

# A DISCOURSE ON THE ABSURDITIES OF LOVE IN JOSEPH FLETCHER'S SITUATION ETHIC

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## **Abstract**

In this study, a critical assessment of Joseph Fletcher's ethical contextualism is undertaken. Fletcher is convinced that his moral theory which is based on love can serve as a basis for the observance of the laws of God and mutual coexistence among humans. It is on this ground that he situates his situation ethic between legalism and antinomianism. Through the method of analysis and interpretation, this study argues that Fletcher's proposal is inconsistent and founders on at least three grounds. Firstly, Fletcher's contextualism is a moral theory that contradicts the teachings of Christian morality and the Bible which Fletcher himself and millions of the human population profess and practice. Secondly, in spite of Fletcher's grounding of situation ethic as a midway between legalism and antinomianism, this study observes that his idea is more legalistic than situational as well as more antinomian than contextual. This is because when Fletcher affirms that his moral theory does not admit "prefabricated rules and regulations," (as holds in legalism), he posits love as a rule. Analogously, Kant recommends duty as a rule when Bentham proposes greater number of happiness over sorrow. More so, Fletcher's failure to state in precise terms what 'love' is lands him in the camp of the antinomian. Thirdly, Fletcher's imploration that all moral agency and agents be grounded on love has unpleasant futuristic or consequential inferences if followed to the logical conclusion. Upon these flaws generated from our critical engagement with Fletcher's ethical contextualism, this study maintains that legalism is more plausible and illuminating than Fletcher's new morality.

**Keywords:** Fletcher, Situation Ethics, Antinomianism, Legalism, Christianity.

## Introduction

Moral precepts arise out of the quest to be a good citizen to one's society and being able to satisfy one's ego without necessarily conflicting or inflicting harm on other members of society. Some others are motivated by a moral precept that keeps them in good standing with their Creator. As a result of these realities, there have been several moral theories that are calculated to serve as groundwork for moral agency. Of these, utilitarianism and deontological ethics are mostly discernable and commonplace. Within the last century however, Joseph Fletcher thinks that the two popular normative frameworks: utilitarianism and deontological ethics are not viable. He therefore proposes his situation ethics which takes cognizance of context with love as its guiding underlying or motivational character. What is the main kernel of Fletcher's situation ethics? What are the limits presented against its application? Does it successfully overcome some of the contentions and founders observed in the two popular normative ethical theories? These are the question that we contend with in the pages that follow. Hence, next section focuses on the gap that situation ethics seeks to fill owing to the shortcomings of the two prominent normative moral theories – utilitarianism and deontology. It will also unclad the main kernel of Fletcher's situation ethic. In the third section, we marshal our grouses against situation ethic as a normative moral theory that makes no improvement over the traditional approaches (deontology and utilitarianism). The fourth part concludes this study.

## John Fletcher's Situation Ethics as a Normative Ethical Framework

For an act to be morally praiseworthy or otherwise, it needs assessment from established moral paradigms. The two most popular and influential normative ethical theories for the task are utilitarianism and deontological ethic. The former may be traced to Jeremy Bentham is convinced that “pleasure and pain govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think.”<sup>1</sup> From this, he proposes the principle of utility as the standard of right action on the part of governments and individuals. Actions are approved when they are such as to promote happiness, or pleasure, and disapproved of when they have a tendency to cause unhappiness, or pain.<sup>2</sup> Utilitarianism has however been heavily, affirming its shortcomings as an inadequate criterion by itself for the evaluation of moral agency. When circumstances arise, we can justify killing one person for the benefit of the majority. Is it always the case that the consequence of moral actions

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<sup>1</sup>Jeremy Bentham. *An Introduction to the Principles Of Morals And Legislation* (New York: Macmillan 1948), 1

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, 1

can be known at all times before hand? These are some of the posers that Bentham's utilitarianism has yet to recover from.

