

REVIEW OF THE MORALITY GAP - AN EVANGELICAL RESPONSE TO SITUATION ETHICS

The morality gap: an evangelical response to situation ethics by Erwin W Lutzer is a delight to read.

The book argues that situation ethics, the notion that rules can be broken if it is most loving thing to do is full of fallacies. He thinks the Bible offers a better way than it.

There is no such thing as breaking a commandment as long as love demands that you ignore the commandment. The commandment does not apply then. Morality focuses on doing the lesser evil when it is unavoidable. He argues that if doing something with love makes it right even if it does a lot of harm then it is not the lesser evil. The action is irrelevant to morality or neutral. That is the mistake situation ethics makes. It cannot see that it is not an ethics at all!

If loving intention alone is the be all and end all or if morality is determined by the loving intention of the agent alone then it follows you cannot assess or judge anybody by their actions but only by the intentions they say they have. The Bible says that the Jews decided to get rid of Jesus or else Rome would unleash bloodshed on innocent Jews over him. It would follow from situation ethics that if the Jews thought they were right to get Jesus nailed to the cross then it was a sin for them if they tried to prevent this. Maybe Jesus was a fraud but doing it for loving reasons so he was right after all to do so. Manipulation is not a sin as long as the end goal is love.

In Situationism, Hitler was a heroic saint if he intended his killing of the Jews to be for the best. Hitler was definitely about trying to be the most useful to the most people. The likes of Hitler took advantage of the fact that bad consequences are not evidence or indicating that a moral theory is wrong.

Situationism when it says the consequence alone matters means the intended consequences not just consequences. If you are asked by a religious persecutor to abandon Jesus and you refuse and you get killed and your wife and children are left without you then you have sinned.

Love is hard to define and put into practice in the sense that what appears to be love can be very damaging. If morality is just about love then it is very confusing.

Situationists do allow for disagreement. Fletcher said Captain Scott did right when he himself and his expedition stayed with an injured man and end up dying themselves of exposure. But Situationism would imply they did wrong and should have let the injured man die. The trouble is Situationist would have you shooting the likes of Hitler to save millions of people but that is disagreeing with Hitler who in this issue was merely being Situationist himself.

Fletcher brings up how a priest bombed a Nazi train during the Second World War. The Nazis eliminated twenty hostages a day as a ploy to urge the guilty person to give himself up. The priest was found out days later. When asked why he didn't just confess and have the lives of the hostages spared his excuse was that he had to be there to give absolution to save souls for there was no other priest available.

People and principles cannot really be separated except in theory. They are fused. For example to treat a principle as a thing implies it can be used like a thing. But doing that hurts people. Principles and things are connected too. For example, your house is a thing but if somebody treats it in a degrading way that makes you angry and violates you. You will not stand being accused of caring only about a thing. It's not just a thing - its your home and you are connected to it and it to you. That is why the assertion that people must be put before principles and things is absurd as a hard and fast rule.

Fletcher thinks nothing is intrinsically right or wrong but that love is intrinsically right. But to say a lie is good when the results will be good is in fact saying the lie is intrinsically or inherently right then. What if situation ethics then is lying that love is paramount? It is not an ethic at all but an assumption and has a nerve asking for trust when it advocates lies.

If morality is determined by the consequences being good enough, the unintentional giving of somebody a painkiller that kills them would be immoral. So you are doomed to failure for good consequences are useless if that is the kind of logic and attitude behind them.

In addition, even if it were possible calculating consequences is problematic. You have a number of steps.

First is the immediate results and the number of people directly affected.

Second can you work out what the unexpected results and the potential results are going to be?

Third is the indirect results and the number of people who are now involved.

Fourth is can you work out what the unexpected results and the potential results are going to be for these people?

Fifth what is the length of time the good is going to last and the bad? What if the bad lasts a bit longer?

Sixth human natures feelings and reactions are impossible to predict. Something can cause people to hate each other.

