

Situation Ethics

(A) Give an account of the key ideas of Situation Ethics

For millennia philosophers have concerned themselves with the questions surrounding what is right and what is wrong; “*Are there certain acts that are always wrong?*” and “*What is good?*” Situation Ethics is Joseph Fletcher’s, an Anglican theologian, answers to these questions. Fletcher laid down his beliefs in the book “Situation Ethics” published in 1966, in his book he reacts against deontology and legalism, which suggests that there are fixed ethical rules and that the “best” outcome can be deduced from these rules. However, in the same way Fletcher was not suggesting an antinomian society with no fixed rules at all, instead he was suggesting that there needed to be a situational approach to ethics, he suggested that there should be one single, simple “boss principal” on which all decisions are based, and then maxims or guidelines which aided the decision-maker, but which were not fixed “laws”.

As a Christian, Fletcher came to the conclusion that the “boss principal” should be the Christian notion of love, perhaps better described as the Greek *agape*, which we understand to mean a “giving”, non-reciprocal love seeking the best interests of all. He said that this was the only law of Situation Ethics, and that so long as the action was the most loving thing to do, it was the right thing to do, or as William Temple said “*There is only one ultimate and invariable duty, and its formula is ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.’ ... this is the whole of moral duty.*” This raises the question of “*what is love?*” something Fletcher tries to answer in his six propositions of Situation Ethics, all of which are key to understanding Situation Ethics.

The first proposition is that “*love only is always good*”. Fletcher criticises what he calls the intrinsic fallacy, which is that Good and Bad are ‘assigned’ to objects, i.e. that killing is an action, and the action has the property of being ‘Bad’. Fletcher states instead that the loving thing to do is the right thing to do, always. He says actions are only as loving as their consequences. The second proposition is that “*love is the only norm*” which explains the key idea that love **is** the law, it is not subject to what we see as “laws”, and it overrides all laws, some may see this as dangerous since it gives

permission to murder, steal etc, if they are the most loving thing to do in a given situation.

“Love and justice are the same,” is the third proposition of Situation Ethics, and it quite simply states that *“justice is love distributed, nothing else,”* which can be expanded into the principal *“[the right thing to do is] the greatest amount of love for the greatest amount of people.”* Another key idea of the Situation Ethics is the fourth proposition, *“Love is not liking,”* this seeks to define “love” in this context as the Greek notion of agape, this notion of love is defined nicely in 1 Corinthians by St. Paul:

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres.” (1 Corinthians, 13:4-8)

The fifth proposition is that *“Love Justifies its means,”* by this Fletcher is returning to his point about the intrinsic fallacy, according to Fletcher all actions are neither “right” nor “wrong”, however, they *become* “right” if they have a loving consequence, and “bad” if they do not. This key principal can be summarised as “the end justifies the means.” The final proposition of Situation Ethics is that *“Love decides there and then”* this is concerned with the idea that there are no other legalistic “laws” to follow aside from that of love. In any given situation the “right” thing to do is difference, depending on the circumstances.

Fletcher also lays down four working principals of Situation Ethics, which can be seen as the ‘justification’ for Situation Ethics; these are pragmatism (it works, therefore it is good), relativism (it is applied to the situation and thus better than fixed rules), positivism (the statement “love is good” is a priori fact) and personalism (Situation ethics allows us to take all situations into account, even the strangest of human relationships.)

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(B) Identify and comment on the weaknesses of Situation Ethics

Fletcher argues the strength of Situation Ethics in his four working principals; however there are many arguments against Situation Ethics which may be seen as weaknesses.

One difficulty with Situation Ethics is that according to Fletcher the right thing to do is “the greatest amount of love for the greatest amount of people”, but how far into the future does one consider? And how easy is that to judge? In the short term there may be minor consequences of an action, making it “right”, but long-term major problems may arise which were unforeseeable at the time of making the decision – does this make the original action “wrong”? *“We do not know if our actions will lead to heartache or joy, but the promotion of love for the Situationalist requires us to do so if we are to avoid acting selfishly.”* (www.faithnet.org.uk)

A significant weakness of Situation Ethics, in many people’s opinions, is that Fletcher says actions have no intrinsic moral value. Fletcher said that fact that in a given situation, any action could be seen as “right”, however, others have argued that just because something is the “best” thing to do in a situation; it is still not necessarily a “good” thing. For example, if one steals to feed their starving family, then they arguably did the “right” thing, but does that make stealing “good”, its just “more loving” than letting the family starve to death. This point of view has developed into an alternative to Situationalism; proportionalism, which accepts that certain actions are “good” or “bad”, but that in some situations they are the “right” thing to do, regardless of their moral value, as described by Bernard Hoose: *“An evil like death ... should never be described as ‘moral’. It is the act as a whole which is right or wrong, and it is the person ... who is morally good or morally bad.”*

Another weakness of Situation Ethics is that the lack of rules leaves moral choices open to subjective thought. This therefore relies on the fact that we are all capable of making objective decisions, and that we all think in the same way which would allow us all to come to the same decisions. Hume believed that we should all be able to come to these a priori conclusions since we are all given “reason” or “intuition”, but this is not a view shared by all. People have different priorities and this may affect

their ability to make a decision. For example the Nazis believed the Jews were responsible for Germany's problems, and therefore it made sense to get rid of them to save the country, however we would not say that the holocaust was by any means morally justified.

One final weakness of Situation Ethics is motivation, for a Christian motivation to be "good" in society comes from the promise of a happy afterlife, but for the atheist and agnostic what *need* is there to be good? Why bother being selfless? There are inevitably going to be people in society who won't make the "best" moral decision in every situation. What does one do then? If you lay more laws to force them their behaviour to be "good" then you are defeating the object of situationalism, but if you leave them not following the rules then you have antinomianism. One might say this weakness is unfounded though, since it is a problem which will apply to all possible ethical approaches.

575 Words
Total 1314 Words

Credits: All quotes not explicitly stated otherwise taken from "Situation Ethics" by Joseph Fletcher. Other resources used include: "The Puzzle of Ethics", "Dialogue: Ethical Theory" and "<http://www.faithnet.org.uk>"