

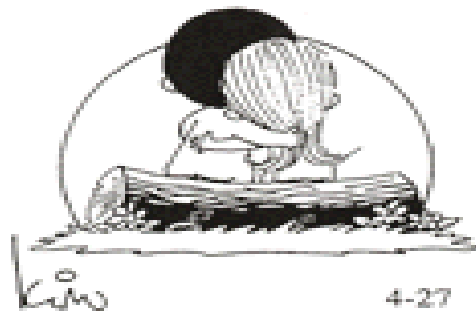
SITUATION ETHICS

All You Need Is Love

The Beatles (Lennon/McCartney)

Love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love.
There's nothing you can do that can't be done.
Nothing you can sing that can't be sung.
Nothing you can say but you can learn how to play the game
It's easy.
There's nothing you can make that can't be made.
No one you can save that can't be saved.
Nothing you can do but you can learn how to be in time
It's easy.
All you need is love, all you need is love,
All you need is love, love, love is all you need.
Love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love,
love.
All you need is love, all you need is love,
All you need is love, love, love is all you need.
There's nothing you can know that isn't known.
Nothing you can see that isn't shown.
Nowhere you can be that isn't where you're meant to be.
It's easy.
All you need is love, all you need is love,
All you need is love, love, love is all you need.
All you need is love (all together now)
All you need is love (everybody)
All you need is love, love, love is all you need.

Love is...



...uncomplicated.

SITUATION ETHICS

Background

Think of the 1960's – What was happening in society?



What was happening was also reflected by a change in the way that some philosophers made decisions about what was right/wrong.

Although SE was around in the 1950's it gained more importance by the 1960's. It reflected a demand for a more liberal approach to moral issues.



JOSEPH FLETCHER is an American theologian who is famous for developing Situation Ethics in a book published by the same name in 1966. From this book we can put together a definition, or checklist for the ethical system. Fletcher attracted much criticism from the press and religious groups for his ideas. In particular the Roman Catholic Church were critical of his method of decision making.

Summary

Situation ethics is a way of deciding what is right or wrong *according to the situation* – nothing is ever good or bad in itself.

In other words – nothing is every ***intrinsically*** good or bad. The only criteria is whether an action is beneficial to others.

Q. Can you name any things that have traditionally been accepted as 'good' or 'bad'?



Fletcher translates the principle of utility into the principle of love, and develops a form of act utilitarianism. For Fletcher, **LOVE** guides the moral decisions rather than rules.

Fletcher said that **every situation is unique** and there can never be enough moral laws to cover every conceivable occasion. Thus we have to ask ourselves 'What does love require of me?' in each situation. No other question matters as much because there is only one norm, love.

Three approaches to ethical decision-making:

Fletcher claimed there were 3 approaches to ethics. This first is against laws (**antinomianism**). The second is for laws (**legalism**) and the third is situational (**Situation Ethics**).

1. Antinomianism is completely situationist as there are no rules, laws or principles.

Q. What things do you think Fletcher saw as bad about taking this approach?



2. Legalism provides rules where people make their own moral decisions.

Q. What do you think Fletcher criticised this approach for?



3. Fletcher argued that neither extreme could work and so **situational** approach was better. Each situation was assessed in terms of the most loving response.

The guiding principle when making a decision in Christian Situationalism is **AGAPE**, which means love.



Situation Ethics is sensitive to variety and complexity. It uses principles to illuminate the situation and not to direct the action. A situationist is prepared to set aside rules and principles of their community in the situation is love seems better served by doing so.

