

Context of Situation Ethics

1. **What** is the context of situation ethics?

Situation ethics arose during the mid-twentieth century in response to several significant social movements spawned in the aftermath of World War II. During this time, continued industrialisation, globalisation, and advances in economics and technology significantly improved the quality of people's lives in the developed world. Additionally, as long-distance communication and transportation became more accessible, activists and campaigners found it easier to organise and mobilise large numbers of people to support various causes. And there was no shortage of causes: after World War II, historically marginalised minorities were better placed than ever to assert their demands for a fairer future. All these changes led key thinkers like C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), Joseph Fletcher (1905-1991), and John Robinson (1919-1983) to reflect upon and write up the central elements of situation ethics, which responded to widespread social upheaval by attempting to make Christianity more relevant to a generation disillusioned with the establishment. Broadly speaking, the response of situation ethics placed the role of scripture and tradition in the background of ethical decision-making and foregrounded the role of personal experience instead. It diminished the authority of the Church (and, to a lesser extent, the Bible) whilst amplifying the authority of the individual as inspired by the example of Jesus, the embodiment of divine love.



The civil rights movement: the actions of some activists inspired situation ethics.

In Christian ethics, situation ethics was the response to the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, which is widely associated with the rise of the hippie and other alternative lifestyles. Importantly, this counterculture incorporated several famous campaigns, including the American civil rights movement (1954-1968), second-wave feminism (1960s-1980s), and the gay liberation movement (1960s-1970s). During this period, situation ethicists reconsidered the support for race-based, sex-based, and sexuality-based discrimination historically provided by the Bible and the Church. They concluded that Christian ethics required a revolution. The context of situation ethics was a period of significant social change that exposed Christianity's role in the oppression of certain social groups; situation ethics was the attempt to correct course.

2. **How** has the context of situation ethics influenced situation ethics?

Situation ethics was inspired by the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s; however, it is difficult to determine how different campaigns (e.g. the American civil rights movement, second-wave feminism, and the gay liberation movement) affected its development. Notwithstanding this, race-based, sex-based, and sexuality-based discrimination were obvious concerns for early situation ethicists, all of whom struggled to reconcile the way that some scripture and many traditions treated minorities with the example set by Jesus. The specific issues can be illuminated by investigating some of the most famous campaigns of the post-war period.

Civil Rights movement: the social movement to abolish race-based discrimination in the United States had a significant effect on situation ethics. Situation ethicists considered the campaign for racial equality long overdue (along with other changes). It may have inspired John Robinson to write, "[T]here is no need to prove that a revolution is required in morals. It has long since broken out; and it is no 'reluctant revolution'. The wind of change here is a gale."

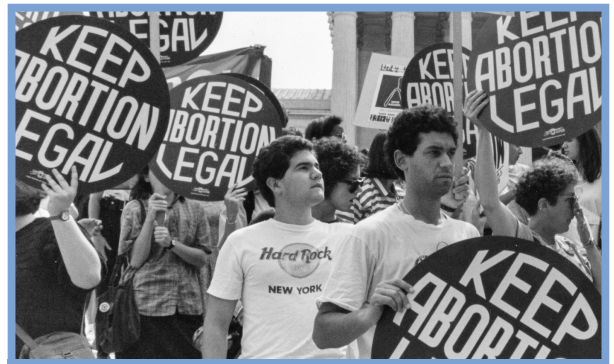
Second-wave feminism: after securing the vote, feminism's second wave campaigned for the abolition of sex-based discrimination in the workplace and the extension of women's reproductive rights. Joseph Fletcher agreed with second-wave feminists about some of the problems caused by prohibiting abortion. In certain circumstances, he argued that performing an abortion is the most loving moral action (and, therefore, the most Christian).

Gay liberation: after the Stonewall riots of 1969, gay and lesbian people began to live much more openly in some more economically developed countries. The treatment of gay and lesbian people may have moved situation ethicists like C. S. Lewis to write, "I believe that the most lawless and inordinate loves are less contrary to God's will than a self-invited... lovelessness." This may have been a subtle reference to homosexuality, which was illegal at the time.

3. Why is the context of situation ethics important?

The context of situation ethics is extremely important: it helps to explain why situation ethics exists and the shape it first formed. Beyond this, there are various reasons why the context of situation ethics is essential to a thorough understanding of this normative ethical theory. First, the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s arose at a timely moment for Christian ethics. In several parts of the world, including the United Kingdom, people on the liberal wing of the Church had already concluded that those on the conservative wing were hopelessly out of touch. The social movements of the post-war period brought the gulf between a significant slice of secular society and some conservative Christians into sharp focus.

Second, the context of situation ethics provided the catalyst for the transformation of Christian ethics, which led to considerable change for the Church. The idea that ethical decision-making can be reduced to ruminating on the question, "what would Jesus do?" went mainstream. And, even though situation ethics has fallen out of fashion among academic philosophers and theologians, millions of ordinary Christians have internalised this powerful message. Third, the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s was transient. It overlapped with the two millennia-long history of Christianity for less than two decades; however, even though it was short, it was not unimportant. The social upheaval of the post-war period left a profound legacy in Christian ethics as it did in wider society.



Second-wave feminism: the legalisation of abortion was endorsed by situation ethicists.

George Thinks

The key thing to remember about the context of situation ethics is that it's anti-establishment: it's the hippie, hallucination-inducing, high-as-a-kite Swinging Sixties. In other words, the backdrop to this turn in Christian ethics was entirely unchristian. Increasingly during the post-war period, the prevailing attitude towards Christianity and the Church was pejorative; people of all political classes, especially the young, were no longer interested in being preached to (or, for that matter, in being preached about)! And campaigns like the civil rights movement, second-wave feminism, and the gay liberation movement were so large and numerous that the Church couldn't escape their impact. Situation ethics is a child of this social change and some of the signal events that marked it. And, which is more, even though it has fallen out of fashion among intellectuals, its central message has proven especially convincing to ordinary Christians: being a good person is about being like Jesus. Consequently, it has secured a much more lasting legacy than most of its critics are prepared to admit.

