

Examine what is meant by situation ethics

Joseph Fletcher an Anglican theologian was the main person to challenge the view that ethics and morality have to be based around laws and rules. He developed three ways of making moral decisions, these were:

1. The antinomian way
2. The legalistic way
3. The situational way

The antinomian way was a way of making decisions without any laws or principles. It is what feels right at that particular time and on no bases whatsoever, only on how it feels to you. This was also where existentialism arose. Existentialism being a principle developed by a 19th century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. His theory was that the best way to make decisions was for each individual to find their own unique bases for morality; the foundation for his argument was that no objective or rational bases could be grounded in moral decisions. So the antinomian approach is therefore that in every existential moment or unique situation the situation itself provides the ethical solution.

The legalistic approach being at the other end of the scale. This is a way of making decisions with regard to laws or rules. The legalist will live their life in accordance with a set of guidelines or rules. For example Jews will abide by the rules of the Torah and make their decisions primarily from this source. Joseph Fletcher suggested a third way of making moral decisions and this was called the situational way, which consists of a compromise between antinomianism and legalism. In the situational approach every decision is made on one universal principle and that is love.

In situation ethics his view was to look at each situation individually. His main line of argument was that the only moral principle that could be applied to all situations is that of love, or:

'To do whatever is the most loving thing.' (Fletcher quoted by Jenkins, Ethics and religion p47). Whereas Natural law theorists ask what the law states, Fletcher asks what is the best possible decision to help others and provide love in doing so. Therefore in his view this is not a law in itself, and its not dictating what should be done in any

particular situation but rather an approach that informs moral choice. In other words you should always have someone's best interest at heart.

Another one of Fletcher's arguments was that Christians are meant to love and care for each other and God is also portrayed to be all-loving. As this is the case for Christians shouldn't morality also be based around this theory 'to do the most loving thing'? The Christian perspective like many other religions is based around the idea of natural law. The natural law ethic arose in the 4th century BCE by Aristotle. The Christian theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas further developed the ideas first put forward by Aristotle. He argued that the natural purpose of the world is found in God. He outlined natural law in the following way by suggesting that all people should follow the law of God. He also believed that 'Human purpose' was to 'reproduce, to learn, to live harmoniously in society and to worship God.' (Jenkins p26, quoted by www.faithnet.freemove.co.uk/situation_ethics.htm). His ultimate belief was that Natural law describes not only how things are, but also how they ought to be furthermore this happens when things fulfil their natural purpose. Natural law is only concerned with what seems to be the 'natural' course of action for humans to take and this is where the conflict arises with situation ethics. There are many circumstances where what appears to be 'natural' doesn't appear to be 'loving'. This is why theologians such as Joseph Fletcher don't agree with the natural law ethic as it causes much controversy. For example the Catholic Church undertook the natural law approach to guide them in terms of their sexual behaviour. They saw the natural purpose for sexual intercourse to be procreation, so therefore anything that proves to be a barrier to this end result is not allowed i.e. contraception.

When developing an approach to Situation ethics Fletcher suggested 4 working principles and 6 fundamental principles to outline his ideas. The 4 working principles are:

1. Pragmatism – being ideas and theories that have to work in practice, to be right of good it has to produce a desirable outcome that satisfies love's demand. The main emphasis is that the practical course of the action should be motivated by love.

2. Relativism– To be relative, one has to be relative to something, as situation ethics maintains it has to relate to love and should always respond to love in each situation. Fletcher says it 'relativises the absolute; it does not absolutise the relative' (Fletcher quoted from Vardy; *Puzzle of ethics* p126). Meaning each absolute can be made relative to love but relativism cannot be applied to a concrete situation as love acts differently in different situations, it depends on how it is applied and this varies with each circumstance.

3. Positivism– this is accepting to act in love by faith rather than by reason, once faith is declared it is supported by logic. In situation ethics positing a belief in God as love or a higher good and then reasoning what is required in any situation to support that belief.

