

# How useful is Joseph Fletcher's situation ethics as a guide

[Life](#), [Love](#)



Situation Ethics (SE) is teleological, as it is dependant on the calculation of consequences and is therefore a subjective approach to ethical decision making. This approach was originally brought about by Joseph Fletcher, whose basic principle of Utility was love. He believed in no absolutes but a situationist approach. "The morality of an action depends on the situation" Like Utilitarianism SE is based on a single principle which enables humans to enter every situation armed with the experience and model of past situations, but willing to lay them aside if the principle of love is better served i. . euthanasia could be permitted in extreme circumstances, because it would be a loving act to save an old person from an otherwise painful, undignified death in a few hours, or what about killing Hitler before he caused WW2 or the Holocaust? The law would not have allowed this but surely it would have been loving to save millions of lives.

So fundamentally SE is all about which course of action best serves love, and therefore gives every being the freedom of decision making, rubbishing all laws, norms, and values of society. Only one thing is good; namely love; nothing else at all" This quote is SE summed up as the only significant factor to be considered should be love. Joseph Fletcher based his situationist approach on religious background. (Jesus' ministry and debates with Pharisees, which put people first, and love as the only value) These stories showed Jesus demonstrating love, compassion, and integrity, and revealing the weakness of using absolute laws as a means of making ethical decisions. Fletcher proposed four working principles for SE.

First being Pragmatism, which was concerned with the practical course of action. Secondly it was relativism, which rejects such absolutes as 'never' or 'always'. Then it was positivism, which recognises love as the most important and lastly was personalism which demands that people should always be put first. SE can also be compared to other ethical theories such as Utilitarianism, and Emotivism as it involves making a value judgment based on an objective point of reference, as it enables humans to enter every situation as they wish, as long as the end goal is love.

There are many strengths to this approach adapted by Fletcher. A key benefit being its flexibility. It takes the circumstances of a situation into account whereas others ignore them i. e. an absolutist approach 'do not kill whatever the circumstances' can lead to all sorts of strange circumstances as the circumstances have not been taken into account i. e. an absolutist would not have killed Hitler regardless of the circumstances 'one must not kill', but then looking back at it, it would have been a bad decision.

Another imperative strength of the approach is how it is modelled on the teachings of Jesus (story of the women caught in adultery shows Jesus adopting a situationist approach rather than referring to the Moses law) this is an huge advantage to SE as Jesus is a well treasured, respected, cherished, loved and a type of a heroic figure to many people. Thus the approach gains more respect and acknowledgment from religious and non-religious beings as it is considered to be a truly Christian ethic, and based on Jesus. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15: 13) in other words Jesus is saying one should be willing to

take life if it was for the greater happiness. He has adopted a situationist approach, and therefore the Teachings of Jesus are a very vital strength of SE. Furthermore SE is based on love, as it seeks the well being of others, even if the course of action is not of preference.

So many will see it as a good course of action as love is seen to be universally good "The law of love is the ultimate law" thus it demands that people should be put first before all norms and laws of society. This is another strength of SE as each situation has its own uniqueness, complexity and variety in, every situation is judged individually and not according to some democratic law that may not even be applicable to everyone. "The morality of an action depends on the situation" in other words individual cases are judged on their own merits, irrespective of what has been done in similar situations in the past.

This is a strong point a situationist would raise. However, opponents of SE would argue that is too individualistic as often situations are very hard for someone to individually judge what is loving, as they are bound to see things from their perspective. Some selfishness can easily creep in with no solid rules; the fact that love is often one of the best ways to ensure you are compassionate to others does not automatically make it the ultimate principle by which we should live our lives i. e. you may think it is the loving thing to have killed Hitler, but this is from your perspective, Hitler and Stalin could have classified their actions as loving, as they certainly saw what they were doing as justifiable... Love isn't the same to everyone. In addition to this SE is seen as too subjective to some people, how is one to know what

the most loving action is in every situation? I. e. does a 17 year drug addict abort her baby based on the possibility that she is unable to look after her child (in her current situation).

Or does she keep her baby, with the aim of getting help to overcome her addiction, in order to become a good parent to her child (something only time will reveal)? " Such an ethic (situationism) cannot but rely, in deep humility, upon guiding rules, upon the cumulative experience of one's own and other people's obedience. It is this bank of experience which gives us our working rules of 'right' and 'wrong,' and without them we could not but flounder" In other words SE rests too heavily on maturity on making judgments in a situation.

You cannot make a direct decision as outcomes don't always turn out to be as a person perceives them to be. Furthermore what is believed to be a loving end could justify actions that some people regard as simply wrong, murder, abortion, lying, rape, cheating, and stealing could become " good actions" in certain situations, whereas some will see them as simply wrong i. e. Roman Catholics. What is seen as moral and loving to one person could be immoral to another.

This is applicable to Christian Roman Catholics, in 1952; Pope Pius XII called SE " An individualistic and subjective appeal to the concrete circumstances of actions to justify decisions in opposition to the natural law or God's revealed will" common sense would seem to say that there are some things that are just wrong and can never be right on any grounds. A man could

easily argue that extra-marital sex is ok with a married woman, because he "loves" her and her husband does not. This doesn't necessarily make the action right.

Another strong argument against SE is that it tends to assume that just because an act is well motivated, it is automatically right. This is clearly not the case. Just because you wouldn't blame someone who accidentally killed two kids while trying to save his neighbour's dog, doesn't mean that his action was, with observation, objectively right. What about the mother to whom the two kids belonged to? Does SE take both sides into account or is it simply a one-sided affair? So how can SE argue a case in which two people reach different conclusions about an action, yet both claim to be acting in the interests of morality and love?

So far the arguments we have looked at provide a hugely contrasting picture, the basic contradictions seem to be Fletcher's definition of love, and how it can be different to different people, whereas Fletcher argues if you act in a situation with love in mind it is the right thing. So in conclusion, I believe Joseph Fletcher's SE is a good guide to human behavior as actions are always performed through the end goal of love. It always seeks the well-being of others and most importantly it always takes the consequences of an action into account unlike absolutist approaches.