

Situation Ethics in the Light of Vatican II

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Situation Ethics

Under the influence of some existentialists and in response to the challenge of the present problems of contemporary man, a group of theologians has emerged spousing what has come to be known as the "New Morality", "Contextual Ethics", or "Situation Ethics".

John A. T. Robinson affirms boldly that "there is no need to prove that a revolution is required in morals. The religious sanctions are losing their strength, the moral landmarks are disappearing beneath the flood . . . This is the end-term of the apostasy from Christianity: the fathers have rejected the doctrine, the children have abandoned the morals."¹ The reason given by Robinson for this apostasy from Christianity is that Christian morality until now has been identified with the old, traditional morality. That would not matter, he says, if this morality were Christian. But the sad reality is that it is not. What we must do, therefore, is to revise morals if we want to save Christianity.²

Not only theologians but also scientists are calling for a new morality. Harlow Shapley, a Harvard astronomer, declares: "We need an ethical system suitable for now—for this atomic age—rather than for the human societies of two thousand years ago."³

Even the Second Vatican Council, dealing with the formation of priests, shows discontentment with the traditional moral theology. It must be renewed. It must be different from the past.⁴ But does this mean that we have to formulate a New Morality in the style of Situation Ethics?

Situationists complain that there is a confusion between the New Morality (which believes in Situation Ethics) and Antinomianism (which believes in no principles at all). Foremost among those respon-

sible for this confusion, according to the situationists, is Pope Pius XII. Ernest Harrison, following Robinson and Fletcher, writes:

There has been a "misplaced debate" about situation ethics, because so many have too quickly taken it to be antinomian. Their error, due to the oversimple judgment of some European theologians, first appeared officially in an Allocution of Pius XII on April 18, 1952, in which the terms "existential" and "situational" were made synonymous. . . . Four years later, Situation Ethics was labelled The New Morality and banned from all academies and seminaries.⁵

There is no doubt that some early situationists were not easily distinguishable from existential or antinomian writers. This was true of certain German Catholics (e.g. E. Michel), and of certain Protestants (e.g. Eberhard Griesbach). But in recent years, both Catholic and Protestant ethicists, have tried to deal somewhat more carefully with the issues at stake.

Situation ethics is rapidly gaining ground as a way of systematic thinking about morality. Among Protestants especially, it claims an impressive array of advocates. Its chief representative exponents are: Karl Barth, R. Bultmann, E. Brunner, Paul Lehmann, James Gustafson, J. Robinson, J. Fletcher, E. Harrison, etc. Situation Ethics has not yet found a home among Catholic theologians but the influence of these Protestant authors is already felt.

Although there are differences among these new moralists, let us make it clear from the beginning, that all of them have two elements in common. First, in the same manner as the existentialist revolted against the bad habits which many philosophers had incurred, these situationists revolted against the traditional morality, labeled by them as "legalistic". Second, for all of them New Morality is a form of ethical relativism.

Is it true that God laid down certain laws never to be broken, valid for all men, at all times, in all nations, under all conditions? To answer this question Joseph Fletcher starts posing a problem with an old joke: A rich man asked a lovely young lady if she would spend the night with him. She said indignantly, "No." He then asked her if she would do it for \$100,000? She said, "Yes." He then asked her if she would do it for \$10,000? She replied, "Well, yes, I would." His next question was, how about for \$500? To this question she replied indignantly: "What do you think I am?" His answer to her was "We have already established *that*. Now we are haggling over the price."⁶

Does any girl who has sex relations outside marriage automatically become a loose woman, guilty of sin or wrong, regardless of what she

accomplishes for herself or for others? The same question can be asked with regard to masturbation, adultery, divorce, abortion, euthanasia, artificial insemination and sterilization. Are these things inherently wrong, or does it all depend on the situation?

In answer to these questions, Situation Ethics stays halfway between antinomianism and legalism. For the antinomianist (literally against the law, or unprincipled) every moment of existence is different from all others, and therefore, all general principles are irrelevant. In every "existential moment" or "unique situation" we must make decisions with autonomy and instantaneity. Moral decisions for the antinomianists are unpredictable. They must be made on the spot, *there* and *then*, within the situation. This approach which is followed by some existentialists, leads to anarchy; thus it is rejected by the situationists.

The legalists, on the other hand, start with the assumption that there are absolute standards, eternally valid, remaining unchanged and to be applied in the midst of change. For these so called "legalists" (the classical Christian moralists) certain things are always wrong, and nothing can make them right.

