

## C. S. Lewis on Situation Ethics

### 1. **Who** was C. S. Lewis and what are his key ideas on situation ethics?

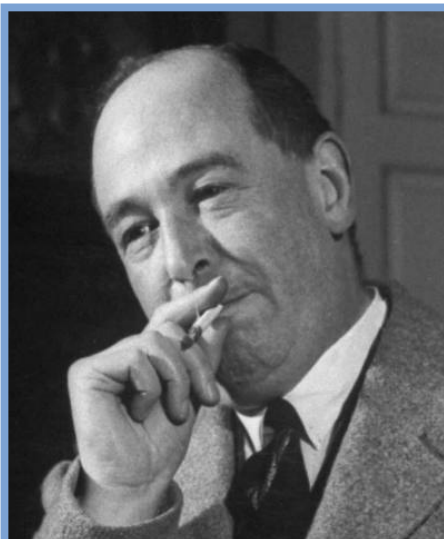
C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) was a British academic, author, and theologian. He was most famous for writing *The Chronicles of Narnia*, a series of seven fantasy novels that have sold over 100 million copies since their publication between 1950 and 1956. C. S. Lewis grew up in the United Kingdom: he was born in Belfast but educated in various places, including England. In 1917, he matriculated (i.e. enrolled) at the University of Oxford, but fighting in World War I interrupted his studies, and he did not graduate until 1923. Thereafter, C. S. Lewis taught philosophy and English at the University of Oxford. In 1931, he converted from atheism to Christianity; this experience inspired much of his theological writing for lay Christians. In 1954, he accepted the professorship of Medieval and Renaissance English at the University of Cambridge. During his tenure there, he wrote *The Four Loves* (published in 1960), which explains his key ideas on the nature of charity (including the ones listed below) and acts as a precursor to the more famous and focused work on situation ethics undertaken by Joseph Fletcher (1905-1991) and John Robinson (1919-1983).

**Charity is divine:** charity is the divine type of love that is embodied by God. It is qualitatively different from the other three natural types (i.e. affection, friendship, and eros), which can work against divine purposes. It is the type of love that the author of 1 John had in mind when he wrote "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

**Charity is inspirational:** charity is selfless; consequently, it inspires people to do good. Affection, friendship, and, especially, eros, can inspire people to act selfishly instead of selflessly (e.g. the actions of a jealous romantic partner). Charity inspires good but the natural types of love can inspire evil.

**Charity is transformative:** charity transforms the natural loves into versions of love that are worthy of heaven. Charity moderates the problematic tendencies of affection, friendship, and eros so that can fulfil their potential. Like a gardener, charity prevents things from becoming wild and uncontrollable.

### 2. **How** do C. S. Lewis's key ideas on situation ethics work?



C. S. Lewis

C. S. Lewis's key ideas on situation ethics are not really about situation ethics at all; they are about love. However, even though no one had fully formulated situation ethics by the time *The Four Loves* was published, C. S. Lewis's key ideas about love dovetail with the work of Joseph Fletcher and John Robinson because they revolve around the importance of agape (i.e. charity, as C. S. Lewis translated the word). Taken together, C. S. Lewis's key ideas reveal why this type of love, charity, should be at the heart of Christian ethics.

**Charity is divine:** C. S. Lewis argued that charity is the divine love, and the others (i.e. affection, friendship, and eros) are the natural loves because they are the types human beings are biologically programmed to experience and enjoy. Consequently, the natural loves are corruptible; people can pursue them selfishly at great personal cost. By contrast, the divine love is entirely selfless, which sets it apart as a different type of love altogether. According to C. S. Lewis, charity is characterised by the actions of Jesus, who sacrificed himself to save humanity from the consequence of sin (as articulated in the words of 1 John 4:8-10).

