

Situation ethics analysis



Situation ethics is a theory based around love. It is a teleological theory which means it is a consequential theory and not one based on rules.

Situation ethics is not based on all types of love but agapeistic love which is love for your fellow man. In the Christian tradition this may be expressed as, 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself' (Matthew 22: 39 The Holy Bible) this making it the most Christian of all theories. A song that was written by Paul McCartney and John Lennon gives the idea of situation ethics "all you need is love"

Situation Ethics was developed by an Anglican theologian Joseph Fletcher as a result of his critique of Legalism and Antinomianism. Legalism is the idea that there are fixed moral laws which are to be obeyed at all times.

Antinomianism is the idea that there are no fixed moral principles but that one acts morally spontaneously. Fletcher was a child of the 60's when free love was seen to be acceptable.

Jesus said nothing about birth control, large or small families, childlessness, homosexuality, masturbation, fornication, premarital intercourse, sterilisation, artificial insemination, abortion, sex, foreplay, petting and courtship. Whether any form of sex (hetero, homo or auto) is good or evil depends on whether love is fully served. (Fletcher quoted by Jenkins p. 49 of ethics and religion)

The precept 'to do whatever is the most loving thing' is not a law but a motive and an attitude that can inform moral choice. One needs to take each situation differently and act in love accordingly even if that means breaking established moral rules/laws. For example, it is considered wrong to steal but

if by stealing a gun you are preventing a person from killing people then you have acted in love therefore your theft is non-accountable. In fact the only accountability in Situation Ethics is whether your actions will result in the highest possible expression of love for others (i. e. what is the best decision I can make to help others?).

One of Fletcher's main arguments in ' Situation Ethics' is that Christians are meant to love people not laws and it is an argument that is grounded in four working principles and six fundamental principles. These are:

Four working principles: 1) The practical course of an action is motivated by love; 2) The necessity to always respond in love to each situation; 3) The necessity to accept the premise of acting in love by faith rather than by reason; 4) The desire to put people, not laws, first.

Six fundamental principles: 1) No actions are intrinsically right or wrong. Nothing is good in and of itself except for love. Actions are good if they help people and bad if they don't. One cannot expect to live responsibly with moral absolutes; 2) good actions should not be done for reward (E. g. experiencing a good feeling or seeking altruistic deeds in return) but should be done for their own sake. Jesus and Paul taught love as the highest principle above the Law; 3) Justice is love at work in the community; 4) Love is practical and not selective. We should show love to all, even our enemies. Christian love is unconditional; 5) Love is the end – never a means to something else; 6) Humans have the responsibility of freedom. They are not bound by any Law. With this comes the responsibility to ' do the most loving thing' in every situation

Fletcher claims that it is a mistake to generalise. You can't say 'Is it ever right to lie to your family?' The answer must be, 'I don't know, give me an example.' A concrete situation is needed, not a generalisation. 'It all depends' is a well used word by a Situationist. (Vardy ; Grosch p. 130 puzzle of ethics)

Many people have noted that situation ethics is very similar to the utilitarian approach except that Fletcher has substituted happiness for love.

People have many different views on any approach in theology. Situation Ethics has been criticised on a number of important points. E. g. in order to 'do the most loving thing' in every situation we have to look at the long term consequences of our actions in the present moment. But this is a difficult thing to do. We do not know if our actions will lead to pain or joy but the promotion of love for the Situationist requires us to do so if we are to avoid acting selfishly. A good example of this is if a 16 year old were to have an abortion because it is believed she will not be a responsible mother (based on her present actions) or on the other hand she may stand up to her responsibility's and be a great mother to her child (something only time will reveal)). It is also possible to act selfishly, in the name of love' without being aware of it (or being very aware of it) some people believe that situation ethics is a very subjective theory and very individualistic pope pious had this opinion.

Another criticism is, Do murder, lying, cheating and stealing become 'good acts' just because someone commits them in the name of love? There seems to be a confusion here between what is morally good and what is morally

right (the act itself – E. g. It may be morally good for me to steal someone's gun to stop them killing people but does that then make stealing morally right?).

Another problem is its lack of rules this means it is up to the person to decide what is right or wrong to do in a situation but people's feelings and emotions do not stay the same what you may think is right one day may have changed by the next. Some believe that you have to have structure in life other wise it does not work.

On the other hand many people believe that situation ethics takes the right approach. It overall shows the most Christian love and it takes into the complication of life where rules do not change because of some circumstances situation ethics may be able to help. It seems to be a practical but flexible theory for people to understand and use as it gives you the freedom within the laws of love. The Agapeic calculus helps offer guide lines to individuals. For Christians it can be the perfect theory as love is at the heart of the morality and supports the teaching of Jesus