

# Situation ethics

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



a.) Explain Fletcher's theory of Situation Ethics (13)

Joseph Fletcher provoked a great debate amongst Christians. He is quite clear in the approach he advocates and in no way wants to be confused with antinomianism, (The belief that through 'grace' a Christian has no need to obey any moral rules/ laws).

In Fletcher's Situation Ethics; no act is in itself either good or evil. He likes to speak in terms of principles, (Guiding decision making): and he stressed particularly the cardinal principle of love.

Augustine had spoken of love in his celebrated remark, " Love God and do what you want". For Fletcher, love for people is to guide decision-making.

Fletcher sets out four prepositions, which apply to all ethical systems. Firstly, one has to ask the question whether a particular strategy actually works (Pragmatism). Secondly, Fletcher says that the method must be relativistic. This is to avoid any absolutes. Thirdly, Fletcher stresses every ethical system requires a faith commitment. This is instead of deriving principles from reason alone (Positivism). Fourthly and finally, Situation Ethics puts people at the centre of concern rather than things (Personalism).

The main parts of his book 'Situation Ethics' (1966), Fletcher outlines six propositions that underlie his situation ethics, in his view.

First of all, the only thing, which is intrinsically good; is love. Secondly, the only norm is love. (For Christian's, this replaces all other norms as well). This love seeks the best interest of your neighbour. Fletcher would say that if love can only follow law if it is serving love. Otherwise, love must always be

followed. He argues on the basis of the New Testament, on texts such as Mark 2: 27- 28 where Jesus says that the Sabbath was made for man. It's under this section of this book that Fletcher considers an area of traditional ethical beliefs which for many people has been the cornerstone of their beliefs- This is the Ten Commandments.

Fletcher looks at each Commandment. He attempts to demonstrate particularly for each of the final six Commandments, the requirements might not necessarily be interpreted as having a binding character and duty may well require them to be broken.

Fletcher writes of the characteristic concept agape. Agape is an attitude of the will expressing a disinterested concern for anyone.

Thirdly, love and justice are to be equated. The Christian never just has one neighbour; therefore love is supposed to be calculating. Fletcher also implicitly approves of the decision by President Truman of the United States of America (1945) to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Fourthly, it should be clear that this agapeic love is not at all the same as liking, it isn't affection. It has its theological roots in the way God is believed to extend his love to all. This love is also supposed to be directed towards the self. Love of yourself is preferred where its advantages outweigh love for your neighbour.

Fletcher's fifth proposition is that love justifies its means. Situation Ethics, according to Fletcher, regards any of these as right or wrong according to a situation.

Sixth, love decides there and then. Fletcher sees it as a psychological weakness that people should wish to make their decisions by reference to a pre-existing code of laws. They see freedom as a curse with which they dare not cope.

b.) Assess the strengths and weaknesses of his view (12)

Situation Ethics has been criticised by both Catholic writers and Protestants of different theological standpoints.

John Benner (A Protestant) contended that the Christian community needed objectives or goals to which it could strive. From an evangelical Protestant position, the objective character of ethical norms is seen as taken from the belief in an actual revelation from God, (What the Bible says). Karl Rahner (A Catholic) also argued for objective norms.

Fletcher's explanation has been subject to examination by a variety of critics who might be categorised as defenders of an approach based on principles. Fletcher attacks emphasis given to law in decision making. The decision should be taken here and now according to him. Law represents part of the resources, which can be brought to bear on a situation requiring a decision. It's a resource, which represents the distillation of human experience. (Earlier thinkers were not as rigid as Fletcher leads people to think).

Thomas Aquinas allowed for exceptions in his theory of Natural Law. Robin Gill (1986) suggested that Luther was a situationalist as far as Christians were concerned. Within an ideal Christian community agape would regulate

the affairs of society. Rules, however, would be needed to avoid chaos amongst the wider population.

Paul Ramsey uses the concept of agape. He writes of Rule- Agapeism in contrast to Fletcher's Act- Agapeism. To employ agape in Christian ethics one still needs the insight of rules.

It has been suggested that for most people the kind of examples Fletcher uses to argue his case are highly unusual and remote: most people do not regularly face the dilemma of whether to rescue their father or the Mona Lisa from a burning building, for example.

Fletcher may be too optimistic about people's capacity to calculate how love might be directed in the way he envisages also.

If you accept the idea that human beings are limited in some sense, then you accept that some people may deceive themselves in the judgements they make. Some say that Fletcher overestimates human rationality.

Oliver O'Donovan attempted to refine the issue of freedom. He argues that the situation ethicists are right to point to the freedom from bondage to the Law of Moses, which the coming of Christ has brought.

There is danger of misinterpreting this freedom. Man cannot close his eyes to the universe as it already is. The spirit "forms and brings to expression the appropriate pattern of free response to objective reality". O' Donovan classified Fletcher as a conservative in ethics. His position is that knowledge of the past cannot be simply transformed into knowledge of the present.

Ethical decisions faced in the future can't be resolved by resorting to guidelines from the past. Fletcher seems inconsistent with his own declaration that no actions should be predetermined by any moral rule.