

Situation Ethics



Agape love: an altruistic love felt for human kind. No connection to bodily desire.

Altruism: putting the needs of others before oneself.

We should NOT be focused on...

Eros: Erotic, sexual and physical love.

The New Testament and Jesus



“The second is this: *‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’* There is no commandment greater than these.” **Mark 12:31**

“So in everything, *do to others what you would have them do to you,* for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”

Matthew 7:12

““A new command I give you: *Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*”³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

John 13: 34-35

“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. *But the greatest of these is love*” **1 Corinthians 13:13**

“*God is love.*” **1 John 4:8**

How did Jesus put love into action?



³⁴“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’”

Key Philosopher: Joseph Fletcher



- He was an American professor who founded the theory of Situation ethics in the 1960s.
- He was a pioneer in bioethics and was involved in the areas of abortion, infanticide, euthanasia and cloning.

There is one universal and absolute principle= LOVE. This means its should be applied in **all situations by all people**. Situation Ethics, therefore, is not a relativist theory, as they allow for NO UNIVERSAL PRICIPLES. There is one absolute maxim (a rule which demands application) to which particular judgements are relative. You must always apply love, but what that entails will be different in different situations.

Justice is love in action. It's not enough to say we should love one another, we need to actually do it! To just say it is “fatuous bleating”. Silly and pointless. A key feature of Fletcher's theory is **personalism**: good has to be experienced to be good, so is applicable only to or for a person.

Fletcher maintains that there are essentially three different ways of making moral decisions.

1. Legalistic ethics
2. Antinomian ethics
3. **Situation ethics (THE APPROACH SUPPORTED BY FLETCHER)**

Legalistic Ethics

- Has a set of moral rules and regulations.
- Fletcher said this runs into problems – life's complexities require additional laws. Murder, killing in self defence, killing in war, killing unborn human beings etc.
- Like a textbook morality that leaves people simply to check the manual to decide what is right and wrong.
- The rule is more important than the person.

Antinomian Ethics

- The reverse of legalistic ethics. It literally means ‘against law’.
- A person using **antinomianism** doesn't really use an ethical system at all. He or she enters decision-making as if each occasion was totally unique. Making a moral decision is a matter of spontaneity.
- ‘They are, exactly anarchic – i.e. without a rule’.
- Fletcher is also critical of this approach.

Situation Ethics

- One single rule – the rule of **agape**. This love is not merely an emotion but involves doing what is best for the other person, unconditionally.
- The situationist enters into the moral dilemma with the principles and rules of his or her community.
- However, they are prepared to set these rules aside in the situation if LOVE seems better served by doing so.
- ‘*The situationist follows a moral law or violates it according to love's need*’.
- Situation ethics is sensitive to variety and complexity. It uses principles to illuminate the situation, but not to direct the action.

Fletcher divides his principles into two categories:

Four Working Principles

1. **Pragmatism** – moral actions must work or achieve some realistic goal.
2. **Relativism** – there are no fixed laws which must always be obeyed.
3. **Positivism** – first place is given to Christian love, rooted in faith.
4. **Personalism** – people come first, not rules or ideals.

Six Fundamental Principles/ Propositions

1. Only one thing is intrinsically good: love.
2. The ruling norm of Christian decision is love.
3. Love and justice are the same.
4. Love wills the neighbour's good, whether we like him or not.
5. Only the end justifies the means, nothing else.
6. Love's decisions are made situationally, not prescriptively.

- Proposition five shows the teleological nature of Fletcher's idea.
- An action is ethical if it creates the most loving outcome.

Only the end justifies the means, nothing else

Situation Ethics

Fletcher and Conscience



Traditionally conscience is treated as noun- it is a thing. For example some view it as the voice of God within- eg. John Henry Newman. Some view conscience as a faculty of reflection and reason eg. Aquinas.

This means you can look back at previous decisions and make judgment on them (for example I may have bad conscience about taking my sister's shoes last week). It allows us to decide what to do when faced with particular choices.

Fletcher, on the other hand, thinks conscience should be understood as a verb. Conscience is just you performing an act in a particular way (whilst bearing in mind love). So really by conscience he means we should act conscientiously. He fails to respond to queries from those say we use our conscience to look back and reflect, not just "do". By giving so little detail to his view of conscience he leaves a significant part of moral life insufficiently considered.

Further support:



Archbishop William Temple 1881-1944

Very closely mirrors ideas in Fletcher's work- suggesting he was a significant influence. His views are personalist and love centred.

"There is only one ultimate and invariable duty and its formula is 'Thou shall love thy neighbour as thyself'".

"What acts are right may depend on the circumstance".

Rudolph Bultmann 1884- 1976

A Biblical scholar who claimed *"love thy neighbour as thyself"* = Ultimate Duty.

John A.T. Robinson

Also during the 1960's, Bishop John Robinson was developing similar views to Fletcher. He was supportive of Situation Ethics and himself wrote:

"Assertions about God are in the last analysis assertions about love"

Robinson thought that love was at the core of what it meant to be Christian, rather than inflexible absolute moral rules.



Weaknesses

- It won't appeal to atheists or those of non-Christian faith.
- Besides its one rule of love it is pretty unrestricted! Could allow almost anything and agape could be used to selfish advantage.
- Love is very subjective- people will disagree on what is loving, which is going to limit decision making. Eg. I may agree that euthanasia for a terminally ill child is loving (as is allowed under Flemish law), but another person may see this cruel.



Strengths

- It's based in Christianity and is consistent with the teachings of Jesus (as supported by Robinson), so will appeal to any Christians.
- Flexible, allows for complex moral decisions to be made, without being restricted.
- It emphasises love...how can that be bad?
- Avoids any conflict of duty, which can arise in absolutist systems, eg. In NLT you are told to preserve life and to avoid lying (harmonious society), but if these clash you are given no advice. (*Axe man at the door example*).