

An Ethic of Responsibility

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Many serious-minded Christians share in the alarm expressed by conservative believers over the degenerating moral climate of America — including the American church. Overrapid change in almost every aspect of life has left large segments of our country in a situation of virtual anomie, or at least in considerable confusion about what constitutes the good life.

Negative reaction to this confusion has tended to center against one aspect of contemporary ethical thought, namely, that ethical posture known as Situationism, and one can only feel sympathetic toward the anxiety revealed in this reaction. Unfortunately, many of those who have written and spoken out against this ethical viewpoint have been nonprofessionals who, however well-intentioned, have not possessed the basic information essential to an understanding of what is really at stake.

Above all there is a need for a clarification of language. First, for example, let us consider the terms Situationism and "situationism." Though spelled the same, they refer in fact to quite different entities. The former is a technical term with a fairly precise definition. It is an ethical posture also referred to as Contextualism or Contextual Ethics, terms I shall use interchangeably here. By usage in conservative circles, the latter has come to mean lack of moral responsibility; immorality; permissive, impulsive, or capricious moral behavior; antinomianism; and whatever. Those who decry it see it as characterizing a "generation adrift" — often particularly in regard to sexual behavior. The term New Morality, originally an epithet of disdain applied by conservative critics, enjoys a similar distinction but is mainly employed in a pejorative sense.

Little need be said here about "situationism," since its meaning appears obvious. Apparently much more needs to be said about Situation Ethics as

a method for dealing with moral dilemmas, however. Therefore I shall direct my attention primarily to this use of the word.

By definition, Situation Ethics is a method which assumes that answers to moral questions may be found within the context of the situation in which they arise. When asked, "What am I to do?" the Situationist or Contextualist looks at moral dilemmas and responds, "It all depends on the situation." "What are the facts in the case?" To this extent Situation Ethics involves application of the inductive method to morals.

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Contextual Ethics is an antagonist of a kind of rule ethic which simply turns to prescriptions for all of its answers — that is, an ethic which asks in turn, "What do the rules, the fathers, the authorities say about the matter?" To illustrate: some years ago when Abraham Joshua Heschel, the well-known Jewish religious thinker, was asked about Judaism's position on a medical moral issue, he responded by saying that he did not know since the rabbis had not spoken on that subject. A rule ethic underlies the almost total dependence of some church members on the authoritative pronouncements of institutional leaders as the way to dispel ambiguity in moral matters. The Contextualist, on the other hand, places great store on individual reason and responsibility. He rejects the rule-ethicist's tendency to emphasize conformity for conformity's sake, the tendency to utilize in matters moral his ability to read, listen, and be taught.

I do not mean to imply that the Contextualist rejects rules as of no value simply because he objects to mere rule conformity. He knows that most of life can be, and indeed must be, lived "by the numbers" to use an old Army phrase. He hopes that the people who share the freeways and airports with him and scrub for his surgical operations will be committed to fairly dependable prearranged patterns of behavior. He also knows that life would be simply chaotic if every momentary possibility were turned into a major moral struggle. Habitually good behavior on the part of the majority of people is the very basis of social existence on this planet.

But the Contextualist has a point to make. It is that life is complex and that no two situations can ever be exactly alike. If one is insensitive to this fact, he may discover himself in circumstances where his "habitual behavior" may be quite inappropriate, even morally destructive. Account must be taken of all the circumstances in which an action takes place if one is really to do the "right" thing.

The Contextualist is also aware that one may encounter novel situations for which previous experience, or even "divine revelation," has not precisely prepared him. What does one do when he finds no precise rule ready to guide

him? Or worse, what if the rules express competing claims so that they seem to contradict one another? Is one then reduced to moral impotence? Unfortunately, our rapidly changing world has thrust many such situations upon us.