Kant's deontological ethic similarly suffers the same bitter criticism. The roots of the word 'deontology' can be found in the Greek words 'deon', *duty*, and 'logos', *science*. The best-known representative of deontological ethics is the German philosopher Immanuel Kant.<sup>3</sup> According to deontological ethics, some types of actions are prohibited, or obligatory, irrespective of their consequences.<sup>4</sup> While developing his ethics, Immanuel Kant begins by announcing that "two things fill the mind with constant awe and admiration – the starry heavens above and the moral law within."<sup>5</sup> For Kant "there is, therefore, only a single categorical imperative and it is this: act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law."<sup>6</sup> In simpler terms, Kant demands that since all humans participate in the moral law, for every act the moral agent should ask if such will remain valid if it is universally accepted. Perhaps when prompted to steal, Kant implores to inquire what the world would be like were stealing made a universal valid action. It is therefore the case that for Kant a moral act should not be judged on consequence but based on the rightness or wrongness of the act itself. In this guise, it has been initiated that "Kant would debunk any form of lying to promote the purchasing power of goods and services by marketing agents. This is because, and as deduced from his Imperatives, if one willed lying as a universal act, one would see that it lacks moral support. More so, the whole affair of lying about products and services does no more than to use fellow humans, in this case, consumers as a means to an end, but not as an end in themselves."<sup>7</sup>

It is within these extreme perspectives to the assessment of moral agency that Fletcher's contextualism enters the discursive fray for an improved moral normative theory which takes serious consideration of the unique contexts or situations of a moral act. Situation ethics is referred to as "a circumstantial ethics that appropriates and utilizes the prevailing factors at a time in the determination of a piece of action."<sup>8</sup> Situation ethics

3Tobjorn Tannsjo. *Understanding Ethics*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd 2002), 56.

4Ibid, 56.

5Immanuel Kant. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. M. Gregor. (Trans.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998), 30.

6Ibid, 31.

7Babajide Dasaolu. Marketing, Lying And Ethics. *Journal of Philosophy and Development*. 2017. (16) 1, 116.

8Benson Igboin. Situationism and Christian Ethics: An Appraisal. In P. Iroegbu and A. Echekwube (eds.) *Kpim of Moral Ethics*. (Lagos: Heinemann

insists that each moral choice must be determined by its unique particular context or situation, i.e. by a consideration of the outcomes that various courses of actions might have. As a consequence, a good act in one situation may be adjudged otherwise in another situation.<sup>9</sup>

Fletcher's situation ethics falls between the two extremes of legalism and antinomianism. The former defines moral rules and principles as absolute laws that must of necessity be obeyed. Immanuel Kant's duty ethics, briskly considered in the preceding section, clearly falls within this spectrum. Concerning legalism, Fletcher reveals that "one enters into every decision-making situation encumbered with a whole apparatus of pre-fabricated rules and regulations."<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the latter insists that man is free and as a result no law or principle can guide human decision-making. Immanuel Kant's duty ethic and Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism, both tersely considered hitherto, clearly fall within this spectrum. Regarding antinomianism, Fletcher imagines "one who enters into decision-making situation armed with no principles or maxims whatsoever, to say nothing of rules."<sup>11</sup> The term antinomian derives from two Greek words, *anti* (against/ instead of) and *nomos* (law). Thus, the antinomian is the one who denies there is any normative ethical law. The moral deliberations and choice of the antinomian are haphazard, unreliable and loose.

Fletcher maintains that everything is relative to its unique situation.<sup>12</sup> This version of normative ethic has no absolute principle for adjudging a situation to be either praiseworthy or blameworthy, other than love. Even the biblical injunctions that we heretofore considered "absolute" are only generally or provisionally true. The Ten Commandments, according to Fletcher, would fall into this category because there can be exceptions to each and every command. As a result of this conviction, Fletcher offers that "The situationist enters into every decision-making situation fully armed with the ethical maxims of his community and its heritage, and he treats them with respect as illuminators of his problems. Just the same he is prepared in any situation to compromise them or set them aside in the situation if love seems better served by doing so."<sup>13</sup>

The prime place of departure between situation ethics on the one hand with both legalism and antinomianism, on the other hand, is that the

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Educational Books 2005), 49.

