

What is meant by situation ethics

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



" Christianity has traditionally been dominated by natural law thinking and Situation Ethics arose out of this background" (The Puzzle of Ethics, by Peter Vardy and Paul Grosch, page 123). In the 1966 an Anglican theologian, Joseph Fletcher published a book called " Situation Ethics" in which he rejected previous deontological ethical systems. It would be wrong to believe that Fletcher founded the idea of Situation Ethics because, as I have already stated, Situation ethics has its foundations in the natural law thinking of the Christian Church.

Fletcher claimed there were three possible approaches to ethics. There was the deontological approach where you have a set of rules that may never be broken, no matter what the circumstances. Fletcher believed this inflexible approach created a poor ethical system because it put the law first and made the law the most important thing. The Ten Commandments is a good example of this. Take " thou shalt not steal", is it right to steal a gun from a man who intends to use it to murder his wife? If you believe that the law is intrinsically good and should be put first then you would not steal the gun.

This example illustrates the problem with the deontological approach, because in these circumstances it would be ethically good to not steal the gun and allow the man to murder his wife. At the other extreme, the second approach to ethics would be to abandon all rules- antinomianism. However, having no rules would lead to anarchy. Fletcher rejects the idea of having no rules because this would mean it was impossible to make moral decisions. Consequently we come to the third and final approach, Situation Ethics.

Situation Ethics is where the right course of action is the one where the outcome is the most loving. With Fletcher's system, nothing is intrinsically good or bad except love itself. It is impossible to know beforehand what is right and wrong because all situations are unique. Situation Ethics is perhaps best summed up by John Lee in his book " Ethics: Moral Rules", on page 23 where he says, " Thus Fletcher's view of ethics is a form of relativism: there are no hard and fast rules about what is right and wrong except to say that the Law of Love should be followed.

When we say " the most loving thing", we mean the selfless love that is referred to in 1 Corinthians or St John's gospel, chapter 15, verse 13, " Greater love hath no math than this, a man lay down his life for his friends". In the English language we have only one word for love that can infer several very different meanings. The Greeks have four words for love, philo, storge, eros and agape. This profound, selfless sort of love associated with ethics, religious belief and often the idea of sacrifice is agape.

As a Christian, Fletcher saw the theme of love ran throughout the bible and the teachings of prominent personages such as St Thomas Aquinas, According to Joseph Fletcher, the sort of love Situation Ethics is about is agape. In Fletcher's book, he sets out the four working presumptions of Situation Ethics as being Pragmatism, Relativism, Positivism and Personalism. Let us examine each of these in turn so as to understand more fully the idea of Situation Ethics. The first presumption is Pragmatism, the idea that the principle must be workable.

Following the ideals of Situation Ethics, the aim to which the course of action leads must be the most loving in that situation. The second presumption of Situation Ethics goes under the heading of Relativism. Deontological ethical systems failed Fletcher's eyes because they were absolute. No matter what the situation some things were intrinsically good and others bad. The use of "absolute", "never" and "always" is rejected because each situation is unique and whatever the rule it is always possible to find an exception.

Instead, everything is relative to the particular situation, the only thing which is intrinsically good is love and nothing else. Positivism is the third presumption; Fletcher claimed there were two ways to understand religious belief. The first way being Natural theology, where human reason and sense experience are used to prove God's existence. The second is Positivism, reasoning within religious faith. People have to be able to see for themselves why love is paramount and the most important consideration. Situation Ethics is dependent upon people being able to see that love is the most important factor.

Personalism is the fourth presumption that people should be put first. Deontological ethical systems put the law first; in these systems the law is the most important factor. With Situation Ethics people are the most important and are put before any other consideration. Supporters of Situation Ethics love people not laws. To take the example of the man with a gun who intends to shoot his wife. The most loving action would be to steal the gun for love of the wife because he intends to kill her, the person is put first.

If we were simply following the Ten Commandments then the law would be put first, it would be wrong to steal the gun and so we must allow the man to shoot his wife. As well as the four presumptions that Fletcher highlighted in his book " Situation Ethics", there are the six basic principles. These follow on from and extend the presumptions. The first principle is " Only love is intrinsically good; nothing else", with Situation Ethics the only criteria for something being good is that it brings about love; if something does this then it is good and there are no other factors to take into consideration.

Natural law would say that lying is bad whatever. Under Situation Ethics nothing except love is absolute, therefore if a spy lied to save lives then that course of action would be the most loving and so lying was good, but only in this one unique incidence. Secondly, " The ruling norm of Christian ethics is love; nothing else". In the bible this is the attitude adopted by Jesus when arguing against the Pharisees. He said that the most important of the Ten Commandments was, " Love thy neighbour as thyself" all the other commandments, although important, were not absolute.

The result of this is that a supporter of Situation Ethics would not be able to simply refrain from things such as adultery and stealing to have a clear conscience, they would feel it their duty to go out and help those in need as that would be the most loving thing. With the words, " Love and justice are the same. Justice is love distributed" Fletcher argued that justice was taking into consideration the whole community and deciding what the most loving thing to do was. Everyone is entitled to justice in the same way everyone in a community is entitled to love.

Fletcher said justice was due to everyone because justice is love. Humans can decide for themselves what is the right thing to do because justice is simply "love using its head". "Love wills the neighbour's good whether we like the neighbour or not" is a development of Jesus' teaching in Mark 12: 33 "love your neighbour". The type of love to which this refers is agape, the sacrificial, profound religious love. This does not mean we must all like our neighbour and try to please them but we must act in the most loving way towards them.

For example, forcing someone to take an exam may not seem the most loving thing because they would not want to take it but it could be the most loving course of action if it leads to them getting a good job. The important aspect of this is that we should love even if we do not expect any love in return; this comes back to the nature of agape, the sacrificial form of love. In Situation Ethics the end result is the most important. This is summed up in the fifth principle "Only the end justifies the means; nothing else". In other words, anything is permissible as long as the result is the most loving.

For example, if your husband was desperately ill and in a lot of pain, if there was no chance of his survival and he wanted you to give him an overdose of painkillers so that he could die with dignity then this would be permissible. It would be the most loving thing to do and so in some situations could be right, yet under other ethical systems euthanasia would not be permissible no matter what the circumstances because it is killing another person, which equates to murder. The sixth and final principle is that, "Love's decisions are made situationally, not prescriptively. "

In Situation Ethics there is no way of knowing whether something is right or wrong because the circumstances of each situation are unique. Moral decisions are only possible when applied to a particular example, generalisation and absolute decisions are not permitted. However, for this to work we have to rely on the assumption that people are able to make decisions themselves. Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor believed that people could not cope with the freedom given to them and wanted to impose laws instead. For Situation Ethics to work the Grand Inquisitor must be wrong and humans must be able to make decisions for themselves.

To conclude, Fletcher, although not the original pioneer of the basic principles of Situation Ethics is the authority we look to simply because it was he who developed these basic ideas and published his book " Situation Ethics" in 1966. The foundation of Situation Ethics is the 'Law of Love', the agape form of love is the most important thing and comes before any other consideration. Also, absolute rules are not permitted because Situation Ethics recognises that each situation is unique and should be treated as such. The only absolute statement that cannot be contradicted within this ethical system is that love is the most important thing.