

Situation Ethics

Strengths	Weaknesses
Personalist – puts people before rules. Jesus said, ‘Sabbath was made for man not man for Sabbath’	Rules – We are supposed to follow rules. “They weren’t called the ‘ten suggestions’.”
Relativist – flexible, allowing individualised responses to different contexts. Rules are useful, but there are exceptions. “Sometimes you have to push aside your principles and do the right thing.”	Vague – It’s impossible to say what you’re supposed to do. How do you work out what the most loving thing is, if it changes from situation to situation?
Pragmatic – Situation Ethics suggest solutions that work. It is a useful ethical theory.	Evil – Allows terrible things (adultery, theft, lying, murder) in the name of love.
Teleological – it focuses on the end or outcome of an action. “If the end doesn’t justify the means, what does?”	Misguided – The end does not justify the means. Paul said Christians should not do evil that good may come of it.
Situationist – This is a great way for the Church to reconcile strict rules in the Bible with Jesus’ approach. Jesus criticised the Pharisees for being legalistic. On the other hand, it would be wrong to get rid of all rules (antinomianism). Situation Ethics is midway between the two, allowing Christians to consult the Bible and Church tradition, but put these aside if love demands it, just as Jesus did.	Isolates the Church – as the individual acts independently, the Church has no place in moral decision making. The situationist approach ignores thousands of years of Church tradition, throwing away the wisdom of the greatest teachers. Wise men have debated important topics for generations, and yet the individual can make a more informed decision on the spur of the moment?
Up to date – Situationism allows you to change with the times. This includes ideas about marriage, sexuality, medical ethics etc.	Lacking in standards – Biblical principles hold true for all societies at all times. The same is true of the Natural Law that is universal.
Autonomous – allows the individual to make their own decisions. Acting out of love frees us from having to follow established authorities of which we have become distrustful. Paul said that Christians have died to the law and “ are not under the law but under grace ”. Robison: “The only ethics for the man come of age.”	Idolises the individual – It gives each person more authority than the Bible or the Church. Our Post-modern society focuses too much on the individual. When others are free to lie, steal, even kill, this doesn’t amount to autonomy, but a dictatorship of individuality. Robison “It will all descend into moral chaos.”
Social Justice – Agape motivates people to change things for the better, to get rid of discrimination, help those who are poor etc. Change is needed, and a system of rules doesn’t help bring about change.	Unfair – Justice requires us to follow the law, and treat all people equally. Situation Ethics allows us to treat people differently, break the rules, lie and steal in individual circumstances, and this is not fair.
Positivist – Focuses on love, which is “patient, kind, not self-seeking, it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” What better motive to act on?	Baseless – There is no justification for basing ethics on love. No defence is given. We are just supposed to accept as obvious the idea that there are no fixed rules and ethics=love.
WWJD? – It follows Jesus’ teaching. He said that we should love God and love our neighbour. “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”	We’re no angels – If we were all like Jesus, this might work. Barclay believed we can’t be trusted to do the right thing, and it would only work ‘if all men were angels’.
Focuses on motive – Utilitarianism focuses on consequences, but these are out of our control. Situation Ethics has most of the strengths of Utilitarianism, but doesn’t rely on consequences that are immeasurable, unpredictable and incalculable.	Focuses on motive – ‘The road to hell is paved with good intentions’. Just because you act out of love, this doesn’t mean you have done the right thing. I may give money to a homeless man out of love, but it will probably only perpetuate his situation. Reason (not love) would tell me it is better to give to a charity for the homeless that will look for long-term solutions.
Not limited to reason – Whilst rationality may play a part in working out what is in the best interests of others, love is not limited to cold, hard reason. Rationality cannot motivate our actions as it is dispassionate. Love moves us to do what reason shows us is the best outcome.	Irrational - “By the 1970s, situation ethics had been roundly rejected as no ethics at all... Good ethical theory, it was believed, should be objective, rational, internally coherent and consistent, universally applicable, detached from individual self-interest, and impersonal in its capacity to transcend the particularities of time and culture.” Callahan