

SITUATION ETHICS - A STUDY IN AUTHORITY

INTRODUCTION

1. Christians hold the Bible to be the verbally inspired word of God. They believe that it is the guide - the only guide - for behaviour, in every situation, toward God and man.
2. The Christian holds that our lives are to be specifically governed by the commands of the Bible and generally by the principles laid down to help us make decisions.
3. The Christian holds that the only exception to the commands of God are the exceptions which the bible, itself, makes.
4. Conclusion: Therefore, the Christian holds that in every decision-making process that the rules and principles have been laid down a prior - that is, beforehand, and that all one needs to make a correct decision is to either apply a specific command - negative or positive - or to apply the general principle.

I. THERE ARE ONLY THREE ALTERNATIVE ROUTES OR APPROACHES TO FOLLOW IN MAKING MORAL DECISIONS.

1. Legalism.

The Christian is a legalist in this sense because he accepts beforehand - that is - before a decision has to be made the criteria with which he will make that decision. In this case, it is the Word of God and His truths are, thus, absolute.

2. Antinomianism.

This is the opposite extreme of legalism. It maintains that there is no set of rules and regulations which are available beforehand by which he can make moral decisions. He maintains that all of his moral decisions must be made only when the problem arises by the use of reason and judgment. He literally says that there is no law to govern his decisions.

3. Situationism.

"The situationist enters into every decision-making situation fully armed with the ethical maxims of his community and its heritage ... Just the same he is prepared in any situation to compromise them or set them aside in the situation if love seems better served by doing so."

Joseph Fletcher, Situation Ethics, p. 26

"Situation ethics, on the other hand, calls upon us to keep law in a subservient place, so that only love and reason really count when the chips are down." Ibid, p. 31.

"In situation ethics even the most revered principles may be thrown aside if they conflict in any concrete case with love." Ibid, p. 33.

"There are times when a man has to push his principles aside and do the right thing." Ibid, p. 13.

"Situationism, it appears, is the crystal precipitated in Christian ethics by our era's pragmatism and relativism. Historically, most men really have been situationists,

more or less, but the difference today is that we are situationists as a matter of rational and professed method. Gone is the old legalistic sense of guilt and of cheated ideals when we tailor our ethical cloth to fit the back of each occasion. We are deliberately closing the gap between our overt professions and our covert practices. It is an age of honesty, this age of anxiety is." Ibid, p. 147.

NOTE: Love is the only criteria - only standard - by which one makes any decision. All decisions would naturally be subjective.

Fletcher says,

"There are four questions of basic and indispensable importance to be raised about every case, four factors at stake in every situation, all of which are to be balanced on love's scales:

1. The End - What is wanted? Sought? Aimed at?
2. By What Means the End to be Acquired?
3. The Motive - What is the drive behind the act?
4. What are the Foreseeable Consequences?

II. SITUATION ETHICS MAINTAINS THAT GOD'S LAWS ARE TO BE SET ASIDE UNDER SOME CIRCUMSTANCES.

- A. Fletcher says that "Every little book and manual on 'problem of conscience' is legalistic. 'Is it right to' have premarital intercourse, gamble, steal, euthanase, abort, lie, defraud, break contracts, et cetera, adnauseum? This kind of intrinsicalist morass must be left behind as irrelevant, incompetent, and immaterial. The new morality, situation ethics, declares that anything and everything is right or wrong, according to the situation. This candid approach is indeed a revolution in morals. At the same time, it is as ancient as the prophet Isaiah (ch. 4:1) who, foreseeing a day when the sex ratio would be imbalanced, said, 'Seven women shall take hold of one man' to even things up. (With us, monogamy may be an ideal but it should not be an idol.)"

Situation Ethics, p. 124

"If a lie is told unlovingly, it is wrong, evil; if it is told in love, it is good, right. Kant's legalism produced a 'universal' that a lie is always wrong. But what if you have to tell a lie to keep a promised secret? Maybe you lie, and if so, good for you if you follow love's lead." Ibid, p. 65.

