

An Introduction to Religion and Ethics Eduqas AS Knowledge Organiser:

Theme 3B: Fletcher's Situation Ethics - Principles

Key concepts:

- The boss principle of Situation Ethics is this idea of pure, unconditional, sacrificial love that was epitomised in the character and work of Jesus.
- This love is the ultimate, superlative virtue. Fletcher notes, 'Augustine was right to make love the source principle, the hinge principle upon which all other virtues hang, whether cardinal (natural) or theological (revealed).'
- Fletcher therefore describes agape as the 'boss' principle of Situation Ethics.

Fletcher established four practical 'working principles' for use in its application.

- Pragmatism means that any ethical dilemma needs a practical solution: 'the good is what works, what is expedient, what gives satisfaction.' A theory is of no practical good if it falls flat in practice.
- Relativism avoids words like 'never', 'always' and 'absolute'. Agape 'relativises the absolute' and does not 'absolute the relative'. The situation is always relative, but only to agape. Even though every situation is unique that does not mean a response should be 'random, unpredictable, unjudgeable, meaningless, amoral' as this would make it anarchic and antinomian.
- Positivism means that agape is an act of faith; reason is then used to work out the application of this faith: 'The Christian does not understand God in terms of love; he understands love in terms of God as seen in Christ.'
- Personalism means that Situation Ethics is people-focused; a concern for people and not things, a concern for the subject of ethics, not the object.

Fletcher developed the six fundamental principles to test the application of agape.

- Only one 'thing' is intrinsically good; namely, love: nothing else at all. This love 'is' found as a property only in God. Humans are finite and therefore do love as an active principle in relating to people and performing acts.
- The ruling norm of Christian decisions is love, nothing else. Fletcher argued that Jesus breaking the Sabbath rules was a clear demonstration that religious laws have been totally misunderstood and given an artificial dictator status. Jesus saw that the true purpose of religious laws as to serve people and made agape the new covenant because it supersedes the old laws.
- Love and justice are the same, for justice is love distributed, nothing else. For Fletcher, this was simple, when justice is done love is served.
- Love wills the neighbour's good whether we like him or not. Jesus teaching to 'love your enemies' was the most radical obligation within Christianity, displaying the self-emptying (kenotic) love that Jesus himself displayed. Love (agape) is not discriminative but rather equally indiscriminate.
- Only the end justifies the means, nothing else. Fletcher considered it an 'absurd abstraction' to think of ethics as deontological. Deontology only pays 'an unlovely lip service' to the practices that display contradiction. In making 'flexible' the 'inflexible maxims' the ends dictate ethical decisions; in other words, any deontological system has, in practice, to be teleological.
- Love's decisions are made situationally, not prescriptively. Fletcher argued that to seek out deontological rules only leads to failure in practice 'because they are too petty or too rigid to fit the facts of life.' Christian ethics needs the freedom and flexibility that avoids deontological absurdities.

Key quotes:

"What a difference it makes when love, understood agape, is boss." (Fletcher)

"There must be an absolute or norm of some kind if there is to be any true relativity." (Fletcher)

"To love Christianly is a matter of attitude, not of feeling." (Fletcher)

"Justice is the many-sidedness of love." (Fletcher)

Issues for analysis and evaluation:

Key arguments/debates

Some philosophers see Fletcher's idea that 'love is justice distributed' trending towards a divorce from social context. Integral to its definition is a relativistic understanding of the whole. Others see Fletcher as an active social reformer, questioning discriminatory laws and demanding change: 'love wills the good of others, regardless of feelings' and eradicates prejudice and discrimination.

Key questions

Is Situation Ethics too individualistic for it to work in society?

Is Situation Ethics based in extreme examples and so distorted?

Key words:

Agape

relativism

ruling norm

boss principle

positivism

justice

virtuous

personalism

love for neighbour

pragmatism

intrinsically good

teleological