<sup>9</sup>Dasaolu, op. cit., 117.

<sup>10</sup>Joseph Fletcher. *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press 1966), 18.

<sup>11</sup>ibid, 22.

<sup>12</sup>ibid, 43-4.

<sup>13</sup>ibid, 26.

former keeps “law in a subservient place.”<sup>14</sup> The implication here is that law is relegated under love for Fletcher. Fletcher’s insistence that every moral situation is guided by the principle of love brings him close to the utilitarian injunction that the end justifies the means. By amplification, whatever moral agency can use and/or do to promote love as it ends is justified. This is made clear in Fletcher’s assertion that “Jesus said nothing about birth control, masturbation, fornication, or premarital intercourse, sterilization, artificial insemination, abortion, sex play, petting, and courtship. Whether any form of sex (hetero, homo, or auto) is good or evil depends on whether love is fully served.”<sup>15</sup> He expatiates that People are learning that we can have sex without love, and love without sex, that baby-making can be (and often ought to be) separated from lovemaking. It is, indeed, for recreation as well as for procreation. But if people do not believe it is wrong to have sex relations outside marriage, it isn’t unless they hurt themselves, their partners, or others.... All situationists would agree with Mrs. Patrick Campbell’s remark that they can do what they want “as long as they don’t do it in the street and frighten the horses.”<sup>16</sup> Given these premises, Fletcher concludes that “for the situationist, there are no rules – none at all.”<sup>17</sup> Hence, love is the crucial underlying basis for moral agency. In this connection, Fletcher proposes six axioms that are cardinal to situation ethic: (1) Only one thing is intrinsically good; namely love and nothing else; (2) The ruling norm of Christian decision is love and nothing else; (3) Love and justice are the same, for justice is love distributed and nothing else; (4) Love wills the neighbour’s good whether we like it or not; (5) Only the end justifies the means and nothing else; and (6) Love’s decisions are made situationally, not prescriptively.<sup>18</sup> As a way of validating his thesis, Fletcher uses instances. One of the instances he used which has also come under attack is the unique situation of Mrs Bergmeier. According to Fletcher:

“At the Battle of the Bulge (World War 2, winter of 1944), a German infantryman named Bergmeier was captured and taken into a prisoner of war camp in Wales. Later, his wife, compelled to forage for food for their three children, was picked up by a Soviet patrol. Before she could get word back to them, she was sent off to a prison camp in the Ukraine. Within a few months, Bergmeier was released and upon return to Berlin began to search for his family. He found Paul, who was 10, and Ilse, who was 12, in a Russian detention school. Their 15-year-old

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid, 31.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, 131.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid, 140.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, 55.

<sup>18</sup>

brother, Hans, was found hiding in a cellar. But they searched in vain for some word of their mother. Her whereabouts remained a mystery. During those agonizing months of heartache, hunger and fear, they needed their mother to reunite them as a family.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, in the Ukraine, Mrs. Bergmeier learned through a sympathetic commandant that her husband and children were together in Berlin and were desperately trying to find her. But the Russian rules would allow her release for only two reasons: (1) an illness requiring medical care beyond the camp facilities, in which case she would be sent to a Soviet hospital elsewhere, and (2) pregnancy, in which case she would be returned to Germany as a liability.<sup>20</sup>

She wrestled with the alternatives and finally asked a friendly camp guard to impregnate her. When her condition was medically verified, she was immediately returned to Berlin and to her family. They welcomed her with open arms even when she told them how she managed it. When little Dietrich was born, they especially loved him, feeling that he had done what no one else could do—bring the family back together.<sup>21</sup>

Adultery, granted is a sinful act that is morally blameworthy. Within this context however, Fletcher lauds Mrs Bergmeier’s courageous act as morally praiseworthy, tagging it as “sacrificial adultery.” In the words of Fritz Ridenour: “Fletcher uses this story, which is based on fact, to show, that in a certain situation, doing the loving thing might make it necessary to ‘set aside’ that stodgy, stiff seventh commandment, ‘Thou shalt not commit adultery’ [Exodus 20:14].”<sup>22</sup>

With the main idea of Fletcher’s contextualism already disclosed with the illustration of Mrs Bergmeier, it is important at this juncture to disclose the criticisms leveled against the idea and the illustration.

