SITUATION ETHICS

"All you need is love..."

(John Lennon and Paul McCartney)

Edited and Summarized From a Paper

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Introduction & Principles

Situation ethics (a term coined in 1966 by an Episcopalian priest, Joseph Fletcher) is a body of ethical thought that takes normative principles like the virtues, natural law, and Kant's categorical imperative and generalizes them so that an agent can make sense out of one's experience when confronting ethical dilemmas. Situation ethics also rejects any attempt to turn these generalizations into firm and steadfast rules and laws, what Fletcher (1966) called a form of [ethical] idolatry.

Fletcher ascribes six fundamental principles to Situation Ethics:

1. Love is the only thing that is intrinsically good
2. Love is a moral truth
3. Love and Justice are identical
4. Agape (Greek word for brotherly love) is selfless love
5. Only consequence matter in an action

6. Moral behavior should assume all situations are unique

These principles are grounded in four foundational assumptions;

1. Pragmatism: An American movement in philosophy founded by C. S. Peirce and William James and marked by the doctrines that the meaning of conceptions is to be sought in their practical bearings, that the function of thought is to guide action, and that truth is preeminently to be tested by the practical consequences of belief.
2. Contextual Relativism: A doctrine that emphasizes the importance of the context of inquiry in a particular question.
3. Positivism: the theory that laws are to be understood as social rules, valid because they are enacted by authority or derive logically from existing decisions, and that ideal or moral considerations (e.g., that a rule is unjust) should not limit the scope or operation of the law
4. Personalism: A system of thought that maintains the primacy of the human or divine person on the basis that reality has meaning only through the conscious mind.

Sometimes called contextualism or relational ethics, situation ethics maintains that the collective wisdom of the past can be used to guide ethical decision making in the present but must be set aside if love requires something else. For situationists, then, love provides the substantive basis for all ethical decision making, as John Lennon and Paul McCartney crooned in the Beatles 1960s hit, "*All you need is love*."

The Challenge

In Situation Ethics, Fletcher was interested in answering the difficult and sometimes troublesome and perplexing question concerning how agents employ normative principals in ethical dilemmas. As was common during the anti-establishmentarian years of the mid-1960s through the early-1970s, Fletcher rejected legalism. Not following the path of many 1960s activists, however, Fletcher also rejected antinomian relativism. Fletcher rejected the former because he believed that absolute rules and laws demand unthinking obedience and, Fletcher concluded, only accumulate into elaborate systems of exceptions and compromises that eventually form additional rules and laws. In turn, these only serve to encourage agents to invent clever, new ways around these rules and laws, foreshadowing what Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) would later argue in *Organizational Misbehavior*. Fletcher rejected the latter because he well-understood the consequences of believing that no absolute rules and laws exist which are capable of governing all cultures, in all places, and for all times. All one has to do to appreciate the inherent error in antinomianism is to read William Golding's (1959) novel about a group of English choir boys, *Lord of the Flies*.

In place of legalism and antinomian relativism, Fletcher synthesized what he called situation ethics. In real-life situations, Fletcher maintained, agents must acknowledge, on the one hand, those traditional rules and laws (evidencing a less strict version of legalism) within which the agents seek to operate (evidencing a less strict form of antinomian relativism). Fletcher's

commonsense ethic avoided the extremes of legalism and antinomianism by recognizing, on the one hand, the remoteness of universal principles from actual conduct that can be asserted with certitude (e.g., lying is unethical) and, on the other hand, by filling the gap between such principles and the exigencies of conduct with practical policies and prudent decisions that are neither universal nor do they express ethical certitude (e.g., lying in this situation may be ethical).

Thus, while these rules and laws may assist in the process of ethical decision making, situationists modify or compromise these rules and laws if the situation requires. Why? Because, as situationists argue, real-life is a very complex endeavor where an agent's knowledge is far from certain. When human beings confront ethical dilemmas where value choices conflict and no other person can render a decision, human beings must make the decision for themselves and live with the consequences.

The fundamental issue for situationists concerns whether normative principles which assert generalizations about desirable human conduct are not only valid in themselves and universally obliging of all people and in all times and places. But, existential ethics which are called antinomian because they reject absolutely the authority of rules and laws are also problematic because existential ethics rejects absolutely the authority of rules and laws. In contrast, situation ethics endeavors to identify the good and to do what is ethical given the idiosyncratic circumstances in which the agent is operating.

