

Compare and contrast the ethical theories of natural law and situation ethics.

There are two main approaches to ethics which are held by Christians today. Over the years it has proved to be a very controversial and widely debated issue. Catholics and certain other 'strict' denominations of the Christian church hold the view that natural law should be the means of making ethical decisions, whereas more liberal Christians consider situation ethics as a more suitable ethical system to go by.

Natural law was advocated by St Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. It states that all ethical decisions should be made by looking at the absolute moral laws which have been laid down for us by God. For Christians these stem from The Ten Commandments. Believers in this are known as Ethical Deontologists. They maintain that an action is intrinsically good, bad, right or wrong. When faced with a moral dilemma, one should refer to the Law, irrespectively of what the outcome will be. It is suggested that the human purpose of life is to live and reproduce, to live harmoniously, to learn and to worship God.

Problems can arise when the consequence of the decision causes more harm than good. An example of this can be found in Catholic moral theology - abortion is immoral and can never be permitted. A loophole in this law means that a surgical procedure may be acceptable even if the result of it leads to the death of a foetus. In this case abortion isn't the primary intention, but is a by-product of the primary objective. This makes it permissible, but can lead to further problems if there are more biological complications. It is at points such as this that the basic natural law approach begins to fall apart. In this day and age it is becoming increasingly difficult to apply absolute moral laws to every situation that arises. On the basis of the principle, it could be argued that it is acceptable to kill thousands of Afghans so as to avoid the deaths of a few Americans. Evil 'effects' can be easily justified by claiming that they are by-products of one's actions.

This brings us to the question of whether God has laid down firm and unalterable rules or whether as human beings, we need to make our own moral decisions.

As a result of the major flaws that appear in the theory of natural law, a Teleological approach to ethics was later introduced by the Anglican theologian, Joseph Fletcher, although the basic ideas of situation ethics have a much longer history. This relative theory of ethics is based on consequentiality - the outcome of an action. The main principle of this theory is that for an action to be ethical, it simply has to be carried out in a loving manner. Nothing is intrinsically good except for love. Actions are good if they help human beings and they are bad if they hurt people - there are no other criteria. What is right in one case may be wrong in another. The individual

and the situation are the only important thing when making a decision, rather than applying a principle (for example 'thou shalt not kill'). The following quotations help to summarise situation ethics,

"There is only one ultimate and invariable duty, and its formula is 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'. How to do this is another question, but this is the whole of moral duty." (William Temple)...

"The law of love is the ultimate law because it is the negation of law; it is absolute because it concerns everything concrete...the absolutism of love is its power to go into concrete situations." (Paul Tillich)

Even though the teleological approach is a relative theory of ethics, it still involves an absolute law which is to do everything in love. However, the relativity of this theory allows room for exceptions to rules. Relativism doesn't imply that anything goes. For something to be relative, you 've got to have something to be a benchmark, and situation ethics states that it should be relative to love. Fletcher said that it "relativises the absolute, it does not absolutise the relative!"

Jesus and the apostles replaced the Torah, the strict Jewish Law with the principle of love. In the New Testament Jesus condemns the Pharisees for taking the Jewish Laws to such extremes because it loses the spirit in which the Law was written. This Christian love that Jesus taught and lived is known as 'agape'. Agape does not depend on being loved in return. The command of love calls individuals to a high level of personal responsibility. Agape is not selective and doesn't have favourites - it is a matter of attitude not feeling. It desires the good of others, not of the self. Above all, Christian love is practical (James 2:14-26). Jesus tells us that we should 'love our enemies' - our neighbour is anybody and everybody.

As with just about every theory of morality, situation ethics is open to a considerable amount of criticism. The notion of basing actions on consequentiality is not always helpful because it can be difficult to determine the outcomes of certain situations, especially in the long-term. Humans also tend to look at situations subjectively so it becomes easy for selfishness to taint love. It can be difficult to assess a situation with objectivity. Even some actions don't necessarily become good just because they are done from a loving motive.

The two theories that I have looked at are in stark contrast to one another. I think that it is difficult, if not impossible, to say that there is one approach that should be used at all times to justify every ethical decision that needs to be made. Each situation can throw up unexpected technicalities and difficulties that we have to contend with, but that doesn't mean to say that we shouldn't make decisions on the basis of our own moral beliefs.

Bishop John Robinson once wrote, 'There is no one ethical system that can claim to be Christian' and I completely agree with that. A supporter of the natural law approach asks what the law says and the situationist asks what is the best decision to help human beings, but why can't there be a middle ground? We should be able to use what was once the Law as a guideline when making ethical decisions rather than sticking rigidly to one approach

just for the sake of theological argument.

The Pope believes that the Law is 'God's revealed will' but it could be said that God revealed his will most fully through Jesus' time on Earth. Not only did He preach on the importance of love, but He also showed us perfect examples of it throughout His life. It is the subtle difference between these doctrines that lies at the heart of many issues which are in hot debate at the moment. If the Church could ignore these theological ambiguities and become reunited, perhaps they could then learn to fulfill their purpose in Christ.