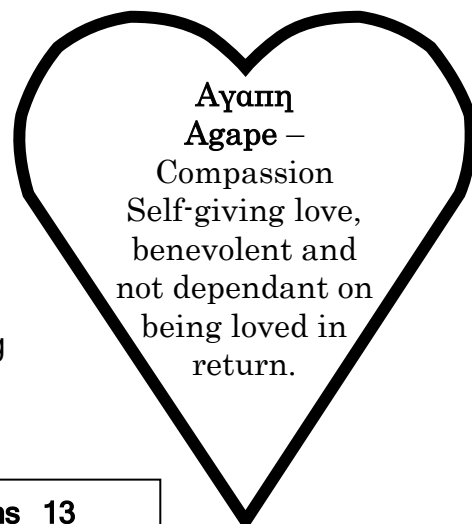
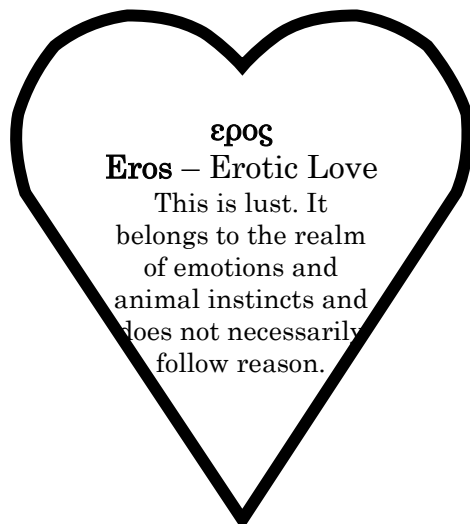
Task:

(a) Think of a contemporary dilemma where obeying the law would not lead to the best consequences.

(b) How would applying a situational approach lead to a better outcome?

Situation Ethics is sometimes summarised crudely in the Beatles song 'All you Need is Love'. But what exactly is love?

The Greeks had 4 words for love:



For those who are not Christians, the guiding principle is acting out the **highest good** or **SUMMUM BONUM**.

There is a famous passage in 1Corinthians 13 that summarizes the Christian attitude to agape; "Love is patient; Love is kind: Love is not envious, boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.... And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and greatest of these is love."

HOW SITUATION ETHICS WORKS IN PRACTISE

Fletcher sets out –

4 working principles and
6 basic propositions

The 4 underlying principles are:

(1) **Pragmatism** – It is necessary that all courses of action should work. In this case the success or failure of an action is to be judged by **love**.

(2) **Relativism** – supporters of SE reject the use of words ‘never’, ‘always’ and ‘absolute’ as they believe that circumstances always give exceptions. According to Fletcher *relativism does not mean that anything goes*. (This was a criticism of SE in the 1960’s). Instead all actions should be relative to love. Humans being are commanded to act lovingly, but how this is applied will depend on the situation. E.g. Jesus attacked the Pharisees’ strict insistence on following Jewish Law.

Situation Ethics ‘relativizes the absolute, it does not absolutize the relative’.

(3) **Positivism** – Faith is accepted on a voluntary basis. SE depends on a free decision by individuals to give first place to Christian love. Therefore SE rests on a value judgement that cannot be rationally proved. When asked ‘Why should I love?’ there is no answer to this question. The person has to see this is the most important thing.

(4) **Personalism** – People are most important. Therefore decisions are based on what is best to help people. Morality should be person-centred.
‘Morality is made for man, morality is not man-made.’



NB. CONSCIENCE

SE claims that there is no such thing as conscience which should guide human actions (at least if conscience stands for intuition or God in some way speaking to human beings).

The 6 Fundamental Propositions are:

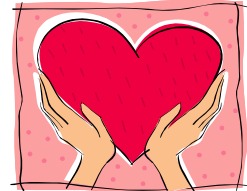
(1) *SE holds that nothing is good in itself except for love.*

("One 'thing' is intrinsically good, namely, love and nothing else.")

Actions are good if they help human beings and they are bad if they hurt people. What is right in one case may be wrong in another. LOVE decides which actions are good and which are bad.

Circumstances are all important. As mentioned previously, there is nothing intrinsically good or bad.

Q- What does this mean?



(2) *Law has been replaced with the principle of love.*

("The ruling norm of Christian decision is love: nothing else.")

Jesus and St. Paul replaced the Jewish Law with the principle of love. Even the 10 Commandments are not absolute. Bonhoeffer in his 'Ethics' considered the command against killing to be absolute and uses this to reject euthanasia. However Bonhoeffer was executed for trying to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Supporters of SE would maintain that his action was probably right.

SE aims to widen freedom and responsibility because it believes human beings can cope with this. Love makes it a positive duty to go out to people in need.

Task- Think of other situations/people to support this proposition.

(3) *Love and justice are the same as justice is love at work in the community.*

("Love and justices are the same of love is justice distributed.")

Fletcher sees justice as a matter of giving people what is due to them, i.e. love. It is caring and acting benevolently to others.



Justice is working out the most loving thing to do taking the interests of all those in the community into account.