### **A Disclosure of the Three Founders against Fletcher’s Situation Ethic and the Absurdities of Love**

A common grouse adduced to situation ethics is that as a moral norm, it has no absolute principles. Nothing could be more false. For the

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19Ibid, 1

20Ibid, 1

21William Banowsky. *The New Morality: A Christian Perspective*. (Campus Evangelism 1968), 1

22Fritz Ridenour. *The Other Side of Morality*. (Glendale, C.A.: Gospel Light 1969), 74

situationist, the human person is an absolute value that cannot be subordinated to anything else. There is no objective yardstick that may be used to adjudge a moral agent as either or not culpable. Similarly, the situationist refuses to accept objective rules of good and evil to be absolutely valid because the moral intention cannot be determined exclusively by the objective structure of an act, by the context or situation. In this section, three flaws will be discussed to show why the new morality of Fletcher does not pass gamut as an improved alternative to traditional normative ethical theories.

Granted, law and love are mutually exclusive in Fletcher's contextualism. It is however the case that both are mutually inclusive in Christian morality and the bible. It is not possible and morally justifiable for a fervent Christian to use love to surpass the law as Fletcher insists. This is why Fritz Ridenour too adds that "Joseph Fletcher would have you believe that when it comes to ethics and morals, all that counts is love. The Bible, however, teaches that you need love and law."<sup>23</sup> This objection is made more elaborate by David Lipe thus:

For Fletcher, it is **either** law **or** love; but, for the Christian, it is **both** law **and** love. Fletcher even misunderstands the nature of love. Love is **preceded** by faith and **followed** by obedience. In John 14:15 Jesus says, "If ye love me, **keep** my commandments." Fletcher says, "If ye love me, **set aside** my commandments." Thus, according to the Bible, love is defined by acting in harmony with the will of God. From this, it can be seen that any ethical system must have content. For Fletcher the **content** of his ethical system is totally relative, and only specified by the principle of the "loving thing to do."<sup>24</sup> [Emphasis in the original]

Secondly, it is the case that Fletcher's contextualism makes no improvement over the legalism and antinomianism it seeks to usurp. Recall that Fletcher disagrees with absolute normative ethical principles such as Kant's deontology and Bentham's utilitarianism. For situation ethics keeps "law in a subservient place."<sup>25</sup> This implies that law is subordinated to love. What he has done is to replace law with love. The implication is that even situation ethics is a form of legalism since love is a paragon for assessing moral agents and agencies. In simple language, Fletcher takes from the back door what he rejects at the front door. This is why this study maintains that Fletcher's contextualism is legalistic. It however boasts of an antinomian reading as well.

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid, 90

<sup>24</sup>David Lipe. Situation Ethics. *The Spiritual Sword*. July 1978, 4.

<sup>25</sup>Fletcher, op. cit., 31.

In spite of the admission that love is a principal factor makes it an improvement of antinomianism, it is crystal clear that throughout his treatise, Fletcher was not certain about what constitutes love, thereby creating mass confusion. Vernon Grounds too concedes that Fletcher provided almost a dozen definition of ‘love.’<sup>26</sup> For Fletcher, love can be an action, a motive, a principle, or just plain “good will.” The “absolute” of “love” suddenly has become not so “absolute” after all. It is, in fact, capable of almost any possible definition. In the end, he admits that “the word ‘love’ is a swampy one, a semantic confusion.”<sup>27</sup> Fletcher however intends that this “swampy and semantic confusion” may be erected to the level of a moral framework for adjudging moral agents. The result will be a very poor, erratic, haphazard, unreliable and loose idea of morality, which is characteristic of his rejection of antinomianism. Inadvertently, situation ethic becomes antinomian as well. Granted, Fletcher did not, like the antinomian deny ethical laws. However, his refusal to provide a normative understanding of the concept, ‘love’ lands him in the same consequence the antinomian finds herself. Regarding the fluid or loose nature of love, Norman Geisler ripostes that “a single but contentless absolute is no absolute at all. Commanding “love” in every situation without being able to define what “love” means is like commanding one to do X in every situation, when X is unknown.”<sup>28</sup> Wayne Jackson also contributes that Fletcher’s contextualism “...is fraught with insuperable logical difficulties. First, it affirms, ‘There are no absolutes.’ Are you sure? ‘Absolutely!’ It claims there are no rules save the rule of love, yet by their own rules the situationist would define love”<sup>29</sup> It is this second objection that informs the massive erratic consequences that an ardent embrace of situation ethic will face. The inability to state what love is, also informs the case of Mrs Bergmeier which has come under serious attack.

