

Ethics Essay

What are the distinctive features of situation ethics?

Joseph Fletcher was the Anglican Theologian who invented the idea of situation ethics in 1966. This came at a time when free will and speech was important and people were in search of a time of social change and self-expression. We need to ask ourselves, what are the fundamental points of situation ethics? And what did Fletcher mean when he referred to love? By doing this we can analyse the theory and come to our own conclusions as to its practical use in the world today.

His theory was in opposition to the more traditional ideas of morality at the time, the most important two being Antinomian and Legalistic approaches. The Antinomian approach is the lawless approach where there are no set principles. The situation should tell us what is the right or wrong thing to do and if we are required to take any kind of action. We should use our intuition and listen for the 'inner voice' which many people see as being out conscience and do what it tells us to do. Fletcher disagreed with this approach because he said it would lead to 'moral anarchy'. It was too vague and many people would disagree on which 'inner voice' is correct.

The legalistic approach to moral issues is based on a set of absolute laws that everyone had to apply. It is said we should seek to apply these moral rules to our everyday lives and to do this there must be a large set of rules, sub rules and regulations we all must follow. Fletcher also disregarded this argument because he saw it as 'unsatisfactory to apply general rules to modern moral issues.' They did not allow for special circumstances or situations, which ethically made them unfair and unjust.

Fletcher saw the only fair way to deal with moral issues was to use the situation ethics approach. This was developed in opposition to natural law and is a very subjective or relative theory. Fletcher believed that we must take into consideration the different situations that things happen in. He said that individual people and situations take precedence over general moral rules.

The idea of situation ethics totally revolves around the one idea of love. Fletcher said that if we always did the most loving thing in every situation then this would always be the right thing to do. Our only duty to society was to do the most loving thing towards everyone else.

He based his theory on a fundamental idea of Christian teaching, the idea of agapeistic calculus. Agape is the Christian idea of love that should be shown towards everyone else in society, regardless of how they treat you. This is the only intrinsically good and nothing else, the only criteria are that things that help people are good and things that harm are bad. The only law that you should follow is to 'love thy neighbour as thyself' and if you do this then you will always be doing the right thing.

Fletcher believed that God was a personal being and so likewise morality should be personal also. We should treat our fellow people with the same love that God showed us. He also believed that by treating others with love, regardless of how they treat you would set a good example for the bad and would 'will the neighbours good' (Joe Jenkins – Ethics and Religion). This means that if we show love to others then as a result of our kind acts they may change their ways and show love to others in return.

One of the best examples of someone who used situation ethics is Jesus. He gave the command of the Golden Rule to the people and this over rode all the Jewish laws given to them before. They were simply commanded to show love to one another, which is the one rule that would please God. He is the ultimate example for followers of situation ethics to use as a role model.

Fletcher also believed that every situation should be assessed on the consequences of different actions we could make. Then we should choose the action with the most loving results brought about by love and apply this to the situation. He said that doing the loving thing is 'the overriding principle of decision making' thus other laws can be taken into consideration and used as guidelines in life but love will always takes precedence above these rules.

The principle of showing love in all moral situations is not one law that has to be followed but more of a way of life. It is an attitude that we all should have towards one another. It is an informed choice and a way of behaviour that we should all live by. In-turn if we were all to follow this rule of love, Fletcher believed there would be peace on the earth and everyone would be happy because love is the ultimate duty.

Fletcher believed the idea of situation ethics to be set on four working principles. The first of these working principles is Pragmatism. This was the idea that every act we make must be working towards something and this something is what we judge the goodness of our acts against. This something is Love.

Relativism is the next principle and it is the idea of circumstances. Different situations can always create exceptions to the rule. This is why words such as 'absolute', 'always' and 'never' are rarely if ever used by Situationists. However, relativism is not an excuse for everything to be acceptable, we must only be relative to love. Fletcher describes this as it 'relativises the absolute, it does not absolutise the relative!' We must all act lovingly but how we apply love to the moral issue depends on the situation.

Theological positivism is the Christian idea where faith in something is accepted willingly of your own accord. You believe it by choice and not because it has to be proven to you. In the same way, positivism can be applied to love in that we should not feel the need to ask why we have to act lovingly towards others, even when they do wrong against us. We should want to do it because we know it is the right thing to do and we have to be able to see for ourselves that it is the right thing and not because someone tells us it is.

The final principle is the idea of Personalism. This involves the idea that people come first and in all situations a Situationists would try to do what was best for the person unlike a legalist who would strictly follow the laws of the country. It is also based on

the idea that God is a very personal being and so likewise we should be too. Peter Vardy believed that if we applied these four principles then we would be doing the most loving thing and this would make our actions right.

In conclusion situation ethics is the principle revolving around the idea that love is the one duty we have and the key to correct moral decision making. It is a very popular theory because it is so positive and based on love. However like all moral theories, we have to analyse the good and bad sides to see if it really is an adequate standard to base our moral decision making on. It is a very popular theory because it is so positive and based on love. In the next section of this essay I will analyse situation ethics more and try to come to a conclusion as to its practical use in every day life.