The Problem Posed By Ethical Rules And Laws...

Throughout human history, a variety of ethical theorists have defined the good as "that which promotes happiness." These theorists have not only speculated about what constitutes true happiness but also have generalized and set forth normative principles identifying what happiness requires in terms of human conduct. The ancient Greeks and Romans as well as theists and non-theists through the centuries and millennia, for example, have operationalized these normative principles in terms that prescribe ethical conduct and proscribe unethical conduct. Telling the truth, fidelity, and respect for life as well as others possessions seem to have stood the test of time in terms of specifying what constitutes ethical conduct. Similarly, lying, adultery, murder, and theft seem to have stood the test of time in terms of identifying conduct that most, if not all, would agree are unethical.

While situation ethicists concur with this widely-held conclusion, they question whether these normative principles are to be applied as strict directives (i.e., as imperatives, for example, as fiats or edicts) or, instead, as guidelines (as orientations, for example, as wisdom or proverbs) that agents should use when determining a course of ethical conduct. The situationists ask: Should these norms, as generalizations about what is desired, be regarded as intrinsically valid and universally obliging of all human beings? Situation ethics highlights the important point that, in ethical dilemmas, circumstances do count. They not only can and should influence an agent s decision-making process, but circumstances can and should also alter an agent s

decision when warranted. Thus, situation ethics upholds the commonsense observation, what is in some times and in some places ethical can be in other times and in other places unethical.

What the situationists seek to avoid is the charge that they are ethical relativists at the level of norms. Situationists rightly point out that normative principles are contingent upon a number of factors unique to particular instances. Thus, situationists conclude, normative principles although helpful for understanding what ethics requires do not transcend all situations as normative ethicists would like. For example, there are many situations in which an agent may understand clearly that lying, adultery, murder, and theft are unethical as principles but the agent may understand with equal clarity that these prohibitions may not apply given the idiosyncratic circumstances in which the agent must render a decision. It is in this sense, then, situation ethics is better called principled relativism.

Because situationists assert that relativity in ethics is found at the normative level, it does not therefore follow that the application of an ethical principle is inherently unethical at the level of conduct. For instance there are many instances when commonsense would dictate that telling a lie would not be unethical. For situationists, the principle isn't relativized. What is relativized is the application of the principle in concrete real-life dilemmas where agents are confronted by a choice between two goods. Thus, ethical norms are only relatively obliging as they provide a substantive absolute to which all conduct is relative.

The Good That Is To Be Sought

For centuries indeed for millennia thoughtful people have attempted to define what the good is. While most definitions have pointed in the direction of that which brings about happiness (or, more to the point, true happiness, as Boethius [1976] noted in the 6th century), Moore (1903) claimed in the early 20th century that most definitions specify the good in terms of itself, not what the good is in and of itself. The good is the good is equivalent to stating that a car is a car. Thus, Moore argued, the good is an unanalyzable predicate,a word whose meaning is not able to be reduced to its individual components or properties.

For Fletcher, the application of the principle is what is important in ethics because, while the good itself is unanalyzable and incapable of definition, ethical behavior (the goods) are able to be analyzed and defined. The good is normative, neither ideal nor real, a principle predicating a decision. Human conduct is what translates a normative principle into a concrete action which can be judged and defined as ethical (i.e., good) or unethical (i.e., not good).

Knowing What Is Good

When evaluating conduct prior to enacting it or by reflecting upon one's conduct after enacting it, how is an agent to know that the course of conduct that one enacted was in fact good? Situation ethics contends that the answer is found in the normative principle or axiom, the good = love. Love (agape, in Greek, αγαπή) is not a feeling or emotion, but an authentic and pervasive attitude or a disposition. Love, then, is an attitudinal approach by which agents solve

their ethical dilemmas (Stevenson, 1960). Whereas virtue ethics and natural law require that ethical principles be objective and universal, situation ethics takes the opposite approach, namely, circumstances are determinative of what ethical principles require of agents. This is what all ethicists are concerned about and busy themselves inquiring into.

Fletcher (1966), then, envisions the situationist entering into every ethical dilemma fully armed with the normative ethical principles of his community and its heritage. Furthermore, the situationist accords these principles profound respect because they do assist in illuminating the values conflict posed by an ethical dilemma. But, the situationist is also prepared in any situation to compromise these principles or set them aside completely in the situation if love seems better served by doing so (1966, p. 26).