William Banowsky, in his book, *The New Morality: A Christian Solution*, points out that despite the fact that Mrs. Bergmeier’s purpose may have been noble from Fletcher’s reading, it is, the case that she “... cunningly exploited a fellow human being to serve her purpose. Would situation ethicists really believe that she treated the guard as a person-or

26Vernon Grounds. *The New Morality: What’s wrong with the New View of Right? (Part 2)*. *His Magazine*. November 1967, 24.

27Fletcher, op. cit., 15.

28Norman Geisler. *Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker 1981), 36.

29Wayne Jackson. *False Doctrines about Human Conduct*. In J. Waddey (ed.). *Doctrines and Commandments of Men: A Handbook on Religious Error*. (Knoxville, TN: East Tennessee School of Preaching and Missions 1984), 330.

a thing? Was the guard a married man? Did he have a family? In her concern for her own family, Mrs. Bergmeier lost sight of love's interest for his family."<sup>30</sup> This is one of the results of failing to provide in precise terms what constitutes love.

Another critic of situationism, Bernard Eller, carried the case of Mrs. Bergmeier even farther. Eller took the unique situation of Mrs. Bergmeier to other possibilities that admits love but with destructive consequences of what Fletcher passes as justifiable – “sacrificial adultery.” Eller hypothesizes that Mrs Bergmeier got out of the camp affirmed pregnant only to find that she is 200 miles away from home and it is winter.<sup>31</sup> She will starve to death unless she gets food. Suppose she goes to a farmhouse nearby, but the farmer will give her food only if she grants him “sexual favors.” So she does. Then suppose she is hitchhiking home and a truck driver offers to give her a lift, but only for “sexual favors,” which she then grants.<sup>32</sup> If “sacrificial adultery” was right with the guard, surely it would be right with the farmer and the truck driver, Fletcher must concede. However, Eller hypothesizes further that “upon finally arriving home, she finds her family destitute and starving. Again, she commits “sacrificial adultery” as a prostitute to raise money for her destitute family. Eller thereby concludes that “sacrificial adultery” on the basis of love for one's family leads to absurdity but then asks an interesting question: At what point did the story become absurd? At the camp? At the farmer's? With the truck driver? As a prostitute?”<sup>33</sup>

### Conclusion

From the discussion thus far, we have succeeded in showing that a thoroughgoing affirmation of Fletcher's situation ethic will lead one into troubles that will even initiate a situation where love will breed hatred and jealousy. As a result, this essay recommends that legalism is more appropriate as an ethical framework to be used for the analysis or assessment of moral agency. We say this mainly because there are some many confusions and negative unforeseen consequences that Fletcher's proposal do not foreclose. When Fletcher's moral ideal is assessed vis-à-vis utilitarian and deontological ethics, we find that the progress made by the latter duo, though not flawless are more encompassing. It is therefore the submission of this proposal that deontological and utilitarian ethics, in spite of their shortcomings are not reducible to the level of absurdity that Fletcher's contextualism of love purports.

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<sup>30</sup>Banowsky, op cit., 19.

<sup>31</sup>Bernard Eller. *The Ethics of Promise*. *Christian Century*. July 1968, 965.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid, 965.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid, 965.

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