"The last six of the commandments, for filial piety (honor your parents), and against killing (or is it murder?), adultery, stealing false witness, and covetousness, are more 'ethical' in this ordinarily non-theological use of the word. All but the fifth (honor your father and mother) are universal negatives. But, situation ethics has good reason to hold it as a duty in some situations to break them, any or all of them." Ibid, pp. 73-74.

III. SITUATIONISTS GIVE A NUMBER OF ILLUSTRATIONS TO JUSTIFY SETTING ASIDE GOD'S LAW.

A. Example #1 - Mrs. Bergmeier.

"As the Russian armies drove westward to meet the Americans and British at the Elbe, a Soviet patrol picked up a Mrs. Bergmeier foraging food for her three children. Unable to even get word to the children, and without any clear reason for it, she was taken off to a prison camp in the Ukraine. Her husband had been captured in the Bulge and taken to a P.O.W. camp in Wales.

"When he was returned to Berlin, he spent weeks and weeks rounding up his children; two (Elise, twelve, and Paul, ten) were found in a detention school run by the Russians, and the oldest, Hans, fifteen, was found hiding in a cellar near the Alexander Platz. Their mother's whereabouts remained a mystery, but they never stopped searching. She, more than anything else, was needed to re-knit them as a family in that dire direction of hunger, chaos, and fear.

"Meanwhile, in the Ukraine, Mrs. Bergmeier learned through a sympathetic commandant that her husband and family were trying to keep together and find her. But the rules allowed them to release her for only two reasons: (1) illness, needing medical facilities beyond the camps, in which case she would be sent to a Soviet hospital elsewhere, and (2) pregnancy, in which case she would be returned to Germany as a liability.

"She turned things over in her mind and finally asked a friendly Volga German guard to impregnate her, which he did. Her condition being medically verified, she was sent back to Berlin and to her family. They welcomed her with open arms, even when she told them how she had managed it. When the child was born, they loved him more than all the rest, on the view that little Dietrich had done more for them than anyone.

"When it was time for him to be christened, they took him to the pastor on a Sunday afternoon. After the ceremony, they sent Dietrich home with the children and sat down in the pastor's study, to ask him whether they were right to feel as they did about Mrs. Bergmeier and Dietrich. Should they be grateful to the Volga German? Had Mrs. Bergmeier done the right thing?"

Conclusion: Adultery is justified depending upon the situation. If this example can be justified, we can name thousands of other similar situations which could be justified.

B. Example #2 - Extra-Marital Sex

Fletcher says:

"How shall we respond to the question whether extra-marital sex is always wrong? Or even paid sex? Women have done it to feed their families, to pay debts, to serve their countries in counter-espionage, to honor a man whom they could not marry. Are we not entitled to say that, depending on the situation, those who break the Seventh Commandment of the old law, even whores, could be doing a good thing - if it is for love's sake, for the neighbor's sake? In short, is there any real 'law' of universal weight? The situationists think not."

Ibid, p. 146.

"A rich man asked a lovely young woman if she would sleep the night with him. She said, "No." He then asked if she would do it for \$100,000? She said "Yes." He then asked, \$10,000? She replied, "Well, yes, I would." He then asked, \$500.00? Her indignant 'What do you think I am?' was met by the answer, 'We have already established that, now we are haggling over the price.' Does any girl who has 'relations' (what a funny way to use the word) outside marriage automatically become a prostitute? Is it always, regardless of what she accomplished for herself or others - is it always wrong? Is extra-marital sex inherently evil, or can it be a good thing in some situations? Does everybody have his price, and if so, does that mean that we are immoral and ethically weak?"
Ibid, p. 18.

Example:

"A young unmarried couple might decide, if they make their decisions Christianly, to have intercourse (e.g., by getting pregnant to force a selfish parent to relent his overbearing resistance to their marriage). But as Christians they would never say, 'It's right if we like each other.' Loving concern can make it all right but mere liking cannot."

Ibid, p. 104.

