

Situation Ethics Theory

As its name states, situation ethics theory applies in specific situations and not necessarily in a wide variety of cases. Ethics, or morality, that applies in one area may not necessarily appertain to additional areas. The idea of generalizations and general rules for morality may not be recognized in particular judgments. (Frankena, 1973, 3) Situation ethics can be associated with act-utilitarianism or act-deontology. In these disciplines, general rules may be helpful, but they should not be used in place of sound judgments made in specific situations. For the individual, the key to situational ethics is to understand the impact their decision will ultimately have on the balance of good versus evil. The individual need not be as concerned about the impact that others' decisions might have on the balance of good over evil. (Frankena, 1973, 35) An interesting aspect of situation ethics is the prospect of being honest and telling the truth, depending on the situation. Many people are familiar with the policy that it's best to be honest. In particular situations, however, honesty is not necessarily the best policy. In the case of a prisoner of war, they would rather lie about their country rather than give the enemy any intelligence. Telling the truth in such a situation could be detrimental to a nation's war efforts. However, telling the truth is a good decision when an individual is under oath in a court of law. Lying in this type of situation would create serious legal problems for the individual. Each situation calls for understanding as to what exactly the facts are, and it is up to the individuals involved to make decisions based on what the most considerate alternatives would be. (Frankena, 1973, 37) This idea is also deemed situationalism, in that it focuses on the unique circumstances contained within each situation.

Several of the Warner case studies present examples where situational ethics may be applied for credible decision-making. In case #1 of the Warner case studies, John Bozeman presents a dilemma about nepotism possibly taking place at SINKO Corporation, where he is the president. Bozeman's brother-in-law, Chauncey, seeks to obtain an executive position with the corporation, which is understandable, as Chauncey's wife owns many shares of the corporation. The problem is that Chauncey is incompetent as a worker. Bozeman would prefer to keep Chauncey away from the company in order to prevent negative consequences. In this situation, Bozeman has an obligation to make wise decisions on behalf of the employees, customers, and shareholders. Bozeman needs to apply a specific set of ethics to the potential of hiring Chauncey than he would otherwise. If there were an executive position open, and Bozeman was interviewing outside candidates, this situation would call for separate ethics. In either case, Bozeman needs to make a decision for the best interest of the stakeholders. For potential nepotism, Bozeman must consider the opinions of his in-laws, as they may vote him out of his job.

Case #4 of the Warner case studies presents a soldier, John, who obtains a bucket of water, which he has refused to share with others. Situational ethics can definitely be applied in this case. Instead of hoarding the water, John could share it with others. He could also give the entire bucket of water to the other soldiers around him. By using situational ethics, John does have to use general rules that might apply in other circumstances. Instead, he can determine what would be the best course of action in the current situation. However, John must come to a conclusion as to what would yield the greatest balance of good over evil. He must ask himself if it is ethical that he keeps all of the water to himself. He might consider that drinking some water and sharing the remaining water would be

good for all the soldiers. The soldiers might help John out when he needs it the most.

Situational ethics definitely warrant consideration in Case #9 of the Warner case studies. Here, Melinda has been fired for abandoning her work shift, which is company policy. Apparently, the company's policy emphasizes the same rule regardless of employees' individual reasons for absence. Melinda maintains that she had a school meeting to attend as her reason for leaving for the day. Individuals have unique circumstances that require them to leave work during the day. Those reasons for leaving might be medical. What if an individual's spouse or child was in the hospital and he or she had to abandon the workday immediately to rush to the hospital? Does such an emergency constitute them getting fired? A one-size-fits-all policy does not meet the needs of employees who each have different concerns. Situational ethics should be applied in each case to determine who should or should not be allowed to leave early from work. In Melinda's case, her employer should gather the information as to why she left work early to attend a school meeting. With her sterling work attendance record, Melinda likely has a very compelling reason for skipping out on work. After the president hears Melinda's case, it might be cause for changing the policy.

Situational ethics can be applied in any given situation or circumstance in life. Deontological in nature, situational ethics in application does not necessarily espouse long-held morals. Individuals of this persuasion prefer to gather all the facts prior to making any decisions. Once all the facts are gathered, they can be synthesized to determine what alternative decisions are available. An example of where making decisions on an individual basis matters can be witnessed in annual employee reviews. Each employee is different, and they each require unique criteria by which they are evaluated. There are likely standards by which employees must perform, but each individual employee will have differing goals to meet for

the coming year. Situational ethics can be applied to annual employee reviews to gain perspective on each employee's performance. Among those alternatives, one choice is made and implemented to further the decision-making process. The idea is that the ethics of each situation can vary greatly. Applying general moral standards to specific situations causes an injustice to those unique circumstances that must be judged independently.

References

Warner, Douglas W. The Basis for Ethical Conduct/Ethics for Decision-Making Case Studies. 5th ed. 1984.

Frankena, William K. Ethics. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973.