

SITUATION ETHICS - THE METHOD OF AUTHENTIC LOVE

Overview

Situation ethics says that only love matters not rules. Do what is the most loving thing under the circumstances no matter what you or the other person deserves - love unconditionally. Situation ethics bans moral agents from saying that an action must never be done, an action is complete, an action is perfect or an action is always right.

Love refers to the love between friends. The love a parent has for their child. Love refers to the sex-related love between a couple. Love refers to unconditional love or agape. Situation ethics is mostly about agape.

Joseph Fletcher who developed situation ethics suggested that there are only three basic approaches to ethics:

1 Legalistic - the approach that only cares about rules. For example, the Catholic teaching that abortion is wrong no matter what.

2 The lawless idea - that rules or love or nothing really matters.

3 The situation ethics approach that asserts that rules are to be discarded when they get in the way of doing the most loving thing. In this system, there should be no rules but only guidelines. It suggests that putting love first must be a voluntary exercise. It puts love for people, including yourself, first. The end justifies the means as long as the end is love. The ethics is simple which is what we need in a cruel and fast world.

Situation ethics is based on the principle of pragmatism - do what works not what feels best. It is based on assessing that different situations need a different approach. Eg adultery could sometimes be right. It is based on the assertion that no ethic can be proven so you must choose situationism for there is good enough support for its accuracy or rightness. It is based on a personalist approach which holds that morality is not theory but people. To be moral is to be concerned about people not rules.

Fletcher used examples of hard cases to show that sometimes moral prescriptions are no good and only the command to love matters. A woman had to kill her baby to silence it for its crying was going to get her and others killed by evil people.

Situation ethics teaches that love is the only law and that circumstances make all the difference so we should not have laws for laws tend to ignore circumstances. It teaches a method for deciding what is moral. It is not a moral system and it disapproves of moral systems as constraining and limiting and blocks to love. It teaches that the value, love, is what matters not rules. It teaches that evidence comes before principles - except one principle which is love. For example, if your principle is that people should be open to new life during sex in marriage that principle should be abandoned if the evidence shows that a huge number of killer diseases are being passed on and it would be wiser to encourage people to use condoms to protect themselves. Situationism reminds the person of their huge responsibility to do the right thing. With moral systems and rules you will have, "If I am doing wrong or doing evil, its the rules fault not mine. If I as a good Catholic urge the poor to get AIDS rather than use condoms, that is not my responsibility and I am only obeying my religion's law."

Christians claim to also accept that love alone is the law but feel that this teaching is twisted in Situationism to allow for saying that you should commit adultery and murder and other things that other systems call evil when they have the most love in them. The Christian, Joseph Fletcher, was the philosophy's main proponent. He realised that his philosophy of love was incompatible with Jesus's frequent tendency to lay down moral rules and he became a Humanist in 1967.

Situationism recognises that no two situations that seem to be the same are really the same. Each situation is different and each is complex. Situationism is not a system. For example, it will not say, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." It would say, "Decide for yourself what is the most loving thing to do recognising that no two situations are exactly the same though they make look the same." Situationism is right that no two situations are the same. This is just a fact and religion tends to oppose it and the evil Vatican in particular.

Situationism is not far from Utilitarianism, the method of trying to work for the greatest number's greatest happiness. The differences are that it can form part of a religious outlook. Utilitarianism refuses to consider God's feelings and wants so it is non-religious. Situationism says that the motive matters more than the results. Some Utilitarians would say it is good to hate and kill somebody and that doing this can lead to most people being far happier. Situationism says that persons may not be killed except if more persons will die if they live. Utilitarianism in principle is forced to deny that murder is necessarily wrong. Many Situationists condone euthanasia which brings them a step closer to Utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism says that anything goes as long as the greatest happiness of the greatest number is promoted. Situationism says the same thing but adds that love is a duty. It says it would be wrong to make society hate somebody even to make the most happiest. That is a small difference.

The problems with Situation Ethics

One major problem is that you can swear you do something out of love and be wrong or significantly wrong for evil is good at disguising itself. Most of us try to look at the good motives we have for doing something and not look at the bad ones. There are always several motives for everything we do. It is said that rule based moralities protect us from our crafty and latent selfishness which may disguise itself so well that even we do not realise it is there. And when a decision has to be made fast we don't have time to check our real motives correctly. Now it is obvious that if we are like that we are like that and rule based moralities will not protect us. Paul disagrees for he writes that love is the fulfilment of the law - ie that love is guided by the law and kept pure by the rules. It supposedly addresses secret and latent selfishness.