Fletcher further says:

"The Christian ethic is not interested in reluctant virgins and technical chastity. What sex probably needs more than anything is a good airing, demythologizing it and getting rid of its mystique-laden and occult accretions, which come from romanticism on the one hand and puritanism on the other. People are learning that we can have sex without love, and love without sex; the baby-making can be (and often ought to be) separated from love-making. It is, indeed, for recreation as well as procreation. But if people do not believe it is wrong to have sex relations outside marriage, it isn't, unless they hurt themselves, their partners, or others. That is, of course, a very big 'unless' and gives reason to many to abstain altogether except within the full commitment of marriage. The civil lawmakers are rapidly ridding their books of statutes making unmarried sex a crime between consenting adults. All situationists agree with Mrs. Patrick Campbell's remark that they can do what they want 'as long as they don't do it in the street and frighten the horses.' Ibid, p. 140.

"As we know, for many people, sex is such a moral problem, largely due to the repressive effects of legalism, that in newspapers and popular parlance the terms 'morals charge' always means a sex complaint. 'Her morals are not very high' means her sex life is rather looser than the morals allow. Yet we find nothing in the teaching of Jesus about the ethics of sex, except adultery and an absolute condemnation of divorce - a correlative matter. He said nothing about: birth control, large or small families, childlessness, homosexuality, masturbation, fornication or pre-marital intercourse, sterilization, artificial insemination, abortion, sex play, petting, and courtship. Whether any form of sex (hetero, homo, or auto) is good or evil depends on whether love is fully served."

Ibid, p. 139

C. Example #3 - Ethics of Abortion.

#1 "In 1962 a patient in a state mental hospital raped a fellow patient, an unmarried girl ill with a radical schizophrenic psychosis. The victim's father, learning what had happened, charged the hospital with culpable negligence and requested that an abortion to end the unwanted pregnancy to be performed at once, in an early stage of the embryo. The staff and administrators of the hospital refused to do so, on the ground that the criminal law forbids all abortion except 'therapeutic' ones when the mother's life is at state - because the moral law, it is supposed, holds that any interference with an embryo after fertilization is murder; i.e., the taking of human life.

"The rape has occurred and the decisional question is: May we rightly (licitly) terminate this pregnancy, begun in an act of force and violence by a mentally unbalanced rapist upon a frightened, mentally sick girl? Mother and embryo are apparently healthy on all the usual counts.

"The situationists, if their norm is the Christian commandment to love thy neighbor, would almost certainly, in this case, favor abortion and support the girl's father's request. (Many purely humanistic decisions makers are of the same mind about abortion following rape, and after incest, too.) They would in all likelihood favor abortion for the sake of the patient's physical and mental health, not only if it were needed to save her life. It is even likely they would favor abortion for the sake of the victim's self-respect or reputation or happiness or simply on the round that no unwanted and unintended baby should ever be born." Is not the most loving thing possible (the right thing) in this case a responsible decision to terminate the pregnancy?"

Ibid, pp. 38-39

#2 Jewish Woman Doctor -

"Several years ago Congress passed a special bill giving citizenship to a Rumanian Jewish Doctor, a woman, who has aborted three thousand Jewish women brought to the concentration camp. If pregnant, they were to be incinerated. Even accepting the view that the embryos were 'human lives,' (which many of us do not), by 'killing' three thousand, the doctor saved three thousand and prevented the murder of six thousand."

Ibid, p. 133

#3 Arizona Woman to Sweden for Abortion -

"When a lady in Arizona learned, a few years ago, that she might bear a defective baby because she had taken thalidomide, how was she to decide. She asked the court to back her doctor and his hospital in terminating the pregnancy, and it refused, to the judge's chagrin, since the law (at that time) prohibited non-medically indicated abortions without exception. Her husband took her to Sweden, where love has more control of law, and there she was aborted. God be thanked, since the embryo was hideously deformed. But nobody could know for sure. It was a brave and responsible and

right decision, even if the embryo had been all right. It was a kairos, a fullness of time, a moment of decision."

Ibid., p. 136

D. #4: Example for Killing:

"Along the Wilderness Road, or Boone's Trail, in the eighteenth century, westward through Cumberland Gap to Kentucky, many families and trail parties lost their lives in border and Indian warfare. Compare two episodes in which pioneers were pursued by savages.

