There is a deep ethical dilemma in the Columbia shuttle disaster that's been overlooked by both principals and commentators. Linda Ham didn't recognize it; neither did the Mission Management Team, or the Photo Working Group, or the Program Manager for Launch Integration, or the Debris Assessment Team, or commentators like Donovan and Green or Davis — or, perhaps, they somehow subliminally recognized it but all assumed it should be decided in the same way.

There was a genuine moral issue here. Assume that, as soon as the photos were taken, it became apparent that the tile damage was much greater than on any previous mission. Indeed, let us suppose that the gravity of the situation was fully recognized by ground control. There didn't seem to be any way out — once the shuttle was aloft, it wouldn't have been possible to dock with the space station, and it wouldn't have been possible to rescue the astronauts. This might lead us to think that, as Linda Ham apparently did, “there isn’t anything I can do.”

But there is something of significant ethical importance that you could do; the question is whether you should do it or not. After all, as we’re assuming, you know there is a high probability that the astronauts will die on reentry — but they don’t know it. Would you tell them? Ham, and apparently all others, have assumed no. Yet this is not at all obvious, and indeed different ethical approaches to the question may yield quite different answers.

We might wonder, to begin with, what it is about the ethical course of not disclosing to the astronauts their impending fate that seemingly makes it so appealing to our moral intuitions. Nobody told the astronauts what very well could happen on reentry, and without access to the discussions of those concerned with tile loss, they had no way to know it themselves. Can we find support in ethical reasoning for our reticence? To do so, perhaps our reasoning takes a certain direction that we might find in
other kinds of moral decision-making: let’s consider several different seemingly analogous cases.

First, let’s say that there is a military operation in which the leaders of the operation know that there is a reasonable chance that certain units will be destroyed by the enemy. Nevertheless, other units in the operation are dependent on these doomed units performing their part of the operation. Should the leaders of the operation inform the members of the endangered units that they are most likely to die? Wouldn’t this knowledge affect their performance, thereby jeopardizing the mission and the lives of others? Isn’t it the case that in the military profession, sometimes leaders know that certain people are about to die, but not only do they not tell them, they also exaggerate their chances for survival? In this profession, the ethical perspective might be one that emphasizes a primarily Utilitarian view of things — that one ought to try to promote the greater good for the greater number, even at some cost to a few.

There are all kinds of ways we can imagine in which informing the astronauts of the real risks they face might affect their performance in ways that could affect others. It is, after all, a very powerful impulse to pursue one’s own survival. If they knew of the damage to the tiles, for example, would they perhaps engage in an unauthorized space walk in an attempt to jury-rig some kind of tile repair, perhaps forgetting their research projects or releasing uncharted debris into space, the tiniest fragment of which could have catastrophic effects on future shuttle and space missions? Would they collapse from emotional stress, or even harm each other there in their small, now-lethal cocoon? The astronauts are about to die in the performance of their own professional duties. Not performing them well could affect others. But if there is a chance of survival, even a slim one, wouldn’t their performance level be diminished by the stress of knowing their fate? This is an argument for not telling them what we know.

But if this were a case in medical ethics, the assumption would be made just the other way around. Suppose, for example, that you’re a physician, and have seven cancer patients, each of whom will die. Would you tell them the truth? Yes, of course; truth-telling even in fatal cancer diagnoses is now standard practice in medicine — though physicians try to do so with tact, empathy, and understanding. Among the standard arguments for truth-telling are that people who are facing death should be allowed to have time to say goodbyes, to set their affairs in order, to make amends, or, if they’re religious, to make whatever final confessions and prayers they wish. This is what it is to respect persons, as Kant might put
it, to recognize them as ends in themselves, able to determine in accord with their own values how they choose to spend the last moments of their lives. This is a deontological response to the deep moral problem here: whatever the consequences, it would be wrong to lie to the astronauts or to deprive them of the truth. It would be wrong to rob them of autonomous choice during their last moments, and of the knowledge that these are their last moments.

But isn't this just what happened, out there in space? If we know there's a reasonable chance the seven astronauts will die, and that there's nothing we can do to save them, shouldn't we tell them? Would they live that last week any differently? Surely, in undertaking a space mission in the first place, they would have made their wills, put their affairs in order, told their spouses and their children that they loved them. But now suppose that they knew the end was really coming. Would they communicate differently? Live differently among themselves, there in the spaceship? Try to extend the length of the voyage until their supplies ran out? Or vote to “reenter” earlier, so that the fearsome end would be over sooner? Plead for help? Or send consoling messages to Earth, recognizing that this is a risk they voluntarily assumed and that they are willing to bear? There are many possibilities for heroism and despair, insight and cowardice, and the whole range of human emotion and reflection — not easy to bear but part of full human life — even one about to be made abruptly short. How will they live this week, before what may be a catastrophic end? These are the things the astronauts themselves should have a hand in deciding, not that should be decided by others.

If we move in the direction favored by Linda Ham, Mission Management, Launch Integration, Debris Assessment, the various commentators, and perhaps our own initial inclinations, we opt for a high dose of paternalism at one of the most significant points in the lives of these people. Perhaps we believe that this knowledge really is more harmful to the astronauts and to others than keeping it from them. Under such a belief, perhaps consequentialism trumps deontology. If, however, we are simply keeping the astronauts in the dark to protect them against their own fears, or even to protect ourselves against our anxieties for them, then this seems an unreasonable cost to their autonomy. Of course it would be painful to know the end was coming; but it would take a resolute paternalism to shield them from this knowledge, something we would not tolerate in other professions who work with people who know they are about to die.
Margaret P. Battin is Professor of Philosophy and Gordon B. Mower is a graduate teaching assistant at the University of Utah