The worst day of my life began innocently enough with my small group of friends preparing to explore a cave. Each month the four of us, I, Jill, John, and Ted, would choose two or three caves and spend our weekends engrossed in exploring them. Today's cave was a special one; it afforded just a small window of opportunity for exploration because it flooded completely with each high tide. As we checked our packs and made sure all our spelunking and survival gear was in order, a rather jovial, but sizable, fellow by the name of Scott Porker happened by and asked if he could join our group. We agreed, as we were always happy to be in the company of a kindred spirit, and since the tide had just gone out we began our descent into the cave.

Our newly acquired fifth member was the last in and got wedged in the opening so tightly we thought we would never be able to pull him loose. Finally, our persistent tugging prevailed, and Scott came loose like a cork from a bottle. We quickly set about probing the cave and didn’t give that incident another thought, since we had just three precious hours in which to achieve our goal of exploration.

After just two hours, our very large friend said he’d had enough for the day and was heading for the surface. We told him he’d be out in a few more minutes and to hang around so we could discuss what we’d found. As we began our ascent toward the entrance, we became acutely aware of the complete absence of light the entrance usually emanated. When our flashlights finally found the source of the unusual darkness we were horrified; the big guy was stuck in the cave’s opening again. This time Scott’s head and shoulders were outside, so instead of being able to pull him through, we would have to try to push him out of the opening. We pushed in every combination of ways possible, and needless to say it did not work this time. The paramount problem was that the cave floods from the interior out, so we would all drown if we couldn’t get Scott unstuck, and unstuck quickly.

We began to panic, picking up rocks and using them as hammers in an attempt to loosen the rocks around the opening. Frantically we pounded, on occasion accidentally hitting Scott and causing him to cry out in pain, but it was to no avail. We had roughly forty-five minutes until high tide and were running out of options. It was then that we decided to empty our packs in hopes of finding anything we might be able to use. Unfortunately, we found just two things with any potential usefulness: a cellular telephone, and the single stick of dynamite that was in the bottom of my pack. Obviously, we decided to try the cellular phone first, but every number we tried rang busy non-stop, including 911.

Time was running short, and the others began contemplating the unthinkable; use the dynamite to clear Scott from the entrance of the cave, allowing us to escape. They kept saying, “Why should the four of us die because his big butt is stuck? We hardly even know the guy; it’s not like we owe him anything.” While I could see their point, I was unwilling to consent to their plan. Since I was the owner of the dynamite, I told my friends that I
wanted to try one more call before we made any rash decisions; and they consented to my request, as long as it was a short call.

My shoes were already wet, as I dialed one of two numbers I had impulsively written in my wallet at a philosophy seminar earlier that year. The voice that answered the phone said, “Hello, David Hume speaking.”

I replied, “Mr. Hume, you don’t know me, but I am in a terrible situation and need your counsel.”

“Please continue,” he said.

I explained our situation and my ensuing ambivalence and asked, “Would it be morally wrong to use the dynamite to clear the entrance, killing Scott in the process, in order to free the remaining four of us?”

He replied, “Well let me begin by saying, that I believe what we need to ask ourselves is, what would an observer think? Now I don’t mean just any old observer, rather one that knows all the particular facts of your situation, has a typical human nature and range of reactions, and has no vested interest in the outcome of the situation. This is what I call an ideal observer.”

“Excuse me Dave, I hope it is all right to call you Dave, but what do you mean by all that?”

“Dave will be fine, dear lady. What I mean is, if an ideal observer were to witness both of the possible outcomes of your situation, what would that person’s reaction to those outcomes be?

“I am not quite sure I follow you, Dave,” I said.

“Well, let’s put it this way,” he said. “Let us say that Mr. Porker is not blown up, and you and your three friends drown. Taking into consideration that this observer has a typical human reaction, how do you think the ideal observer would feel about that outcome?”

“Well, I suppose he or she would feel sorry for us but wouldn’t really blame Scott for our deaths.”

