

Situation ethics

Not to be confused with utilitarianism, which aims to bring about the greatest good for the greatest number, situation ethics is concerned with creating the greatest amount of love. Its roots are quite different, and situation ethics is closer to proportionalism.

‘It is never right to go against a principle unless there is a proportionate reason which would justify it.’

Hoose, B. (ed.) (2000) *Christian Ethics*, Continuum

1 Background

- Second World War
- Women’s rights
- Civil rights
- Vietnam
- Sexual freedom
- Situation ethics as a morality for ‘man come of age’.

2 Single factor

- Agape
- Jesus as the model of ethical decision making.
- Rejection of divine command ethics and supranaturalism.

3 Application

- Will the action best serve the purpose of love? Nothing is itself intrinsically good or bad.
- Legalists enforce fixed rules and rigid morality.
- Anti-nomians shun laws and live without moral restraints.
- Situation ethicists are prepared to lay aside the rules if love requires it.

4 The Ministry of Jesus — situation ethics in context

- ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’ (Matthew 22:36).
- ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath’ (Mark 2:27).
- The woman caught in adultery (John 8).
- The Good Samaritan (Luke 10).
- Lepers and other outcasts.
- The loving father (Prodigal Son, Luke 15).
- Jesus’ death on the cross.

5 J. A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (1963)

Nothing intrinsically wrong; moral dilemmas should be approached ‘situationally, not prescriptively’.

Whatever the pointers of the law to the demands of love, there can, for the Christian, be no packaged moral judgements — for persons are more important even than standards.

What is most real to you? What matters most for you? Is it money and what money can buy? I doubt it, deep down. For you know that you can’t take it with you. And seldom does it bring real happiness. Is it love? That’s a good deal nearer. Because it has to do with persons, not things.

6 Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics* (1997)

Christian ethics is not a scheme of codified conduct. It is an effort to relate love to a world of relativities through a casuistry obedient to love.

- Fletcher’s case studies as key to understanding the principle of situation ethics: Mrs Bergmeier, The Wilderness Trail, the Dying Man’s Dilemma, Special Bombing Mission Number 13.
- Four principles: personalism, pragmatism, positivism, relativism.
- Six presuppositions: love alone is always good; love decides there and then; love is justice distributed; love wills the neighbour’s good; only the end justifies the means; love decides situationally, not prescriptively.

7 Reactions to situation ethics

A false spirituality of this kind has always haunted the thinking of clever men.

Glyn Simon

It is much easier to agree that extraordinary situations need extraordinary measures than to think that there are no laws for ordinary everyday life.

William Barclay (1971) *Ethics in a Permissive Society*

Children are so vulnerable, they need secure homes for their development and a person who is responsible for a child’s lack of this environment sins against it as seriously as a stranger who assaults it in a park.

Working party of the Church of England — sex and morality (1966)

...the gap between Dr Robinson’s idealism and your experience has now become intolerably wide.

Susan Howatch (1990) *Scandalous Risks*

8 The legacy of situation ethics

- Changes in the law (1967): abortion, divorce, homosexuality.
- Suspicion of absolutism and fundamentalism.
- Rise of liberal Protestantism and inclusivism.
- Moral compromise and relativism.