Seventh legalistic people have good intentions and why are we battling them and calling ourselves good because we break the rules in the name of love? A football team is legalistic for you cannot expect to abandon the rules during a game in the name of love!

Eighth what if there are paranormal or supernatural powers that tamper so you don't have a clue what they are going to do?

Incredibly, Situationists say that Jesus was against rules. Jesus did not condemn rules at all but in fact reaffirmed the Jewish rules and added rules of his own. He only condemned those who keep laws but who have no concern for the love and spirituality that the laws are about. He condemned showy obedience instead of obedience from the heart.

He condemned man inventing rules of religion for only God had the right to do that (Mark 7:9).

He argues that legalism is solved by going back to the laws of God in the Old Testament (Matthew 5:19, John 5:45-47 and 10:35).

Jesus refuted Situationists when he said that it was right to use nice ointments on his feet despite the cost and though it could have been sold or feeding the poor.

It is said that if you are to love your neighbour as you ought to love yourself then you cannot love yourself correctly. If you cannot do that you will be no good at neighbourly love either.

Christians argue that unless you keep the big commandment to love God totally with all your heart you cannot truly love your neighbour. The argument is that God changes your heart so that you can put your neighbour on the exact same level as yourself. And having God as the first to love takes the focus off you and stops it being so much about you.

This amounts to saying nobody really loves anybody for who does that? That is what religion means by saying we are sinners for nobody can do it and putting God first tends to be something to try to do rather than something to succeed at.

Proverbs 16 says God hates the sinner with the sin and vice versa.

4 The Lord works out everything to its proper end—

even the wicked for a day of disaster.

5 The Lord detests all the proud of heart.

Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished.

6 Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for; through the fear of the Lord evil is avoided.

Love the sinner and hate the sin is the lie behind belief in God. Its incoherent so a God who represents the principle is himself incoherent.

Christian apologist Norman L Geisler preaches moral hierarchism. It argues that you are exempt from a moral norm when bigger moral norms have to be served. For example, you can lie if you have to save lives. That is not choosing the lesser evil. It merely says you cannot be penalised or found guilty of called a sinner for lying. The rule is still in place but cannot be followed. So you can break the rule for the sake of a bigger one but you cannot be rewarded or punished for doing so. If you cannot be condemned or punished then you cannot be rewarded either.

All good things we do are choosing a lesser evil. There is a side to everything. Giving somebody cake means that those who die from too much cake – diabetes or whatever – have something to do with you. We then reward those who do certain lesser evils. Those who risk serious injury in sport and lead others into the risk are rewarded when they excel. The man who

is forced to kill person a so that two other people can live will not be rewarded. He will not be condemned either. Morality is more cherry-picking than anybody, particularly Christians, want to admit. That makes them more morally suspect than any atheist for at least the latter is not blaming God for giving the morality. To base a bad morality around God is to worship a bad God.

The book explores Geisler who advocates hierarchism - a view that looks similar to situation ethics but is quite different. Geisler interestingly says we know intuitively as a race that it is wiser and better to love God rather than people. This he says is true for atheists too. They know it deep down. This accuses atheists of not understanding human nature. If human nature needs God first and foremost then atheists are very blind and bad and in a sense are dehumanising people. God and implicit hate speech go together.

The assertion in the Bible that some sins are worse than others has no relevance here to hierarchism. Lesser sins are still sins but in hierarchism doing the smaller sin means it is not a sin at all.

Situation ethics is really a morality of the gaps. There are holes and unanswered questions and so it tries to fill the hole with God. The idea is there is a gap and this gap is evidence of the role of love and the presence of God. But as we live in a natural world, we have to live by evidence. That is our nature. So assuming anything supernatural is not on. Most religions agree and try to give evidence that their beliefs about God etc are true.

Conclusions: Situation ethics is an oxymoron. It is neither truly concerned with situations or love. If it is the only real option then it is still a terrible one.