

Situation Ethics and Animal Ethics

1. **What** is situation ethics and how does it work?

Situation ethics is a branch of normative ethics; like others, it is concerned with investigating different frameworks that help decide whether an action is right or wrong. Different normative ethical theories provide different frameworks for ethical decision-making (e.g. natural law), and situation ethics is one of these frameworks.

Although situation ethics is usually associated with the work of Joseph Fletcher (1905-1991), different versions were developed by different thinkers over the twentieth century, including Rudolf Bultmann and John Robinson.

Generally, all versions of situation ethics have two key components. First, the claim that established rules are usually right; and, because situation ethics was developed by Christian thinkers, this means Biblical rules in most cases. For example, the established Biblical rule prohibiting murder is usually right; but not always, because in some situations murder may be right. This introduces the second key component: situation ethicists claim that context affects ethical decision-making, to the extent that it dictates whether an action is right or wrong. For example, between 1974 and 1976, Joseph Fletcher was president of the Euthanasia Society of America; whilst he believed that murder was usually wrong, he argued that the situation (e.g. suffering from a terminal illness) may make murder the right and most loving action in certain circumstances.

Situation Ethics

A branch of normative ethics concerned with making ethical decisions by reasoning the best outcome of an action in any given context.



Jack Kevorkian: a famous supporter of euthanasia.

Love (agapē): the idea of love is central to Joseph Fletcher's version of situation ethics. He believed the self-sacrificing love of Jesus is the model for agapē, a type of selfless love identified by the ancient Greeks. In any given situation, Joseph Fletcher argued that the action that produces the most loving outcome is the right one. Although he believed following established rules in most situations will usually lead to the most loving outcomes, he argued that this is not always the case. Consequently, he supported practices like abortion and euthanasia when undertaken to produce loving outcomes.

Personhood: Joseph Fletcher argued that personhood marks the boundary of consideration in ethical decision-making; however, according to his definition of personhood, all animals are excluded from consideration. According to Joseph Fletcher, human beings have capacities that other animals do not, and these capacities entitle them to rights that animals are deprived of. Consequently, he argued that human beings can use animals to produce loving outcomes for themselves and other people. This idea is anthropocentric, and supports the subjugation of animals by human beings.

2. **How** is situation ethics applied to issues in animal ethics?

Farming: situation ethics considers farming animals for meat and other animal products to be right, regardless of the pain and suffering inflicted on animals, because it produces loving outcomes for human beings: people survive and thrive on eating meat and dairy products. Nevertheless, evidence of the harmful effects of factory farming on people living in less economically developed countries may make factory farming wrong. Factory farming appears to contribute to famine and climate change, and situation ethicists need to decide whether or not this contribution undermines loving outcomes for people in more economically developed countries.

Medicine and science: Joseph Fletcher supported the use of animals in medicine and science, and was a pioneer in the field of bioethics, because medicines brought to market through animal experimentation produce loving outcomes for human beings (i.e. cures). Situation ethics considers any use of animals in medicine and science to be right, including genetic engineering and xenotransplantation (i.e. the use of animal organs in human transplant patients), as long as it produces loving outcomes for human beings. Importantly, pain and suffering inflicted on animals in the process (i.e. loving outcomes for animals) is not considered in any ethical deliberation.

Sport: the use of animals in sport does not appear to be an ethical issue for situation ethicists; at least, not any more than the playing of other sports that do not involve their use. Unlike farming, and medicine and science, the health, safety, and survival of human beings does not depend on the use of animals in sport; therefore, the extent to which their use produces self-sacrificing love of the sort envisaged by Joseph Fletcher is either very limited or nonexistent. Additionally, situation ethics denies animals personhood, which means that the outcomes for them from using them in sport do not have to be considered anyway.

3. **Why** is the application of situation ethics to issues in animal ethics important?

The question of why the application of situation ethics to issues in animal ethics is important is really about why issues in animal ethics are important in the first place. First, issues in animal ethics are pervasive, because they affect billions of captive animals in factory farms and laboratories around the world. Situation ethics accepts any use of animals in farming, and medicine and science; consequently, it exacerbates the pain and suffering experienced by these animals. Second, issues in animal ethics are potent, because they animate animal rights organisations. Situation ethics can align itself with the concerns of animal rights organisations, but only if it extends the boundary of personhood to include at least some animals. Third, issues in animal ethics are problematic, because they reveal human assumptions and double standards; most clearly in the assumption that human beings should only be obliged to show love towards other persons (excluding even disabled people), which appears difficult to establish through rational argument.

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A lot of people think situation ethics is soft and fluffy, especially when compared to other ethical theories that have a reputation for being inflexible (e.g. natural law). I suspect this arises from the emphasis on love in Joseph Fletcher's work; however, this permissive ethic grounded in personal conscience doesn't always appear to lead to loving outcomes. For example, Joseph Fletcher famously argued, "People [with children with Down's syndrome]... have no reason to feel guilty about putting a Down's syndrome baby away, whether it's "put away" in the sense of hidden in a sanitarium or in a more responsible lethal sense." You see, he didn't extend personhood to some disabled people, which raises real questions about how loving his ethical theory really is.

As I hope you'll agree, situation ethics is only as loving as the sphere of ethical consideration it extends this love to. Joseph Fletcher excluded animals and disabled people from consideration in ethical decision-making, which justifies inflicting pain and suffering on both these groups without any sense of guilt. In fact, and this may be surprising, situation ethics can be used to defend some aspects of the Holocaust (namely, the murdering of disabled people). Given this, situation ethics doesn't lead to any better treatment of animals than ethical theories like natural law, unless the sphere of ethical consideration is extended to include them; whilst it's perfectly possible to do this, it's not the approach that was advocated by Joseph Fletcher himself.

