

# Joseph Fletcher on Situation Ethics

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

**I. Three approaches:** 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. 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. 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, 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.

**II. Some presuppositions:** situation ethics relies on four presuppositions. 1. Pragmatism: moral actions are those that achieve desired results, which makes moral decision-making a practical process. 2. Relativism: context should influence the solution selected for any moral dilemma. 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"). 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. Taken together, these four working principles show that situation ethics is about doing good instead of looking it up. Additionally, situationists understand conscience to be a future-orientated process of deciding right action from wrong action; it should aim only at maximising agape.

**III. Love only is always good:** the first proposition of situation ethics is that only one thing is intrinsically good: love. Christian situationists believe that good is nominal: God nominates as good that which is in the best interests of people. The good is that which is of value to people, and loving outcomes to moral dilemmas are of the greatest value to all. The only thing that influences whether an action is good or bad is its effect on others: does it help them or harm them? Martin Luther (1483-1546) argued that when a law promotes unloving behaviour, it should no longer be a law. 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. 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.

**IV. Love is the only norm:** love pushes aside all other principles; it is the only thing people must maximise in moral decision-making. 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. 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. The heart of Christian ethics is love; those who reject this claim repudiate the teaching of the New Testament. 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.

**V. Love and justice are the same:** 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". 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). Justice is the process of pursuing love for all, despite the complications created by vast numbers of beneficiaries (e.g. a nation's citizens); it 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).

**VI. Love is not liking:** 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. Agape is nonjudgemental; it does not matter whether or not its recipients are likeable or deserving of love. 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. 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. 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; situationists must engage in calculations that balance the interests of all neighbours.

**VII. Love justifies its 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; actions are meaningless and random if they do not serve ends. Christian legalism is the cause of many contradictory rules 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. 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. For Christian situationists, what is right in one situation may be wrong in another.

**VIII. Love decides there and then:** 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 cannot hope to avoid sinning; instead, they must settle for sinning bravely. 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. 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. Jesus stated that actions are right because they are loving; however, if they are no longer loving, they are no longer right. For situationists, the situation always influences the decision; consequently, love's decisions are made situationally, not prescriptively.

**IX. Postscriptum: why?** 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. 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. Christian situationists are influenced by the sacrifice of Jesus, which motivates them to behave thankfully. Additionally, Christian situationists are influenced by the type of love that Jesus embodied (i.e. agape) and are inspired to emulate it in their own lives. 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.

**X. An appendix: two other corruptions and four cases:** 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 their churches instead of the broad interest of their neighbours. 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. Concrete case studies reveal whether people are legalistic, pietistic or moralistic. For example, 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? Or how should Harry Truman have responded to the interim committee report on how and when to use the first nuclear bomb when military and scientific experts were divided on the consequences of use? Situation ethics tries to maximise agape in challenging cases like these.