

The Gray Area of Killing: The Concept of Killing the Greater Evil to Preserve Good

Scholar name

Umaiza Javeria

Scholar email

umaizajaveria03@gmail.com

Scholar's affiliation

William Carey Academy

Mentor's name

Zakia Sultana

Date of Submission

10 November 2024

Research Question:

Can killing be placed in a moral gray area to preserve an inherent good, or is all killing against the sanctity of life? What truly determines the evil of killing, and in what situations can it be ethically justified to do so? Do certain demographics place the permissibility of killing at different intervals?

Introduction:

From early childhood through most of our lives, society, religion, and people around us have always painted killing as the ultimate evil. I do not disagree with this. The act of killing places oneself at the pedestal of creator and destroyer. No human truly has the right to take the life of another, but my question lies on the motive. The intention or situation behind killing can

be abstract. A context in which killing is almost always morally permissible is during acts of self-defense. Self-defense is described as the “countermeasure that involves defending the health and well-being of oneself from harm. The use of the right of self-defense as a legal justification for the use of force in times of danger is available in many jurisdictions”[1]. Self-defense can often end as the perpetrator being critically injured or even dead. Self-defense, self being a broader demographic, can be in the form of killing a ruthless dictator responsible for millions of deaths. From that perspective, some might say the sanctity of life is ruined, as it is not one person’s decision to end another. On the other hand, it might be morally acceptable to do one unethical act for the greater good. This research aims to dissect each portion of this argument and come to a solution for the ultimate moral dilemma.

Literature Review:

Killing as a whole is universally accepted as wrong. However, what is most important is the motive or intention behind the killing. John Stuart Mill, in his book *Utilitarianism*, explains that an act’s morality or ethics must be determined by the upsurge of happiness as a result of it or the reduction of harm. He argues that if the well-being of many, as opposed to one or the morals of one is defended, is achieved, then the act is morally justifiable. Conclusively, he promotes the ideology that if a greater good is achieved, then that act is ethically sound [2].

Peter Singer, in his book *Practical Ethics*, also takes an utilitarian approach. He draws parallel conclusions to that of John Stuart Mill, saying that in times of political violence or tyranny, the life of one being is a valid price for the life of many. The main point that he signifies is that if the overall benefit outweighs the ethical grievances of a situation, then at a capacity, it is morally ethical [3].

From a religious perspective, killing is absolutely wrong. In Christianity, one of the Ten Commandments from Exodus says "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13) [4], which is a very clear parameter on what Christians should do. The Qur’an makes a clear claim to preserve the sanctity of life, as per the verse "Whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption done in the land—it is as if he had slain mankind entirely. And whoever saves one—it is as if he had saved mankind entirely." (Qur'an 5:32, Sahih International) [5]. However, both religions (Islam in particular) allow the act of killing in the context of self-defense, justice, and war. In the context of Christianity, Thomas Aquinas [6] claimed that during war time, killing is permissible under some circumstances. He also highlights, in *Summa Theologica* [7], that killing is also granted when they are “just killing” or fair killing. An act of killing that is “just” would be self-defense or war. In the context of Islam, it is morally permissible to commit the act of killing when defending yourself, your family, or your property [8]. It is also permissible to kill when delivering justice or during lesser jihad. Although, there are limits to what acts are permissible during jihad, as the killing of innocents are strictly prohibited [9]. To conclude, the basis in which religion permits killing happens to be in the context of self-defense and war. However, it can be interpreted that killing greater evils can be examples of self-defense and can happen

during war time. All in all, the moral parameters when examining religion relies mostly on the worldviews of the person and from which perspective they are coming from.

Research Methodology:

This study employs a mix-methods approach.

Quantitative Phase: A survey would be conducted to collect numerical data on where people believe the moral line lies in respect to killing. Additional questions will be given to analyze their backgrounds and find an approximate of which demographics lean towards where. Past experiences will also be documented as part of the quantitative phase to find what percentage of people from individual and niche backgrounds think of the prompt.

