

Application of Situation Ethics

1. **What** is the application of situation ethics?

The application of situation ethics involves an identical process to the application of any normative ethical theory. This process begins with identifying an ethical issue in a branch of applied ethics (e.g. sexual ethics). Once an issue is identified, the normative ethical theory is applied by asking how an adherent of the theory would address the issue. There are various ethical issues across every branch of applied ethics; however, some are more central to modern life than others. Of these, a handful are especially challenging to resolve satisfactorily, especially among some religious people like Christians; in sexual ethics, these include the issues of homosexuality and polyamory.



Bed fellows: Christians consider sexual relationships an area of great ethical concern.

Homosexuality: the question of whether or not human beings should have same-sex relationships with one another remains an important topic of debate within Christianity even though secular society has largely moved on. In the United Kingdom, approximately 1.4 million people identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual in 2021, so this question affects a large number of citizens.

Polyamory: the question of whether or not human beings should have relationships involving more than two people. Unlike homosexuality, polyamory is frowned upon regardless of religion: YouGov's latest polling data from 2015 reveals that most British people consider it wrong. Studies suggest that anywhere from three per cent to 25 per cent of the population is polyamorous.

2. **How** does the application of situation ethics work?

Situation ethics and homosexuality: applying situation ethics to the issue of homosexuality involves evaluating the amount of neighbourly love produced by same-sex relationships on a case-by-case basis. In fields as disparate as psychology and sexual ethics, it is overwhelmingly agreed that the agape produced by a committed, long-term relationship isn't dependent on the sex or gender of the partners involved. In other words, anyone of any sexuality or none (i.e. an asexual person) is capable of forming an intimate relationship with a partner characterised by selfless and self-sacrificing love. Given this, situation ethicists accept the morality of any committed, long-term relationship that bears the hallmarks of agape regardless of the sex or gender of those involved; consequently, it is as wrong to denigrate a loving homosexual relationship as it is to decry a loving heterosexual one.

Situation ethics and polyamory: applying situation ethics to the issue of polyamory requires us to evaluate the amount of neighbourly love produced by sexual relationships involving more than two people on a case-by-case basis. Although it is possible to argue that polyamorous relationships are less likely to produce as much agape as monogamous ones because jealousy and resentment may arise more frequently, such feelings occur in monogamous relationships as well. More problematic is the issue that most people believe polyamory is immoral, which unavoidably negatively impacts the wellbeing of polyamorous people. This raises the question of whether or not agape is best served by entering into a relationship if it alienates family and friends and leads to social stigmatisation and discrimination.

Homosexuality

A sexual orientation that is characterised by a romantic and sexual attraction to people of the same sex or gender.

Polyamory

A relational practice that is characterised by consensual romantic and sexual relationships between more than two people.



Polygamy: a type of polyamory that involves marriage between the people involved.

3. **Why** is the application of situation ethics important?

The application of situation ethics is important because it shows situationists how they should act. In the case of sexual ethics, situationists take the agapeic calculus and apply it to issues like homosexuality and polyamory. Joseph Fletcher famously stated, "Whether any form of sex (hetero, homo, or auto) is good or evil depends on whether love is fully served." Although it is possible to imagine certain instances in which specific gay relationships do not best serve agape, this cannot be the general rule. Homosexuality is widely accepted in Western societies, so situation ethicists would consider the morality of any gay relationship much the same way they would consider the morality of any straight one. Situationists would assume it is acceptable unless special considerations suggested otherwise. The issue of polyamory is more problematic. Joseph Fletcher claimed, "[T]here is no reason to regard [monogamous marriage] as a legal absolute. For example, if the sex ratio were to be overthrown by disaster, polygamy could well become the ideal or standard." However, since polyamory remains widely regarded as immoral, polyamorous relationships bring great difficulties and, unlike homosexuality, polyamory may not be intrinsic to people's identity. In many cases, it is possible that agape would not be best served by polyamory. The best that people can probably say is that the jury is out, so careful case-by-case evaluation is required.

George Thinks

Why have we applied situation ethics to issues in sexual ethics, to homosexuality and polyamory? Most of us think they're hardly the most important ethical issues around; some of us believe they aren't ethical issues at all. Surely issues in environmental, medical or military ethics are far more interesting and important because many of them involve matters of life and death? Well, the reason we've applied situation ethics to these specific ethical issues is because they're of particular interest to Christian ethicists. This is the principal point: what makes the situationist response to homosexuality and polyamory interesting is that, under certain circumstances, it opens the door to the Christian acceptance of both. This is highly unusual because the Church is, otherwise, pretty much unanimous in its condemnation of same-sex relationships and any sexual relationships involving more than two partners. For my part, I think situation ethics promotes a really refreshing approach to these issues within the Christian tradition. I think it's difficult to justify judging people on their consenting relationships when the New Testament is so ambiguous; in the reported words of Jesus, there's more tacit acceptance of slavery than there is rejection of homosexuality (in fact, the latter is non-existent). In sexual ethics, there is a stark and significant division between the conclusions of Christian situationists and the rest of the Christianity community.

