

Introduction to Situation Ethics

1. **What** is situation ethics?

The field of ethics has three branches: normative ethics, meta-ethics, and applied ethics; situation ethics is located in the first of them and is one of several different normative ethical theories (including divine command theory, Kantian ethics, and utilitarianism). Meta-ethics is concerned with investigating whether or not morality exists (i.e. whether or not the words "right" and "wrong" describe objective reality); on the assumption that it does, normative ethics is concerned with how to make moral decisions (i.e. how to decide which actions are right and wrong) by establishing ethical principles. Different applied ethics take these ethical principles and put them into practice in real-world situations (e.g. animal ethics, applied ethics, and sexual ethics).



Crosses: a Christian symbol for the loving self-sacrifice of Jesus that saved humanity.

2. **How** does situation ethics work?

Situation ethics works similarly to rule utilitarianism because it requires moral agents to follow agreed rules unless the circumstances of a specific situation mean that breaking a rule will likely lead to a more loving outcome. However, it differs from rule utilitarianism because the rules, at least in Christian versions of the theory, are divinely inspired instead of calculated by human beings using the principle of utility. Additionally, situation ethicists pursue actions that are likely to produce the most loving results instead of those they figure will create the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

When Joseph Fletcher outlined his famous formulation of situation ethics, he attempted to avoid the pitfalls and problems of two ethical traditions in Christianity: legalism and antinomianism. Although these two terms can be applied in different ways depending on the context, in Christianity, legalism is widely understood as the belief that salvation (i.e. the receipt of eternal life) requires adherence to the Old Testament's moral laws. Contrastingly, antinomianism is the belief that salvation does not require such adherence because it has already been freely given through Jesus's death as a vicarious punishment for the sins of humanity. Joseph Fletcher was deeply troubled by the fact legalism, particularly in some unusual or unpredictable situations, can lead to evil or unloving outcomes. However, he was equally concerned by the apparently undirected antinomian approach to ethical decision-making, which expects moral action to be guided by the Holy Spirit's inner working. Situation ethics attempts to resolve the conflict between legalism and antinomianism by promoting ethical decision-making that respects established rules but allows room for manoeuvre in particular situations. Although it remains closely associated with Christianity, other versions have been developed in different religious traditions and secular societies.

Normative Ethics

A branch of ethics concerned with determining moral principles to guide the behaviour of human beings.

Situation Ethics

A teleological ethical theory, which promotes context-specific actions that produce the most loving outcomes for those affected by them.

Agape

A form of selfless, unconditional, and universal love that is exemplified by altruism (i.e. concern for the interests and wellbeing of others).

3. Why is situation ethics important?

Situation ethics is an important normative ethical theory for several reasons. First, it is a Christian theory. Although the New Testament has inspired numerous ethical systems, situation ethics was developed relatively recently and has several novel aspects. These include its compatibility with atheism and other religions given certain modifications. Joseph Fletcher even commented that despite the fact his formulation was inspired by the actions and message of Jesus, some of his critics described it as largely unchristian in character. Second, it is consequentialist, which is a synonym for the word "teleological". Although there are other consequentialist theories, this is one of the only thoroughlygoingly teleological approaches in Christian ethics, which are predominantly deontological in nature (i.e. duty-based, or concerned with rule-following). For example, both divine command theory and natural law require obedience to a prescribed set of rules with very few situational decision-making opportunities. Finally, it is contextual. Situation ethicists are genuinely concerned with the bearing that circumstances have on decision-making. While this is not unique among normative ethical theories, it is highly unusual for a moral system closely associated with Christianity. Nevertheless, it is arguably closer to the character of Jesus's own ethical decision-making, which was marked by the sharp rejection of Jewish legalism and a concern for the particulars of moral dilemmas.



The Ten Commandments: legalism requires inflexible adherence to Biblical laws.

George Thinks

I find situation ethics a fascinating ethical theory for various reasons, but a couple of important ones require particular emphasis. First, its most famous formulation finds expression in Joseph Fletcher's work, and, whilst it was self-admittedly inspired by his reflection on the love of Jesus, he renounced his Christian faith only a year after publishing his seminal work on the theory. But he still held fast to situation ethics, which shows that it was, at least in his mind, entirely compatible with the atheism that he embraced later in life. Second, it points out something I'm surprised it took two millennia for Christianity to come to terms with: the ethics of the Church don't appear to be that similar to the ethics of Christ. The New Testament doesn't portray Jesus as a man who would have been comfortable burning people at the stake for either heresy or homosexuality. Yet, Christian churches happily pursued such punishments for centuries. Situation ethics forces Christians to confront ethical issues it hasn't always compassionately responded to and ask, "What would Jesus do?" Which is no bad thing.

