

# SITUATION ETHICS

The New Morality

JOSEPH FLETCHER



# **Situation Ethics**

**BOOKS BY JOSEPH FLETCHER**  
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**Moral Responsibility:  
Situation Ethics at Work**

**Situation Ethics:  
The New Morality**

**SITUATION  
ETHICS  
THE NEW MORALITY**

by  
**Joseph Fletcher**

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*To our children and grandchildren:  
Joe, Jane, Bob, Maddy, Julia, Tommy*



All moral laws, I wish to shew, are merely statements that certain kinds of actions will have good effects. The very opposite of this view has been generally prevalent in Ethics. "The right" and "the useful" have been supposed to be at least *capable* of conflicting with one another, and, at all events, to be essentially distinct. It has been characteristic of a certain school of moralists, as of moral common sense, to declare that the end will never justify the means. What I wish first to point out is that "right" does and can mean nothing but "cause of a good result," and is thus identical with "useful": whence it follows that the end always will justify the means, and that no action which is not justified by its results can be right.

—George Edward Moore,  
*Principia Ethica*, p. 146.

The true, to put it briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as the right is only the expedient in the way of our behaving.

—William James, *Pragmatism*, p. 222.

The simple-minded use of the notions "right or wrong" is one of the chief obstacles to the progress of understanding.

—Alfred North Whitehead,  
*Modes of Thought*, p. 15.



Such as transgress without a cause shall be put to confusion.

—Psalm 25:2, *The Book of Common Prayer*.

There is only one ultimate and invariable duty, and its formula is "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." How to do this is another question, but this is the whole of moral duty.

—William Temple, *Mens Creatrix*, p. 206.

The law of love is the ultimate law because it is the negation of law; it is absolute because it concerns everything concrete. . . . The absolutism of love is its power to go into the concrete situation, to discover what is demanded by the predicament of the concrete to which it turns. Therefore, love can never become fanatical in a fight for the absolute, or cynical under the impact of the relative.

—Paul Tillich,  
*Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, p. 152.

# Contents

Foreword	11
I Three Approaches	17
II Some Presuppositions	40
III Love Only Is Always Good	57
IV Love Is the Only Norm	69
V Love and Justice Are the Same	87
VI Love Is Not Liking	103
VII Love Justifies Its Means	120
VIII Love Decides There and Then	134
IX Postscriptum: Why?	146
X An Appendix: Two Other Corruptions and Four Cases	160
Index	169



## Foreword

AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY some years ago, e. e. cummings gave his six *nonlectures*<sup>1</sup> on poetry, which some of his critics call "six lectures on nonpoetry." The poet's experience speaks to my condition. Over the years, as I have lectured on non-Christian systems of ethics, comparing them to various Christian systems, I have sometimes included my own *nonsystem*. It is this "nonsystem" which is set forth in capsule form in these pages.

In some cases my critics, like cummings', have argued that my point of view actually represents a Christian system of nonethics. A few have treated it as a non-Christian system of nonethics; and one moral theologian in Ireland has, in effect, taken it to be a non-Christian nonsystem of nonethics!<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Bishop Robinson, discussing "the new morality" in his *Honest to God*,<sup>3</sup> is amiable enough to say that my analysis gives it (the new morality) the "most consistent" statement he knows. We shall see.

The reader will find a method here, but no system. It is a method of "situational" or "contextual" decision-making, but system-building has no part in it. I gladly echo

<sup>1</sup> *Six nonlectures* (Harvard University Press, 1953).

<sup>2</sup> C. B. Daly, "A Criminal Lawyer on the Sanctity of Life," *Irish Theological Quarterly*, Vol. XXV (1958), pp. 330-366; Vol. XXVI (1959), pp. 23-55, 231-272.

<sup>3</sup> The Westminster Press, 1963.