“That is very possible” said Dave, “but what about the judgment that would pass on the four of you if the dynamite were in fact used to remove your corpulent companion from the cave opening, killing him to save yourselves?”

“Well, again I suppose that the observer would feel sorry for Scott but would not really blame us for his death. That still leaves me in a gray area where neither act garners true moral disapproval. Isn’t there some glaringly apparent fact to this situation that we could use to reason our way out of this?”

“Unfortunately, I do not believe that reason can be used to draw any moral distinctions. If I were to stand and look at the outcome of your situation, whichever outcome it may be, and make a list of the particular details I can discover empirically, the rightness or wrongness of the action would not be on that list.”

By this time I was pretty confused and decided to get one more opinion. I asked Dave if I could put him on hold and then include him in conference call with one other party; he agreed. I put him on hold and dialed the other number I had written in my wallet. Fortunately, a soft-spoken man with a German accent answered the phone.

“Mr. Immanuel Kant?” I asked.

“Why, yes this is,” he replied.

“Sir, I have quite a dilemma and am in need of some very quick moral coaching,” I said and quickly proceeded to explain my present situation.

“My goodness, that is quite a problem you have,” he said. “Am I to understand that your only two options are drown or end the life of another in order to save yourself and your three companions?”

“Yes sir, unfortunately that is exactly what I am telling you. I am having some ambivalence about our options but truly do not want to take Scott’s life.”

“As well you should not want to end his life, my dear. All rational creatures must be taken into account when making any decision. They have an intrinsic value and must never be used as a means to an end.”

“So, are you saying that we should not kill Scott and should accept our fate, Manny?”

“No, not at all. What I merely meant to imply is that this is a decision that bears due consideration and cannot be made in haste. You have to consider the duty of each person to preserve the lives of others and themselves. You must also consider any pledges or promises made to each member of your party. It is your duty to not break a promise you have made and also to preserve life.”

“Well, that’s just great. I didn’t make any promises, but now I have a duty to preserve not only my own life, but also those of all my companions, including Mr. Porker, all at the same time. That’s impossible. How will I ever discover
the right course of action?"

"Unfortunately, I think you are right; you have quite the moral dilemma on your hands. What we need to do is determine a course of action, and then take the motivation for that course of action and test it by making it into a universal principle."

"A uni-what?" I asked, beginning to lose hope. The water had now risen over my ankles, and I was becoming impatient.

"A universal principle is one that could be applied to any person in similar situations to determine whether an action is morally correct or corrupt. For instance, we could say that our universal principle is that you may kill another innocent rational being to free yourself from certain death once you have exhausted all other alternatives. Now think about all the potential implications and contradictions caused by this and tell me if it can be universally applied."

I thought for a few moments and replied, "I don't think it could be universally applied. I mean, think about if you were being held hostage and another person blocked your one chance for escape. It would not be right to kill him to get out."

"Very good," said Mr. Kant. "Another thing that has to be considered is that for any action to be good, it has to be done without the prospect of any rewards."

"And that means...."

"Simply this: any action with a conditional value, such as if you do A you will receive B, is being done for an ulterior reason. A good, or morally right, action will be done simply by the virtue that it is the right thing to do, with no hopes of any type of reward. I call this the categorical imperative. It is the motive behind the action, and not the consequences produced by the action, that makes an action right or wrong. For instance, you may find yourself in a situation where every fiber of your being wants to do what is right but is unable. In this case you are morally free of blame even if there is a less than favorable, or desirable, consequence produced."

At this point, as I could feel the water beginning to tickle the back of my knee, and decided to begin the conference call. I brought Mr. Hume back on the line and introduced Mr. Kant; it turned out that no introductions were needed.

"So David," said Mr. Kant, "were you feeding this young lady your drivel about an ideal observer?"

"Well, hello, Immanuel, and I suppose you weren't force-feeding your universal principle, categorical imperative nonsense to this young lady?"

"Guys, guys," I interceded. "Could we please save the testosterone for later? Potential drowning victim, or murderer, here asking for help, okay?"

