Situation Ethics In Moral Decision Making

The 1960’s saw a shift in attitudes as society underwent a new kind of revolution. Post war generations began to increasingly reject authority, laws and government as they enjoyed new liberties not afforded to previous generations. In addition secularism was becoming more prominent within society, subsequently Fletcher devised a new ethical theory. One that included many core Christian values but also attempted to move away from legalistic approaches to be more accessible to “man come of age”. Fletcher devised his theory in response to what he felt were failures of legalism inherent in ethical systems that proposed rules to govern human behaviour. Despite this however, many thinkers such as William Barclay criticised Fletchers view of human nature as being too idealistic. In this way the ethic arguably fails as both a Christian theory but also a secular moral guide.Subsequently it cannot be considered useful in ethical decision making.

Fletcher rejected the premise of universal moral principles relying instead on existentialist decision making. Situation ethics, according to Fletcher resides between the absolutes of legalism, in which decision making is restricted by rules and regulations and antinomianism which sees a distinct lack of any kinds of norms or laws. For Fletcher, agape love is the single intrinsic good, and as such an ethical decision involves simply doing the most loving thing. For so long as love is your intention then the act is justified.

Fletcher argues that we would be “better off to drop the legalists love of law and accept only the law of love”. Thus for Fletcher, breaking any rule, even fundamental Biblical commandments of law, can be justified if the result is an expression of agape love. German Theologian Martin Luther preached “when the law impels one against love, it ceases and should no longer be law”. This can be said to give credit to Fletcher’s view of ethics.

Fletcher finds a theological basis for this position in scripture, he highlights in Mark 2:23 in which Jesus plucked wheat and healed the blind on the Sabbath, a technical violation of the law that prohibited any form of work on the Sabbath. Christ justified setting aside and disobeying the law in such a case stating “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath”. In this, Jesus effectively demonstrated the importance of placing people before the law.

The theory is incredibly personal, it is based on the notion that ethical decisions should be made using flexible guidelines. As such it effectively demonstrates sensitivity towards circumstance, context, particularity and cultural traditions.

Perhaps the greatest weakness found in Fletcher’s theory however is his concept of love. Fletcher posits that agape love represents the single norm in Christian ethics. Fletcher fails however to adequately define what this love actually is, leaving adherence to such a theory widely open to different interpretations of the concept. In the first case Fletcher defines love as the intention of the individual, he writes “nothing can justify an act except a loving purpose” and then later “Love is… an attitude, a disposition, a purpose”. This implies that individual actions are based on intention regardless perhaps of the consequences. Stealing to feed a starving child for example could be considered justified if the action was done in love, with a loving purpose. In a second case however, Fletcher states that love “is not something we have or are,

it is something we do”. This asserts that no action in itself can have value, rather actions gain value because of the results they achieve, essentially the ends justify the means. Essentially Fletcher states that the morality of an action is based upon the intentions behind it but at the same time cannot be considered moral unless it produces a preferable outcome. Reconciliation of these two conditions may present difficulties particularly for religious believers. For many Christians, scripture is a key source of moral authority since it provides the revealed will of God. Obedience to God should be a Christian’s primary aim when one acts and as such an action has moral value independent of personal intention or consequence. An action could be considered wrong for example even if it happened to produce favourable outcomes, equally however it may be considered morally right even if it led to negative consequences. For many Christians the ends do not always justify the means.

Fletcher rejects concrete rules within ethical systems beyond the norm of love. This means that moral laws contained within scripture are reduced to flexible guidelines. Situation ethics removes the normative value of the rule, and as such God’s moral laws cannot be considered a timeless nor absolute basis of morality. Subsequently the practicality of the theory as a Christian ethic is questioned.

Furthermore a disregard of commandments intended as absolutes is at odds with the Biblical message as preached in John 4:8 “This is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome”. This suggests that to break any of Gods commandments, regardless of ones intentions is not to act out of love. Pope Pius XII gives further condemnation of the theory by stating it was “an individual and subjective appeal to the concrete circumstances of actions to justify decisions in opposition to the Natural law or Gods revealed will”. This further highlights rejection of the theory by religious authority and demonstrates that it cannot be considered a useful guide in Christian ethics.

Not only does the theory fail as a Christian ethic but also as a secular moral guide. William Barclay in his text “Ethics in a permissive society” criticised Fletcher’s use of examples to illustrate the need for solving moral dilemmas situationally, for example the woman held in the prisoner of war camp. He argued these are circumstances most people will never encounter in their lives and therefore the usefulness of the ethic is limited in day to day decision making. Barclay stated that it was far easier to imagine that we require extraordinary measures in extreme situations “than to think there are no laws for ordinary everyday life”.

Barclay also suggested that Fletcher over estimated the value of being free from rules and the constraints this implied. If it were the case that agape could always be fairly and accurately distributed, laws would be redundant. As it is there is no such guarantees and so a degree of law is imperative to human survival. The law serves to bring a sense of order to society, by defining crime we are able to deter individuals from committing actions that are detrimental to this order, protecting the people within it.

The notion that we could make a decision purely out of our love for others Barclay believes to be unrealistic. In reality we are all a product of the cultural context of our upbringing that means our actions will always have some element of prejudice or bias. Barclay’s criticisms suggest Fletcher has an overly optimistic view of human nature that mistakenly assumes we are able to make morally correct choices independent of personal preference. Subsequently the ethic cannot be considered a comprehensive moral guide.

Situation ethics shares many similarities with a utilitarian approach to morality except Fletcher has substituted the natural property of happiness for the concept of agape love. This however arguably limits the usefulness of the theory in that love is a far harder and less universal norm than happiness. The notion of living an agapeic life whilst in theory seems an admirable goal in reality (as highlighted by Barclay) holds a far too idealistic view of human nature. It may be easy to envisage pleasure since it something we all have experience of, however it is not as simple to envisage a world based on the principles of agape love. Agape love is an extremely demanding value, the kind of sacrificial committed and altruistic love to both friend and stranger is arguably an impossible ideal. We act in accordance with our own circles of interest and so our inherently selfish nature prevents us from always doing the most loving thing. Agape love perhaps can only be realised by God or God incarnate and as such lacks practicality as amoral guide.