The Contextual ethicist is likely to be intrigued by moral issues raised by aspects of the newer technologies. One Contextualist, for example, recently expressed the wish that all rule-ethicists could spend a few months wrestling with the moral problems of the world of medicine to test whether their astounding ability to separate the moral "black sheep" actions from the white ones could stand up under the pressure of the physician's shadowland of confusing shades of gray. To illustrate: it is one thing to know that killing is wrong and that saving life is right. The rules say very definite things about taking life. But what of the situation where to kill or not to kill are not the alternatives, where rather it is a question of *whom* to kill or *how* or *when*, as in the matters of therapeutic abortion or cardiac transplantation? Often the physician would prefer to shift the responsibility to someone else — as in Heschel's words, the rabbis. But how frequently he cannot. What he clearly needs is an ethic that tells him how to act responsibly as an individual, on his own.

It should be obvious that an ethic that concentrates on the moment of decision and the situation in which it occurs is greatly conditioned by its reading of the situation. Because of this, Situation Ethics seems to be no single entity, at least in terms of the specific answers it gives to moral questions. There is a uniformity of method, that is, in the form of its question, "What am I as a morally responsible agent to do in the light of *this* particular situation?" There may be great diversity, however, in how "this particular situation" is perceived. Thus there may be a fairly broad spectrum of possible situational answers given by persons using the identical method.

Some situational answers may represent a narrow reading of the "situation." This is part of the reason for the pejorative use of the word "situationism." Such persons, for example, might see the extent of the situation as the impulses of a boy and a girl on a lonely road in the back seat of the car, oblivious to the larger personal and social consequences of their actions. But the situation might also be so broadly perceived as to include the revelation of God and the wisdom of the community as well as the future, even eternal, consequences of human behavior. In other words, the conclusions of this method, as in all matters involving logic, are only as valid as their premises.

If this is so, the alarums of the conservatives are understandable but

misdirected. It is not Situation Ethics the method that is at fault but the individual persons who use the method. If one opposes some of Joseph Fletcher's answers to ethical questions, it must be because of Fletcher's peculiar reading of the situation and not because he is a Situationist.

What is new about the "new morality" is not the ethical method involved but the fact that many of the moral premises have changed. The "situation" is being perceived in a new way. What should be criticized is the premises upon which many in our time are basing their moral decisions, not the fact of their involvement in personal decision making. How one perceives God and His revelation to man, for example, is likely to prove most crucial to moral decision. A belief in a highly personal God who is deeply concerned about man and elects to guide him into the way of love is one kind of premise. An abstract notion of a God who is impersonal, with a corresponding view of the commandments of Scripture as an accumulation of human folkways, is quite another. Each radically modifies the perceived situation in its own way.

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Anyone who is sufficiently open to be able to see it can only be struck with the fact that, from one end of the Scriptures to the other, the moral imperatives were constantly adapted to the circumstances in which they were to be carried out. This was so even with the Ten Commandments. The "thou shalt not kill" was given immediate exception, sometimes of a chilling nature. Jesus' dealings with the Sabbath, David with the showbread, Paul and the matter of circumcision — we could go on endlessly, the point being that *never should a rule, even a Ten Commandment rule, be so applied as to oppose love*. This is the situational method, and it is thus as old as morality — what men have always done when they were morally sensitive and accepted responsibility for their actions. It is in fact what most of the detractors of "situationism" themselves do, whether or not they realize it, when they wrestle with morally ambiguous issues. Indeed, it is what they had better do if they do not wish to be involved in unloving actions.

A second semantic misunderstanding in this conflict derives from the use of the term "absolute." The Christian Contextualist insists that there is only one absolute, love. When the opposition objects that this minimizes the significance of the Decalogue, he is not aware that each is using the term "absolute" in a different way.

When the anti-"situationist" speaks of the Ten Commandments as God's "absolutes," he means that they are to be taken with the utmost seriousness and that they possess an exceedingly broad range of applicability and durability. He may also mean that they are the highest expressions of moral

principle that God has revealed to man and that they carry with them the very authority of God Himself.

The Contextualist, who may also take the Ten Commandments seriously, employs the term *absolute* in its philosophic, logical sense, meaning the ultimate, beyond which there can be nothing. In such usage there can never be more than one absolute under any circumstance, just as there can be only one "first." If one speaks of ten absolutes, for example, he makes a semantic error, because these ten, even if prior to all lesser values, would necessarily have to be relative to each other. Note this relativity in the Ten Commandments. Imagine a situation where strictly literal observance of the fifth commandment would put one in conflict with one of the first four. Few persons who take the Decalogue seriously would hesitate to place their obligation to God above that to man even if that man were his earthly father. The fifth commandment is therefore secondary and thus relative to the one taken from the first four, that is, in a sense relatively less binding — at least with a literal reading of the commandments. It will be recalled that Jesus seems to have made a distinction something like this when He said "the second is like unto it." Conceivably, in desperation one might be forced to give one of the last six priority over another, as in that intriguing case of Rahab and the spies.