"My apologies, let us put aside our differences of opinion and see if we can find an equitable solution to this dilemma," said Manny. Dave agreed, and we began to hash out a solution.

"Well, what in your opinion would be the morally correct course of action in this case Mr. Hume?" I asked.

"In my opinion, you should use the dynamite to free yourselves. Neither empirical evidence, nor an ideal observer, could find this action blameworthy. Right and wrong cannot be determined separate from the feelings of the ideal observer. Society may view this differently, but we have societal rules regarding only preservation of life, property, and other sorts of things because it is of some use to society; and we are outside those boundaries right now."

"Poppycock," exploded Mr. Kant. "Absolute rubbish, David," he said angrily. "A truly good action can be produced only through a good will, when you do something simply because it is the right thing to do and not to produce a favorable consequence for yourself. How can you possibly say that rules regarding the preservation of life are merely a societal convenience?"

At this point they began to verbally battle one another, and I was nearly out of time; a decision had to be made soon. I tried to intercede and say my goodbyes but could not fit a word in edge-wise, so I simply hung up. I endeavored to relay as much as I could to my three companions, but could tell they were unimpressed. I knew we had to make a decision right then.

We stood there and debated among ourselves: was it wrong to save ourselves and use Scott as our means to do so? Could we live with ourselves if we did have to kill him? What was the right thing to do? A vote was proposed, and we each decided that we needed a moment of private time to make our final decisions. The water was approaching our hips as we cast our votes by a
show of hands. Not surprisingly the results were three for using the dynamite, and one against; my vote was the lone “no.” I had decided that I would rather die myself than willingly take the life of another. Although I completely understood that in doing so, I would be sentencing not only myself to death, but also my three friends. I just could not come to grips with visiting such a horrible death upon a totally innocent person. I attempted to reason with them: could we maybe use the dynamite to try to loosen the stones to the side of where Scott was stuck? They were unwilling to possibly waste our only means of escape on a long-shot chance and resoundingly vetoed my proposal. Had they even asked Scott his opinion? They said that Scott had told them to not worry about him, and do whatever it was we had to do; he would understand. I wanted to ask him myself but could not bear to do so. A sick feeling suddenly overcame me, and I knew I had to make an attempt to circumvent what was about to happen.

I had control of the dynamite and decided to make a run for the interior regions of the cave; I had to try to make sure they could not use the dynamite for their intended purpose. Regretfully, I did not get far before John overtook me and wrested control of the dynamite away from me. Ted and Jill immediately took hold of me and restrained me to prevent me from stopping what was about to happen. John apologized to Scott for what he was about to do, and as tears ran down my face while I struggled to free myself, he lit the fuse and tucked the dynamite into the back of Scott’s pants. John ran to us and they all pushed me back into a crevice in the rock. I closed my eyes and held my breath as I waited for the inevitable ear-shattering boom of the dynamite. How I wished the cave’s rocky ceiling would collapse and kill me in the explosion.

The dreaded moment finally arrived with a furious roaring explosion and the sounds of breaking bones and shredding flesh. I was horrified. How could this have happened? How could I ever live with myself? I was numb with shock as my three friends more-or-less physically dragged me out of the cave past the remains of Scott.

Once outside, the cellular phone was used once more, this time to call the police. My friends embellished the story a bit and after a thorough investigation, we were all cleared of any suspicion of wrongdoing. I had initially considered confessing what had actually happened, but then I remembered something that Immanuel Kant had told me about the motives for an action. He told me that if a person wanted to do right with every fiber of her being but was unable to do so, she was not being immoral even if bad consequences resulted from inaction. After thinking long and hard about this, I decided that there would have been no way to stop my former friends from killing Scott in order to escape. Had I persisted, they may have also taken my life and still killed Scott to save their own. There was truly nothing I could have done to save him. Not one day goes by that I do not think of that poor happy-go-lucky plump man and feel sorrow for the end that befell him. I just wish I could believe in my heart those words spoken by Mr. Kant that had brought a sense of peace to my head.