4. Personalism– This is the desire to put people not laws first. It is always what is the best to help a person that makes a decision a good one. As God is meant to be personal therefore morality should also be person-centred.

However it is the main framework of situation ethics that is outlined by the 6 fundamental principles. These are:

1. There is only one thing that is intrinsically good– love. Actions are good if they are fulfilling love by helping them but reversibly they are bad if they hurt people. No single act in itself is right or wrong it always depends on the situation the circumstance occurs in. Love always decides the actions that are good or bad.
2. The ruling principle of Christian love is agape love. Agape love is self-giving love and this doesn't require anything in return. The overriding principle of decision-making is love.
3. Love and justice are the same. In Fletcher's words 'love and justice are the same thing, for justice is love distributed.' (Fletcher quoted by William Bailay p73). He also claims that 'justice is love at work in the community in which human beings live.' (Vardy, *Puzzle of ethics* p128).
4. 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself' (William Temple quoted by Vardy, *puzzle of ethics* p123). As the neighbour is a member of the human family therefore love wills the neighbour's good. Love is practical and not selective. Christian love is said to

be unconditional so we should show love to everyone and that includes are enemies.

5. Only the end result justifies the means, love is the end – never a means to something else. Love can justify anything in situation ethics as long as the end result satisfies love.
6. Love's decisions are made in the circumstance of each situation and not prescriptively. Humans have a responsibility of freedom. No one is bound by laws, so with this responsibility comes the notion 'to do the most loving thing' and to apply this to every situation.

'Fletcher claims that it is a mistake to generalise. You can't say 'Is it ever right to lie to your family?' The answer must be, 'I don't know, give me an example.' A concrete situation is needed, not a generalisation. 'It all depends' may well be the watchword of the Situationist.' (*Puzzle of ethics*, Vardy p.130)

There are many moral dilemmas when given certain situations, and taking the situational view we are faced with the duty to do the most loving thing possible, and to serve agape love. Taking an example from William Bailay, on a wilderness trial to Kentucky many people lost their lives to Indians who hunted them down. In one case there was a woman who carried her child with her and her child was crying. The baby's crying was betraying the rest of the camp as the cries were leading the Indians to them. The mother clung to her child and as a result the whole camp was found and they were all killed. In another case a Negro woman and her party found themselves in the same situation, their lives were in danger, as they too would be found out if the baby continued to cry. However the Negro woman strangled her child to stop its cries, and as a result the whole party escaped. How can we tell which action was love? The Mother who kept her baby and brought death all, or that of the mother who killed her own child to save the lives of her family and friends? This is a perfect example of the type of decisions that situation ethics confronts us with. In situation ethics there is no definite right or wrong, it has to be applied by each circumstance. Likewise there is no intrinsic value, no goodness or badness held purely in an action itself. Situation ethics says it all

depends on the situation and whether or not it fulfils love. Goodness and badness are not properties of moral actions they are predicates.

This demonstrates one of the key aspects and an advantage for situation ethics. Sometimes morality can be somewhat restricted however in taking the situational approach there are no moral rules. If someone with morals can only abide to duty they cant go outside their own boundaries. This is the case in many orthodox religions. Whereas situation ethics maintains that there are no absolutes, you are allowed to go outside certain boundaries if in doing so you are providing the most loving result. Take the Islamic faith for example. Muslims follow the laws of the Koran; one law is 'do not steal', which is an absolute. But say if there were a single mother living in the poorer regions of the country who had no money and was struggling to feed her starving children. Would it be right for the mother to let her children starve? Or would it be better for the woman to go against the law and perhaps steal some food in order for them to survive? If the woman followed her religion seriously then it would not be morally right for her to steal and as a result her children lives would be at stake. This is the advantage of situation ethics, it says that words like 'never' and 'absolute' can't be used because there will always be exceptions.