Situationists find it difficult to understand why the Church decided to follow legalism. Jesus was a "trouble maker". He spent much of his life denouncing the law. He broke the Sabbath. He broke the ritual food laws. In spite of this, the Church of the past, Catholics and Protestants alike, have been legalistic-minded. Catholics have based their legalism mainly on the *natural law* from which they derived universally valid laws never to be broken. Protestants have based their legalism on the *Scripture*. The Protestants of the past have done with Scripture what Catholics do with nature. According to them, there are certain revealed laws eternally valid to rule human conduct.

Situation Ethics as an approach between legalism and antinomian unprincipledness, goes part of the way with the natural law, accepting reason as the instrument of moral judgment, but rejects the notion that good is "objective"; that it exists in the nature of things. It adheres to the scriptural law, accepting revelation as the source of the norm, while rejecting all revealed norms or laws except one command which is, to love God and neighbor.

Situationists accept principles and moral laws and treat them with respect as illuminators of their problems. But these laws are never imperatives to be followed in all occasions, and the situationists must be prepared to compromise them or set them aside if love seems better served by doing so.⁸

Although all situationists defend this form of ethical relativism,

there are, nevertheless, great differences among them. Barth and Bultmann, for example, represent a moderate situationism. Robinson, Fletcher, and Harrison are more extremists.

Karl Barth. According to him morality must consider as its primary task the preservation of the direct dependency of the "free children of God" on the Father. Rather than rules, Barth encourages an immediate personal relationship, a "dialogue" or "encounter" with the God of love. In this dialogue, if we are sincere, we will find out what to do in each situation. In the present condition of man in the world the only valid norm to rule our conduct is the Word of God communicated to the believer through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. God gives moral directives in a personal way: "His command is always concrete, for the conduct of this man, within his situation."⁹

However, for Barth, good and evil are "real" or "objective" and only in rare cases can we excuse what the law forbids such as fornication, adultery, homosexual acts, abortion, sterilization, etc.¹⁰

Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann's situation ethics involves an existential view of man. Greatly influenced by Martin Heidegger, Bultmann maintains that man's being is a possibility of being. Man does not have a "fixed" nature, but he is always in the midst of choosing who he is. Man is always ahead of himself, incomplete in his being. He stands before a "not yet"; he projects possibility. Therefore, human nature possesses no constant laws that may be relied upon in any given situation. We cannot bring "fixed" standards of the past to rule the standardless moment of the present.¹¹ God's demands must be formulated; otherwise they will lose their concreteness, their historicity, and their existentiality.

However, Bultmann calls for "radical obedience" to the Word of God. Man must listen and respond to the Word speaking to him through the situation in which he exists. God's demand is written in the situation. If we do not hear it, the fault is ours. But God never demands a *what* (a specific action), but a *that* (that one is to be responsible). He demands that we love in every situation.¹²

Robinson, Fletcher and Harrison go more to the extreme. They do not accept the notion that there are moral standards revealed by God.

Robinson states that the "commandments", which according to the classic mythological statement, were delivered to Moses on the mountain top, graven on tablets, and eternally valid for human conduct, must now be presented for obedience stripped of their mythological garb.¹³ Even the belief that Jesus laid down certain precepts which are universally valid (or the idea that certain things are always right,

others always wrong, for all men, everywhere) is a distortion of his teaching.

The teachings of Jesus, says Robinson, are not to be understood legalistically, as prescribing what Christians must do whatever the circumstances may be, or as pronouncing certain courses of action which are universally right or universally wrong. They are not legislation laying down what love always demands of every one: they are illustrations of what love may at any moment require of anyone. They are, as it were, parables of the kingdom with moral claims.¹⁴

Fletcher also criticises those moralists who take the Gospel legalistically. Jesus and Paul replaced the precepts of the *Torah* with the loving principle of *Agape* (love). "The written code kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6).

For Fletcher, Situation Ethics repudiates any attempt to anticipate or prescribe real life decisions in their existential particularity. Christian Situation Ethics has only one principle which is binding in all cases, which is always good and right, regardless of the circumstances. And that is love or *agape*. Everything else without exception, all other principles and norms are contingent; they become valid only if they serve love.¹⁵

With regard to the commandments, Fletcher affirms that in some situations, it is a duty to break them, *any* or *all* of them.¹⁶ The reason given is that the Christian must be neighbor-centered. Love is for people, not for principles. Love is personal; the principles are impersonal. Therefore, when the impersonal conflicts with the personal, the latter must prevail. Love is of people, by people, for people. Things are to be used, people are to be loved. It is immoral when people are used and things or principles are loved.¹⁷