**Charity is inspirational:** in *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis argued that charity can inspire people to be good and do good on a much higher level than the natural loves alone. He presented models of natural love, including the devoted mother (for affection), the benevolent teacher (for friendship), and the considerate spouse (for eros). He claimed that although these models of the natural loves are examples of good people who do good things, their benevolence only extends to those with whom they have a relationship or to whom they have an obligation. C. S. Lewis argued that the divine love inspires people to extend their parental, friendly, or spousal concern to everyone. According to him, Jesus is the model of the divine love because he extends his benevolence to outcasts and sinners, famously including criminals, enemies, and lepers. C. S. Lewis claimed that charity has the ability to inspire people to extend their capacity for selfless behaviour to every category of person.

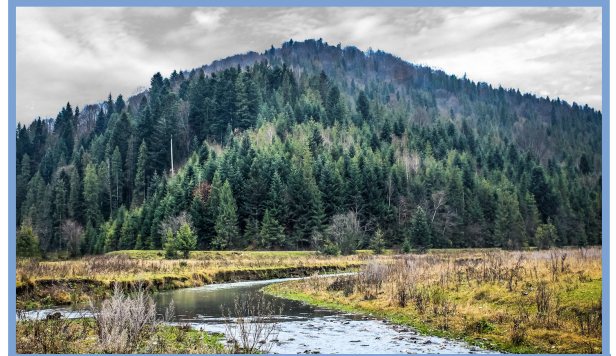
**Charity is transformative:** C. S. Lewis's third key idea bookends his chapter on charity. On the first page, he introduced a striking analogy with which he concluded his book by returning to it at the end of the chapter as well. According to C. S. Lewis, the divine love has the power to transform the natural loves, enhancing and perfecting them for heaven. He claimed that the natural loves grow into an unkempt and unruly wilderness if left to their own devices. Against this backdrop, and by analogy, he compared the role of charity to that of a gardener who transforms a wilderness into a paradisaical garden. For C. S. Lewis, this garden state represented the natural loves in their appropriate relationship with the divine love. He argued that anything that isn't eternal is out of date in paradise; consequently, relationships must be perfected through regulation by charity to survive in heaven. In other words, heaven requires perfection, and human beings can only perfect loving relationships through charity.

3. **Why** are C. S. Lewis's key ideas on situation ethics important?

**They popularise the importance of love to ethics:** The Four Loves is all about the role of the divine love, which is encapsulated in the words of 1 John: "God is love". Due to C. S. Lewis's popularity, The Four Loves has reached a huge readership; his key ideas have helped persuade people that love is at the heart of Christian ethics.

**They prepare the way for situation ethics:** arguably, the most famous works on situation ethics were written shortly after The Four Loves by Joseph Fletcher and John Robinson. Although these works were still considered radical, C. S. Lewis's ideas helped pave the way for them to receive a more open-minded reception.

**They focus purely on the nature of love:** C. S. Lewis's key ideas focus exclusively on exploring and explaining the nature of love, both the three natural loves that he identified and the divine love. Unlike John Robinson's key ideas about love in Honest to God, C. S. Lewis's are not systematically connected to other areas of philosophy or theology. Although critical philosophers or theologians may perceive this as a weakness, it allows for a much deeper and richer investigation into why love should be of central importance to Christians.



**A wilderness:** without regulation by charity, the natural loves grow unkempt and unruly.

### George Thinks

The Four Loves is an incredibly absorbing read, but it's not really about situation ethics even though, in many ways, it prepared the way for it. In his day, C. S. Lewis was an incredibly widely-read author; by highlighting the centrality of love to Christian ethics, he familiarised people with the foundational idea of situation ethics: love should guide our behaviour. Nevertheless, his work is troubling in places. His analogy of the garden hasn't aged well: today, plenty of people would argue that there's greater beauty in unspoilt landscapes than there is in those manipulated by human hands. In brief, and by extension, it's not entirely clear that there isn't considerable beauty in the natural loves when they're left unregulated by charitable feeling. The implication of C. S. Lewis's conception of charity is that we should treat strangers with the same concern that we treat our friends and family. Whilst this might be laudable, there's real doubt about whether we're even capable of doing this without great psychological cost to ourselves and those closest to us. Martyrs make victims of their families as well as themselves.

