



Review Article

Fletcher's Situation Ethics for Societal Moral Order

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Abstract: Situation ethics is aimed at regulating human actions and values based on the prevailing and forcible circumstances that may determine what should be valued as morals. Such “ethics of living” is necessary for the sake of the common or greater good. In most cases, the situations determine the survival of a greater number of persons, irrespective of the nature of causality that may be impeded. With situation ethics, Fletcher advocates that a human person is an agent of a conscious being. These human actions in society cannot be free from moral implications when the sense of common goodness prevails. Adopting expository and descriptive methods of inquiry, the essay examines Fletcher's situation ethics in relation to the possibilities of moral order in our world that has been bedeviled by erotic and erratic actions, ideologies, interests, and values without meaningful responsibility that can guarantee authentic and integral living. The paper highlights the moral thrusts for one's actions and choices not to be judged or evaluated at face value, but to consider the possible rationality based on the situations in which actions are expressed and choices are made. The objective of the paper is hinged on the indispensability of one's situation as a conscientious determinant of one's moral responsibility and interest. The paper concludes that Fletcher's situation ethics will remain ever relevant in the face of other ethical theories, principles, movements or ideologies, as it can lead the human persons and their world to an enduring possibility of peace and tranquility, and then, guarantees the sustainability of moral order when the principle of love and care is generally adopted to regulate the contents of human freedom and conscience.

Keywords: Human actions, moral order, human person, integral humanism, situation ethics, human choices

Introduction: The questions about the possibility of moral order in society have been beclouded by the rays of conflicting social and development interests and ideologies (such as individualism,

isolationism, nihilism, escapism, separationism, racism, ethnicism, particularism), that have been occasioned by contemporary imposing moral orientations and civilization¹. With these prevailing and imposing moral

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orientations and civilization, many ethical questions are mostly situated within the existential influences of one's choices and decisions in relation to the expected responsibilities². They propel the possibility of common moral behaviors or actions made by the individuals as moral agents of development and as subjects of lived experiences³. Such participatory moral demands on the individual and groups of persons are to be accepted in the community of persons that necessarily and indispensably judges the actions of the individual, to be right or wrong, good or bad, depending on the social and communal acceptability of such actions, choices or decisions. In most cases, society fails to consider the nature of the situations on which such actions are performed, and choices and decisions are made⁴.

We are to be morally judged and accepted in the community of persons based on the decisions and choices we make. But, in most cases, the community of persons with moral consciousness and dispositions does not consider the power of situations that may or can influence the kinds of actions, choices, and decisions associated with the individual in some particular circumstances, in order to achieve some level of moral order⁵. With the developmental demands for moral order, we understand that "the society presents before the human person what he or she will consider moral or immoral according to the norms and customs which he or she has already internalized in the understanding of natural order⁶. This is simply by creating opportunities for social justice based on the power of common goodness and solidarity⁷. With rationality and freedom, the human person can be simply differentiated from other beings, according to Joseph Omeregbe: *The human being is so constituted, that, it is not all kinds of actions that befit his nature and lead to happiness and self-fulfillment. Certain kinds of actions befit his nature, promote his or her general well-being and lead him or her to happiness and self-fulfillment*⁸.

Hence, the concern of the paper with the consideration of the philosophy of Joseph Fletcher's situation ethics as a basis of the social interrogation of human actions, choices, and decisions is towards the possibility of

societal moral order. In the paper, this conception of the human person as an agent of social and moral change through the power of choice he or she possesses in when his or her actions is ethically classified, and may amount to the phenomenological individualistic or subjectivist purviews of situationism as an ethics for possible moral order in our world that has been bedeviled by conflicting moral values and ideologies.

A Core of Fletcher's Situation Ethics:

Situation ethics, also known as the "new morality", is the ethics that emphasizes the situation as the determining factor in the morality of any action. It is "a form of consequentialist ethics that affirms attending to the implication of action"⁹. Situation ethics is largely a reaction against the legalistic tendency in ethics, especially in Classical Christian ethics which maintains that certain actions are intrinsically evil¹⁰. In the legalistic ground of evaluation, any bad actions based on normal moral judgment, are evil irrespective of the reasons why such actions are performed or expressed. But, situation ethics denies that the same actions which are bad in one situation can become good, depending on the rational nature of love and care such actions are bound to be projected to be achieved¹¹. In view give a clear understanding of what he meant by agape love, he posited what he called six fundamental axioms of love, to be known as Christian situation ethics¹². These axioms summarized the crux of situation ethics as a theory of care, which, according to him, is not systematic; but a method for arriving at moral decisions¹³.