Like Utilitarianism, situation ethics denies the fact that I know for sure I exist and am not as sure about the reality of other people so my needs take priority. Both Utilitarianism and Situationism both tell me not to always put myself first. The trouble is that even if an ethic tells you not to put yourself first all the time and to be willing to sacrifice yourself the sense that I alone am sure I exist and therefore everything else takes second place even God and even my baby the ethic is not going to be convincing at all. One will have to resort to intimidation and hypocrisy to cover up one's true thoughts and feelings about it.

It is felt that though moral situations and decisions are always different they have enough in common to justify fixed rules. Each situation is not unique enough to justify situationism.

Legalists blame rules for their obsession with rules and how they love rules and not people on rules. So do many people who suffer at their hands or because of their philosophy. But is it the rules or how people think of them? It is the latter. It is possible to be very liberal but have the legalistic mindset. For example, liberals tend to hate people and exclude them who want more rules than, "Just be liberal", "Allow as much abortion as possible" or "Normalise pornography." Legalism is not to be blamed on rules but on the human desire for control. Even liberals have principles they want to force on others. You cannot drop a good rule just because nobody treats it right or uses it right. To drop the rule just because you want to make feelings rule is stupid. Better to be ruled by a sensible rule than one that is driven by emotion.

The alarming thing about Situationism is that it authorises too much freedom. Some would say that all ethical systems have the same problem. Take the absolutist who says adultery is wrong full stop no matter what the circumstances are. The absolutist is seeking the freedom to lay down absolute laws. Is this really better than not having absolute laws? The person who lays down absolute moral laws would not be doing so in love but out of a wish to control others. He is saying his moral laws are right and the absolute rules of those who disagree with him are wrong and at least harmful if not evil. So he promotes division and suspicion and sectarianism. His ecumenism is insincere. The absolutist wants the freedom to manipulate others and control them so the absolutist is the one that seeks too much freedom. The freedom of Situationism is scary but the alternative is worse. And at least Situationism asks you to have a good heart. It is easier to live in a world that means well but makes lots of ethical mistakes than in one that does not but is not warm of heart.

Situationists are accused of claiming to be infallible because though you may think a particular course is loving it might lead only to trouble. You would need to be psychic to foretell the consequences. It is true there is, often huge, risk involved but Situationists say this risk is necessary and your motive is about love. Situationists do not claim to be infallible or fortune-tellers. They claim to be trying to do their best.

Christians are Situationists with belief in God. They urge you that it is the most loving thing to believe in God. Thus by default adultery and murder are better than not seeing you should believe in God! It is situationism in principle.

The absolutist could prolong the tortuous life of a dying person for spite and say his motive is an absolute respect for life. The Situationist might give the person morphine to kill them but even if this is wrong the Situationist is the better person for he or she means well.

It is not how much freedom any moral system or moral outlook such as Situationism allows but how much legitimate freedom it allows. Rational morality could allow a lot more freedom than other moral outlooks and systems. The other systems could be more constricting. But if a moral system is wrong, it is wrong regardless of how liberating or constricting it is. Its liberalism or rules do not make it better when it is wrong in the first place.

As with the followers of Utilitarianism, it is impossible for the Situationist predict if an action will really result in the most good. The act is neither good or bad until the results are seen. And these results are often dependent on other people. What

if a person throws a spanner in the works – deliberately? For example, if I work hard to throw a party for my son and his ex-friend says something to him that night that spoils the whole thing according to Utilitarianism and Situationism I have done wrong. The latter will say I meant to do right and that is what counts in this situation. But we want a morality that works and not just one that is about motives. We want to be practical.

Utilitarianism and Situationism would be dangerous when it is believed that human beings are more sinful than good which is a doctrine that is directly implied by belief in God (because if we are more good than bad we don't need faith in God) and bluntly stated in the Bible. They make morality into guesses and crossed fingers. If God exists he comes first and anything that falls short of that is sin meaning all we do is sin. Even our thoughts of God are inadequate for we won't bring our whole selves to him and keep holding something back which is why we always rebel.

The examples that Fletcher gives to prove Situationism are extreme ones. He tells the story of a wrongly-imprisoned married woman who committed adultery to get pregnant so that she would be freed from a prison camp and go back to her husband and children. Fletcher approved for he saw this as serving love. It was the least evil. It is true that she probably did do right. Some would say that it was wrong but it was not immoral for she had no choice. Others would say she had a choice and so her adultery was immoral. Suppose she had a choice and the adultery was still right. This would not mean that it is right when a person makes an unimportant promise to somebody that is not important to him and then breaks it because he'd rather go to the pub than keep it for that is not as extreme a situation. Some forms of Situationism would have to say the most love and justice was in not keeping it for he would hurt himself more than the other person if he did not. But we can agree with Situationism in the extreme cases but in the lesser cases, the maintenance of order and not love must be what is gone by. But perhaps some Situationists will say that the maintenance of order then would be love.

