

## Analyse Critically Joseph Fletcher's Situation Ethics.

### INTRODUCTION.

Joseph Fletcher's Situation ethics is known as the New morality. This name implies that there had been <sup>an old</sup> a morality on existence before this one. These old morality are those of Catholics, Jews and Pentecostals. This traditional/old morality is said to be legalistic and asserts that actions are intrinsically evil, situations and circumstances cannot change the nature of these actions.

The Situationist, that is the new moralist disagrees for them, the same action can be good in certain situations and bad in others. Fletcher, a priest of Episcopal Church of America who later became an atheist popularized situation ethics in his 1966 work "Situation Ethics." His ideas on situation ethics would be analysed thus.

### JOSEPH FLETCHER'S SITUATION ETHICS.

Fletcher regards situation not as a system of ethics but as method of moral-decision making.



His basic tenets is that situations are different, each situation is unique and not identical with another situation. Hence, the same action cannot be judged in the same way in every situation. Each action has to be evaluated within the context of particular situation.

An action is judged to be good or bad depending on the prevalent or unique nature of the situation in which it is performed. Almsgiving for example is regarded as something good, but for the situation almsgiving is neither good nor bad. If it is given to an indigent person to lower the dignity or self worth of that person, one should refrain from doing it for it is bad.

The implication of this position of the situationists is that existing moral laws are not absolute. Moral laws cannot be validly applied in all situations since every situation is unique.

Fletcher however regards moral laws as illuminators, not directors in moral decision-making. They are illuminators in that they serve as guides on what to do but are not directors in the sense



that they are not absolute, they are not obligatory.

All moral laws are illuminators and not directors.

The only moral law Joseph Fletcher recognizes as absolute is the Law of Love, the Love of the Neighbour as commanded by God. It is only Love that can be validly applied in any situation, for him Love is the only thing that is intrinsically good. Therefore any action inspired by Love is good.

Fletcher understands Love in a utilitarian way. For instance, if performing an action will ensure the welfare of the neighbour or yield positive results, one should perform it, for it is a good action. It should be performed no matter what the moral law says.

Laws that guide decision making are not a priori laws, that is moral laws are established and codified before one ever comes face to face with a concrete moral situation. For him Fletcher, laws that influence decisions ought to be empirical, since the experience of the concrete moral situation may help one to choose action which are more beneficial than others in a particular situation.



## EXAMPLES THAT SUPPORT SITUATION ETHICS.

### WORLD WAR II

America detonated two atomic bombs in Japan in 1945, one in Hiroshima and the other in Nagasaki. One hundred and fifty two thousand people (~~13~~ 12,000) died on the spot and many more died later due to the effects of the bombs. Japanese surrendered after the detonation of those bombs.

Later, US military and Scientists discussed whether it was proper to have deployed the bombs. Some said it was appropriate, others that it was necessary, since the Japanese needed a drastic action to surrender. However, the Situationist would approve the use of the bombs, for their preconceived outcome is more positive than negative. For them it is more beneficial to use them, than not to use them.

### A WOMAN ON A SHUTTLE FLIGHT

This was a woman Fletcher met on a shuttle flight, who shared her moral dilemma with him. There was a war raging at the moment she said, and her government was asking her to go and



seduce an opponent spy and blackmail him. This was the only way to end the war quickly and save the life of many people; but her Conscience procked her because involving in seduction was against her morals.

The situation ethics would advise her to go for the seduction. In order to indicate the nature and importance of situation ethics.

### THREE APPROACHES TO MORAL DECISION MAKING.

1. **Legalism**:- They are traditional moral decision-making systems which are codified and written out in books. For the Legalist, all the moral laws are not only illuminators but directors.
2. **Antinomianism**:- This is the opposite of Legalism. It is a principleless and lawless approach to decision making. It rejects the idea of laws as illuminators and directors in moral decision making.
3. **Situationism**:- It stands in the middle of Legalism and antinomianism. It recognizes that moral laws are illuminators but not directors of moral decision making.



### Four Working Principles of Situation Ethics.

1. Pragmatism:- This implies that it is concerned with what is workable, expedient and satisfactory.
2. Relativism:- Situation ethics is relativistic in the sense that moral laws are not absolute but relative.
3. Positivism:- Situation ethics is positivistic for it adopts empirical rather than a priori approach in moral decision making.
4. Personalism:- The <sup>objective</sup> principles of situation ethics ~~are objective~~ is good and for the welfare of the human person. Moral laws are for the benefits of Man.

### EVALUATION.

Fletcher's emphasis on the agape love is something good. It is because we love God that we are obliged to love all. But his understanding <sup>of the</sup> ~~that~~ application of agape love encourages the violation of the Commandments of God.

Also, He looks at agape love in utilitarian way; the problem with this is that it is very difficult to



forsee all the direct and indirect consequences of an action. For instance the claim that the atomic bomb did not kill as much people as would have been if the war continued. This claim is only hypothetical and not categorical, it cannot be confirmed, since other factors were not used

Conclusion.