F. D. Maurice on "system" and "method." He found them "not only not synonymous, but the greatest contraries imaginable: the one indicating that which is most opposed to life, freedom, variety; and the other that without which they cannot exist."<sup>4</sup> If this is "system-phobia," let the epithet be duly noted! Bishop Robinson rightly says that "there is no one ethical system that can claim to be Christian,"<sup>5</sup> but I am inclined to say that *any* ethical system is unchristian or at least sub-Christian, whatever might be its claim to theological orthodoxy.

Bultmann was correct in saying that Jesus had no ethics, if we accept, as I do not, his definition of ethics as a *system* of values and rules "intelligible for all men."<sup>6</sup> Yet the point is not so much that there *is* no such universal ethic (on that score Bultmann is on entirely firm ground) but that no ethic *need* be systematic and Jesus' ethic most certainly *was* not! I accept Hendrik Kraemer's trenchant statement: "Christian living . . . can never be stabilized in any historical or theoretical system, the splendid theoretic laws of the Old Testament included. There may be systems of philosophical ethics; there can never be a system of Christian ethics, at least if it is true to its nature."<sup>7</sup>

The label "new morality" is not altogether justified. Its meaning in journalism is a relaxed or even lax ethical outlook, especially in matters sexual. Two things should become clear as we proceed: (1) that the "new morality"

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in A. R. Vidler, *Witness to the Light* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *Christian Morals Today* (The Westminster Press, 1964), p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, tr. by Louise Pettibone Smith and Erminie Huntress Lantero (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 84.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Edward Duff, S.J., *The Social Thought of the World Council of Churches* (Association Press, 1956), p. 103n.

is not exactly new, either in method or in content, and (2) that as a method (which is the primary focus of this essay) its *roots* lie securely, even if not conventionally, in the classical tradition of Western Christian morals. It's an old posture with a new and contemporary look. At the same time, to be candid, the new morality—i.e., situation ethics—is a radical departure from the conventional wisdom and prevailing climate of opinion. In the language fashionable just now, the problem solver and the decision maker will see that situation ethics is not particularly Catholic or Protestant or Orthodox or humanist. It extricates us from the *odium theologicum*.

Let an anecdote set the tone. A friend of mine arrived in St. Louis just as a presidential campaign was ending, and the cab driver, not being above the battle, volunteered his testimony. "I and my father and grandfather before me, and their fathers, have always been straight-ticket Republicans." "Ah," said my friend, who is himself a Republican, "I take it that means you will vote for Senator So-and-So." "No," said the driver, "there are times when a man has to push his principles aside and do the right thing." That St. Louis cabbie is this book's hero.

Look also at a passage in Nash's play *The Rainmaker*. On the stage and as a movie it was a great success. But the key to it, ethically, lies in a scene where the morally outraged brother of a lonely, spinsterized girl threatens to shoot the sympathetic but not "serious" Rainmaker because he makes love to her in the barn at midnight. The Rainmaker's intention is to restore her sense of womanliness and her hopes for marriage and children. Her father, a wise old rancher, grabs the pistol away from his son, saying, "Noah, you're so full of what's right you can't see what's good."<sup>8</sup> I nominate the Texas rancher as co-hero

<sup>8</sup> N. Richard Nash, *The Rainmaker* (Bantam Books, Inc., 1957), p. 99. See also Robert Anderson's *Tea and Sympathy* (The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1956), esp. Act III.

with the cab driver. (An English movie in the same genre is *The Mark*, in which a man is sexually attracted to little girls until a woman his own age rescues him by seducing him and releasing him from his pathology.<sup>9</sup> At least it worked in the movie!)

