

# Joseph Fletcher on Situation Ethics

Fletcher, J., 1966. Situation Ethics: The New Morality. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

## I. Three Approaches

**APPROACHES TO DECISION-MAKING:** there are three approaches to moral decision-making. 1. Legalism: this approach involves using preformulated rules to guide behaviour. Legalists look up these rules in books like the Bible and insist they are strictly followed. Occasionally, following preformulated rules to the letter causes disaster; consequently, some legalists develop special exemptions for these situations. 2. Antinomianism: this approach is the opposite of legalism. It involves abandoning all rules and relying on conscience or the Holy Spirit to guide behaviour, leading to anarchy. Paul the Apostle confronted it in his letters to the Christians of Corinth and Ephesus. 3. Situationism: this approach lies between the extremes of legalism and antinomianism. It involves approaching moral decision-making with preformulated rules to guide behaviour; however, it also involves being prepared to break these rules if they will not produce the most loving outcome in a given situation. For situationists, agape (i.e. neighbourly love) is the only unbreakable principle with which moral decision-making should be concerned.

**PRINCIPLES, YES, BUT NOT RULES:** situationists accept the importance of general principles, but only as illuminating guides rather than absolute rules. For situationists, the only unbreakable principle is agape. For legalists, the rules derived from agape are also unbreakable, which creates some problematic contradictions: occasionally, following a rule derived from agape does not produce the most loving outcome. However, unlike antinomians, situationists accept that people should follow preformulated rules in most situations.

**ABORTION: A SITUATION:** in 1962, a schizophrenic female child in a state mental hospital was violently raped by another patient, resulting in pregnancy; the victim's father requested an abortion, but the mental hospital refused to perform one. The position of the legalist is the same as the position of the mental hospital; the position of the antinomian is impossible to determine. On the other hand, a situationist would have performed the abortion because, despite the law, it would have produced the most loving outcome.

## II. Some Presuppositions

**FOUR WORKING PRINCIPLES:** situation ethics relies on four presuppositions. 1. Pragmatism: moral actions are those that achieve desired results, which makes moral decision-making a practical process. Consequently, people should not consider abstract or impractical aspects of moral dilemmas when deciding how to behave. 2. Relativism: context should influence the solution selected for any moral dilemma. However, this does not mean that any type of behaviour is acceptable (as some antinomians might suggest). Situationists should still hold an absolute principle in mind when considering how the context of any moral dilemma might affect their actions. For Christian situationists, this absolute principle is agape; they must maximise agape in any given situation. 3. Positivism: moral decision-making relies on values, not facts; it is impossible to deduce how to act from how things are (i.e. David Hume's (1711-1776) is-ought problem, which states it is impossible to derive an "ought" from an "is"). Consequently, situationists must first decide the value their decision-making should seek to maximise; for Christian situationists, this value is the absolute principle of agape. 4. Personalism: moral decision-making should be personalistic; it should be concerned with subjects (i.e. persons), not objects (i.e. things). One problem with legalism is that it is more concerned with things (i.e. rules) than people; this is misguided because things derive their value from their usefulness to people. Taken together, these four working principles show that situation ethics is about doing good instead of looking it up.

**CONSCIENCE:** situation ethics is interested in conscience as a process instead of as a hypothetical mental capacity. There are four competing theories about what conscience is; situationists are uninterested in them because they are only interested in what conscience does. In the ancient world, people understood conscience as the process of justifying past behaviour; today, people understand conscience as the process of deciding upon future behaviour. Situationists understand conscience to be a future-orientated process of deciding right action from wrong action. It should be mindful of some general ideas about moral decision-making (e.g. to tell the truth); it should be attentive to the specifics of any given situation; it should aim only at maximising the absolute principle of agape.

### III. Love Only Is Always Good

**NOMINAL GOOD:** the first proposition of situation ethics is that only one thing is intrinsically good: love.

Fundamentally, ethics is concerned with value: what it is and where it can be located. Medieval thinkers debated whether the good was nominal (i.e. that which is nominated by God) or real (i.e. that which is good independent of God's nomination). Christian situationists believe that good is nominal: God nominates as good that which is in the best interests of people (atheistic situationists nominate it for themselves). The good is that which is of value to people, and loving outcomes to moral dilemmas are of the greatest value to all. Situations affect which actions will produce the most loving outcomes, but love is the value to be pursued.