1. A Scottish woman saw that her suckling baby, ill and crying, was betraying her and her three other children, and the whole company, to the Indians. But she clung to her child, and they were caught and killed.
2. A Negro Woman, seeing how her crying baby endangered another trail party, killed it with her own hands, to keep silence and reach the fort.

Which woman made the right decision?

Ibid., p. 124-125

E. #5: Example for Lying:

"In 1804 at a log-rolling near Louisville, Kentucky, the question arose as to whether or not a man could be justified in telling a falsehood under certain circumstances. This illustration was proposed:

'Suppose a man has five children. The Indians come and kill four of them, the fifth one being hidden nearby. The savages then asked the father if he has another child, would he be justified in telling them that he has not?'

The dispute waxed hot and finally got into the Long Run Baptist Church and split it into the 'lying' and 'no-lying' Baptist churches."

Ibid., pp. 136-137

NOTE: Men can Always Manufacture Excuses for Their Actions:

Scene: A hood is caught with his hand in the First National Bank safe. He says, 'Ordinarily I don't covet the bank's property, but income tax is about due - and look what happened to Al Capone.'

Scene: A couple who are married (to other people) is surprised in flagrante delicto. Chorus: 'We wouldn't ordinarily dream of committing adultery, but Agnes is tired and Chuck wanted to go bowling ...'

Scene: Mrs. Doe calls police to report she has just killed her husband. She says: 'Ordinarily I don't approve of killing people, but John had the most annoying way of blowing on his soup. I just couldn't take it anymore. Know what I mean?'

F. #6 - Suicide - Euthanasia and Anti-Dysthanasia (Mercy-Killing).

1. On his way to the hospital, a minister stops at a house near his church to say a word of personal sympathy to a couple sitting on the porch with their family doctor. Upstairs the man's mother is in bed, the victim of a series of small cerebral hemorrhages over the last eleven years. Her voice went two years ago and now there is no sign that she hears anything. Communication has ended. Says the son, with a complex question-asking glance at his wife, "my mother is already dead."
2. Automobile accident had left son in a coma for four years. The crash hopelessly shattered his cerebral cortex. All thought and feeling have been erased, and he hasn't moved a single muscle of his body since the accident.
3. Later, at the hospital, the minister visits a woman in her early seventies. He had last seen her at her fiftieth wedding anniversary party two months earlier. She has now been in the hospital for a week with what was tentatively thought to be 'degenerative arthritis.' But the diagnosis is bone cancer. Both legs were already fractured when she arrived at the hospital and little bits of her bones are splintering all the time; she has agonizing shaking attacks that break them off. She turns away from her clerical caller and looks at her husband. 'I ought to die. Why can't I die?' It is the living that fear death, not the dying.
4. The minister leaves, somehow feeling guilty, and goes upstairs to surgical. An intern and a young resident in surgery grab his arms and say, 'Come on, join our council of war.' They go into an empty room where two staff physicians and the chaplain are waiting. In the next room, a man is dying, slowly, in spite of their ingenious attempt to save him from pneumonic suffocation by means of a 'tracheotomy,' a hole cut in his throat through which an artificial respirator is used. The question is: should they take away the oxygen tank, let the patient go? the chaplain is pulled two ways. One of the doctors is against it, the other joins the resident in favor. The intern says he doesn't like it. The visiting clergyman said, 'I would.' They do. The oxygen is removed, the light turned off, the door closed behind them. Then they send the chaplain to comfort the widow out in the alcove at the end of the hall, saying, 'We are doing everything we can.'

NOTE: There are three forms mercy killing can take.

1. Administering a death-dealing pain killer.

An example of this is the administration of morphine in doses which are pyramided to toxic, fatal proportions. The doctor has to choose between doing nothing to alleviate

suffering, or giving a merciful dose which kills both the pain and the patient.

2. Ceasing treatments that prolong the patient's life - or death, if you prefer.

An example of this is the pulling out the tube of a respirator so that the patient cannot continue to get oxygen.

3. Withholding treatment altogether.

An example of this is followed when a defective baby is not respirationed at birth, or when a highway accident victim is found so late that no attempt is made to reverse the loss of vital function.