As Paul Ramsey has pointed out, with some distaste, my approach is both personalistic and contextual.<sup>10</sup> These seem to me to be the two main features of Christian situationism. But I should make clear at the outset what is meant by "contextual" in this book. Paul Lehmann muddies the water with his use of the term because he attaches to it two different but often confused meanings. Sometimes he means that Christian action is to be carried out within a theological frame of reference, in the *koinōnia*, in the context of *faith*. Sometimes he means that Christian action should be tailored to fit objective circumstances, the *situation*.<sup>11</sup> It is in this second sense that I use it. (After all, *all* Christian ethics is "contextual" in the first sense, but that deprives the term of any discrete meaning in theological ethics!) Properly used, the word is applicable to *any* situation-sensitive decision-making, whether its ideology is theological or nontheological—e.g., either Christian or Marxist.<sup>12</sup>

People in churches and students in the "religious" departments of universities (but not others) sometimes

<sup>9</sup> Cited by H. A. Williams, "Theology and Self-Awareness," in A. R. Vidler, ed., *Soundings: Essays in Christian Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 82.

<sup>10</sup> "Lehmann's Contextual Ethics and the Problem of Truth-Telling," *Theology Today*, Vol. XXI (1965), p. 474.

<sup>11</sup> *Ethics in a Christian Context* (Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1963).

<sup>12</sup> See a penetrating paper by James A. Gustafson, "Context Versus Principle: A Misplaced Debate in Christian Ethics," *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 58 (1965), pp. 171-202.

complain that I fail to treat situation ethics in a very "Christian way," meaning that I do not seem, at least explicitly and persistently, to make enough reference to the theological framework. This is often wittingly the case, except for a stress on the normative ideal of "love"—always carefully distinguished as New Testament *agapē*. My reason is that the basic challenge offered by the situationist has nothing to do in any special way with theological over against nontheological faith commitments—as we shall see. (This is not to say, however, that one's faith is without an important bearing upon the situationist's action and decision-making.)

One explanation should be made. The word "love" is a swampy one, a semantic confusion. Compare these statements: (1) "See it now! Uncensored! Love in the raw!" (2) "I just love that hat. Isn't it absolutely divine?" (3) "Do you promise to love, honor, and obey?" (4) "Aw, come on—just this once—prove your love." (5) "I love strawberries, but they give me a rash." (6) "So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." (7) "And Jonathan loved David."

The temptation is to drop the word "love" altogether in Christian ethical discourse, to use only the New Testament word *agapē* (as Tillich has proposed<sup>13</sup>), or to hyphenate it with a C for Christian (C-love), or something of the kind. I appreciate the difficulty in using the simple English word (the Japanese have to cope with the same problem of multiple meanings in *ai*), but in this book I have kept it—with some explanation. The word is too rich, with too much important and legitimate meaning over and beyond its technical meaning in New Testament theology, to throw it away ruthlessly. Although not at all satisfied with his results, I am somehow impressed with the wealth of content in C. S. Lewis' *The Four Loves*.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Morality and Beyond* (Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1963), p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> London: Geoffrey Bles, Ltd., Publishers, 1960.



I am grateful for invitations to three lectureships which have helped me to crystallize this material. It began with the Alumni Visitation Day Lecture at the Harvard Divinity School in 1959; found fuller statement in the Easter Bedell Lectures at Bexley Hall, Kenyon College, in 1963; and won still further fashioning in the Visiting Professorship at International Christian University in Tokyo, 1963–1964. Throughout the preparation of these lectures and this book I have, as in past volumes, had the vital help and tolerance of my wife. And to students and practitioners in theological, medical, and business schools in various American universities I owe a lot for their illuminating discussions of both the theory itself and some real cases used to test it.

My greatest regret is that I did not have Professor Ramsey's quite remarkable symposium *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy* when this was written. He was thoughtful enough to send it to me in page proof but that was too late to cite or quote it. Nearly every paper in it is of the first importance and value to those who want to assess the merits of situation ethics, the ones by Dewi Phillips, of Bangor, and George Wood, of London, being quite directly relevant. Crossing swords with Ramsey's own concluding essay, about trying to find some way to rehabilitate the natural law theory, will have to wait upon later work.

JOSEPH FLETCHER

Cambridge, Massachusetts