**LOVE IS A PREDICATE:** the only thing that influences whether an action is good or bad is its effect on others: does it help them or harm them? Christian situationists claim that only love is intrinsically good; however, this is misleading because love is actually a predicate, not a property (i.e. it is an attribute or adjective, not a thing or noun). (There is one exception: God is a thing, and because God is love, love is a thing in this context.) Martin Luther (1483-1546) argued that when a law promotes unloving behaviour, it should no longer be a law because God himself would want it suspended. The other side of the argument that only love is intrinsically good appears to be that only hate is intrinsically evil; however, this is also misleading. Indifference is the true opposite of love because it treats others as things, not persons; the only thing worse than evil is indifference to evil.

**ONLY EXTRINSIC:** love is the only absolute principle, the only intrinsic good; there are no other absolute principles of any kind. The principal problem of legalism is its assertion that there are intrinsic goods in addition to love. For example, telling the truth is intrinsically good so telling a lie is intrinsically evil. As a consequence of this idea, Christian legalists claim that telling a lie is evil even if it saves an innocent person from being murdered (although the evil involved in telling a lie can be repented for and forgiven). Christian situationists reject this: telling a lie is good if it saves the life of an innocent person because it produces the most loving outcome. No repentance is necessary. Consequently, actions are extrinsically good or evil; they derive their ethical value from the situations in which they occur and the outcomes they produce. Love is the only intrinsic good.

### IV. Love Is the Only Norm

**LOVE REPLACES LAW:** love pushes aside all other principles; it is the only thing people must maximise in moral decision-making. Love replaces the law, despite passages like Matthew 5:17-20, which suggests that Jesus supported legalism; he did not, these passages are inconsistent with the rest of the New Testament. Situationists only submit to the law when it serves the interests of love.

**TABLETS OF STONE:** love relativises the Ten Commandments, and even legalists appear to bend or break them in the interests of love. For example, some legalists produce graven images of God and others take solemn oaths, which are both prohibited according to the letter of the law. Likewise, the commandment against murder is literally a commandment against killing, but even legalists accept killing in some circumstances.

**NEITHER NATURE NOR SCRIPTURE:** systematised Christian ethics, either based on nature (e.g. natural law) or the Bible, cannot expect to last; eventually, all forms will be rejected. Nature-based ethics are unable to avoid the ought-is problem; scripture-based ethics cannot coherently systematise the conflicting commandments in the Bible. Only the summary of the law is binding: love your neighbour as yourself.

**LOVE HAS NO EQUALS:** the heart of Christian ethics is love; those who reject this claim repudiate the teaching of the New Testament (e.g. Galatians 5:14 and 1 Corinthians 13). In certain situations, legalism produces perverse and unloving outcomes. Situationists approve of Augustine of Hippo's (354-430) words, "Love with care and then what you will, do". When agape is accepted as boss, Christians can freely do what is right in any situation.

**OBJECTIONS:** some critics of situation ethics claim that people prefer the happiness and security provided by the existence of law to the dangerous freedom created by its absence. However, the law undermines happiness and security by demarcating people's obligations; for example, the law does not require anyone to save a drowning baby. Other critics argue that situation ethics requires people to know too much information and exercise too much responsibility; situationists respond that it aims to increase freedom, which is the other face of responsibility.

## V. Love and Justice Are the Same

**LOVE IS CAREFUL:** Christians are sometimes perplexed when the interests of love and justice appear to conflict; however, properly understood, love and justice are the same thing, "for justice is love distributed". Situationists should be careful with love and prudently calculate how to distribute its gifts between possible beneficiaries; justice results when this is done fairly.

**WRONGFUL SEPARATION:** attempts to separate love and justice are misguided. Serving justice is relatively simple when it involves one-to-one obligations (i.e. commutative justice); it is relatively complex when it involves one-to-many obligations (i.e. distributive justice) or many-to-one obligations (i.e. contributive justice). Justice is the process of pursuing love for all, despite the complications created by vast numbers of beneficiaries (e.g. a nation's citizens).

**A PROPOSED REUNION:** the conflict between love and justice is a pseudo-problem, like the conflict between faith and works. Faith works, and justice loves; understood properly, they are both aspects of the same thing. All attempts to separate love and justice imply that in certain situations the maximisation of either love or justice must be prioritised at the other's expense. This suggestion muddies the waters of Christian ethics and should be rejected.

