



Ovia Ebikaboere

Ethical Contextualism: An Appraisal of Situation Ethics

Honest Morality



LAMBERT
Academic Publishing

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DEDICATION

To the superhuman power that saw me through to the successful completion of this programme.

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional ethical theories have the main goal of wanting to find a universal moral standard, one that would be valid for all men everywhere, one which will be able to help man to distinguish what actions are right and which are wrong. All these theories can be classified under the general group deontology. The Greek word "DEON" means "duty". Deontological ethical theories accept the performance of duty as the basis or standard of assessing an action to be either right or wrong. For them

Men have a duty to perform certain actions whether
Or not they can foresee any good resulting from them.
Some types of behaviour are thus held to be intrinsically
right or wrong.¹

This means such ethical theorists are not concerned with the consequence or end result of an action to determine its rightness or wrongness. Instead, the mere fact that one followed the laid down rule justifies the action.

They all agree on this point, but concerning the origin of the rule of duty, they differ. For Immanuel Kant it is the categorical imperative whereas Emil Brunner believes it to be a divine imperative from God. Kant as a deontologist holds strongly that moral laws are either apriori good or bad. The empirical moral

experience or circumstance does not influence the value of the action. Deontological theory of ethics holds that "rules are valid independently of whether or not they promote the good".² This means the law is absolute. How it affects the recipient does not arise. Performance of the law justifies the action. But in this way the legalist is not in contact with the needs of man. He stifles the individuality and creativity in man, laying emphasis on external obedience instead of the motive. He forgets that man is a rational and dynamic being; that he is constantly developing and therefore there is the need for him to transcend former qualities. The legalist wants man's actions programmed. He consequently concerns himself with what the law says and which is applicable in each situation.

The teleological school of thought on the other hand is of the view that circumstances determine the value of an action. Value therefore is not intrinsic in any action or law. They maintain that it is the motive of the actor that determines the value of that action. The Greek word "TELOS" means "END" or "PURPOSE". For them "no behaviour is held to be intrinsically right or wrong – an action is right only if it produces or tend to produce good results"³ But the next question is what is good? Jeremy Bentham, J.S.Mill and a host of others consider pleasure, happiness among others as the good. Fletcher posits that the good is agapeic love.

These two schools are what John Wilson refers to as moralism and factualism. The latter considers moral rules as guides. This is what Fletcher calls an illuminator, they

Have no particular validity on themselves, no absolute authority. If they serve human ends, they are good rules. If they do not, they can be scrapped.⁴

Wilson summarises his opinion by saying “the appropriate attitude to morality is a rational attitude”.⁵ This implies that one should consider the given facts in conjunction with their peculiar situations before acting. John A.T. Robinson maintains that there is no responsible man who will see love and law as antithetical. They should be seen as compliments to each other.⁶

Frankena says moral philosophy arises only when man transcends the stage of being directed by traditional and conventional rules. Moral philosophy is when man looks at his norms critically and decides why he chooses to do a thing and not another. He is of the opinion that man making choices portrays him as the true moral agent that he is instead of the robot that he acts like.⁷ For it is not possible to reduce all that will come across man’s path into laws. Hence the need to make laws a posteriori and not a priori. This the situationist advocates that even though

the letter of the law is good, the spirit, the intention of the law is better. As a result, the spirit of the law should take upper hand.

This research is devoted to critically examining both the formalist as well as factualist schools of thought. In the first chapter, an in-depth study of what traditional ethics is about is looked into. This is achieved through the random sampling of the role which philosophers and theologians assume ethical codes should play in man's life. Having known what the traditionalist's position is, in chapter two an expository study of Situation Ethics will be made. For effective study purposes, we shall examine the text *Situation Ethics – The New Morality* written by Joseph Fletcher. Here it is necessary to explain the choice of book. Joseph Fletcher has been chosen because it seems he is the only one who has devoted one or more texts to Situation Ethics.

It is possible that there are other texts devoted to 'Contextualism', but it is not known yet. For now, Fletcher seems to be the only lone apostle of contextualism. But this does not imply that he is the only person who has considered that in certain peculiar situations moral principles cease to be applicable. This is why in Chapter Three we shall examine previous critics of traditional ethics. These are people who accept the necessity of legally coded moral laws in society so as to give order to society. But they feel that under unique circumstances, man can and

should re-interpret the moral laws. When necessary, they should be reviewed so as to update their validity. This section shall be called influences on Joseph Fletcher. We are assuming that he was aware of some of these writings and so they must have influenced him. This opinion is more plausible when one realises how much reference he makes to some of these writings. In Chapter Four, we shall examine the reactions of people to 'Situation Ethics', commenting on specific areas as well as the general notion. We shall also give a critical appraisal of the method of 'Situation Ethics'. In conclusion, the tenets of the situationists as it applies to contemporary world economy will be briefly examined.

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Situation Ethics is the bridge between 'is' and 'ought', the real and the ideal. It subscribes to both the traditional as well as existential theories. Its cardinal law however is agapeic law as distinct from phial and erotic laws which are selective in their outreach. It focuses on the neighbour. Situation Ethics acts with long term effect in mind. Situation Ethics is ethics for man come of age.



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Ovia Ebikaboere is a graduate of the University of Lagos, where she read Philosophy at first and second degree levels. She is interested in ethics as it applies to real life situations. Presently she works at covenant University Ota, Nigeria.



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