

# The main features of joseph fletcher's theory of situation ethics

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



Joseph Fletcher devised the theory of situation ethics which is based upon the invariable Christian duty of "love thy neighbour as thyself" therefore every response to act must be based around the law of love, as love is the only thing which is intrinsically good. Fletcher also maintained that there are three ways of making moral decisions: legalistic ethics which is a set of prefabricated moral rules and regulations; antinomian ethics which bases moral decisions on spontaneity, basically against law, and then there's Situation ethics which bases decisions on traditions of society and love.

Joseph Fletcher, the mastermind behind this theory began his beliefs on situation ethics after teaching Christian ethics at school which influenced him to come up with situation ethics which is why it is so heavily Christian based. Although Fletcher depicted there was three main ways to make moral decisions (legalistic, antinomian and situation) he concluded that situation is the best out of the three. This is because it lets you have some freedom but also helps you to make the 'correct' decision, which is what gives the most love as love is the only thing which is intrinsically good.

It also gives freedom as nothing is inherently good or evil and it gives an acceptable reason for your actions instead of the pathetic reasoning 'lesser evil'. The Christian love aspect to situation ethics plays a dominant role in the entire theory; however it is also based upon principles; the four working principles and the six fundamental principles. If you pursue these then the outcome will be the right one. The four working principles are the basis of the theory, they consist of: Pragmatism, this plainly states that if an act is going to work then it must be practical.

For example, if there were two conjoined twins then the Catholic Church may say to kill one, saving the other would be evil or bad, however Fletcher disagreed as letting both girls die is not pragmatic it would be more practical to save one at the expense of the other. The second principle is relativism, which means that rules (absolutes) do not always apply, it depends on the situation. , for example the absolute rule 'do not steal' becomes relative to love- if you have to feed the poor and starving, then you would steal food.

However, it does not mean 'anything goes' it has to be appropriate and loving. The third main principle is Positivism that you have to want to do right and make the good choice and not just base it on reason. The final principle is personalism which puts humans first so therefore the value is something is when that act happens to be useful to love in the case of a person. Another element to the theory is the six fundamental principles. They are fundamental therefore they must be abided by in order to make the best decision.

The first principle is that only one thing is intrinsically good; namely love, nothing else. The second proposition is how love replaces law and isn't equalled by any other love, for example Jesus broke the ten commandments when love demanded him to. The third proposition is love and justice cannot be separated as justice is love coping in situations where distributions are called for; justice is love at work in a whole community. The fourth proposition is how love is not a matter of feeling, but an attitude.

As it is not sentimental but rather a desire for good of another person which leads on to one of the main factors of situation ethics; agape, unconditional love, nothing is required in return. The penultimate proposition describes how actions acquire a moral status as a means to the end because the most end is the most loving result. The final proposition basically defines situation ethics, whether something is right or wrong depends on the situation that it is in, if an action will bring a result that serves the maximum amount of love then it is the correct choice.

Many people agree and disagree with situation ethics and some people even have differing approaches to the theory. Bernard Hoose created a different twist upon situation ethics; proportionalism, which suggests that although Fletcher has some good ideas but the natural moral law is not just a list of absolutes but an appropriate guideline for us as human beings, as they help us navigate ourselves in life. Also, people don't usually choose to do something in the knowledge that it is wrong.

Rather, they pursue an apparent good rather than a real good. That is to say that they rationalise their choice so that they think they are doing the right thing, even though they are not. For example, Hitler was persuaded that Jews were not really human beings and were evil, and rationalised the murder of six million people. He thought his actions supported the good of creating a better Germany, one in which more people would be fulfilled more of the time.

Unpalatable as it may seem to say it, most Nazis would have been horrified at the suggestion that they were engaged in cold-blooded mass-murder on grounds of irrational prejudice. They believed they were pursuing an apparent good. They were horribly mistaken in their reasoning of course, but there was reasoning. If it was followed by the natural moral law, they would of understood it is wrong to kill, except in extreme circumstance- self-defence.