Assess the view that situation ethics provides people with an adequate guide to moral decision making (17 marks)

It is all very well having everyone loving and kind towards each other and in an ideal world, this would work perfectly. However we live in a far from perfect world and so we need to ask whether this ethical approach is practical and useful in the world today. This can be done by weighing up the pros and cons of situation ethics and coming to a decision as to whether it is an acceptable method to making moral decisions.

The most obvious strength of this ethical theory is its relativist approach. It is subjective and allows for different situations or circumstances. It takes all factors into consideration before any course of action is taken which gives a much more just and fair approach to society. If there were a set of absolute laws then things may happen where it would not be fair to punish someone in such a harsh manner. For example the penalty for murder is life imprisonment or death, however would it be just to sentence to death a person who was mentally unstable and was not aware of what they were doing? According to legalistic law it would be, however we can see that it would be unjust to do this and this is why Situationists take the relative approach. It allows people to be given a fair chance and the opportunity to say what they think or feel before the right action is taken.

However, it has been proven and is very evident in the world around us that society needs a global morality or universal set of laws to follow. If it were left up to us alone, there would be chaos and havoc in the world. We would have no absolute moral set of standards we could always judge against if there was a debate as to whether something was right or wrong. It is too individualistic to follow.

Situationism is a relatively simple approach to understand. This is a strength because it means it is easy for everyone to apply it to their every day lives without confusion or argument. There is only one single principle we have to follow and therefore only one right way of approaching a situation and the only course of action that you should take is the most loving one.

Even though it may be a simple theory to follow, Situationism does take the arrogant point of view that humans do make errors. They have not considered the fact that some people are not always aware of what is right or wrong. This may be due to upbringing or lack of intellect. We cannot just disregard such a large group of people so dismissively.

Situation ethics also seems to be contradicting itself. It revolves around the fact that there are no absolutist approaches and every situation should be treated differently. However it does say there is no set rule for Situationism, but it also says we all have one duty to follow and that is love. On one hand it is saying there are no laws and on the other it is saying there is one ultimate law. This could pose a problem because

people will argue that it is not a well thought out theory and it does in fact have one law to follow, which may be limiting in itself.

Situationism also gives us the opportunity to show compassion and sympathy towards others, which legalistic approaches do not. For example, in the case of euthanasia where the legalistic and absolutist view would be against it, the most loving thing to do for the person would be to put them out of their suffering and so the Situationists would be for euthanasia if it were the wishes of the person who is ill.

The idea of Situationism is unlike any other ethical theory because it not only takes the emotional side of a situation into consideration, but the rational thinking approach too. We are allowed to make a balance between our emotions and our rational thinking to decide what is the most loving thing to do in that circumstance. We don't have to follow a set conventional moral law, if something goes against what we see as being the loving thing to do then we don't have to do it.

The fact that our actions are based on personal decision provides an opportunity for the theory to be exploited. Not everyone is kind and genuine, we have to allow for the fact that some people will have selfish motives to gain something they need and claim they are 'acting in the name of love'. There is no argument against this even if we know they had selfish motives because there is no proof. Many people will take advantage of this fact, which could bring more evil and selfishness into the world. This may mean that anything goes, for example a stalker could claim to be following a person because of the intense love they have for that person.

The fact that Situationism is based on love makes it a universal theory. Every one of us can relate to the feeling of love in one way or another, whether it is in an emotional or rational way. When we analyse love closely, we can see it is a key feature to all other moral approaches because in one way or another they revolve on the just thing to do that will always take into consideration love and compassion for one of the parties involved. For example it is the loving thing to do for the family of a murdered victim to imprison the murderer. The fact that it is also a very positive theory makes it widely approved of by many people too.

However, some people may argue that no form of punishment can be loving. This could result in mass debate in which no final answer can be found. Many would say that if you are repentant for your wrong doings then you should be let free. This could result in people committing crimes and then saying they are sorry because they know they can get away with it.

The fact that there are no absolute objective laws gives the freedom of opinion to the people. We do not have to feel like we have done something wrong if our opinion differs from everyone else. It is flexible to different situations so we do not have to find ourselves making justifications for the actions we have taken. If we truly believe what we have done is the most loving thing then we do not have to answer to anyone.

The main problem with this extreme freedom is that many people differ in their opinions. What one person sees the most loving thing to be could be very different to what another may see it as being. This will always be a constant argument going on

and there is not one definite way of judging if something is the most loving thing to do.

The final problem we have to consider is that the Situationist approach to moral issues is vulnerable to the 'slippery slope' argument. The idea is that we do the loving thing but where do we draw the line of this love? There is no definition of the fine line as to when something is loving or obsessive or unethical. This means the theory is open to a wide range of problems and debates that can never be solved because there is no one right answer. It is also impractical because not everyone can be bothered to consider what the most loving option would be as this involves considering each and every action in turn to decide which is the best. Many people do not have the strength of character to do this all the time.

In conclusion, we have to make a personal opinion as to whether it is a useful guide to moral decision making. It could be considered as a good theory however to get an overall balanced decision in a moral situation, some people may see it better to use situation ethics along with another theory. This would mean that we take into consideration different circumstances but still have a good guide as to how we would decide the most loving thing to do. It all comes down to personal opinion and if we are strong enough to stick with the principle of considering every result as a consequence to our actions and then choosing the most loving one.