
Situation Ethics Today: Three Adventist Views

Kainer, Gordon, *Faith, Hope and Clarity: A Look at Situation Ethics and Biblical Ethics*. 144 pp. Mountain View, CA.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1977. \$4.95 (paper).

Johnsen, Carsten. *God, the Situation Ethicist*. 191 pp. P.O. Box 1474, Loma Linda, CA.: Center of Christian Realism, 1981. \$9.00

by David R. Larson

In an influential article first published in 1965, a Congregationalist theologian named James Gustafson described the controversy regarding situation ethics as a "misplaced debate." Misplaced or not, the dispute continues, as revealed both by Gustafson's later writings and by the contributions of Gordon Kainer, a theologian and administrator at Rio Lindo Adventist Academy in Northern California, and Carsten Johnsen, a linguist and philosopher who has taught at Andrews University and a number of other American and European schools. This is fortunate because the issues evoked by the orientation Joseph Fletcher and others call the "new morality" are as interesting and important today as ever.

Kainer basically contends that Joseph Fletcher's brand of situation ethics overreacts to the pettiness of much piety. Fletcher rightly criticizes Christianity for frequently spawning interpretations of the righteous life that are legalistic, simplistic, and loveless, Kainer declares. But this provides no reason to doubt, he contends, that the ideal solution in every circumstance is to obey God's will. Kainer emphasizes that God has revealed this will in Scripture, particularly in the Ten Commandments.

The spirit of God's love permeates the letter of God's law so thoroughly that it is never legitimate, in Kainer's view, to appeal to the former against the latter. Despite their specialness for the ancient people of Israel, he insists, the mandates of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 apply universally without addition, subtraction, or modification. All ethical dilemmas experienced by those who honor these requirements are more apparent than real: Kainer believes there is no situation in which one is actually compelled by unfortunate circumstances to choose a lesser evil. Therefore, the primary ethical struggle is not the effort to reduce one's moral perplexity; it is the battle against one's reluctance to submit to God's sovereign authority. This war, Kainer writes, can be won only in the strength of divine mercy and power.

Johnsen's primary point is that only God can function as a situation ethicist because only God knows enough about any set of circumstances to do so wisely. He develops this line of reasoning in direct conversation with those who believe that Fletcher's form of the "new morality" enjoys scriptural support. The Bible sometimes portrays its heroes and heroines acting in ways which are ethically questionable, Johnsen concedes. But frequently, he responds, the Old and New Testaments record these deeds without approving them. At other times, he continues, Scripture reveals that God commanded ethically exceptional action for reasons best known to God. Given the vast differences in ability and integrity between sinless divinity and sinful humanity, it is arrogant and rebellious, Johnsen believes, to use events in which God commanded morally unusual conduct as precedents and justifications for human compromises with evil. Johnsen insists it can never be right for humans to do evil, as defined by Scripture's

commandments, under the guise of choosing a *lesser* evil. In his view, the willingness to make such decisions is evidence of idolatrous self-sufficiency, the opposite of the humility and submissiveness to God's authority that mark the true Christian.

Kainer and Johnsen both express an ethical approach that places primary emphasis upon compliance with absolutely binding imperatives established by a supreme moral commander who, in their case, is God. Like Immanuel Kant, Kainer and Johnsen hold that some imperatives are never to be compromised, but unlike Kant, who believed commands are discerned by human reason, they believe commands are delivered by divine revelation. From Kant's perspective, Kainer and Johnsen ground morality on the uncertainties of religious belief; from the point of view of Kainer and Johnsen, Kant deified human rationality. Kainer and Johnsen stress the moral necessity of obeying God's directives.

My present orientation differs from that of Kainer and Johnsen on the one hand, and from that of Joseph Fletcher on the other hand, in two primary respects. In the first place, I prefer the "way of responsibility" to both the authoritarian emphases of Kainer and Johnsen and the teleological approach of Fletcher. The "way of responsibility" accepts the benefits and burdens of making ethical decisions without shifting this challenge to some commander who issues directives or to some computer that forecasts consequences. In either of these cases, some factor other than the decision-maker is ultimately accountable for what is decided: a state of affairs that may wrongly dodge moral liability. In addition, the "way of responsibility" is frankly pluralistic in its claim that there is no single consideration that is always overriding other than the ultimate commandment to love God with the whole of one's being and one's neighbor as one's self (Matt. 22:37-39). Both the

emphasis upon beneficial consequences ("You will know them by their fruits." Mat. 7:20) and the emphasis upon respecting personhood ("Whatever you wish that men do to you, do so to them." Matt. 7:12) must always be considered, but exactly which of these two valid emphases applies is deliberately left unspecified. This qualifies both Fletcher's contention that the rightness or wrongness of a course of action is determined exclusively by the goodness or badness of its consequences for the whole of society and the view of Kainer and Johnsen that divine authority is the sole ethical standard.