Qualitative Phase: After the numerical data is collected, we move on to a face to face interaction. The interview will dissect each portion of their answers and what experiences have led to them choosing said stance on the gray area of killing. Traumatic experiences will be documented, as life-changing experiences have influences on our moral decisions and behaviors.

Data Analysis: The data that we have collected has both numerical and qualitative value. First, the qualitative value will be dissected. Each answer, nuanced as it may be, will be divided into which stance they are lenient on—killing falls in a gray area, killing is morally permissible often, killing is not morally permissible but has some exceptions, and killing is not morally permissible at all. If there are more gradients to the answers given, the data will be grouped together with the closest likely answer. Then, we move on to the qualitative aspect. We hash out each individual's answers and find comprehensive connections to religion, gender, socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicity, etc. and the answers that they have given. As such, we will be able to come to an indefinite conclusion of who believes killing falls into a gray area, and the reasoning behind their standing.

Project Practicalities:

Since the project's main goal is to understand where the gray area of killing is among the general public and to understand how or if the answer differs among demographics. The estimated time projection is about two to three weeks. This project needs little to no funding. The project is also important in the context of real-world ethics, as this may answer fundamental questions of human rights and the well-being of greater good. These ethics can be applied to real-life tyrants and dictators, and to preserving the good. The practical impact of this research lies in its potential to inform public policy and educational programs by shedding light on the nuanced ethical views of the public. Lawmakers, educators, and mental health professionals may benefit from these insights to better address societal attitudes toward violence, self-defense, and justice. Additionally, the findings can help improve training programs for law enforcement and military personnel by incorporating an understanding of moral reasoning, helping them navigate

ethically complex situations. By examining the moral flexibility in society's views on killing, this study offers valuable data that could support more empathetic and informed decision-making in real-world, high-stakes scenarios.

Roadblocks and Potential Limitations:

Since morality and ethics are deeply personal and influenced by cultural, religious, and social factors, responses may vary widely, making it challenging to draw clear conclusions. The subjective nature of moral beliefs might lead to inconsistencies in the data, complicating the analysis and interpretation of results. Discussing topics like killing can be emotionally charged and may cause discomfort for participants. Some may be hesitant to share their true opinions, leading to biased or guarded responses. This sensitivity could limit the depth of qualitative insights and affect the study's overall validity. Obtaining a diverse sample that accurately represents various demographics could be challenging. If the sample lacks diversity, the findings may not generalize well across different cultural or social groups, reducing the study's applicability.

Post-Program Plan:

The research will aid lawmakers and educational institutions to make distinctions when considering the ethical line of killing and the context in which it stands. The study will also further psychological prospects when understanding the human boundaries during high-stakes situations. This research allows people to understand how different ethical dilemmas are perceived across cultures and demographics and how emotions may play a part in it. Partner with universities or ethical research centers to disseminate findings through academic journals, conferences, or lectures. This collaboration could help establish the study as a credible source for discussions on ethics, while also fostering opportunities for further research funding and support.

References:

- [1] Wikipedia contributors. (n.d.). *Self-defense*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved November 6, 2024, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-defense>
- [2] Mill, J. S. (1863). *Utilitarianism*. London: Parker, Son, and Bourn.
- [3] Singer, P. (1993). *Practical Ethics* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press
- [4] *The Holy Bible, King James Version*. Thomas Nelson, 1987. (Exodus 20:13)
- [5] *The Qur'an: Translation of the Meanings in English*. Sahih International, 2011. (Qur'an 5:32)
- [6] "Thomas Aquinas." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Aquinas. Accessed 9 Nov. 2024.
- [7] Aquinas, Thomas. (1274). *Summa Theologica*, Second Part of the Second Part, Question 40. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province.
- [8] The Qur'an. (2011). *The Qur'an: A new translation* (Sahih International, Trans.). Amana Publications. (Original work published 610-632 CE) (Qur'an 2:190, Sahih International)
- [9] Abu Dawood, S. (2011). *Sunan Abu Dawood* (M. Ahmad, Trans.). Dar Al-Kotob Al-Ilmiyah. (Original work published 9th century CE)