Do the extreme examples show that Situationism is nonsense? Some say yes - they don't want to believe in Situationism in daily life but only want it limited to extreme horrors that happen to one or two people thousands of miles away. They want Situationism to be almost useless in the world or virtually unused. But the answer is no. Fletcher uses extreme examples but any case where one rule was up against another would do. An extreme situation is a very important one. It drives the point home that principles can contradict each other so you have to do whatever, to the best of your judgement, serves the most principles the best. Extreme or not, that is all that is happening - you decide what principles to sacrifice in the name of the greater good. Extreme has nothing to do with Situationism being right or wrong.

There is only one way to do what is right but many many more to do what is wrong. Chance seems to be against the consequentialist and the Situationist. But legalism is more dangerous for it ignores results.

In the fundamentalist Christian work Christianity for the Tough-Minded we read that Fletcher's ethics are wrong for he was not clear in his mind on what love was (page 92). He said that it was an action, the reason for the action, an attitude, a preference for goodness and a way for relating towards others. The book's fallacy is assuming that love is one of these only. Love is all these things. Each of the elements is inseparable. Each one is love and in another sense they are all love collectively. The objection is invalid. Moreover, Christians claim that love is all these things. Clearly Christianity has to smear Fletcher's doctrine. They even condemn their own doctrine when he teaches it!

Here is another Christian objection to Situationism, "There are a lot of things which can never be right. This is not to say that absolutism is right for some things always have bad consequences therefore are always wrong on a consequentialist basis. Examples are committing infanticide just because the baby cries too much at night or battering the wife because the dinner was not made on time. Situationism sees rigid law as a bad thing. But whatever the law allows it encourages. So if the law made infanticide legal under all circumstances it would be encouraging it. So without the laws that Situationism hates so much there will be less love and morality and excessive freedom."

Fletcher believed that justice and love were one and the same thing. He believed that since justice gives a person what they deserve and since all deserve love that justice is love and love is justice. But if you hate somebody it is unintelligible to say that you deserve love. You might have to be loved for another reason but to say you deserve love is hypocritical and absurd. You might have to be loved to help you reform or because you are a person but you don't deserve it. Love and justice are not the same thing. Fletcher could still save his doctrine that love is the law if he can prove that love is better than justice. But to love a person without regard for justice is not love at all for it has no concern for what a person deserves. Justice and love are either equally important or justice is better than love for there can be no love until it is worked for and served first. God

God by definition is that which is to be totally and ultimately valued as being perfectly good. Fletcher approves of Jesus' diabolical command to love God with all our power which is really just another way of saying we should love God only. So, real Christian Situationism is really only worried about God and forbids many things because they hurt others which hurts God – the latter being the only hurt they are concerned about.

Situation ethics should be about what people need not God. It is hardly loving to put a God whose existence may be in

doubt before the person sitting beside you. And God is surplus to requirements and thus should not be honoured as God. God is only a waste of love.

True Situationism is irreconcilable with belief in a moral God. If God exists he does secret miracles to make what is expected to happen not happen for his unfathomable plan is all that is in his head. If Situationism or consequentialism is the true doctrine of right and wrong God tears it up for you cannot plan anything if God exists. Evil is to reign on earth if God lives and reigns forever and ever.

There is one thing that the Situationist must consider to be always wrong apart from hatred or indifference. That is not converting others to Situationism. There is always some way that can be done no matter how narrow others may be – even if it is just sending an anonymous report in disguised handwriting through the post. Situationism wants each person to do what is best for themselves in their own life and the more Situationists there are the better for goodness in the heart and good works. People who do not like anybody stealing from them will not want to give anybody a reason to defraud them or want people to be forced to take what is theirs for some overriding good. And if Situationism is right it is necessary that it be popularised for a good example for others. But people are not going to like it much. If it is the true morality, it is to be tolerated and lived with rather than celebrated.

If Situationism is bad when it is prevalent in society then Jesus who Fletcher thinks taught it must have been a fraud when he said he wanted all to be told his gospel.

If all we need is love, then what is God promoting religion for when he supposedly does miracles? If we have to decide for ourselves, religion is only going to get in the way for its a system of rules about behaviour and beliefs. The only good miracle would be melting cold hearts so that they reach out to all people in love. Any other miracle such as the resurrection of Jesus would only be showing off.

Despite the attempts to base situation ethics on God, God is only a obstacle. The worship of God is thus evil.