Fletcher in a very pregnant statement says:

"The right of spiritual being to use intelligent control over physical nature, rather than submit beastlike to its blind workings, is the heart of many crucial questions. Birth control, artificial insemination, sterilization, and abortion are all medically discovered ways of fulfilling and protecting human values and hopes in spite of nature's failures or foolishness. Death control, like birth control is a matter of human dignity. Without it, persons become puppets. To perceive this is to grasp the error lurking in the notion - widespread in medical circles - that life as such is the highest good. This kind of vitalism seduces its victims into being more loyal to the physical spark of mere biological life than to the personality values of self-possession and human integrity. The beauty and spiritual depths of human stature are what should be preserved and conserved in our own value system, with the flesh as the means rather than the end. The vitalist fallacy is to view life at any old level as the highest good. This betrays us into keeping 'vegetables' going and dragging the dying back to brute 'life' just because we have the medical know-how to do it." Moral Responsibility, pp. 151-152.

IV. MAKING THE RIGHT MORAL DECISIONS ARE SOMETIMES VERY DIFFICULT AND UNCERTAIN:

Example #1: A thief holds your wife and children hostage and demands that you rob a local supermarket for him or he will hurt your family - What would you do?

Example #2: A mentally disturbed man holds your wife as a hostage until he gets word that you have killed his unfaithful wife for him - or he will kill yours - What would you do?

Example #3: You can preserve the marriage of a close friend by telling a lie - What would you do?

Example #4: Your husband has brain cancer and is dying, yet his life can be spared for two more years by an operation, but he will be only a vegetable - What would you do?

- Example #5: Your husband has become a vegetable as a result of a brain operation and does not even know that he is still living. At least there is no visible way to know that he knows anything. If you could permit him to die by just stopping giving him Dextrose - Would you do it?
- Example #6: If your family was hungry and needed food and you had been unsuccessful in getting a job or of getting a loan - Would you steal the food?
- Example #7: If you were closing your college career and the time had come to take an English test, would you cheat on the test if the failing of this subject would keep you from getting a diploma?
- Example #8: If you knew that you were going to die within a year even though you were given certain kinds of tablets to keep you alive that long - would you terminate your life in six months if you knew that your wife and family would collect \$100,000 in insurance by merely quitting taking the pills since you were going to die anyway and since they would badly need the money after you were dead?
- Example #9: If you and your wife had exhausted every means in order to have children but could not because the husband was sterile - would you be willing to undergo artificial insemination in order to have a child?
- Example #10: If you knew that you could win enough in a poker game to pay off the mortgage on your house which had come due and there seemingly was no other way to pay it - would you do it?
- Example #11: If you were living on Social Security and were unable to get by on the amount of money which the government would permit you to earn outside your Social Security check - would you refuse to report any amount above what you can earn since you badly need the money?
- Example #12: Your business is about to go bankrupt but by falsifying your income tax for this year you believe that you might save enough money to barely keep it going, hoping for a better year next year - would you do it?

*False premises and incorrect methods of thinking will surely get us into trouble.

Premise The act of adultery is sufficient grounds for divorce. (Matt. 19:9)

Premise A lustful look is the same thing as the act of adultery. (Matt. 5:27-28)

Therefore, a lustful look is sufficient grounds for divorce.

We are called upon each day to make hundreds of moral decisions. We need to be sure that we are making the right decision because all of our tomorrows are going to be the products of our decisions today.

V. WE LIST A NUMBER OF RULES WHICH WILL HELP US IN MAKING MORAL DECISIONS:

1. All persons ought to choose values which are self-consistent, harmonious, and coherent, not values which are contradictory or incoherent with one another.
2. Choose so that one can approve the foreseeable consequences of each choice. Choose with a view to the long run, not merely to the present act.
3. All persons ought to will the best possible values in every situation, hence, if possible, to improve every situation.
4. Each person ought to respect all other persons as ends in themselves, and, as far as possible, to cooperate with others in the production and enjoyment of shared values.
5. All persons ought to judge and guide all of their acts by their ideal conception (in harmony with other laws) of what the whole personality ought to become both individually and socially.
6. All persons ought to recognize themselves as obligated to choose in accordance with the ideals which they acknowledge.
7. In Every Decision We Need to Ask: Is there a command from God to cover this situation - either positive or negative - And if not, Is there a basic principle available to help me make the right decision?