For some ethicists like Arne Naess, Warwick Fox, David Rothenberg and Aldo Leopold, and Gareth Hardin, the concern of any ethical theory, principle or movement should be centered on the possible realization of societal moral order, and Fletcher's situation ethics cannot be said to be an exception. It is on this objective concern for ethics that Fletcher considered love and care as the foundational virtues or motivations for one's actions and choices in relation to the social establishment of human common goodness. Thus Fletcher's task here was to find "absolute love's relative course"¹⁴. And they are:

1. Only one thing is intrinsically good, namely love nothing else

2. The highest norm of Christian decisions is love, nothing else
3. Love and justice are the same, for justice is love distributed, nothing else
4. Love is a neighbour's good whether we like it or not
5. Only the end justifies the means, nothing else
6. Love's decisions are made situationally, not prescriptively

Every situation, Fletcher maintains, is unique, and consequently that, the same kind of action cannot remain morally wrong in all circumstances. For an action is to be considered moral right or wrong depends on the situation in which it is performed. The goodness or badness of such action or decision as a choice is not something that can be found inherent in such a situation at that level of uncompromising freedom and responsibilities, or as properties of such responsibility that must be done for the sake of love of oneself and for others, especially for common or greater survival¹⁵ They are not properties inherent in actions, rather, they can only be predicated on such actions, and whether an action is said to be predicated with the term "good" or "bad" depends on the situation in which it is performed. However, Fletcher's *situationism* is based on four main presuppositions and they are:

1. The principle of pragmatism where one would be convinced of: whether we like it or not, what is good must be judged on the basis of what works or not. In other words, it is or should be concerned more with its usefulness circumstantially and not its delectability—pleasantness to behold, taste and feel. For example, a pragmatic expression of love and care which witnessed was a scenario in Urelu, Benin City, Nigeria where a food vendor fell down when trying to cross through a major Benin-Lagos Expressway and her wares were shattered on the road. She was at the risk of losing her life and her wares by the incoming vehicles. But the first very motorist approaching her and the shattered wares stopped and used his vehicle to block or close the vehicular traffics and he beckoned on some other motorists to do the same in order for the woman to clear her wares or to salvage some of her wares from being totally destroyed. This very motorist and the others

who listened to his appeal showed a high level of humanistic kindness as a bridge that linked the weak and the power, and rich and the poor. Such consciousness of having the other persons in mind makes common goodness so practicable and workable.

2. The principle of relativism. With this belief, Fletcher based his situation ethics on the principle of relativism – but with caution; even as he preached relativism, he opined that the way in which love is carried out may be situation dependent. For instance, with love, we readily understand our world through the care for others. To understand the other persons, direct the individual on how to manage their pains and joys, and it initiates participatory authenticity of oneself even when pains and suffering may be relative in the minds of the individuals. Such truth may be relative, but it is factual in its practical objectivity. Such understanding of the relativity of human interests necessarily situates the indispensable social foundation of conflicts, irrespective of the indispensability of the longing for peace and order.

3. The principle of positivism is Fletcher's third proposition, and on which he based his situation ethics. Here, he recognized the fact that faith claims cannot be proven to be true against the backdrop of rationality. They can at best, only be posited without recourse to rationality and affirmed by the person who chooses to believe their accuracy. Thus, situationism does not seek to prove that an ethical conclusion is true at all time. But it only seeks to provide justification (firm support) for the ethical decision taken or made. For example, one's consciousness of human togetherness will help to overcome emotional limitations and development in any society, not for the others only, even for oneself. It is in caring for others that one knows the values of his or her own life and existence, and through which, the positive and healthy living is for the wholeness of the society that accommodates everyone is guaranteed.

4. The Principle of personalism, with which Fletcher sees ethics as not separable from the people. This succinctly put, means that to have an ethical system that is based upon a code or rule without regard for the people is pointless and of no visible effect. Situationism, with love as its primary standard effect, focuses on love

as it relates to people. For example, the relationship between the human person and the society engineers the human structures for social order and justice through proper understanding of the existential phenomenology of the human person, in order to redeem the fullness of human nature. For humanity does not end in death. The consciousness of the salvific endings recognizes the indispensable inseparability of human physicality and spirituality. It is deeply concerned in knowing the nature of the human person in relation to his or her actions in order to redeem him or her from any pressing situations against his or her happiness and salvific ending.

