

Strengths

- It is compatible with and common to everyone.
- It is an objective theory – certain actions are inherently right or wrong.
- Double effect and proportionalism give a degree of flexibility.
- Evolutionary neuroscientists (e.g. Pinker) argue that some aspects of our moral behaviour are determined genetically which might support the idea that morals are instinctive or naturally instilled in us in some way.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Weaknesses

- Nature does not always seem to be good; there are many things which are instinctual to us that might not necessarily be moral.
- Atheists are unlikely to follow this supposedly universal ethic as it is inextricably tied to belief in God.
- Issues with infertility would challenge the primary precept of the importance of natural reproduction.
- It suffers from the naturalistic fallacy (is/ought) – just because something is, it is a leap of logic to infer that this makes a statement about how something ought to be.
- Feminist critiques have posited that it could be viewed as misogynist as the primary precept of reproduction could reduce women to only having value in their biological reproductive function.

Lying is immoral according to natural law. It violates the primary precept of worshipping God, much like theft, because it is directly forbidden in the Ten Commandments in Exodus. It is also considered to violate the primary precept of pursuing an ordered society because falsehoods create issues in communication within society, leading to malfunction. This is an example of divine command ethics, because it sources morality from the commands of a deity.

'You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour'
Exodus 20:16 NRSV

Like the issue of theft, lying can also be considered to be permissible under proportionalist thinking. For example, if by lying you can save someone's life (thereby upholding the precept of the preservation of life) then a proportionalist such as Hoose would argue that this is a morally sound action – even though it breaks the law of God. The same can be said regarding the precept of upholding of the ordered nature of society – if telling a lie serves the purpose of ensuring society remains ordered, then some proportionalists may consider this to be permissible.

Natural Moral Law (2)

Application to the Issues of Theft and Lying

The Issue of Lying

Theft is the deliberate taking of an item or asset which does not belong to you. Lying is the deliberate stating or omission of a fact or falsehood.

However, in some circumstances exceptions can be made in natural law which would view theft as being the morally correct choice. For example, proportionalism would argue that as long as there is a proportional reason to break a law, which upholds another precept, then it might be acceptable.

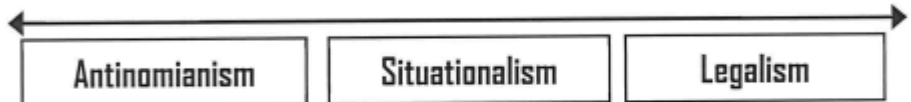
An example of this might be Jean Valjean from the novel *Les Misérables*, who stole a loaf of bread to feed his starving niece. The primary precept of preservation of life would be deemed a proportional reason to steal. If stealing somehow serves the purpose of upholding the primary precept of an ordered society, then it can be considered to be acceptable in Bernard Hoose's proportionalism.

'You shall not steal'
Exodus 20:15 NRSV

The Issue of Theft

According to natural law, theft is immoral. This is because it violates a number of the primary precepts. For example, it violates the precept of worshipping God. It is considered to be worship to follow the commandments of God. To steal is against the commandments of God – as in the Ten Commandments, it states that *'you shall not steal'* (Exodus 20:15 NRSV). By breaking this rule, the primary precept of worshipping God is broken. Theft also violates the primary precept of pursuing an ordered society, as it violates the existing structures surrounding material possession and ownership laws.

- Fletcher did not think that legalism or living without any moral codes whatsoever were attractive ways of living. Situationalism, Fletcher's proposed idea, is positioned in the middle of the two.
- On the one hand, unlike the antinomian, Fletcher believes people must have some principle or concept to appeal to when making an ethical decision. This is **agape**, and the maxims derived from it.
- On the other, unlike the legalist, Fletcher believes that these principles cannot be so absolute and inflexible as to require a decision which flies in the face of common sense.
- This ethical theory is teleological because it is concerned with the outcome of actions – whether actions result in the demonstration of **love**. Fletcher believes that there are four presuppositions and six principles which will enable someone to make an appropriate moral response.