In the end, Fletcher argues, commitment to some chosen value functions as a starting point in the ethical decision-making process. This value like love cannot be proven in a strictly rational, empirical, or scientific manner. A leap is required, Fletcher maintains, one where the agent gives up proving something to be either true or false and, instead, chooses that value and make a commitment to it as one sets about making decisions in ethical dilemmas.

In situation ethics, the principle of love as a disposition dictates concern for the good of people as that is specified in various normative principles such as respect for others and their property. However, these principles don't dictate what an agent is to do but, instead, are contingent upon the circumstances in which an agent must apply these principles. The social sciences and, in particular, those of anthropology and psychology, provide empirical data retrospectively so that agents can validate their answers to the question What is good conduct?

The Critics

"If necessary, I can be ethical.
Fortunately, it hasn't come to that."

While many people in the late 1960s and early 1970s were enamored with and applauded Fletcher's insight into how ethics work in the real-life dilemmas people face, Fletcher's insight actually wasn't novel. In fact, as early as the 5th century, St. Augustine was telling the members of his congregation in Proconsular Africa (Hippo Regius in Numidia) love and do what you will.

Unfortunately, situationists have seized upon a second unanalyzable predicate (Moore, 1903) to define the good, namely, love. Whether in its theological or secular sense, situationists assert that the good is love and this normative principle or axiom is what must guide ethical decision making. That is, when confronting an ethical dilemma, an agent is required to do what love requires in order to bring about the greatest amount of good. What the good is, then, is not particular conduct but the ontological principle invoked by an agent who, in turn, applies it in particular situations.

It All Depends Upon What Love Is and Means as a Normative Principle.

Before identifying specific critics and criticism of the theory of situation ethics consider three cases:

> *Case 1: The Irish Immigrants*
> More than 150 years ago, a group of newly-arrived Irish immigrants decided to make their way from Boston across North America to settle in the Minnesota where there was a bank managed by the Archbishop of St. Paul-Minneapolis, John J. Ireland, who personally guaranteed low-interest mortgages to poor Catholic immigrants who would farm the land.
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> Journeying through Ohio, the immigrants spotted some Indians. Having been told that the Indians killed settlers, the immigrants decided to hide in a forest somewhere along Lake Erie. Moment by moment, the Indians honed in on the immigrants. One woman was holding her baby who had been asleep but was now awakening and about to cry. Instinctively, the mother put her hand over the baby's mouth because she knew that, if the baby made any noise, the Indians would immediately discover the immigrants and kill them. As the Indians drew nearer and nearer, the mother noticed that she was suffocating her baby.
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> If the mother kept her hand over her baby's mouth she would kill her child. But, if she took her hand away, the baby would cry and the Indians would kill the settlers. What should the mother do?
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> *Case 2: The Bermuda Triangle Disaster*
> A Caribbean cruise ends in tragedy as the cruise ship sinks somewhere in the Bermuda triangle following an inexplicably sudden hurricane. Fortunately, 50 passengers survive along with the ship's first officer. Afloat in a lifeboat, the officer tells the 50 survivors

that the lifeboat has enough food for 20 people for 10 days. In that amount of time, the 20 probably could row to safety at the nearest shore.

However, the ship's officer also points out that the ship was miles off course when it sank and the captain failed to send out an SOS. Furthermore, the ship's lifeboats were not equipped with the latest GPS technology. So, it is quite likely that everyone will starve to death if they stay put because it is equally unlikely that a search plane will find the 50 who survived the ship's capsizing within four or five days.

What should the 50 survivors do? Throw the 30 most frail survivors overboard so that the 20 most healthy can row to land and live? Or, should the 50 do nothing knowing that, in all likelihood, all 50 will die?

Case 3: The Apartment Fire

An individual is headed to her best friend's apartment. As this individual turns the corner, she sees that the apartment is on fire. Racing to the scene and standing outside of the apartment, she knows with absolute certainty that two people are inside: her best friend who is a hair stylist and her best friend's lover who is a skilled in vitro neurosurgeon. Judging from the ferocity of the flames, she is pretty certain that she will have just enough time to dash into the house and rescue only one of the two persons in the apartment. Who should she rescue first?

