



# Principle vs. Practicality: Situation Ethics

By Mike Winther

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A critical question relating to the fireworks example (as well as a host of other, more important, issues) is whether society should let circumstances (situations) determine the legality of an action. If we let situations determine government policy, there are several problems that arise.

## **Government policy loses all consistency.**

One dangerous behavior or substance is banned because of misuse, abuse, or accidents, while another equally dangerous behavior or substance is allowed because it has not yet produced negative impacts.

## **We devalue the law.**

The law no longer represents absolutes of right and wrong. It just becomes a statement of the emotion of the moment. Carried to its logical extension, what is legal today may be illegal tomorrow and vice versa. There is, therefore, no reason to respect or adhere to the law. When the law is no longer moral, our only motivation for obeying it is to avoid its punishment. Avoiding

the law's punishment becomes a more important objective than obeying the law itself—this encourages law breaking.

## **We destroy common sense, we make people vulnerable, and we make them dependent on government.**

Citizens begin to look to government to protect them instead of using their own good judgment. People begin to reason as follows: “This product must be safe or else the government wouldn't allow it to be sold. I don't need to analyze its safety or research the matter.”

## **We set up our system to reward terrorism.**

It is no secret to anyone that efforts to ban substances or behavior are far more successful if preceded by well publicized problems with the substances or behavior. A poisoning death from a farm chemical significantly improves the chance of banning the chemical. A shooting spree by a crazed gunman improves the chance of passing a weapons ban. Significant financial losses by investors in “junk bonds” will greatly improve the chances of banning or regulating those types of investments.

If these relationships are obvious to honest, mild mannered, unassuming citizens, is it hard to believe that unscrupulous people might consider using (or creating) disasters to further their own agenda?

If our political system makes a habit of reacting to every disaster, we will only encourage the unscrupulous to take advantage. If, on the other hand, our political system bases its laws on moral and philosophical principles and refuses to enact legislation based on fluctuating situations, the unscrupulous will be far less inclined to try to create a crisis. Interestingly, the result of this resolve is fewer crises.

There is a well-known axiom in politics that says, “The action is in the reaction.” Groups, organizations, armies, businesses and individuals often attempt to get “their way” by inciting an action that may be very different from their actual objective. They are banking on a reaction which meets their agenda.

## **We encourage sensationalism and imbalanced reporting of news events.**

A political system based on practicality will elicit undesirable actions on the part those who report and analyze the news. Once it becomes obvious that political decisions are based on situations and not on consistent ideology, it is very easy for those who report the news to focus on those stories that might elicit a particular reaction. Because of their ability to choose what to

report, the news media have “agenda setting” powers. They determine the problem of the day, week, month or year. There are, of course, an infinite number of “problems”, but government action is sure to occur if those in the media focus enough attention on a few select problems.