Joseph Fletcher & the Basics of Situation Ethics

Agape:
One of the Greek words for love. It is an attitude of generosity that expects nothing in return. **It is the love Jesus showed humanity.**

Teleological ethics is an ethical system which serves an end or purpose.

Telos is a Greek term which Aquinas adopted from Aristotle – it means 'end' or 'purpose'. This is the root of the term 'teleological'.

Fletcher's Six Fundamental Principles

- 'Only one thing is intrinsically good; namely love: nothing else at all'
- 'The ruling norm of Christian decision is love: nothing else'
- 'Love and justice are the same, for justice is love distributed, nothing else'
- 'Love wills the neighbour's good, whether we like him or not'
- 'Only the end justifies the means, nothing else'
- 'Love's decisions are made situationally, not prescriptively'

Situation Ethics (1)

'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.'
Matthew 22:39

Cultural Background:
The foundation for situation ethics developed in a time of change worldwide in the 1960s and 1970s, including:

- Women in the workforce
- Vietnam War
- Kennedy assassination
- Civil rights movement
- Contraceptive pill and sexual revolution
- Hippy and student culture

Fletcher's four presuppositions	Explanation
Pragmatism	Moral demands should be practical and achieve the intended outcome or result, which is love.
Relativism	All situations should be assessed on how best to demonstrate love, rather than through following moral laws which use the words 'never' or 'always'.
Positivism	Being able to say that 'God is love' on the basis of faith, not reason or human experience. The moral agent has to decide, through their faith in God, that love is the most important thing of all.
Personalism	Demands that the needs and importance of people are considered first, not the demands of moral laws.

Strengths

- It responds to social and moral change, meaning that it fits well with modern moral sentiment.
- It is in keeping with Jesus' biblical rejection of legalism.
- It gives modern Christians who might be uncomfortable with more traditional, legalistic morality a way to practise their religious faith beyond the strict boundaries of natural law.
- It provides flexibility and responsibility.
- Agape is widely considered to be desirable – few would consider 'love' to be an undesirable end.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Weaknesses

- Pope Pius XII criticised it and **emphasised moral law**. For some Christians, such as those within the Catholic Church, this would be a significant issue. The Pope is considered to be the closest person to God, and the most in tune with the will of God. To decry situation ethics as immoral, it would mean such a Christian would struggle with this.
- Jesus condemned some **actions as always wrong**.
- Peter Vardy argues that situation ethics confuses **agape** and **gives a lack of clear guidance**.
- It could also be argued to be easily abused to get what individuals want rather than what is moral.
- William Barclay argues that it creates dangers of moral mistakes and harm.

As with any application of situation ethics, the only blanket rule to be applied here is the service of love (agape). Greater value is placed on love than on the value of truth. As with theft, lying is discouraged within traditional Christian discourse, which had a heavy emphasis on Christian practice. As situation ethics is a Christian ethical practice, this should be considered.

The way in which a situation ethicist might approach this question is not asking whether or not lying is wrong, it is whether or not lying would serve agape. For example, if lying would save the life of an innocent human being, then it is the correct moral choice in that situation – it is made out of love for that individual. However, if a lie is told in order to avoid punishment, for example, then agape is not being served and, therefore, this is considered to be immoral.

Theft is the deliberate taking of an item or asset which does not belong to you. Lying is the deliberate stating or omission of a fact or falsehood.



The Issue of Lying

Situation Ethics (2)

Application to the Issues of Theft and Lying



The Issue of Theft

This is well explained through the use of an example: Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* was imprisoned for stealing – specifically stealing a loaf of bread in order for his niece to eat (as she was starving to death). A situation ethicist would consider this to be a moral action – as it is a loving course of action.

However, if an individual chose to steal a loaf of bread because they felt entitled to the bread or simply did not feel like paying for it, then this would be considered to be immoral. Here, the intent is the key issue.

Situation ethics is a Christian form of ethics, and as stealing is discouraged within Christian teaching (due to Exodus 20:15), most situation ethicists will view stealing as being immoral. However, situation ethics aims to serve the purpose and end of agape in a contextual basis, meaning that theft may be considered the most loving thing to do in certain situations.