



Explain the six fundamental principles of situation ethics (20)

Situation Ethics was devised by **Joseph Fletcher** in the **1960s** as a response to Christian legalism and antinomianism. He believed that ethical decisions should be made **teleologically** – looking at the end result, and also **relatively** where each situation is seen as unique. Fletcher based his theory on the one rule of Christian love or ‘**agape**’, because he believed that **Jesus** demonstrated this value in the Bible. Fletcher devised 6 fundamental principles to his theory **which allow us to weigh up whether a certain action would bring about the most loving response**. This can be seen as Christian utilitarianism, or an ‘agapeic calculus’.

The first principle is that **the ruling norm of any Christian decision making must be love**. This highlights the Christian nature of Situation ethics, and how it is supported in Bible passages such as Corinthians 1:13 where Paul says that only love is the basis for Christian decision making. Fletcher emphasises that all ethical actions must be approached with the norm of love.

Secondly, **love is the only intrinsic good**. In this sense, all other laws are subordinate to love and are therefore only ever a guideline. This demonstrates the relativistic nature of situation ethics, as ‘love’ is offered as the only guideline in between the two positions of legalism (many rules) and antinomianism (no rules). For example, if a young woman was considering an abortion, the only rule that she would need to consider is love, as opposed to following strict religious rules such as the Catechism.

Thirdly, Fletcher tells us that **love is justice distributed**. Here he informs us that a just result can come from following situation ethics. **For example, in a homosexual relationship**, if love is regarded as the only intrinsic good and a couple love each other, then it is the just thing to allow the couple of have an intimate relationship.

Fourthly, we are reminded that **love wills the good of others**, regardless of the outcome. This is emphasised in the parable of the Good Samaritan where we are told that our ‘neighbour’ is any fellow man. This stresses that the type of love that Fletcher promotes is an altruistic and caring love, as opposed to a self-centred love.

Fifthly, **we are reminded that love’s decisions are to be made situationally, not prescriptively**, which links in with the relativist nature of the theory as discussed before. This again demonstrates that situation ethics is a pragmatic approach whereby each situation is considered in its own right.

Finally, we are reminded that **a loving end justifies the means**. This condones bad actions as long as they bring about a loving end. For example, in a world war situation, it is possible that dropping a bomb could be the morally right decision if that bomb brings about the end of a war which would go on to kill more innocent civilians.

‘Situation Ethics encourages unethical behaviour’. Discuss this view (30)

To some extent, situation ethics (S.E) does promote unethical behaviour. **Some would argue that the very fact that the moral agent is left to approach each decision with a sense of autonomy suggests that S.E is too subjective**. This means that what one agent thinks is the most loving approach may not be what another agent considers a loving approach. In the case of homosexuality, whilst one agent may think it is more loving to allow a homosexual couple of be intimate, another Christian may take a more literalist approach of the Bible and consider it loving to remind the couple that there may be a prospect of eternal damnation for their action. Here we can have two Christians who have a different idea on what love actually is and it could be deemed unethical behaviour by



some to engage in a homosexual relationship, whilst at the same time it could be deemed unethical to judge a homosexual relationship by others.

However, **Fletcher would respond to such criticism that we can reach an idea on what love is quite easily by following Jesus as a role model.** He would suggest that agape is always an altruistic love which considers others. Having said this, Jesus himself gives mixed messages on love as he at times states that Christians should love their neighbour, but also reminds us that there will be a separation of sheep from the goats (sinners and non-sinners). Therefore, we are still left with an unclear idea of exactly what Christian love is, because there is love that we may have for our fellow man in this life, but is it not also loving to help our fellow man reach eternal salvation in the next life – and this is arguably attained through following more rules than just ‘love’. In this sense, S.E can promote unethical behaviour depending on what view you have on how to follow Christian teachings.

Similarly, **S.,E can promote unethical behaviour because it allows bad actions to occur for the sake of using this action as a means to an end.** Because of its relativist and teleological nature, S.E. would allow even killing in some cases if that killing went on to prevent many more deaths. This seems to suggest that S.E at the very heart of itself of course encourages unethical behaviour. However, this is only deemed unethical behaviour if we look solely at the act as opposed to the end product. For example, if we are looking at an abortion scenario, the act of killing a foetus is undoubtedly in most people’s minds unethical. However, the difference is that many people will then look to the consequence (a happy mother) to see the act in context and see it as a necessary means to an end. Therefore, it seems that S.E in many cases actively encourages unethical acts, and it depends on the agent as to whether they regard the consequences as a good enough end for the action to have happened.

Many would suggest that **S.E doesn’t encourage unethical acts, because they may believe that ‘love’ as a norm can never lead to a bad action.** These people would suggest that the very basis of putting love before rules, or even before reason, means that bad actions can’t happen. However, I would argue that this is just the intention of love. Moral agents can have the intention of love in all their actions which may well only ever encourage ethical acts. However, **humans can’t predict consequences accurately all of the time** and in this sense, whilst love may be the intention, certain unethical actions may be encouraged because we don’t know what is going to be the overall outcome. To refer back to the abortion example, at the time it may be suggested that a young impoverished mother is acting out of love by terminating her pregnancy, but how do we as agents really know whether or not she will go on to regret this decision. Moreover, how do we know for sure whether the love the mother could go on to have with her child may supersede the love in the termination. This again reiterates my previous criticism of S.E that the idea of love is too subjective and it also can’t be completely and accurately predicted. Psychologists would disagree and suggest that all human ethical behaviour tends to work on the basis of consequences, and therefore S.E doesn’t promote unethical behaviour more than any other ethical theory.

On this note, others would suggest that **a more rule based approach to ethics is clearer because it doesn’t have room for subjectivity and therefore doesn’t rely on unpredictable consequences as much.** In this sense, a system such as ‘natural law’ may be more appropriate because the agent has clear guidelines on how to approach ethical dilemmas and therefore can’t go onto commit unethical acts as a means to an end, nor can they complete an action and mis-predict the consequences. The problem with this suggestion though is – which rules do we follow? Whilst I have suggested natural law, others may argue back that the Hadiths or the Talmud. Moreover, there is bound to be rules within these books which seem to promote unethical behaviour within themselves. It is no doubt partly because of this confusion between laws that Fletcher removed himself from rigid laws to



create a middle way of 'love'. The problem here arises that love can promote unethical behaviour as much as a strict set of laws can promote unethical behaviour.

Overall, it appears that S.E by its very nature encourages unethical behaviour more than other ethical approaches, simply because it encourages moral agents to see actions as a means to an end. It seems that whether or not S.E promotes unethical behaviour *overall* is the true question in hand. To this I have suggested that S.E can promote unethical behaviour overall because love is too subjective and humans can't accurately predict the consequences.