Within the Situation Ethics of Fletcher, Robinson, and Harrison, it would be a wrong approach to morality to start from the position, for instance, that "sex relations before marriage or divorce are wrong or sinful in themselves. They may be in 99 cases or even 100 cases out of 100, but they are not intrinsically so. The only intrinsic evil is lack of love."¹⁸

By stressing the demand of love, these situationists claim to be at once more lenient and more strict than law morality. The demands of love are deeper and more penetrating. For instance, Professor Fletcher writes: "if the emotional and spiritual welfare of both parents and children in a *particular* family can be served best by divorce, . . . then love requires it."¹⁹ John A. Robinson discussing the problem of premarital sex relations says:

To the young man asking in his relations with a girl, "Why shouldn't I?", it is relatively easy to say "Because it is wrong" or "Because it's a sin"—and then to condemn him when he, or his whole generation, takes no notice. It makes much greater demand to ask and to answer the question, "Do you love her?" or "*How much* do you love her?", and then to help him to accept for *himself* the decision that, if he doesn't or doesn't very deeply, then his action is immoral, or if he does, then he will respect her far too much to use her or to take liberties with her. Chastity is the expression of charity—of caring enough. And this is the criterion for every form of behaviour, inside marriage or outside of it, in sexual ethics or in any other field. For *nothing else* makes a thing right or wrong.²⁰

Ernest Harrison commenting on adultery writes: "If love is denied, if there is a mere using of another person for a passing pleasure, if wives and husbands are irreparably hurt, if children are mauled emotionally, then clearly the adultery is not love. But if love is satisfied, then adultery is not wrong."²¹

Some of these new moralists are already conforming to the current of the so called "death of God" theologians. Monotheism is no longer for them an imperative, but an indicative to follow; God can certainly be denied for a loving cause. "An atheist who lives by love is saved by the faith in the God whose existence (under that name) he denies."²² "In morals, as in everything else, the secret of our exit from the morasses of relativism is not, I believe, a recall to religion, a reassertion of the sanctions of the supernatural. It is to take our place alongside those who are deep in the search for meaning *etsi deus non daretur*, even if God is not there. It is to join those on the Emmaus road who have no religion left, and there, in, with and under the meeting of man with man and the breaking of the common bread, to encounter the unconditional as the Christ of our lives."²³

Evaluation of Situation Ethics

We are of the opinion that an open-minded Theologian should be able to see some positive elements in Situation Ethics.

Situation Ethics is a constant reminder to avoid the pitfalls of legalism. Christian existence is not a "prescribed" existence. Creativity more than conformity should be present in the lives of most Christians. Nevertheless, the Catholic moralists of the past, with the exception of a few great theologians, leaned heavily towards legalism. Manuals and Textbooks of Moral Theology abound in expressions and opinions that this or that is a mortal sin. Non-competent confessors and professors

or morals, formed in the light of these Manuals have been purporting this "crippled morality" instead of teaching the authentic doctrine of the Church.

The consequence of this "crippled morality" of the past is the frightful amount of "infantilism" shown in many Catholics of today. This infantilism is most often and most clearly manifested on the occasion of Confession. Take for example, the pious young woman who speaks of her "little sins", or the nun who regularly adds to her confession "the sins which I might have forgotten", as some kind of magic safeguard against the accounting of an all-seeing God.

How often, do many Christians, instead of attempting to gain insights, for their own decisions, turn over their responsibility to the confessor ("he gives me permission to do it this way"—"I am allowed by my confessor"). And with the infantile penitent there is a tendency to paternalism on the side of the priest who insists on dealing with all kinds of peripheral problems at the expense of what is religiously essential.

This "legalistic morality" has contributed many times to the false idea of a "good Catholic". Many, simply fulfilling the letter of the law, by going to Mass on Sundays, to Communion during Easter, etc. have become contented Catholics without fulfilling the true demands of the Sermon on the Mount. Others put their private devotions or semi-superstitious practices of a personal sort before the great commandments of love of God, love of others, and the duties of one's state of life. Even many priests and religious, guided by these Manuals and Textbooks of Moral Theology, put emphasis almost exclusively on sexual sins, while they remain blind to the most elementary demands of social justice and social solidarity.²⁴

On the other hand, Situation Ethics, emphasizes the dignity of the human person and personal responsibility. "Things are to be used, persons are to be loved." "Sin is the exploitation or use of a person". Authentic morality should be *personal* and community-minded. We live in a world in-the-presence-of-others with whom we share a common nature. We must also share in the responsibilities of our society. We are reminded of this by the Vatican II:

. . . true education aims at the formation of the human person with respect to his ultimate goals, and simultaneously with respect to the good of those societies of which, as man, he is a member, and in whose responsibilities, as an adult, he will share.