It is clearly consistent both with the words of Jesus and the writings of Ellen White to say that the Ten Commandments are *expressions* of God's law. But note: that which is an expression of something is relative to it, even if it is its highest expression.

It is important to remind ourselves at this juncture, however, that the love "absolute" which is commanded is no mere sentimentality or feeling, even less the biological urgency suggested in the plaint that "it must be right because we love each other so." The love commanded is a principle. *agape* — love involving reason, choice, will, commitment, loyalty, the acceptance of responsibility for, etc. It can even be directed toward one for whom one has no positive feelings as such, even the enemy. Such love alone, with exception, is eternally valid. It is indeed the very character of God.

All expressions of this love are conditioned, however, by time and space. Stated positively as "thou *shalt*" notes, they are sublime descriptions of how love operates under the conditions of our being human. But these descriptions might have to be restated so as to be appropriate to other conditions, as, for example, the fifth and seventh when literally applied to angels. They may even be amplified (magnified) so as to apply in spirit to new

situations. Paul's observation regarding the governing powers is an illustration of such an amplification of the fifth commandment. The same can be said for Christ's descriptions of *agape* in action in His well-known sermon. But the very fact that this can be done attests to the truth that it is not their wording that is sacrosanct but their principle, the absolute value that undergirds them. But if one says this, one has become a Christian Contextualist in essence. The conservative Contextualist tends only to give these descriptions of love greater practical authority because of his presuppositions about God and what happened at Sinai.

A final point of contention uncovers a semantic error on the other side. This concerns the word "legalist." Both sides vigorously reject legalism but, as before, the antagonists simply mean different things by the term. (From what has gone before, it should be plain that the true antagonists are the Christian moralists and the "situationists," not Christian moralists and Situationists.) When the "situationist" (note well the quotes) rejects legalism, he is likely, as an antinomian, to be rejecting rules *per se*. On the other hand, Christian Contextualists, whether so self-consciously or not, are more likely to be simply objecting to a misuse of the rules. To be consistent, I shall speak of the former as "legalism" and the latter as Legalism. Since Legalism constitutes the stimulus and the point of departure for the whole Contextual enterprise, it is important that we understand this distinction.

The Christian moralist who views God's commandments as the supreme expressions or descriptions of love — love in action and thus relative to love — must always insist that the rules serve love. If any rule is stated or applied in such a way as to conflict with love, it is no rule, or it is a bad rule, or rather a bad application of a rule, and must be suspended or abrogated. One of God's commandments can never contradict love and be God's commandment without introducing an unthinkable contradiction in God Himself. (Generally, in such a case what we have is a misinterpretation of the requirement, not a rule truly opposing love.)

Legalism does not consist simply in having rules or even in their precise application. Being careful may indicate the depth of one's concern or even a quality of personality or character. The careful surgeon who takes great pains with his operative procedure may be revealing something very important and valuable about himself. The same might be said about a housepainter, a bricklayer, or anyone else who takes pride in his workmanship. He is not thereby necessarily a legalist — though of course, he may also be.

The Legalist is one who is morally "careful" for the wrong reasons. For the Legalist, law does not serve love — it serves law; or perhaps even more

accurately, it serves unworthy motives or unresolved conflicts in the Legalist. It is one thing for the surgeon to practice his art with all of the skill and precision he can muster, including scrubbing before the operation in a fairly well-defined manner for the sake of reducing his mortality rates to the barest minimum (and thus out of his loving concern for his patients), but quite another thing if he does so for the purpose of enhancing his own status in the medical and larger community, or, even deeper, as a way of compensating for or resolving hidden conflicts within himself.