The difficulty with making God's sheer authority the ethical standard is not that this criterion is divine, but that it is authoritarian and therefore at least incipiently arbitrary. The "way of responsibility" does not deny the importance of obedience, but it places obedience in the context of responsive love. In one of his most effective chapters, Kainer utilizes a helpful diagram to illustrate that true obedience is always a loving response to God's graciousness; however, the primary emphasis of the rest of his book is upon God's authority. Fletcher also devotes a few pages to the theme of responsiveness in *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966); however, the primary focus of his various publications is upon consequences. Johnsen's book, which compares the relationships between God and humanity to those between employers and employees, pays even less notice to the responsive character of biblical ethics.

Because God's steadfast love gives monotheistic ethics its distinctive dynamic and motivation, it deserves primary attention. When this is done, the parables of Isaiah 5 and Luke 15 become every bit as helpful in making ethical decisions as the directives of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. And when this is done, it becomes apparent that even the Ten Commandments, as revealed by the verses that introduce them, are indicators of appropriate ways in which to respond to God's prior goodness.

The second primary way in which my present orientation differs from that of Kainer and Johnsen, on the one hand, and Fletcher, on the other hand, is that ethical guidelines are less important to me than they are to Kainer and Johnsen but they seem more significant to me than they do to Fletcher. From their opposing points of view, Fletcher as well as Kainer and Johnsen deny that it makes sense from a moral point of view to say "necessary but lesser evil." For Fletcher, if an alternative is morally necessary, it is not evil. For Kainer and Johnsen, if an option is evil, it is not morally necessary.

Both positions miss the realities of life as currently experienced and as exposed in Scripture. Ethical guidelines are very important because, among other things, they indicate normal ethical expectations. To use a concept J. Philip Wogaman develops in *A Christian Method of Moral Judgment* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), ethical guidelines can function as moral presumptions that place the burden of proof upon those who would violate them. In some circumstances these guidelines conflict with each other, and the more particular and numerous they are, the more likely it is that such tension will occur. In such circumstances, I believe, one should choose the lesser of evils, all things considered, without refusing to be held accountable for one's choice and without denying the moral ambiguity of the alternative one chooses. Either to refuse to be answerable or to pretend that the course of action one prefers is wholly without moral blemish is, in my view, less than responsible.

Two illustrations may be helpful. First, Kainer's book regrets that 80 percent of the students surveyed in a Seventh-day Adventist academy approved of a woman calling to her absent husband in an attempt to deceive and frighten away an intruder. I agree with Kainer that there is a very strong Christian

presumption in favor of speaking truthfully; however, on this issue, all things considered, my vote is with the academy students. It is evil to deceive; but it is more evil, I fear, to refuse to protect the members of one's home from a truly illegal alien.

Second, Johnsen's book subjects the guidelines on abortion provided for denominational hospitals by a committee of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists to severe criticism because he believes its approval of abortion in cases of felonious intercourse, maternal jeopardy, or severe fetal defectiveness violates the sixth commandment. I agree with Johnsen that there is a very strong Christian presumption in favor of protecting all forms of life, and an even stronger presumption in favor of protecting human life at every stage of existence; however, in the end my vote is with the General Conference guidelines, even though they are not perfect. Abortion is never without moral ambiguity; there are sound ethical as well as medical reasons why it should not be utilized in a routine or frivolous manner. But I believe the committee that formulated these guidelines rightly saw that in some circumstances it would be less evil to perform an abortion than to refuse to do so on the grounds, suggested by Johnsen, that one should let God intervene if God chooses to do so.

Such decisions are difficult even when they are made carefully and prayerfully, and they should ever remain so. It is not always easy to accept the freedom and responsibility God has given us. But we can find comfort and joy in God's unrelieved goodness. God's unending benevolence can widen our imaginations as we consider our options, strengthen our resolve as we fulfill our callings, and soothe our inner turbulence as we discover our inadequacies. No one is more worthy of our trust.

David Larson is associate professor of Christian ethics at Loma Linda University.