Hence, the moral judgment of an action, according to Fletcher's situation ethics, is always a *posteriori* not a *priori* (moral judgment comes after the occurrence of an action, not before the action due to lay down principle). However, while traditional Christian ethics admit several absolute moral norms, situation ethics maintains that moral norms are relative except one, and which is, "no moral norms or law is absolute; no moral law is applicable in all situations." A moral law that is applicable to one situation may not be applicable to another situation but there is a moral law which is applicable in all situations. That is, the law of "love". Love is the only absolute law in situation ethics. The expression or application of love differs from one situation to another in the sense that, love is the only thing or condition, which is intrinsically good, and any action motivated by love in any situation is a good action.

Fletcher and the Situation of Morality:

Fletcher tries to identify justice with love. For him; justice is when we distribute love to others. He argues that a situation is a system or a method, necessary used at arriving at moral decisions. It is necessary and so very important to note that, in time past, many ethicists have argued on what justifies the action of the human person. The priority to this overwhelming situation, Fletcher posits his own idea on moral decisions, and in it, he denied the intrinsic effect of any human action but though gave preference to love¹⁶. For examples, for the love and the successful future for herself and her siblings who are orphans, the eldest sister in the family goes into prostitution as a possible means of

generating funds for the family upkeep and education. Such action or choice should not be morally judged to be totally bad or evil, as it is taken for the greater good of the family and creating some level of social order. Thus, for Fletcher, love is the only thing that is good in itself (intrinsically). Central to this idea, Fletcher tried to combined love over laid-down principle (law)¹⁷. According to Fletcher, any action considered to occur under the influence of love is and should be justified as a morally right action, for it is on the principle of love that the whole world is created, and it is in it, can the same world be integrally sustained¹⁸. This by implication means that love helps justice to discharge its moral responsibility. Where there is no love, no justice, and equity are practically impossible.

Fletcher gave series of examples to illustrate his points in his book that what is bad in a particular situation could be predicated with the term "good" in another circumstance¹⁹. For the sake of clarity when examining the persuasive nature of situationism as an enduring ethical principle of development of moral order, Fletcher made situational examples to demonstrate ethics based on moral constraints, and properly virtuous acts becoming situational, thus: "in the 18th century along the Boone Trail, the following two scenarios took place –

- i. A Scottish woman saw that her suckling baby, ill, and crying, was betraying her and her other three children, and the whole company to the Indians. But she clung to her child, and they were caught and killed.
- ii. A Negro woman, seeing how her crying baby endangered another trail party, killed it with her own hands, to keep silence and reach the fort. The question that looms large at this juncture is: which woman made the right decision?

Fletcher holds that love decides where and when to act and this decision cannot be made outside the particular situation. After all, no moral decision is made outside any given situation. Hence every moral judgment or decision cannot be valid if it ignores the context of which an action is carried out. This means that, looking carefully at the full play of the ends, means motives and result in making any moral judgment²⁰. These are the factors that must be considered in every situation, all

of it is to be placed and balanced in love's scale.

With this, Fletcher reinstates his position that love decisions are not based on the moral law on the situation, and that, situation ethics could thus be described as ecological ethics taking into as full account as possible of the context (environment) of every moral decision. For instance, a mother who accepted to collect money for her vote during election from a contesting candidate for a particular political elective position; probably accepted such money due to some moral constraints, on which she has taken the money offered to her as her last and immediate available resort for the treatment of her dying child in the hospital. She did it out of love for her child, even when she knows the moral implication for selling her vote for money. Such action is highly conditionally situated within the purview for the value for life of the child over the moral implication of selling of one's vote for money. Although, the contesting candidate may not know the motif of which the woman accepted to sell her vote for money. At the moment of moral decision making, the woman has created some level of moral order for herself and those around her, but to the detriment of the moral rectitude of the candidate who supposed to be moral not to bribe for the woman's vote.

Fletcher on Interplay between Love and Justice: The major proposition of Fletcher's notion on human moral responsibility is that, "love and justice are one and the same" and such that when you say love, you mean justice, when you say justice you mean love²¹. Such ethics of love is directed by the power of choice, reflective on the future consequences or values. With situation ethics, Fletcher repudiated the social and legal thrusts of moral law on the face-value of moral subjectivity, and posited that love is the only basis by which an action should be judged right, which is justice. Both love and justice can be used interchangeably and synonymously. Love is justice being distributed. In loving there is a need to be thoughtful and prudent. For that reason, Fletcher says love is being careful with judgment, and being prudent in moral decision making. Prudence for him, forms the essential part of love, both (prudence and love) are inseparable. It is in being prudent, calculative

and being careful that love becomes justice being adequately distributed.