According to situation ethics, the principle of love not ethical rules or laws or, even, what one thinks best informs an agent about what one ought to do. Thus, in the first situation, the loving thing is for the mother not to suffocate her baby and for the Indians not to murder the immigrants. In the second situation, the loving thing is for members of the Coast Guard to rescue the 50 survivors. In the third situation, the loving thing is to rescue both your friend and you friend's lover. However, in all three cases, it is not possible to do what love requires. So, the agent must now decide upon a course of conduct which will specify who the agent will help.

In *Situation Ethics*, Fletcher (1996) argues that the following general principles would enable an agent to arrive at an ethical decision:

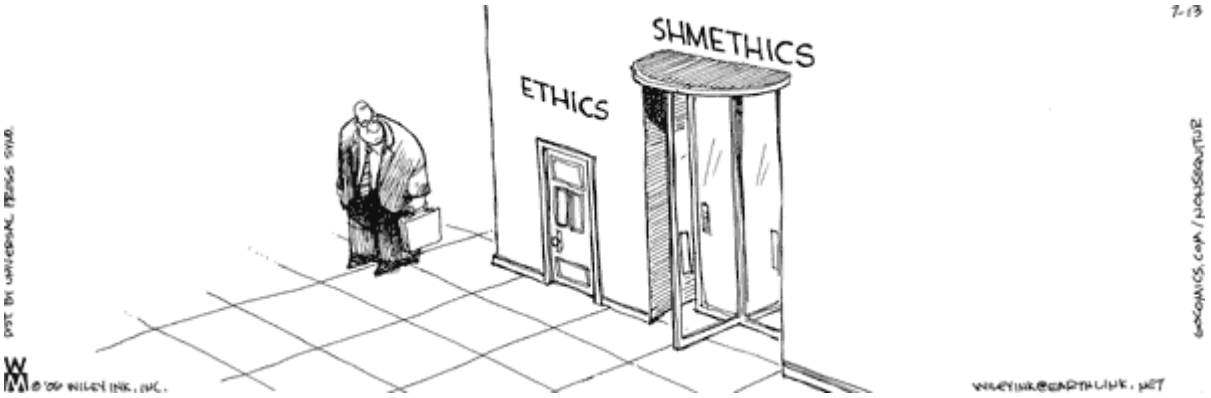
a) help the person whose need is greater;
b) perform the action that helps the greatest number; and,
c) help the person who is more valuable.

Applying these principles to the first case, the second principle is especially pertinent. The ethical decision is for the mother to suffocate her baby because the Indians may then give up their search for the immigrants if they offer no further clues or telltale signs of their presence in the forest. In the second case, the second principle also applies. Thus, the ethical decision is to jettison the 30 weakest people overboard so that the fittest 20 survive. Otherwise, everyone will die. In the third case, the third principle is especially pertinent. Thus, the ethical decision is

to rescue the surgeon because this person can provide greater and more valuable help to more people than the hair stylist will ever be able to provide.

Because situationists think that only one thing is ethical, to love other people, all other considerations are moot. It is this logic, which critics find objectionable, namely, that anything and everything is permitted (which can include killing, jealousy, generosity, stealing, etc., because none of these actions are ethical or unethical in their own right). According to Fletcher, these actions become unethical only if an agent does them out of hatred or indifference; likewise, these actions are ethical if performed out of love.

In Sum



Situation ethics asserts that agents must make ethical judgments within the context of the entirety of the situation, that is, there are no fixed ethical rules and laws applicable to each and every ethical dilemma. In addition, situation ethics holds that there is one normative principle the ethic of love that agents can apply in ethical dilemmas on a universal basis.

Situation ethics, then, does not attempt to abstract ethically relevant features from particular cases and, then, to apply them to other similar cases, as do virtue ethicists, natural law theorists, and absolutists. Instead, situation ethics leaves it up to the agent who is to evaluate the ethical choices available within the context of the entire situation, as the agent invokes the ethical principle of love. At the same time, situation ethics insists that this ethical principle can only be understood appropriately within the particulars of the situation.

Critics argue that, while situation ethics provides a valuable insight into the nature of ethics and how agents solve real-life ethical dilemmas, the theory can be pushed to extremes which would uphold just about any conduct. To be logically consistent, the critics maintain that ethics cannot condone unethical conduct as ethical.

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