William Barclay on Situation Ethics

Generally, people think ethics are a series of rules and principles that prescribes how human beings should behave, saving people from the difficult and dangerous task of making their own ethical judgements. However, in 1966, Joseph Fletcher's influential book, Situation Ethics, challenged this conception of ethics by claiming nothing is universally right or wrong, good or evil (with the exception of one intrinsic good: agape (i.e. neighbourly love)). According to Joseph Fletcher, agape should guide people when they are deliberating moral dilemmas, and different situations should lead to different ethical decisions in the service of agape. For example, agape may require a mother to murder her infant child if its cries threaten to reveal the location of her entire caravan of travellers to a group of marauding Native Americans. Alternatively, agape may require a couple to engage in extramarital sex if it will produce more neighbourly love than abstaining from such activity. Situation ethicists consider the idea of universally right or wrong actions to be a type of moral evil; this idea gives rise to the immorality of morality and produces what Mark Twain referred to as good men in the worst sense of the term.

Additionally, Joseph Fletcher claimed that love and justice are the same thing, suggesting that justice is merely love distributed. For situation ethicists, love should be calculating and deliberate; it should concern how best to spread agape among those affected by any moral action. Calculation and deliberation give rise to justice and prevent it from being reduced to vague sentimentality. Joseph Fletcher provided several examples of justice as love distributed, like T. E. Lawrence's execution of a murderer to prevent a blood feud from erupting within his camp or two fictitious characters who had extramarital sex that produced loving outcomes. One example, titled "Sacrificial Adultery", is particularly famous and relates the story of a German wife and mother held prisoner by the Red Army during the aftermath of World War II; to secure her release, she committed adultery with a camp guard as the commandant summarily returned pregnant women to Germany. Joseph Fletcher argued that sex within a loveless marriage is morally wrong, whereas sex within a loving relationship between an unmarried man and woman is morally right; whether an action is good or evil hinges entirely upon its outcome.

There are several responses to the arguments presented in Situation Ethics. First, Joseph Fletcher's examples are too extraordinary; the existence of extremely difficult moral dilemmas does not mean laws are useless under ordinary circumstances. Second, situation ethics provides people with too much freedom; most people want to be unthinkingly guided by prescribed rules whilst others (e.g. children) cannot use freedom responsibly. John Robinson claimed that situation ethics is the only ethic for man come of age; however, man has not yet come of age! Situation ethics could only work if everyone were a saint. Third, according to situation ethicists, there is no such thing as an intrinsically good or evil action. Instead, situation ethicists claim that circumstances make actions either right or wrong. However, this cannot be the case because some actions are never right (e.g. addicting a young person on drugs or breaking up a family by having an affair). Finally, situation ethics ignores the negative consequences of some apparently loving actions. For example, having sex with someone out of sympathy may appear loving; however, kindling a person's sex life may ultimately distract him or her from positive and productive work (e.g. missionary evangelism, which is sometimes incompatible with maintaining a romantic relationship).

Situation ethicists have a phobia of law and present it as the polar opposite of freedom. However, law has several functions that make it difficult to discard without producing problems. First, law is the distillation of collective experience; it catalogues actions that society has learned are either generally positive or generally negative. Second, it offers a framework for reasonable people to live within; it marks the perimeter of any society's approved ways of life. Third, law defines (and redefines) punishable actions (e.g. polygamy, which was legal in early Old Testament times but had become illegal by New Testament times). Fourth, law deters people from behaving immorally, although it does this imperfectly. For example, both Paul the Apostle and Augustine of Hippo claimed that the existence of any law prohibiting a particular action can make it more tempting. Fifth, law protects society. It allows people to group together to prevent harmful behaviour, just as several small children can combine together to stop a school bully. Finally, most people accept that law is concerned with public morality, not private morality. Consequently, adultery and homosexuality are no longer crimes and should not be. Law has no place in a person's private life unless it threatens to harm the public good.

Situation ethics reveals several tensions that are impossible to resolve satisfactorily. First, the tension between freedom and law. Joseph Flectcher argued that an action can only be moral if it is freely taken, implying that the law undermines morality by forcing people to behave in some ways instead of others. However, law is not the only thing that influences people's behaviour, so does DNA, family, and the environment. For many people, freedom is an illusion. Second, the tension between immorality and illegality. It appears impossible for any society to agree upon what constitutes a crime. Some people argue that there should be no distinction between public morality and private morality and that society should criminalise everything the Bible considers sinful. Others say that legislatures cannot use the Bible to define crime because it is a fallible human text. On the boundary between public life and private life, there is considerable debate about whether certain actions are merely immoral or should be illegal. Finally, there is the tension between the individual and the community. Excessive legislation undermines personal freedom but excessive personal freedom undermines the rule of law. The only solution to the problem created by these tensions, which pit freedom against law and the individual against the community, is for people to learn what it means to love others as they love themselves.

George Thinks

This chapter of Ethics in a Permissive Society is the first point at which William Barclay departed from his discussion of biblical ethics. The first three chapters of his book cover Old Testament ethics, the ethics of Jesus, and the ethics of Paul the Apostle. The fourth chapter is on situation ethics, which is revealing in itself: William Barclay wrote in 1971 when situation ethics was in the ascendancy and considered a serious threat by conservative Christians; this chapter is his urgent response. The first half is concerned with recapping the most important aspects of situation ethics: (1) that agape is the only intrinsic good, everything else is good or evil to the extent it produces agape, and (2) that justice is agape distributed. The second half is concerned with cautioning Christians (and society more broadly) against adopting situation ethics; however, in the final analysis, his treatment of the theory is relatively sympathetic.

So, my problem with the criticisms contained within this chapter is that they take aim at a straw man construction of situation ethics. William Barclay accused situation ethicists of having a phobia of law. It's certainly possible to come to this conclusion based on a superficial reading of Joseph Fletcher's Situation Ethics, but careful consideration of the actual arguments reveals this isn't the case. What situation ethicists have a phobia of is following the law when it's wrong, which they determine by considering how much agape is likely to be produced by following the law compared with breaking it. William Barclay's criticisms are all concerned with emphasising why we need laws. Now, whether or not we actually do is beyond our discussion here but, and this is the surprising thing, Joseph Fletcher would have agreed: we do need them. Ultimately then, whilst this chapter makes for interesting, clarificatory reading, it misses its mark for me.