A. God's Word Admonishes Us:

- (1) Deut. 6:6-9: "These words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk to them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates."
- (2) Psalms 119:11: "Thy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against thee."
- (3) Matt. 22:36-40: "Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

CONCLUSION: GOD'S LAWS ARE ABSOLUTE AND CANNOT BE BROKEN WITH IMPUNITY.

1. If Grounds Can Be Found For Breaking One Of God's Laws - Grounds Can Be Found For Breaking All of Them.
2. If Grounds Can Be Found For Breaking All of God's Laws, Then They Are Merely Relative.
3. This Is a Flat Denial Of God's Word Which Is Supposed To "Furnish Us Unto Every Good Work."
4. Finally, Christians Need To Know God's Law.

Christians Need to Have Proper Regard for God's Law.

Christians Need to Apply God's Law To His Everyday Decision Making.

"Be not deceived, God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man soweth - that shall he also reap."

BACKGROUND MATERIAL ON SITUATION ETHICS

Joseph Fletcher, Robert Treat Paine, Professor Social Ethics, Episcopal Theological School, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Once taught in St. Mary's College, Raleigh, University of Cincinnati, Graduate School of Applied Religion, and was Dean, St. Paul's Cathedral, Cincinnati. B.A. University of West Virginia; B.D. Berkeley Divinity School; S.T.D., London University-Kenyon College. Author: The Church and Society, 1930; Christianity and Property, (Ed.), 1948; Morals and Medicine, 1954; William Temple, 1963; Situation Ethics 1966; Moral Responsibility, 1967; et al. Episcopalian.

Quite apart from the actual ideas it advances, Situation Ethics has made an important contribution to what might be called the "democratization" of the theological conversation. In this accomplishment, Fletcher's book shares credit with such other events as the publication of Bishop John Robinson's Honest to God, the so-called "death of God" controversy, and the widespread impact of the Second Vatican Council.

Time, January 21, 1966

"Situation ethics" is rapidly gaining ground in U.S. Divinity schools as a way of systematic thinking about morality, and it claims an impressive array of advocates. In Europe it has found a home in the thinking of Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudolf Bultmann. Its chief American exponents include Paul Lehmann of Union Theological Seminary, James Gustafson (who wrote to Time to say that he did not want to be classed in this way) of Yale, and Joseph Fletcher of the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Seward Hiltner in Pastoral Psychology (May 1966)

"Ever since 1932, which saw the publication of Brunner's The Divine Imperative and Niebuhr's Moral Man and Immoral Society, ethics as a discipline has been in ferment among Protestant scholars. Most of the leaders - including, in the U.S.A., Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, Paul Lehmann, Paul Ramsey, Paul Tillich, John C. Bennett, and others - have been agreed on what must be rejected about the old Christian ethics, i.e., that which reached its peak in the 1920's. In various ways, they have renounced legalism, moralism, perfectionism, provincialism, pride, and oversimplification. They have done so in the name of the Biblical message itself, along with realistic observations about people, cultures, and institutions."

The Situation Ethics Debate, edited with an introduction by Harvey Cox. 171.1 C

Moral Responsibility, by Joseph Fletcher. 171.1 F

Situation Ethics, by Joseph Fletcher. 171.1 F

The Christian New Morality, by O. Sidney Barr. 241 B

Making Ethical Decisions, by Howard Clark Kee. 171 K

Morality Without Law, by Walter F. Ewbank. 241 E

The Virtues, by Romano Guardini. 241 G

Man For Himself, by Erich Fromm. 171 F

Absolute In Moral Theology?, edited by Charles Curran. 241 C

Moral Law in Christian Social Ethics, by Walter G. Muelder. 171.1 M

Norm and Context in Christian Ethics, edited by Outka and Ramsey. 241 O