

Joseph Fletcher on Situation Ethics

1. **Who** was Joseph Fletcher and what are his key ideas on situation ethics?

Joseph Fletcher (1905-1991) was an American ethicist and Episcopal priest until he lapsed into atheism during the 1960s. Today, he is best known for pioneering the field of bioethics and writing the bestseller, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*, which was received with a mixture of adulation and criticism at its publication in 1966. He came from humble beginnings but advanced to West Virginia University, Yale University, and the London School of Economics before accepting a professorship in social ethics at the Episcopal Theological School of Harvard University. Over time, his faith faded away; he renounced his Christianity in 1967, retired from the Episcopal Theological School in 1970, and then accepted a professorship in medical ethics at the University of Virginia, where he co-founded the Program in Biology and Society. Over his career, he wrote 10 books and hundreds of academic articles, attended dozens of conferences, and taught prolifically. Against this backdrop, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* remains his most enduring work, containing his key ideas on his normative ethical theory of the same name (as listed below).

Situation ethics is moderate:

situation ethics steers a middle path between the extreme positions of legalism and antinomianism. Unlike legalists, situation ethicists do not abide by prescribed rules whatever the circumstances; however, unlike antinomians, they do not reject the guidance of such rules altogether.

Situation ethics is situational:

situation ethics focuses on the impact different situations have on ethical decision-making. Situation ethicists are interested in making practical, context-specific decisions that put people before principles and maximise neighbourly love (i.e. the four working principles).

Situation ethics is agapeic:

Christian situation ethics has only one absolute principle: agape (i.e. neighbourly love). Christian situation ethicists argue that agape is the only thing that is intrinsically good; consequently, ethical decision-making should always be concerned with maximising its production.

2. **How** do Joseph Fletcher's key ideas on situation ethics work?



The Episcopal Theological School: where Joseph Fletcher taught from 1946 to 1970.

Situation ethics is moderate: Joseph Fletcher's first key idea is that situation ethics provides a compromise position between legalism and antinomianism. Joseph Fletcher argued that legalism, which for Christians is the belief that salvation requires adherence to the moral laws of the Old Testament unless the New Testament has superseded them, sometimes produces perverse, unloving and evil outcomes. Casuistry is the legalistic attempt to address these outcomes by creating special cases, but Joseph Fletcher argued it is inadequate; however, he also claimed that the antinomian rejection of moral laws is equally problematic. Instead, situationism (i.e. situation ethics) promotes adherence to moral laws in most circumstances but is unafraid to deviate from them in cases where following them might do more harm than good.

Situation ethics is situational: Joseph Fletcher's second key idea is that the situations in which ethical decisions are made dictate whether they are right or wrong. This idea is also central to utilitarianism so, by the time *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* was published, it was already widely accepted by many nonreligious people. However, it was also rejected by most Christian communities, especially those with legalistic traditions. Joseph Fletcher argued that four working principles affect ethical decision-making, influencing whether it is right or wrong. First, pragmatism: moral actions should be guided by practical considerations; ethical decisions must have positive effects given their situational parameters, they must actually work (in other words, theoretical considerations are irrelevant). Second, relativism: moral actions should be relative to situational specifics; people should respond to the circumstances they are presented with and must not apply preformulated rules uncritically. Third, positivism: for Christian situation ethicists, agape is the only thing of absolute and intrinsic value; ethical decision-making should always maximise the production of this value. Finally, personalism: because people are more important than things, moral laws (which are things) should work for the benefit of people; people should not work for the benefit of rules. These principles focus attention on how situational specifics affect ethical decision-making.

Situation ethics is agapeic: finally, Joseph Fletcher argued that Christian situation ethics has only one absolute principle: agape. He acknowledged that it is possible to assert the existence of a different absolute principle (e.g. pleasure), which brings some nonreligious types of situation ethics very close to utilitarianism. However, Joseph Fletcher claimed Christian situation ethics must be agapeic because of the six propositions: (1) love only is always good, (2) love is the only norm, (3) love and justice are the same, (4) love is not liking, (5) love justifies its means, and (6) love decides there and then. Taken together, these statements, which are heavily influenced by the example of Jesus, explain why Joseph Fletcher believed agape is the end towards which Christians should direct all ethical decision-making.



St Paul Episcopal Cathedral, Cincinnati:
where Joseph Fletcher began his ministry.

3. **Why** are Joseph Fletcher's key ideas on situation ethics important?

They challenge legalism and antinomianism: situation ethics challenges legalism and antinomianism as appropriate approaches to Christian ethics. It exposes some of the serious problems with legalism, including how far it departs from the ethics of Jesus in some circumstances.

They identify neighbourly love as the only universal principle: situation ethics puts agape at the centre of Christian ethical decision-making, which makes it considerably more compassionate than legalism in some situations. Joseph Fletcher's six propositions are primarily concerned with justifying this approach.

They present a systematic approach to situation ethics: Joseph Fletcher's key ideas build upon a number of other Christian writings (e.g. *Honest to God* by John Robinson). However, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* goes beyond them because it provides a fully formulated approach to Christian ethical decision-making.

George Thinks

I think *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* is an excellent piece of writing. It was a publishing sensation in 1966 because it captured the spirit of the age (according to James Childress, who penned an introduction to the 1997 edition from the Library of Theological Ethics). However, there's one way in which I don't think it's aged well, primarily because Joseph Fletcher was experiencing a serious crisis of faith whilst writing it: it's painfully unclear who it's aimed at. For the Christians it's sometimes trying to convince, it lacks the detailed theological argument that might persuade some legalists; for the non-Christians it otherwise appears aimed at, it fails to explain why agape is the only absolute principle ethical decision-making should serve (instead of, say, pleasure). Nevertheless, it's engaging and incisive about the primary issue it was written to address: both antinomianism and legalism have serious problems. In the decades since the publication of *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*, it's been impossible for Christians to claim that people should blindly follow biblical laws or simply ignore them.