E.g. -

(4) *Love wills the good for the neighbour, whether individuals like others or not.*



("Love wills the neighbours good, whether we like him or not.")

Kierkegaard talked of the need for Christian love to be non-preferential. In other words, love cannot have favourites as Jesus made it clear that our neighbour is anybody and that we should 'Love our enemies'. It is practical. Christian agape, real Christian love, desires the good of the other and not one's own good.

E.g. -

(5) *Only the end justifies the means; nothing else.* (Same as original)
Love can and does justify anything, but love must be the end that is sought. It can never be a means to get something else.

Q – What does this mean?

(6) *Love's decisions are made in the circumstances of each situation.*
("Love's decisions are made situationally, not prescriptively.")
SE depends on the view that individuals can cope with freedom in decision making.

Q- Do you think it is better to have a rigid laws or the freedom to chose?

Task – Using some of Fletcher's case studies discuss how/what decision should be made.

Remember to use the following advice given by Fletcher:

- Use agape
- When deciding between 2 people – chose the one whose need is greater.
If this is oneself – this is acceptable.
- Try to help as many as possible.

CASE 1

The President of USA is involved in a bomb attack. Should he callously scuttle for the safety of his shelter, or tend to the cries of fear and pain around him?

Why?¹



CASE 2

A company's shares become suddenly worthless. News of this leaks to a firm who buy and sell shares for clients. Should they sell their clients' shares and ignore the welfare of everybody else? Why?²

CASE 3

One unit of blood plasma is left in hospital. A doctor feels guilty when he ignores a drunk and gives the blood to a mother. Should he feel guilty? Why?³



CASE 4

A Scottish woman saw that her suckling baby, ill and crying, was betraying her and her three other children, and the whole company, to the Indians. But she clung to her child, and they were caught and killed.

A Negro woman, seeing how her crying baby endangered another trail party, killed it with her won hands, to keep silence and reach the fort.

Which woman made the right decision? Why?⁴



CASE 5

See separate sheet.

¹ Taken from 'Situation Ethics', J Fletcher, Pg. 113.

² Taken from 'Situation Ethics', J Fletcher, Pg. 97.

³ Taken from 'Situation Ethics', J Fletcher, Pg. 97.

⁴ Taken from 'Situation Ethics', J Fletcher, Pg. 125.

Fletcher claims that it is a mistake to generalise. You cannot say 'Is it ever right to lie to your family?' The answer for Fletcher must be 'I don't know, give me an example.' A concrete situation is needed, not a generalisation. Is a woman right to have sex with a man for money? The situationist will say 'It all depends'. If the money is to be used to buy a new dress then the situation is different from if the money is being used to stop the woman's family from dying of starvation.

It is important to understand what Fletcher does not say:

1. He does not say 'anything goes' and he does not encourage 'permissiveness'. The love he advocates is one which involves an immense capacity for self-sacrifice and a very high view of the value of other human beings.
2. He does not completely ignore Christian teachings. He has a limited respect for it but only as far as it illuminates what agape-love is like. He is not indifferent to the authority of the Bible and claims that his theory is grounded in it.
3. He is not a hedonist arguing for the supremacy of pleasure.

During the 1960's, Christians were searching for new styles of sexual morality, Fletcher's work became part of that debate. One of the reasons for this was that he used illustrations from sexual morality frequently. For example:

"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."⁵

In light of this statement – What is a strength of Situation Ethics?

Task- Create a modern dilemma and try to solve what Situation Ethics would say is the best thing to do in the situation. Use the 4 principles and the 6 propositions.

It might be a current situation in the news or one that you have made yourself.

⁵ Situation Ethics, J Fletcher, Pg. 139.

Is Fletcher's approach a much-needed reformation of morality or an invitation to anarchy?

In favour of Fletcher:

1. It is very simple in its main thesis and is practical.
2. Situations change and SE takes this into account. (E.g. Progressive Judaism's attempts to apply the Torah to the modern age and Orthodox Judaism's attempts to preserve the Law against moral relativism)
3. It provides an alternative Christian ethic. It recovers some significant New Testament insights (Love your neighbour) and rescues Christian ethics from an elaborate string of moral laws.
4. It provides guidelines for situations where many values seem to compete for loyalty.
5. It upholds the value of persons in an age where technology and vast institutions seem to be crushing the individual.
6. It is based on concern for others.
7. It takes into account the complexities of human life and enables an emotional and rational response to determine what is right in the given situation.
8. It makes persons more important than principles (Mark 2vs27).

