructed, there are two shafts, one large and one small. Ten of the miners are in the small shaft, and the other 90 miners are in the large shaft. Using his equipment, Faisal can either attempt to rescue the miners in the small shaft or the miners in the large shaft, but it is impossible for him to rescue both before the mine floods.

Though any loss of life would be tragic, it seems clear that if Faisal can only rescue one group of miners, it would be better to rescue the group of 90 miners in the large shaft than the group of ten miners in the shallow shaft, assuming that either rescue attempt would be successful. However, in this situation, the chances of success are not equal between the two options. The shape of the large mine shaft makes it much more difficult for Faisal to rescue the miners from that shaft with his equipment, whereas it would be relatively easy for Faisal to rescue the miners from the smaller shaft.

Faisal quickly does the math and calculates that if he were to attempt to rescue the 90 miners from the large shaft, he would have a 15% chance of success, whereas if he were to attempt to rescue the ten miners from the small shaft, he would have a 90% chance of success. He now needs to decide which group of miners to attempt to rescue. One way of deciding is to calculate the number of expected lives saved by multiplying the number of miners in each shaft by the chance of rescuing them. According to these calculations, if Faisal were to attempt to rescue the miners from the small shaft, the number of expected lives saved would be nine. If he were to attempt to rescue the miners from the large shaft, the number of expected lives saved would be 13.5.

Faisal feels conflicted about what to do. These calculations suggest that he should attempt to rescue the miners from the large shaft because the number of expected lives saved is greater. However, there is only a 15% chance that Faisal will succeed if he attempts to rescue the miners from that shaft. That means that if he tries to rescue the 90 miners, there is an 85% chance that all of the miners will die. Whereas if he attempts to rescue the miners from the other shaft, he will almost certainly save ten people.

As Faisal attempts to decide what to do, he increasingly feels like there is no right answer. Doing calculations with human lives feels wrong to him, as it seems to reduce people to numbers. But he knows that he has to decide somehow, or else all of the miners will die.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. All else being equal, it generally better to do something with a high chance of benefiting a small number of people, or something with a low chance of benefiting a large number of people?
2. Is there anything morally problematic about doing calculations with human lives? Why or why not?
3. Besides such calculations, is there any other reasoning that could help Faisal figure out the right thing to do?