**LOVE USING ITS HEAD:** justice is love using its head, calculating resources and obligations to distribute love best. This process involves a coalition with utilitarianism, replacing the hedonistic calculus with the agapeic calculus: Christian situationists should maximise love for their neighbours in moral decision-making. Sometimes this involves almost impossibly difficult calculations (e.g. the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki).

**ADDENDUM:** there is a difference between moral justice and legal justice. If the law (i.e. legal justice) does not serve moral justice, it should be disregarded. In the first instance, this disregard should involve civil disobedience; however, if the absolute principle of love is served by it, it could escalate to revolution. Notwithstanding this, if the law serves moral justice, people should follow it because it promotes order. The reality of sin in society means that some people need order lovingly forced upon them.

## VI. Love Is Not Liking

**NEVER SENTAMENTALISE LOVE:** love wills what is good for the neighbour regardless of whether or not he or she is likeable. Unlike friendship or romantic love, agape is not sentimental; it is an attitude controlled by the rational mind, not an uncontrollable emotion. Consequently, agape can be directed; people can be commanded to agape, but not to friendship or romantic love. Agape is nonjudgemental; it does not matter whether or not its recipients are likeable or deserving of love.

**THE NEIGHBOUR IS ANYBODY:** Matthew 5:43-48 states that the category of neighbours includes the category of enemies; consequently, anyone is a neighbour. Whether or not a neighbour reciprocates agape is irrelevant; unlike friendship or romantic love, agape gives expecting nothing in return. The crucifixion narratives portray Jesus praying for the forgiveness of his executioners, which is an example of agape in action. Romantic love primarily takes and friendship gives only as much as it takes; on the other hand, agape gives without thought of receiving anything.

**SELF-LOVE FOR THE NEIGHBOUR'S SAKE:** agape does not deny the need for self-love as long as the love of others comes first; self-love is an acceptable byproduct of agape. Jesus's words, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself", command people to love themselves as well as others. This is especially true when self-love serves neighbours. For instance, agape is at work when a pilot preserves his life at the expense of a passenger if his death would lead to a greater number of casualties. Agape always seeks to serve whoever's need is greatest instead of whoever's need is least and those who number many instead of those who number few.

**CALCULATION IS NOT CRUEL:** agape requires careful calculation. A situationist must be clever in order to be good; he or she must be capable of calculating the most loving course of action in any given situation, which is a complex process. Agape requires people to be unsentimental. For example, people should not give money to beggars just because they are confronted by them; they may not be the neighbours in greatest need. Situationists must engage in calculations that balance the interests of all neighbours (e.g. maintaining relatively high speed limits on roads, even though a 15mph speed limit would reduce deaths by 80 per cent).

## VII. Love Justifies Its Means

**WHAT JUSTIFIES A MEANS?** Only the end justifies the means. In Christian ethics, the blind belief that the end does not justify the means creates cynicism and despair; just as the unexamined life is not worth living, the unexamined maxim is not worth living by. Actions are meaningless and random if they do not serve ends; means and ends are interrelated whether Christians like it or not. This does not mean that any means can serve any ends (contraception serves birth control better than abortion), but means acquire their moral value from their ends.

**LAW ENTANGLES ITSELF:** Christian legalism is the cause of many contradictory rules; these arise because legalists identify all moral value in means, not ends. The new morality, situation ethics, rejects ideas about the intrinsic moral value of means. During World War II, French resistance fighters lied, stole, and murdered; what justified their actions was the moral value of their ends. Christian legalists ignore Paul the Apostle (c. 5-67 CE) (1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23), who wrote that what makes something lawful is whether or not it builds up to something (i.e. its ends).

**THE FOUR FACTORS:** moral decision-making involves weighing four factors: (1) ends (i.e. the desired outcome), (2) means (i.e. the method of achieving the desired outcome), (3) motive (i.e. the reasons for seeking the desired outcome), and (4) consequences (i.e. the effect of achieving the desired outcome). Legalists claim actions are wrong if they fail on any of these four factors; situationists do not accept this if they still maximise agape. Sometimes, legalists claim actions (e.g. euthanasia) are the thin end of the wedge (i.e. if widely practised, they would cause chaos), but this implies that the possibility of abuse should prevent legitimate use (a widely rejected principle).