This holy Synod likewise affirms that children and young people have a right to be encouraged to weigh moral values with an upright conscience, and to embrace them by personal choice.²⁵

Another important element of Situation Ethics, worthy of our attention, is the fact that most situationists encourage a personal contact or "dialogue" with the Father of love. We also maintain that the primary law of conduct for Christians is the law of the spirit "who dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful as in a temple."²⁶ The Second Vatican Council reminds us that Christ sent the Holy Spirit upon all men that:

He might inspire them from within to love God with their whole heart and with their whole soul, with all their mind and all their strength, and that they might love one another as Christ loved them.²⁷

We believe that it is essential for Christian morality to develop awareness of the Spirit who sanctifies and leads the people of God. The Christian must be an open-minded man who listens to the internal call of the Spirit and to the appealing kindness of his neighbor.

With this we do not intend to deny the objective norms of morality. On the contrary we boldly affirm that the "Ethics of the Spirit",—the "Ethics of the Heart" of Situation Ethics, without reference to objectivity, even for the man "come of age" is a very dangerous Ethics and might easily degenerate into arbitrariness.

Without reference to the objective laws of morality, how is it possible to distinguish love from self-interest? How do we know, for instance, that adultery, in certain situations, is the most loving thing to do, and not cruelty, or lack of love?

Here I want to mention St. Thomas, not because I think his moral theology sufficient for our time, but because he is a good example of a man who rejects both the externalism of the legalists and the pitfalls of the situationists.

In his *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas devotes about 300 questions to morality, but only 18 are concerned with the law. He has never maintained that conformity to the law is sufficient for a good action. In the morality of St. Thomas, "love" is the soul or life ("forma") of every virtue.²⁸ By this he means that every genuine virtue is just a form of love. Chastity without love is, for him, not a true chastity at all, but a corpse; and for an Aristotelian such as he was, a dead body is not even a body, it is a heap of chemicals which happens to be easily mistaken for a body. Moreover, he held that chastity without love would, in a fairly short time, cease even to resemble chastity; like a corpse it would soon fall to pieces and begin to smell.²⁹

This is evidently not a legalist's position and yet St. Thomas, contrary to Situation Ethics, thought that some prohibitions were uncon-

ditionally binding. He distinguished between absolutely binding norms (such as the fundamental precepts of the natural law), and norms which do not bind always, like for example, the positive laws of the Church and of the State when they cause grave inconvenience to their subjects. In these instances, St. Thomas maintained that one ought to depart from the letter of the law and to follow the spirit of the law.³⁰

St. Thomas' distinction between absolutely and relatively binding norms is supported by the authentic Magisterium of the Church. Pope Pius XII in his evaluation of Situation Ethics, wrote:

From the essential relationship between man and God, between man and man, between husband and wife, between parents and children . . . it follows among other things that . . . abandoning the true faith, adultery, fornication, the abuse of marriage, the solitary sin, etc. no matter what the situation of the individual may be, there is no other course open to him but obey—these things are gravely forbidden by the Divine Lawmaker.

Where there are no absolutely *binding standards*, independent of all circumstances and eventualities, the situation which happens only once, demands, it is true, in its unicity, an attentive examination, in order to decide which rules are to be applied here and now. Catholic morality has always and extensively, treated the problem of forming one's conscience by first examining the circumstances of the case to be decided. The whole of its teaching offers a precious aid to the definite guidance of conscience, whether theoretical or practical. Let us suffice to mention the explanations of St. Thomas, still of value, on the cardinal virtue of prudence and the virtues connected with it. His treatise shows his understanding of a sense of personal activity and actuality which contain whatever of true and of positive elements there may be in "Ethics according to the situation", while avoiding its confusion and wanderings from truth. Hence it would be enough to the modern moralist to follow the same line if he wishes to make a thorough study of the new problem.³¹

The modern moralist should, of course, look towards the future. Our existence, in a certain way, is an existence in time, therefore in history, an existence in evolution, in growth. But this does not mean that he has to discard everything belonging to the past as "obsolete" and opposed to the movement of renewal in the contemporary Church.