Another advantage of situation ethics is that people are always put first, it is a personal matter. People are made more important than principles. This goes against the legalistic approach. Where legalism put laws in first place conversely situation ethics makes people the main emphasis. Furthermore we often find that the outside world is constantly changing. As we live in the modern day and age we are on a constant roller coaster of changing situation. As a result of this many religions find it extremely difficult to apply their laws to the modern world. Take the Torah being applied to the modern age or orthodox Jews attempts to conserve laws against modern relativism to be an example. Because situation ethics can change with time this gives it a huge advantage.

Situation ethics also makes the important link between love and justice, which is another key aspect and this is shown as the third of the six fundamental principles. To Fletcher justice is love distributed and Justice is love working out its problems. (William Bailay p73)

However there have also been many criticisms of Situation Ethics. When referring to the meaning of love, this is sometimes seen to be too general. As love has no definite meaning, it changes according to the situation, it becomes relative, and so it cannot be said that there is only one moral absolute. As there are no specific guidelines for agape love it could be said that it is possible to justify any action. These are dangerous boundaries. The question 'What might happen if I allow euthanasia once?' could be asked. It may be hard to know where to draw the line; people all over the place might start killing their grandparents because they are too old...in the name of love!

Situation ethics sometimes relies on spontaneity, however spontaneity can sometimes be misguided. It may turn out to be irrational and foolish. The abandonment of rules may in turn reduce situation ethics to antinomianism. It may lead to a state of moral flux as rules play an important part in sociological maintenance. It is also been decided that there are certain examples of absolutes. Take rape, child abuse and genocide, these are all examples of absolutes that are wrong and under no circumstance would they be right. You would not be able to justify this with love.

It is often quite hard to understand exactly what is meant by the meaning of love. It can be hard to know what the most loving thing to do is. It is also hard to know what the most loving thing is in terms of the consequence. How can we predict all the consequences of an action? This can be shown by euthanasia. Say there was a man who had AIDS and had only a 5% chance of getting better again, he approached his friend and asked him if he would end his life for him. What happens if he got better? Even if there is only a very tiny chance there is still a chance. The man might suddenly make a recovery and go on to lead a long and prosperous life. How can we predict the consequences? It is also hard when attempting to share love out fairly in a particular situation. This can also be shown by this example of euthanasia; it is hard to know what is the best for the person, friends and family. It might be best for the man but what might be best for him might not necessarily be the most loving thing for the family or their friends.

It is also quite hard to view a situation from a totally unbiased perspective. There is a possibility that a decision could be made selfishly with or without realising it but as it's in the name of love it is

justifiable. This again makes the boundary for love very hard to distinguish. It is also questionable as to whether it is possible for all members of society to judge each situations by its merits. A lot of time and energy has to go into the decision this isn't always accessible to everyone. How practical is situation ethics? Finally on what basis is it possible for the situationist to make moral decisions? What happens when there are no ultimate ethical principles? The situationist is making prejudiced decisions based potentially on personal whims. An example of a danger caused by this can be seen in the actions of Adolf Hitler and his attitude towards the Jews in the Second World War.

For those who felt that situation ethics went to far in attempting to set itself free from any conception of law, there is an approach that combines both theories of natural law and of situation ethics. This approach is known as proportionalism. Proportionlists hold the belief that there are particular situations where moral rules should be abided to unless there is a proportionate reason for not contending with them. This reason would be grounded in the situation itself. In this way the primary precepts of natural law could be accepted (e.g. killing, stealing, lying etc) as the ground rules unless there was a sufficient reason for not doing so. Proportionlists hold a clear distinction between moral and non-moral acts. For example proportionlists would say abortion is wrong, but it may be morally right in the circumstances of that situation. However unlike situationalists they say that love does not then make a wrong action right. Furthermore they still incur the same problems that situationalists face in trying to determine what best serves love in a situation, and on making decisions by selfish means.