**HALLOWING THE MEANS:** for Christian situationists, the ends hallow, justify, or sanctify the means, and the means are affected by the situation: what is right in one situation may be wrong in another. It is delusional to believe that turning to the law prevents conflicts from arising in moral decision-making. For example, it is against canon law for a priest to disclose a confession, even if the person confesses to a murder for which an innocent man faces execution; in instances like this, law places the principle of secrecy above agape (i.e. saving an innocent life). Situationists should oppose the intrinsic valuing of means in classical Christian ethics.

## VIII. Love Decides There and Then

**WANTED: A SYSTEM:** people long for an ethical system of preformulated rules. Paul the Apostle claimed that living by the Torah (i.e. Jewish religious law) is like slavery, but most Christians want to live as slaves under a Christian version. Situationists cut themselves free from the false promises of an ethical system, but this creates its own problems (e.g. human error). Situationists cannot hope to avoid sinning; instead, they must settle for sinning bravely.

**THE GREY AREA:** ethical grey areas are the places where situationists are called to sin most bravely. These areas include whether or not to abort a severely disabled unborn child or whether or not to kill some people in an overcrowded lifeboat to save the remainder. Situational moral decision-making is too full of variables for some people, but the modern era has revealed the law to be little more than a comfort blanket.

**THE END OF IDEOLOGY:** political and social institutions often seek the security of fixed moral codes because they need to enforce order. Situation ethics prioritises freedom in moral decision-making, along with responsibility for such freedom. Ideologists are simplifiers who avoid addressing how circumstances alter cases in moral decision-making by reaching for preformulated rules. If legalists want to maximise agape, they must put aside childish rules.

**FANATIC VIRTUE:** virtues are not timeless; in the past, it was virtuous for women to be uneducated, but this is not the case today. The fanatic love of virtue has done more damage than all the vices put together. Jesus stated that actions are right because they are loving; however, if they are no longer loving (because of circumstance or era), they are no longer right. Abstract theorising about what is right and wrong often obscures this issue.

**WHEN RIGHTS ARE RIGHT:** for situationists, moral decision-making is relative, not absolute; however, once a moral decision is made, it is obligatory to act. Legalists promote doing what is right and letting the chips fall where they may; situationists respond that where the chips fall dictates what is right and wrong. In this process, the situation always influences the decision; consequently, love's decisions are made situationally, not prescriptively (i.e. according to preformulated rules).

## IX. Postscriptum: Why?

**A NEOCASUISTRY:** situation ethics could be described as neocasuistry (i.e. new casuistry). Casuistry (i.e. old casuistry) involves bending or reprioritising rules to maximise agape in specific situations, especially situations in which following rules unthinkingly might minimise agape. Casuistry may be well-meaning, but it has created a web of rules that threatens to throttle agape; neocasuistry (i.e. situation ethics) addresses this issue.

**NO MORE TABLETS OF STONE:** situation ethics is similar to the approach to moral decision-making advocated by Aristotle (384-322 BCE) and echoed by Paul the Apostle's affirmation of the spirit instead of the letter of the law. Situation ethics considers the specifics of a situation in the light of what love demands and then decides how a given moral dilemma should be addressed; it prioritises personal responsibility over preformulated tablets of rules.

**ALLERGIC TO LAW:** Christian ethical systems usually emphasise one of the following four aspects at the expense of the others: (1) freedom, (2) sin, (3) grace, and (4) law. Critics accuse situationists of emphasising freedom to excess and expressing an allergy to law. However, in John Robinson's (1919-1983) words, "[situation ethics] is the only ethic for 'man come of age.' To resist it in the name of religious sanctions will not stop it."

**THE CHRISTIAN REASON WHY:** Christian situationists differ from non-Christian situationists because different motives inspire them. Christian situationists are influenced by the sacrifice of Jesus, which motivates them to behave gratefully and thankfully. Additionally, Christian situationists are influenced by the particular type of love that Jesus embodied (i.e. agape) and are inspired to emulate it in their own lives.

**THE QUESTION-ASKING WAY:** Christian ethics should adopt situation ethics: it should not prescribe obedience to a set of preformulated rules; instead, it should promote the conscious and continuous maximisation of agape according to circumstances. In recent history, science has advanced by using the scientific method, which involves working by trial and error to validate hypotheses. It is time for ethics to advance by a similar process of trial and error, which is epitomised by the approach of situation ethics.