We mentioned at the beginning that the Second Vatican Council shows discontentment with the traditional moral theology. It must be different from the past. But with this, the Council did not intend to do away with the traditional fundamental norms of morality, as proposed by the situationists. The Council is speaking only of a new emphasis: authentic Christian morality must be less

"legalistic" and more "personal", more "community-minded", more "Christian". It must be renewed by "livelier contact with the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation."³²

FOOTNOTES

¹ Robinson, John A.T., *Honest to God*, SCM paperback, pp. 105-106.

² *Ibid.*

³ Harlow Shapley, "Stars, Ethics, and Survival", *Religion in Life*, Vol. XXX (Summer, 1961), p. 341.

⁴ Vatican II *Decree on Priestly Formation*, n. 16.

⁵ Earnest Harrison, *A Church Without God*. Lippincott, 1967, p. 109. Cf. Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics* (The New Morality), Westminster Press, p. 34. Cf. AAS, 44 (1952), p. 416.

⁶ Joseph Fletcher, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁷ Cf. Robinson, *ibid.*, p. 107; Fletcher, *op. cit.*, p. 18; Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

⁸ Fletcher, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

⁹ Franz Bockle, *Law and Conscience*. Sheed and Ward. See chapter on "norm in situation in Protestant Ethics", p. 94. Cf. Goffinet, J., *Morale de situation et morale Chrétienne*. Pensée Catholique. Bruxelles-Paris, 1963, p. 20.

¹⁰ Fletcher, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

¹¹ John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology* (A Comparison of Heidegger and Bultmann). Harper Torchbooks, 1965, p. 112. Cf. Henlee H. Barnette, *The New Theology and Morality*. Westminster, 1967, pp. 33, 35.

¹² Henlee Barnette, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

¹³ Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110-111.

¹⁵ Fletcher, *op. cit.*, pp. 69, 29-30.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 74

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 51.

¹⁸ Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

¹⁹ Fletcher, *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, October 1959, p. 15; Cf. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

²⁰ Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

²¹ Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 118. Harrison says that "in the case of pre-marital intercourse, the problem is easier. Unlike extra-marital relationships, there is not the same likelihood of damage to innocent people inextricably linked with the situation. That is why those who support the New Morality, while speaking very cautiously about extra-marital relationships, frequently speak in favor of pre-marital ones."

²² Fletcher, *op. cit.*, pp. 72, 52.

²³ Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 121; Ernest Harrison says that we "no longer have to use the word Christ. Because I am Anglican I use the word "Christian" frequently. In the words of a laywoman I "am bugged by Jesus", and find in him the clearest and fullest declaration of man's freedom to be a man . . . Christ is alive even, to use Robinson's phrase, when he moves among us *incognito*. The classical parable constantly quoted by the New Moralists, is that of the sheep and the goats. Those who are blessed by the judge did not know the Son of Man at all, but helped others in poverty, prison, and hunger. The damned were those who called on him constantly, very religiously, but did not help those in poverty, prison, or hunger." (Earnest Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 122).

²⁴ Louis Monden, S.J., *Sin, Liberty and the Law*. Sheed and Ward. N.Y., 1965, Cf. pp. 112-115.

²⁵ Vatican II, *Declaration on Christian Education*, n. 1.

²⁶ Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, n. 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, n. 40.

²⁸ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 23, a.8 et ad 2um.

²⁹ Herbert McCabe, O.P. "The New Morality, *Commonweal*, Vol. LXXXIII (January 14, 1966), p. 433.

³⁰ The virtue of prudence, and more specially the virtue akin to it called *Gnome* will give us the sense of the "unique situation". This virtue named *Gnome* in the teaching of Aristotle, corresponds to *epikeia* in the morality of St. Thomas: "contingit autem multoties quod aliquid observari communi saluti est utile ut in pluribus, quod tamen in aliquibus casibus est maxime nocivum. Quia legislator non potest omnes singulares casus intueri, proponit legem secundum ea quae in pluribus accidunt, ferens intentionem suam ad communem salutem. Unde si emergeat casus in quo observatio legis sit damnosa communi saluti, non est observanda." (*Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 120, a.1).

³¹ AAS, 44 (1952), pp. 417-418. Vatican II corroborates the doctrine of Pius XII. Thus in the Constitution on the *Church in the Modern World*, n. 51 affirms: "the moral aspect of any procedure does not depend solely on sincere intentions or on an evaluation of motives. It must be determined by objective standards. These, based on the nature of the human person and his acts." The same Council on the Decree on Religious Freedom, n. 3, states: "the highest norm of human life is the divine law—eternal, objective, and universal whereby God orders, directs, and governs the entire universe and all the ways of the human community, by a plan conceived in wisdom and love. Man has been made by God to participate in this law . . ."

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