

Situation Ethics: 4 Working Principles, Relativism

Situation Ethics is a moral relativist theory. It mustn't be confused with Cultural Relativism, which says that there is no objective morality, and moral values vary from one society to another. What is right is relative to the situation. Some textbooks claim that there is therefore an absolute principle in Situation Ethics – to always love. However, Fletcher himself said that love "relativizes the absolute, it does not absolutize the relative". St Augustine said, "Love, and do what you will." Situationists believe that all things are possible in love. One example Fletcher gives is of a married woman in a prison camp who has an affair and gets pregnant in order to get home to her family.

Situation Ethics: 4 Working Principles, Personalism

Situationists put people before rules. Jesus said 'Man was not made for the Sabbath', suggesting that rules are there for the benefit of people, so Fletcher believes that if it helps people to break the rules, they should be broken. An example may be the conjoined twins Mary and Jodie. Both girls were going to die, as their shared organs couldn't support them both. The Roman Catholic parents believed it was wrong to kill one of the girls, so they said both girls should be allowed to die. However, the doctors separated the girls, killing Mary to save Jodie. Situations would support this decision, as it meant putting Jodie's well being before the rule "do not kill".

Situation Ethics: 4 Working Principles, Pragmatism

Situation Ethics is practical, choosing the course of action that works. This part of the theory is very similar to Utilitarianism – pragmatism is like utility. For example, embryonic stem cell research could potentially save millions of people. If it can be shown to work, Situationists would support it. They wouldn't be worried about the use of embryos, as this has no practical impact. Fletcher talked about people's interests, so a pragmatic course of action would be one that helps the most people. Whilst this sounds a lot like Bentham's hedonic calculus, the difference is that a Situationist is motivated by love.

Situation Ethics: Teleological - love justifies the means

Fletcher asked "If the end doesn't justify the means, what does?" He was a teleologist, focussing on the end or purpose of actions. Fletcher gave the example of the atom bombs dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. He describes the deliberations of the Interim Committee set up by the US President "which decided that the lives saved by ending the war swiftly by using this weapon outweighed the lives destroyed by using it and thought that the best course of action." One of the Six Fundamental Principles says that love justifies the means – if you are acting out of love, you can do things that would otherwise be considered evil, even use "the most terrible weapon ever known"

Situation Ethics: Agape (Positivism)

Situation Ethics is based on a Positivist stance – the free decision to do the most loving thing. Love here is a selfless Christian love, Agape. Fletcher says "Loving is not liking" (one of the 6 fundamental principles). He describes love as "... goodwill at work in partnership with reason" in seeking the "neighbour's best interest with a careful eye to all the factors in the situation". Another fundamental principle is that only love is good in itself. *'Only one 'thing' is intrinsically good; namely, love: nothing else at all'*. Situation Ethics is very clear about how you should act in any circumstance – you should simply do whatever love and concern for other people dictates.

Situation Ethics: 6 Fundamental Principles, 'The ruling norm of Christian decision is love: nothing else'

Some textbooks claim there is only one rule in Situation Ethics – love. This is not the best way to understand Situation Ethics. There are many rules – don't lie, don't steal, don't hurt other people or cheat on a loved one. These are all good rules, and Situation Ethics is not antinomian (a system with no rules at all). However, Situation Ethics is not legalistic – sometimes you need to lie, steal, even cheat on a loved one. A situationist response is one where there are no absolute rules, but lots of rules that can be broken if love requires it. This doesn't make love a rule, but a guide to what to do when you need to break the rules.

Situation Ethics: 6 Fundamental Principles, 'Justice is love distributed.'

One serious criticism of Situation Ethics is that it allows you to justify doing evil in the name of love. E.g. torturing someone who may well be innocent might be justified because it prevents a terror attack and saves hundreds of lives. Critics would say the torture was unjust, because justice means treating everyone equally, as you would want to be treated. Fletcher says justice is something else – torturing one person to save hundreds is the fairest thing to do. Justice here means getting the best outcome for the most people: 'love distributed'. Hundreds are better off and one suffers – that's more just than the alternative.

Situation Ethics: 6 Fundamental Principles, 'Love decides there and then.'

Fletcher gives four examples to prompt people to think about what a loving response would mean. He doesn't say how to apply the theory in each case, because his 'theory' involves deciding there and then what you should do. One example he uses is of a dying man with life insurance. If he takes some pills, he will live for 3 years and leave his family poor. Instead, he could not take the pills, die in 6 months and leave them with a significant life-insurance payout. Fletcher doesn't say how the man should respond, but his theory suggests the most loving thing might be to stop taking the pills – you would have to decide in the situation.