Fletcher explains that when we see love this way, we are forced to pull back from the sentimental and irrational idea that love is not intellectual. Once we believe that love is prudent, calculative, and love is careful, we will be forced to move from the idea that love is emotional. He cited Martin Luther, who spoke about faith; he said that faith is a devoid of reason, that if we really want to be Christians, we have to detach faith from reason²². For Fletcher, in exercising or expressing one's strength of love and care for the order of creation, projects that; to be a person of faith, one must readily develop the power of his or her rational perception of values²³. This is on the basis of self-recognition and self-will for the projection of the power of inter-subjectivity and authenticity, and that such, the interpretation or meaning of such items of reasoning could be or may be mistaken in the application of love and justice, that is, if we really want to love; we must take away from justice and love must be sentimental.

Within Fletcher's situation ethics, love is never sentimental but rational, calculative, and prudent. Love and justice is one and the same thing. In loving, we are distributing justice and justice is giving to others what is due to them²⁴. In spite of the above, one thing is central in Fletcher's moral responsibility and that is the fact that he professes individualism and situationism in moral decision making²⁵. Love in this perspective, Fletcher remarks it to be the only thing that is due to the other person. If at all our political leaders could identify with this very idea of Fletcher that love is not selfish that would have been able to combine justice in their action, justice in this aspect, is when we value each individual in the society and try to see the position we find ourselves as a medium to serve not an opportunity to enrich our own personal wallet. Love is not one to one affair; rather it is something that reaches out to many.

Collective Concern for Possible Moral Order: Having given a clear and conceptual understanding of what morality in relation to human situation at a particular time and for a particular indispensable need, it will become interesting and imperative to evaluate what Fletcher holds as moral responsibility. Here,

worthy to mention therefore, is the fact that Fletcher's notion of moral responsibility can be understood through the interrogation of common human survival in the face of the choice of lesser evil for a good end²⁶. This is by asking the basis question: to what extent can one held morally responsible for his or her action, when such action of him or her is laden by the situation of which it is taken or done for the sake of love and care that will guarantee greater end? Can such decision when made in a great faith of a greater end guarantee the institutionalization of moral order in the world that has been beclouded or bedeviled by the selfish choices and ideologies?

For Fletcher, the power of care and love should necessarily supersede the power of legalism in judging one's moral decision and responsibility based on situational determinism. This owes that Fletcher's notion on moral judgment is basically individualistic, in other words, he deals with individual's concern in a particular situation. It becomes very complex to talk about objective moral responsibility, considering the application of love in decision making and choices²⁷. For an example, according to Fletcher, "a woman in Arizona, having taken thalidomide, feared that her baby would be born with severe disabilities. So, her husband took her to Sweden, where, as love has more control of law"²⁸. This, by implication, means that, no same judgment should be applied to two individuals, because, the situation may not be the same and individuals differ. For, another family may decide to travel to Sweden just to procure abortion, not because of any possible risk of post-natal disabilities. So, to be held morally responsible for one's action, one must have been judged based on the situation surrounding one's action (actions must be weighed on the scale of intention, circumstance and consequence of a particular individual, for the judgment to be valid).

Nevertheless, Fletcher disregarded any act of legalism, and recommended that the law should not be the basis for moral judgment, rather, the situations in which such actions are taken. Therefore, only one law is recognizable and valid for judgment, and that is the law of love. And then, he further argues that "only the commandment of love is categorically good, noting else"²⁹. This means that, before an action is judged good, it must obey the law of

love. In all, Fletcher's situation ethics espouses the supremacy of love over all norms and the exulted nature of situation in moral decision making judgment. It implies that love becomes the only universal and absolute norm, while situation becomes the determining factor of that love.

Fletcher's Situation Ethics for the Possibility of Societal Moral Order:

The basis of human morality is hinged on the social existentiality of truth, love and justice. That is the morality of *otherness*. No one lives integrally or reasonably without the influences of truth, love and justice. They define the individual and the society made. Within the consideration of human rights in the management of human affairs, the importance of moral order and justice becomes very imperative³⁰. For the moral personalist adjudication of human affairs, it should be understood that the human society does not lack material resources to take care of itself, but by the community of persons, showcasing the *otherness* of living: a consciousness of human common goodness³¹. What it does lack is the act of love and justice to distribute them. This has given rise to many philosophical and sociological thoughts for the purpose of integral humanism in living with *others* being elusive of peace and justice; cannot be pushed aside³².