The Legalist is one who keeps the rules not so as to be more loving but more often so as to solve personal deep feelings of guilt and unworthiness that prevent him from really accepting himself, and thus other people. Guilt, of course, need not be clearly identified as such by the individual. Psychologists speak of "free-floating" guilt, that is, guilt tied to no clearly recognized act or situation. Such guilt, for example, may be related to forgotten parental perfectionism internalized by the child as an enduring sense of frustration, failure, and unworthiness, only to appear later as attempts to earn feelings of "righteousness" by a life of high-level moral rectitude. Theologians call this "salvation by works." Unable to feel worthwhile and accepted, even if he does not understand the basis for his anxiety, such a person attempts to earn the acceptance of himself and others. But unfortunately he most often only succeeds in compounding the difficulty.

The Christian solution to his problem is "salvation by grace," of course, rather than by works — that is, through the acceptance of God's loving acceptance, through trusting in God's forgiveness freely given. (This is a doctrine which is psychologically sound, by the way. In practice, grace is often mediated through accepting, noncondemning, loving persons in such a one's life.) The one who can accept himself because he has truly learned to trust God is thereby released from his frenzied struggle for superficial moral purity and is freed to a life of unstrained and naturally outflowing loving behavior in which the rules serve as useful guides.

The Legalist often identifies himself by the way the rules function in his life. Most often they are either the means by which he receives the punishment he feels he deserves (masochism), or they become the vehicles by which he critically projects his own guilt on others (the other side of the same coin, that is, sadism). They are not easy persons to live with. Such legalism is rejected by all Christian Contextualists, including the Apostle Paul.

To summarize: Christian Situation or Contextual Ethics, as opposed to "situationism," is a clearly defined ethical method for dealing with moral

dilemmas. Such dilemmas occur in the presence of conflicting and competing moral claims or where there is a lack of adequate, clear, and applicable moral guidance. This ethical method recognizes the complexity of human life as it is lived morally and the difficulty of anticipating all of the factors that make up any particular moment of decision. It admits to only one absolute norm for human behavior — love as *agape*, as concerned commitment to the other in ways that are appropriate to and guided by the needs of particular circumstances.

As a method it is inductive and depends on a marshaling of all of the relevant facts that make up the situation. It accepts full responsibility for deciding what is the most “loving” action in the light of these facts.

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Individual Contextualists may differ widely in how they interpret the “facts” of the context or situation, depending on their antecedent beliefs and experiences. As in any enterprise involving logic, the ethical conclusions reached will reflect such premise differences. These differences may demonstrate the *Weltanschauung*, or world view, of the individual observer, including his conceptions of God, the meaning of existence, man’s eternal destiny, and the relative value and authority he gives to such revealed guidance as the Bible. Persons with little respect for the “authority” of the Bible are likely to appear antinomian, capricious, and impulsive as they draw ethical conclusions, and this is part of the reason why conservative Christians find them disturbing. A Christian Contextualist who takes the Bible authoritatively, on the other hand, may include in his perceived situation the whole of human history and destiny, including God’s acts toward and revelations to man. Contextualists may thus be “broad” or “narrow.” In either case, however, it is *not the method* which makes the difference *but the beliefs or premises* of the ones who use the method.

The narrow “situationist,” a virtual antinomian, is likely to reject the “legalism” of having rules — which is how he defines legalism. The broad Contextualist, in contrast, sees Legalism as not the having of rules but the misusing of them. He values the rules as giving guidance to love and thus serving love. He knows that the Legalist uses rules as means to the wrong ends, frequently the solving of unresolved conflicts deep within himself.

It is important for persons who take morality seriously to recognize that the “new morality” is not new in method, but in its way of looking at the “facts.” What has changed is not a perfectly logical and valid way of dealing with perplexing moral questions but the “world” in which the questions are being asked. And it is this misreading of the total context of decision which should give them concern.

If we are to bring some sort of clarity out of the present obvious confusion of moral tongues occasioning so much well-meant but meaningless controversy, we shall have to reexamine the language of the conflict. Perhaps even the creation of new terms is in order. I conclude by suggesting a new name for this so badly misunderstood and misjudged ethical method, with the hope that its presentation will further movement in the direction that the name suggests. That name is *Responsible Ethic*.