

Neil Messer on Situation Ethics

1. **Who** is Neil Messer and what are his key ideas on situation ethics?

Neil Messer (b. 1965) is a British philosopher and theologian who was appointed professor of theology at the University of Winchester in 2011. In 1986, he received a BA from the University of Bristol, followed, in 1989, by a PhD from the University of Cambridge; however, both these degrees were in unexpected fields for an academic theologian: biochemistry and molecular biology. In the early 1990s, Neil Messer's career changed direction: he completed a diploma in theology and began an ordained ministry in the United Reformed Church. Thereafter, he received a MA in Christian ethics from King's College London, became a lecturer at the University of Wales, and, in 2005, published his popular textbook, *Christian Ethics*. Since his forties, he has worked at the University of Winchester, formerly as a head of department and reader and latterly as a professor. In the introductory chapter of *Christian Ethics* (and elsewhere in his book), Neil Messer revealed his key ideas on situation ethics (including the ones listed below), although he communicated many of his points implicitly.

Situation ethics is irrelevant:

although situation ethics attracted a lot of attention in the mid-twentieth century, it is no longer a normative ethical theory that stimulates much intellectual interest because it is academically lightweight. Consequently, situation ethics is only of interest as a historical curiosity.

Situation ethics is unsupported:

Christian ethics has four sources of authority: scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Situation ethics is not clearly supported by the two most important (scripture and tradition). Only experience provides any substantial support and this is the least reliable source of authority.

Situation ethics is vague:

Christian ethics can be identified by some of their specific moral teachings (e.g. on abortion and homosexuality), which distinguish them from secular morals. Situation ethics rejects some of these specific moral teachings, which makes it too vague and woolly to be an acceptable Christian ethic.

2. **How** do Neil Messer's key ideas on situation ethics work?



Neil Messer

Neil Messer's key ideas on situation ethics suggest that it is irrelevant to Christian ethics and unimportant to the wider field. He did not explicitly make these claims in his introduction to *Christian Ethics*; in fact, he made no mention of situation ethics at all here. However, his views on Christian sources of authority and overt statements on situation ethics elsewhere in *Christian Ethics* reveal his key ideas and opinions on this normative ethical theory. In short, he finds it a highly unsatisfactory moral code.

Situation ethics is irrelevant: Neil Messer's first key idea is that situation ethics is irrelevant to Christian ethics, a category to which almost all of its supporters claim it belongs. In his introduction to *Christian Ethics*, Neil Messer discussed Christian deontological normative ethical theories at length; however, Christian teleological ethics are conspicuous by their absence. Later, he claimed that Christians are suspicious of teleological ethics, that "there are many grounds for this suspicion", and that "situationism is indeed inadequate as a theological ethic". He confined situation ethics to irrelevance with the words, "Many Christian ethicists now regard it as little more than a historical curiosity."

Situation ethics is unsupported: in *Christian Ethics*, Neil Messer presented four sources of authority that Christians commonly turn to for guidance: scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Ultimately, Neil Messer argued that scripture and tradition have a relatively important role in Christian ethics, with almost everyone accepting that these two sources should have a significant influence on ethical decision-making. However, this is not the case for reason and experience, which Christians largely agree should play a relatively unimportant role. This creates a problem for situation ethics because it relies heavily on experience as a source of moral authority, as all teleological ethics do: past experiences help people to make predictions about the future consequences that are likely to arise from their present actions. Joseph Fletcher used experience to justify deviating from commandments in the name of love; the implication of Neil Messer's view is that experience does not provide sufficient authority to permit such deviation.

Situation ethics is vague: Neil Messer's third key idea is that situation ethics cannot be a Christian ethic because it is too vague and woolly. Christian responses to certain moral issues distinguish Christian ethics from non-Christian ethics. On issues like abortion, homosexuality, and war, Christians hold specific views that are often diametrically opposed to those held in wider secular society. Generally speaking, scripture and tradition lead Christians to abhor abortion and homosexuality; likewise, Christians widely condemn war, although the water has been muddied by the just war tradition. Neil Messer's criticism is that situation ethics cannot be Christian: situationists must accept abortion and war in certain circumstances (i.e. when they produce the most loving outcomes), which are almost always broader than those ever admitted by scripture or tradition. Additionally, situationists must accept loving and long-lasting homosexual relationships with no distinction between them and heterosexual ones.

3. **Why** are Neil Messer's key ideas on situation ethics important?

They contextualise situation ethics: Christian Ethics is not really about situation ethics because Neil Messer contextualised it within the 2000 year-long development of Christian morality. He called situation ethics a footnote, which is reasonable when 20 centuries of Christian moral development are stacked against it.

They expose significant weaknesses in situation ethics: Neil Messer implied that situation ethics is not a Christian ethic. Although it is possible to be a situationist without being a Christian (like Joseph Fletcher), if situation ethics is not Christian, then it is not much more than a pale imitation of utilitarianism.

They discuss situation ethics in a subtle and limited way: Neil Messer's key ideas on situation ethics are cryptic; they are discussed directly only in passing and not in detail. In Christian Ethics, the absence of robust, well-reasoned or detailed arguments to support Neil Messer's apparent assertions means that his claims about situation ethics are not well supported. In brief, it is possible to mount a counterargument to Neil Messer's key ideas on situation ethics and its weaknesses with relative ease.



A pregnancy test: unlike most Christians, situationists sometimes accept abortion.

George Thinks

In truth, Neil Messer's thoughts and opinions are difficult to discern because he writes so sparingly about situation ethics: he thinks it's a footnote and treats it like one. This said, his criticisms are more successful to my mind than William Barclay's, the other great denigrator of this normative ethical theory. William Barclay was responding to the threat of situation ethics in the heat of the moment; consequently, his criticisms mischaracterised his opponents and their views. The new morality is framed as an existential threat to Christian ethics; the whole thing smacks of alarmism. Neil Messer takes a different tack; for him, whatever situation ethics is, it isn't really Christian, and, since the Swinging Sixties, life's moved on. Neil Messer isn't alarmed by the new morality; on the contrary, he seems to wonder what all the fuss was about. Even if we disagree, the strategy is somewhat successful: situation ethics is presented as an unthreatening curiosity. Notwithstanding this, Christian Ethics doesn't deal with the fact that situation ethics appeals to ordinary Christians, making it more enduring than Neil Messer is willing to admit.

