

[1973. In *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics*. Carl F.H. Henry, ed. Washington D.C.: Canon Press.]

**SITUATIONAL ETHICS.** See also *Fletcher, Joseph; Utilitarianism*. Situational ethics, though popularly and correctly associated with the name Joseph Fletcher, has a background in Nietzsche (q.v.) and Dewey (q.v.).

Nietzsche's evolutionary logic, repudiating Kantian a priori forms and making our learning processes nothing more than practical expedients for handling things, is the extreme of nominalism in the thesis that there are no identical cases in nature. Observed similarities are due to the coarseness and inadequacies of our perceptive organs. The use of moral rules therefore, treating different cases as if they were alike, falsifies the situation. Intelligence should evaluate each case uniquely.

Dewey invites the same inference. He constantly stresses the concrete (i.e., the individual) situation. For example, since the rationalistic theory affords no guidance and by its futile attempt to construct a hierarchical scheme of values or duties confesses its inability to judge the concrete, the implication seems to be that general rules should be replaced by an intuition of the individual situation (*Quest for Certainty*, New York, Putnam, 1960, pp. 265ff.).

If perchance Dewey would not word it just that way, there is no doubt whatever that Fletcher fulminates against moral rules and universal laws. He urges us to break every one of the Ten Commandments and insists that "Any ethical system is unchristian... Jesus had no ethics, if... ethics (is) a system of values and rules intelligible to all men."

The attack on system is sustained: "System is that which is most opposed to life, freedom, and variety." Later on he says, "Christian situation ethics... denies that there are ... any unwritten laws of heaven, agreeing with Bultmann that all such notions are idolatrous and a demonic pretension." (Why did he say *unwritten* laws? It is the written Commandments he does not like).

Apparently in an effort to avoid complete anarchy Fletcher inserts a sub-head: *Principles, Yes, But Rules, No*. What follows is pretty much a play on words, but the pretense cannot be maintained, for two pages later he returns to his first love, "In

situation ethics even the most revered principles (!) may be thrown aside if they conflict in any concrete case with love” (pp. 31-33).

Presumably he does not mean to throw aside his own revered principle, but clearly he has no sympathy with the universal laws of the Ten Commandments.

Love is what Fletcher wished to substitute for system, commandments, or rules intelligible to all men. On the page before the Table of Contents he quotes Tillich: “The law of love is the ultimate law because it is the negation of law; it is absolute because it concerns everything concrete.” In his own words he says, “Christian ethics posits faith in God and reasons out what obedience to his commandment to love requires in any situation.” Again, “the ruling norm of Christian decision is love: nothing else.”

Ignoring his own prescription here, Fletcher never “reasons out” what love requires. To be sure, he asserts that love dictates abortion on the ground that no unwanted and unintended baby should be allowed to live. He approves of bachelor mothers; and very clearly states, “Whether any form of sex- hereto, homo, or auto- is good depends on whether love is served” But there is no reasoning to support these assertions. Could not love for babies prohibit abortion? Could not love for God abominate homosexuality?

Fletcher indeed has some apprehension that love furnishes no guidance in the concrete situations of life. Accordingly he appends a method or system to remove the deficiency. Even so he never makes use of the method in solving any concrete problem. The method is simply the utilitarian calculus applied to love: “Love can calculate.”

But if Bentham could not calculate pleasures, Fletcher has no easier problem. First, he does not make it clear whether an adulterer should try to maximize his own feelings of love, or those of his paramour, or those of this paramour and his wife, or perchance of the whole human race. Since in one place he uses the phrase “on the whole,” the last possibility is probably the correct interpretation. But how does a man measure the feeling of both women? Second, the measuring is impossible because there are no identifiable units of pleasure or love to make counting possible. Third, if there were units, there is no way to total them for a single individual and a total for the whole human race is so impossible as to be ridiculous.

Finally, Fletcher rejects the Scriptures. He denounces Paul’s “obscure and contradictory” view of the justice of God- “a confused wrangle in which Paul did not

provide a cogent answer to the questions he raised.” Fletcher seriously misinterprets Gal. 5:1 and Matt. 5:27-32; and, of course, discards the Ten Commandments. How then can he appeal to the Bible for the one phrase, “Thou shalt love”? A person who believes all the Bible can consistently appeal to any verse, as Jesus did in John 10:35; but a person who does not, must give reasons for accepting one verse rather than another. Fletcher gives no reason. To all intents he treats it as if it were a verbally inspired revelation to himself alone. Strange that Fletcher is inerrantly inspired and the Scripture is not.

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