SOME CRITICISMS OF SITUATIONAL ETHICS

1. Situation Ethics was condemned by Pope Pius XII in 1952 (14 years before Fletcher's book was written) as an **individualistic** and **subjective** appeal to the concrete circumstances of actions to justify decisions in opposition to the natural law or God's revealed will.

Pope Pius XII was right that SE was opposed to natural law but this criticism only counts if you first accept natural law as correct.

As for the Pope's reference to 'God's revealed will', supporters of SE would say that God revealed His will most fully in Jesus Christ and it was he who insisted on the primacy of love.

2. Paul Ramsey (Pg.14 in Fletcher's book) "Has pointed out with some distaste that it is both personalistic and contextual."

Q- What does he mean? Can you give an example to illustrate his point?

3. New morality – This is an offensive label given to SE. It is not a Biblical moral but one which we decided to make. It lacks authority ('new' morality), i.e. it has just sprung up from nowhere.

Task- Create a list of criticisms of Situation Ethics. There should be at least 6 good points on your list.

If you are stuck, read through Vardy and summarize his criticisms of SE and read through Peter Baez and summarize both sides of his arguments.

QUESTIONS

1. Is it right that actions should be judged by their consequences?
2. What does it mean for an action to be loving? How might love be defined?
3. What are the principles dangers of Situation Ethics and do they outweigh the possible advantages?
4. How might a supporter of SE decide whether capital punishment was right or wrong?
5. If a woman could save the life of someone she loved by going to bed with a fat, old man in a powerful position and it no other option was available, would it be right for her to do this and why?

KEY WORDS IN ETHICS

1. The theory that morality is **absolute** rather than relative. I.e. that there are **moral** truths which we must adhere to and which particular situations, people or places do not affect.

2. 'I ought to do such and such regardless of my own wishes.' The key principle of Kant's **ethics** which states essentially that an act is **immoral** is the rule which would authorize it cannot be made into a rule for all human beings.

3. Theories that maintain that an action is good or bad, right or wrong, by something within the action itself. (*Deon comes from the Greek meaning 'Duty'*)

4. The belief that human beings are capable of handling their affairs without evoking a God. The disengagement of institutions, practises and activities from religion.

5. The theory that morality is relative rather than **absolute**: i.e. that morality can differ in different cultures at different times.

6. Belief that an action is right if it has consequences that lead to happiness, and wrong if it brings about the reverse. Thus society should aim for the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

7. The belief that there is a **universal moral** order at work and that some ethical beliefs are identical irrespective of differing cultural beliefs and practices.

8. Theory that the only ethical principle applicable to all situations is love.

9. Theories which are concerned with the consequences of actions or rules. The traditional philosophical name for this is teleology from the Greek *telos*, meaning end or purpose.

10. 'What one person calls good another calls bad.' The belief that morality is different in different countries or cultures at different times.

11. A type of **ethic** that seeks to prescribe rules for every conceivable occasion or moral choice.

12. Applicable to all human beings, situations and places. A **moral rule** which is 'universalizable' is one which is capable of being applied to all human beings without self-contraction.

13. Theory that everything is created for a particular purpose and fulfilling this purpose is the 'good' to which everything aims.

14. The belief that ethical values depend upon, and vary with, cultural conditioning and moral training, and so no moral belief system can be **universally** true.

15. Theories in which actions are judged good or bad by reference to the end which they aim.

Word Bank

Summum bonum	Absolutism
Subjective morality	Deontological
Utilitarianism	Consequentialism
Relativism	Natural Law Theory
Categorical Imperative	Universalism
Secularism	Teleological
Cultural Absolutism	Objective
Situation Ethics	Legalism
Cultural Relativism	
Subjective	
Prescriptivist	
Objective morality	

16. Coming from within us rather than from outside.

17. A final value which is desirable in itself and not merely desirable as a means to an end.

18. Outside or external to us rather than within us.

19. Principles that are the same for all people everywhere and at all times.

20. A name commonly given to these view which hold that moral judgements are in some special sense 'action-guiding'.