

# Situation Ethics

## Introduction

Joseph Fletcher is identified as the "Father of Situation Ethics" as well as the pioneer of "Biomedical Ethics." His book *Situation Ethics* is used as a model for the Situation Ethics platform and nearly all later studies and research refer to Fletcher's model. He died in 1991, at the age of 86. He was born a protestant and became a priest in the Episcopal Seminary in the 1960's. He was an advocate of Planned Parenthood and member of the Euthanasia Educational Council.

## Definition

- Situation Ethics *is based on one principle: Ethics (or doing good) is a matter of always acting in agape (love).*
- Agape is defined as benevolence or good will, or as giving love constantly and unconditionally, regardless of the actions of the loved one.
- Legalism is the insistence that predetermined laws are to be put into action when they are relevant to the situation at hand.
- Antinomianism says no guidelines or principles, not even love, can tell us whether an action is right or wrong.

## Four Presuppositions

Fletcher's situationism is based on four main presuppositions.

1. *Pragmatism* ~ Whether we like it or not, what is good must be judged on the basis of what works.
2. *Relativism* ~ Situation ethics is also based on the principle of relativism. This does not mean that everything is relative. It still claims the principle of love. However, the way in which love is carried out may be different from one situation to another.
3. *Positivism* ~ Faith claims cannot be proven to be true rationalistically. They can only be "posited" and affirmed by the person who chooses to believe their accuracy. Thus, situationism does not seek to prove that an ethical conclusion is true. It only seeks to provide justification (support) for the ethical decision.
4. *Personalism* ~ Ethics cannot be separated from people. To have an ethical system that is based upon a code or rule without regard for the people is pointless. Situationism, with love as its primary standard, focuses on love as it relates to people.

## Situation Ethics is based on six fundamentals

- Only one thing is intrinsically good, namely, love: nothing else.
- The ultimate norm of Christian decisions is love: nothing else.
- Love and justice are the same, for justice is love distributed.
- Love wills the neighbour's good whether we like him or not.
- Only the end justifies the means: nothing else.
- Decisions ought to be made situationally, not prescriptively.

## Applications of Situation Ethics

These are some of the examples often used in discussions about Situation Ethics.

1 As the Russian armies drove westward to meet the American and British armies, a Soviet patrol picked up a Mrs. Bergmeier scavenging food for her three children. Unable to get word to the children, she was taken to a prison camp in the Ukraine. Her husband had been captured in the Bulge and taken to a POW camp. When he was returned to Berlin, he spent weeks rounding up his children. Their mother's whereabouts remained a mystery. Meanwhile, Mrs. Bergmeier learned through a sympathetic commandant that her husband and family were trying to keep together and find her. But the rules allowed them to release her for only two reasons: 1.) Illness needing medical facilities beyond the camps in which case she would be sent to a Soviet hospital, and 2.) Pregnancy, in which case she would be sent back to Germany. She turned things over in her mind and finally asked a German camp guard to impregnate her, which he did. She was subsequently sent back to Berlin and to her family. They welcomed her with open arms, even when she told them how she had managed it. When the child was born, they loved him more than the rest, on the view that the child had done more for them than anybody had.

2 In the 18th century along the Boone Trail, the following two scenarios took place:

- a) A Scottish woman saw that her suckling baby, ill, and crying, was betraying her and her other three children, and the whole company to the Indians. But she clung to her child, and they were caught and killed.
- b) A Negro woman, seeing how her crying baby endangered another trail party, killed it with her own hands, to keep silence and reach the fort.

**Which woman made the right decision?**

3 A Romanian Jewish woman doctor aborted the pregnancies of 3000 Jewish women brought to the concentration camp. If they were found to be pregnant, they would be incinerated. Even if we believe that the human embryos are human lives, by "killing" 3000 the doctor saved 3000 and prevented the murder of 6000 in total. Is this not good?

## Comment

At first glance, these examples seem to validate Situation Ethics as a theory, since each seems to demand, literally, a situation ethic – a principle of action (ethic) driven by the judgement of the person caught up in the situation. However, it was always recognised in Natural Law Ethics that it is one thing to have principles of action, another to apply them. In difficult or dilemma situations (like the ones above), a person has to fall back on very basic principles (e.g. 'do good, avoid evil') and apply them as best the person could. Has Fletcher really said anything new? And is the concentration on dilemma or near-dilemma situations really that instructive for the student of ethics? See criticisms below.

## Critique of Situation Ethics

### Positive

- 1 It can be considered as the solution to two tendencies in ethics – rule-bound ethics (legalism) and no-rules ethics (antinomianism). It has one rule: love. The rule of love is **prescriptive**, others rules merely **illuminative**.
- 2 It is simple and yet profound. It is **not** meant to encourage laxity. Fletcher has in mind *agape*, that self-giving, unconditional willing of another's good, when he uses the word *love*.
- 3 In grounding his theory in this love Fletcher seeks to align it with the gospels and the letters of Paul (cf. Great Commandment & St Paul's hymn to *agape* in 1 Corinthians).
- 4 It aims to skirt the problems arising when a situation brings important rules into conflict. It simply says: 'Do the most loving thing.' Fletcher, in book *Situation Ethics*, highlights cases when the application of rules in itself does not address the moral problem.

### Negative

Fletcher's theory will share the weaknesses of *utilitarianism*, of which it appears to be a form.

- 1 Fletcher's theory depends on the individual's appraisal of situations. A person, even with the finest of intentions, cannot foresee every consequence of an action, nor realise the number likely to be affected by it.
- 2 Add to this the taint on a person's decision-making arising from ingrained self-seeking and from a reluctance to aim for the high standards of unconditional love, and we quickly see the value of a more rule-dependent moral system - if only to protect others

from our latent selfishness masquerading as 'love'.

- 3 St Paul wrote not that 'love is the end of the law' but that 'love is the fulfilment of the law'. For love and law need each other. Love needs law for its direction, while law needs love for its inspiration. (cf. John Stott)
- 4 Add to this the impracticality of attempting a moral calculus when a quick decision is needed.
- 5 Fletcher's ethics stresses the uniqueness of moral situations. Whilst no two situations demanding moral choices can be said to be identical, the moral problem may be so similar in each as not to require separate analysis. In other words, **situations that vary enormously in externals may be very similar in their moral tenor.**
- 5 It could be argued that when one acts lovingly there are certain things one will *always* do and certain things one will *never* do. Fundamental rules, like those in the Decalogue, are merely 'crystallisations of love'.
- 6 Hence, the rule of love is interpreted through other rules which should also be prescriptive. Certainly, the Judeo-Christian heritage is one wherein rules have a place - even in the *agape* communities of the early Church.
- 6 The problem of legalism is not brought on by rules, but by a mindset. Legalistic minds may abound even when there are few explicit rules, and those who are not of a legalistic mindset will ignore the fussier, pernickety prescriptions of an elaborate rule system - they will realise that certain prescriptions are more binding than others.