The concern of Fletcher in the possible moral order of the human society is hinged on the actualization and sustainability of common good and greater survival³³. It has being for the realization of integral humanism as factors of truth that should be ontologically and epistemologically applicable in very realistic administration of love and care for the realization of moral order in a society beclouded with conflicting moral interests and ideologies through the adoption of humano-utilitarianism, which is a theory of integral happiness as a result of responsible actions and choice values³⁴. Such philosophical demands suggest that all human actions been done in right freedom and responsibility for the established of justice, order, harmony, peace and progress³⁵. Such world of values envisages the possibility of integral humanism within unity of human reason and faith in

exacting true human knowledge and development. In all, the model of development adopted or embraced by any particular society is determined by the philosophical ideologies that prevailed in such society, like utilitarianism as an ethics of living. It is a socio-political spirit based on human interests and freedom.

Due to some failures in managing human freedom, many moral expressions of human lived experiences point to the violence of human essence and that violation of human rights. For the sake of human otherness, it demands that such negative actions should not be in the consciousness of humanity for the possibility of moral order. There can be moral order where there are senses and praxis of social justice through the exercise of integral human freedom and truth³⁶. Hence, the thoughts of justice, order, harmony, peace and progress presuppose the proper morality of Human actions. It is through the expression of one's actions that the expected corresponding responsibilities are adjudged. These are expected to be the thoughts beyond mere physicality of interests that project the holistic or integral nature of the human person. It is the recognition of development as a human right, which will be necessarily hinged on the ontological benefit of human commonness that expresses the presence of God in human affairs³⁷. The human person ontologically recognises the world as a gift or benefit from God to the human person as an agent of development, and as the indefinable right which should not be denied by/from other persons whether powerful or weak. The world shows the sense of collective existence and everyone is limited before it. For no world if there is no person; and no person if there is no God. God is known through human person, and the human person is known through his or her activities in the world, that is, the level and contents of one's lived experiences.

It is for the sake of moral order that the contents and factor of happiness or pleasure for the benefits of oneself and the other persons, when many persons are pleased with such acts of utility. This is utility of purposes that drives the others to oneself through the acts of kindness, care, charity and love³⁸. The

propelling forces of societal engineering and socialization indicate that no development is possible without the courses of utility of human interests, and these interests of common survival greatly engender the very interests of authenticity and transcendence that propel the currencies of human values, togetherness and sense of solidarity. It is about the administration of the societal economics and values to have humanistic consideration of people's purposes and interests for social integration, cultural and moral maturity³⁹. With this, the human person as a subject of lived experiences will always be capable to overcoming the dilemma associating with moral decision making, as the values of human person and quest for common survival become the basis of his or her moral responsibility⁴⁰. When it comes to the questions of which rights to be promoted and protected, it is beyond the values of oneself, but for the greater good for many persons, especially when faced with the positivist and post-modernist classifications of human interests, and it requires its rationality to choose rightly in order to promote itself for good⁴¹.

Conclusion: In all, Fletcher's ethics demands that moral responsibility should be based on the situation in which such actions are carried out, not on the facts that whether the actions are right or wrong legally. The existentialist choice is not limited to such important occasions which are not an everyday affair, and choice is what we make every moment of our life, and as it is the inevitable activity of the human person so long as he or she is alive⁴². Thereby, the demands for possible moral order in our world remains on the kind of choices we make, depending on the situations before us. We should understand that the ethics of love in Fletcher's situationism is about the values of common survival which can be taken as the foundation for moral order in any society. This is life based on the commonness of living which is hinged on the contents of one's choice making⁴³. The guarantee for integral and meaningful life is about qualities of ethical choice made, and for such choice should be judged on the level of love, care and common goodness it commands. So that; the contents

or reasons for moral actions should be the determining factor for such moral judgment⁴⁴.

Therefore, the consciousness for the values of life through the principles of love and justice should be over one's sustenance of moral standard or principle, and this may guarantee some level of moral order in the community. For the love of what is right at a particular time due to the circumstance, and for the sake of justice regarding what is properly right or appropriately needed in evaluating the causes of lesser evil, Fletcher advocated that our moral judgment and responsibility should be based on what a particular situation demanded from a particular individual in carrying out a moral action. On the conviction, the moral objectivity in assessing the same action committed or carried out by two different persons at different occasions or situation for different reasons, should not be judged in the same way. Therefore, our moral judgment should be based on how morally responsible we are in respect to one's moral action or choice, and ultimately it should be basically situational in expressing the values of love and justice.

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