## X. An Appendix: Two Other Corruptions and Four Cases

**PIETISM:** legalism is only one way Christian ethics can be corrupted; two other ways are pietism and moralism. Pietism is the separation of faith from society; it corrupts Christian ethics because it encourages Christians to act in the narrow spiritual interests of themselves or their churches instead of the broad interest of all their neighbours.

**MORALISM:** moralism is another way Christian ethics can be corrupted. Moralism is the reduction of morality to the observance of petty rules (e.g. don't drink, don't gamble, and don't smoke). Moralism corrupts Christian ethics because it encourages Christians to focus on trivial moral dilemmas instead of important ones.

**CHRISTIAN CLOAK AND DAGGER:** concrete case studies reveal whether people are legalistic, pietistic or moralistic. For example, how should an unmarried young woman have responded to a government request to have an affair with an enemy spy in order to secure important secrets from him? What response would have maximised agape?

**SACRIFICIAL ADULTERY:** likewise, how should a priest have responded to baptising a baby born to an adulterous wife when she only cheated in order to secure her release from a Russian prisoner of war camp so she could reunite with her German husband and three children? Again, what response would have maximised agape?

**"HIMSELF MIGHT HIS QUIETUS MAKE":** similarly, how should a married, middle-aged man with five children have responded to being diagnosed with a terminal illness, when accepting medication would have lengthened his life by three years but led to his \$100,000 life insurance policy lapsing whilst refusing medication would have ended his life within six months but ensured an insurance payout for his family? What response would have maximised agape?

**SPECIAL BOMBING MISSION NO. 13:** finally, how should Harry Truman have responded to the interim committee report on how and when to use the first nuclear bomb. Military and scientific experts were divided on whether or not a nuclear bomb should be used against Japan, whether or not a warning bomb should be dropped, and whether or not any other action would secure a Japanese surrender. What response would have maximised agape?



## George Thinks

Joseph Fletcher's Situation Ethics is the go-to text on his normative ethical theory of the same name: situation ethics. If you only ever read one book on the subject, this should be it. Joseph Fletcher described it as a "fat pamphlet", by which he meant a long promotional leaflet. When Situation Ethics was published in 1966, it was incredibly timely, which helped make it an overnight sensation. It encapsulated and legitimised an antiauthoritarian and irreligious mood spreading across the Western world, especially among younger generations. And, although Joseph Fletcher promoted Christian situation ethics, he was in the process of abandoning his faith when he wrote this book, so it betrays quite a lot of hostility towards some brands of Christianity. It also benefited from the work of John Robinson and C. S. Lewis. Despite Joseph Fletcher's disappointment with C. S. Lewis's writing on the subject, the popularity of *Honest to God* and *The Four Loves* primed the population for Situation Ethics and helped propel it into the bestseller lists.

Joseph Fletcher made several significant points about moral philosophy in Situation Ethics. Among these, this was arguably the most important: it's possible to steer a moderate course between the extremes of legalism and antinomianism. These are the two approaches to ethics that Joseph Fletcher abhorred; however, as James F. Childress opines in his introduction to Situation Ethics, he reserved his most forceful condemnation for legalism, not antinomianism. As far as Joseph Fletcher was concerned, legalism all too easily leads to evil when its adherents insist on blind obedience to the law, whatever the consequences. And antinomianism isn't much better: it leads to evil by rejecting the idea that people should follow the law in the first place. In my opinion, Joseph Fletcher's most significant contribution to ethics, especially the Christian variety, is the illumination of a middle way: situationism (i.e. situation ethics, to you and me). In brief, he advocated following the law most of the time because it usually promotes loving outcomes but breaking the law whenever following it would promote evil.

Nevertheless, Situation Ethics has plenty of critics. Most of their well-known criticisms are pretty flimsy, like the fact that God created natural law, so it has to be followed whatever the consequences. Fine, if you believe in God, but even then, what about cases where following the law creates tremendous pain and suffering? Are we really supposed to believe that God wants us to do what we're told even when it produces horrific consequences? For anyone capable of critical thinking, criticisms like this aren't worth wasting too much time on. A thornier issue is the presentation of love as the absolute principle guiding all moral decision-making. Why not happiness or utility? Joseph Fletcher claimed he wasn't writing exclusively for Christians, but he doesn't explain how non-Christian situation ethics is anything more than utilitarianism. Another issue is the accurate prediction of consequences. Situation Ethics ends with a case study about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, revealing how difficult situational thinking can be. So, it's a flawed masterpiece, but it's still very much worth reading.

