Situation Ethics - Knowledge organiser

Sub-topics

- Influence of Robinson on Joseph Fletcher and the development of Situation Ethics
- The four working principles and the six fundamental principles of Situation Ethics
- Biblical basis for Situation Ethics, particularly in the ministry of Jesus
- Application of Situation Ethics to historical and contemporary ethical situations
- Context of the theory e.g. political and social reform
- Concept of relativism in ethics
- Strengths and weaknesses of the theory of Situation Ethics
- Compatibility of Situation Ethics with religious approaches
- Appropriateness of its continuing application and use in modern society

Possible H/WK/Questions

8 mark

Explore the contribution of situation ethics in moral decision making
Explore the social and political influences of situation ethics
Explore the concepts of agape and situationalism in situation ethics
Explore Biblical examples of situationist thinking

12 mark

Assess to what extent agape can be used a guiding principle in moral decision-making.
Assess to what extent Situation ethics is guided by Biblical principles.
Assess the view that situation ethics is a successful ethical theory.

30 mark

Evaluate the claim that situation ethics fails as a Christian ethic.
Evaluate to what extent Situation ethics succeeds as an ethical theory for moral decision making.
Evaluate the claim that neither utilitarianism or situation ethics continue to offer a useful framework for ethical decision making.

Stretch and challenge/Suggested further reading

All available on Microsoft teams

Peter Vardy- the puzzle of ethics: chapter on situation ethics
Peter Vardy- ethics matters: chapter on situation ethics

Situation Ethics: The New Morality by Joseph Fletcher

https://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/introduction/situation_1.shtml

Panpsycast podcast-

Episode 12 part 1 and 2 on situation ethics

Key words

Agape: Unconditional love, the only ethical norm in situationism
Antinomian ethics: Does not recognise the role of law in morality
Legalistic: Law-based moral decision making
Metaethics: The branch of ethics concerned with the justification of ethics and the meaning of the language used
Personalism: Ethics centred on people, rather than laws or objects
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Positivism: Proposes something as true or good without demonstrating it
Pragmatism: Acting, in moral situations, in a way that is practical, rather than purely ideologically
Relativism: The rejection of absolute moral standards, such as laws or rights.
Situational: Another term for situation ethics, ethics focused on the situation, rather than fixed rules

Key scholars

Bonhoeffer

G.E. Moore

Joseph Fletcher

William Temple

J A T Robinson

Starting point- Important key facts

- For 'situation ethicists', an action may be justified if it is more loving. It is a relative ethic, taking into account each individual situation, which argues that our actions should be based on the principles of agape.
- Joseph Fletcher is most usually associated with Situation Ethics and wrote the clearest and most controversial statement of it. He began by researching William Temple's ethics, which influenced his thinking on medical, social, and business ethics. He also agreed with Robinson that Jesus' approach to ethics is fundamentally situationist.
- Fletcher was very practical in his understanding of Christian Ethics and deplored both the Church's failure to engage with major issues of the time and its tendency to discourage Christians from taking personal moral responsibility by laying down inflexible rules for them to follow.
- He suggested that there are three possible approaches to Christian moral philosophy: legalistic, antinomian, and situational.
- Fletcher argues that the situational approach is the only appropriate response to real ethical dilemmas. It values individual freedom, puts people first and acknowledges the genuine diversity of circumstances. It guards against acting on selfish impulse or whim, and respects the values of the community (agape), but is sufficiently flexible to operate in the real world.
- Fletcher argues that the situationist must always uphold the law of love, which is accepted without further justification. They must only break the laws of their community if they clearly go against the law of law.
- Fletcher gives four working principles as the basis: pragmatism, relativism, positivism, personalism. He assumes these will appeal to common sense rather than appealing for these principles.
- There are also six fundamental principles which explain how the system would work in practice:
  1. 'Only one thing is intrinsically good; namely love.'
  2. 'The ruling norm of Christian decision is love: nothing else.'
  3. 'Love and justice are the same.'
  4. 'Love wills the neighbour's good, whether we like him or not.'
  5. 'Only the end justifies the means, nothing else.'
  6. 'Love's decisions are made situationally, not prescriptively.'
- Fletcher feels there is a basis for Situation Ethics in the ministry and teachings of Jesus, in particular, in his commandment to 'love thy neighbour as thyself.'