‘Situation ethics’, ‘situationism’ as we shall call it, burst with a shower of sparks on the English-speaking Christian world in the 1960s and is clearly here to stay for some time yet. Its best-known expositor has been J. A. T. Robinson; its most incisive spokesman the American, Joseph Fletcher. It has a good deal going for it. It offers itself as a seemingly simple method of solving complex problems about what to do. It claims to correct the legalism and remove the artificiality which have in the past disfigured much Christian thinking about conduct. It endorses the modern (and, we might add, ancient and Edenic) disinclination to treat any external rules as unbreakable. Its exponents have a lot to say about sex, which to most people is a very interesting subject, particularly when handled in a way that sounds permissive. In its rhetoric, situationism seems to endorse the hunch which popular music and pulp writing so often express, that love will justify anything and that in seeing this we are both wiser and more humane than our fathers were.

Not surprisingly, therefore, situationism allures as common ways of stating Christian morality do not. Frequently today the old formulations are dismissed as

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1 This chapter is indebted to three unpublished papers by Gordon Stobart.
3 Unfortunately, Fletcher really did write: ‘Sex is not always wrong outside marriage, even for Christians’ (Moral Responsibility, p. 138). No less unfortunately, H. A. Williams, on this showing a situationist fellow-traveller, dabbled in his essay in A. R. Vidler (ed.). Soundings (Cambridge University Press, 1962) with the Freudian fancy of therapeutic and therefore valuable fornication. Of an episode in the film Never on Sunday he wrote: ‘The prostitute gives herself to him in such a way that he acquires confidence and self-respect. He goes away a deeper fuller person than he came in.’ And of something similar in The Mark: Will he be able to summon up the necessary courage or not? When he does, and they sleep together, he has been made whole. And where there is healing, there is Christ, whatever the Church may say about fornication’ (pp. 8 if.). All else apart, however, is it safe to assume that real life will be like what you see at the movies?
a bad brew of Victorianism and Puritanism, two outlooks which we are urged to abhor as unholy and oppressive blends of narrow-mindedness, pomposity, prejudice and hypocrisy—all law and no love, and dull as ditchwater into the bargain. The moral pendulum has swung with a vengeance, so that creative freedom in structuring caring relationships is now ‘in’ while the conscientious rigour of law-keeping is ‘out’.

It could at once be objected that since loving action is what the Decalogue and the law of Christ are all about, the antithesis is false, just as are the proffered descriptions of Victorianism and Puritanism. Granted; but since situationism sees loving as the only prescribed duty and denies that there are any other, more specific, divine laws to keep, we cannot leave the matter there. Situationist claims must be examined on their merits, As we saw, this viewpoint owes much of its attractiveness to its identifying with what Fletcher called ‘the whole mindset of the modern man, our mindset’; an outlook which Paul Ramsey correctly if turgidly summed up as ‘prejudice in favour of individualistic freedom, normlessness, traditionless contemporaneity, and modern technical reason’. So, too, when J. A. T. Robinson calls for a recasting of Christian ethics, with Christian faith, on the ground that man today has ‘come of age’, he is appealing to our unself-critical conceit in the same way that Fletcher does. No doubt, favour is gained this way. But the rights and wrongs of situationism cannot be settled at the murky level of popular prejudice, whether for or against. There are arguments to be weighed—complex and sophisticated arguments, as it turns out.

**What is situationism?**

First, let us note that though ‘situationism’ is usually thought of as a term referring specifically to one view of Christian morality, it is actually an umbrella-word for all views which reject the idea that the way to decide what to do is always to apply rules, positive and negative, concerning types of actions (e.g. keep your promises, do not steal, do not rape, do not torture). The situationist does not regard such rules as prescriptive, i.e., as having absolute and universal authority, but as at best illuminative, in the sense of being relative, provisional and violable indicators of what behavior may (though it may not) be right here and now. Thus, ‘situationism’ is a term of negative classification, dear only in what it excludes and covering many positive conceptions that are intrinsically different.

The word ‘existentialism’ is similar; it, too, is an umbrella-word for all views, Christian and non-Christian, which reject the idea that one can achieve authentic personal existence without total commitment, and it, too, in practice covers a wide range of outlooks. Now as a view about the way to determine what one

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4 Situation Ethics, p. 58.  
should do, situationism can be part of an atheistic existentialist or humanist position no less than of a Christian one. The mark of existentialist situationism is its requirement that one should always act whole-heartedly, in conscious personal freedom (meaning by this, openness to variation from all one’s actions hitherto). The mark of humanist situationism is its quest in all circumstances for the realization of personal values as it sees them. The mark of Christian situationism is its conviction that general moral rules applied to the matter in hand will not always lead you to what the command of God and the calculations of neighborly love (which two things some identify and others distinguish) actually require.

The claim traditionally made for Christian morality is that love can be, and indeed has been, embodied in rules, so that in using the moral principles of Scripture prescriptively a Christian will always be expressing love, never frustrating it, and so will always be doing the will of God. Situationism diagnoses this claim as legalistic and declines to accept it, insisting that love itself requires one to go further and do more: namely, to pay fullest attention to the situation itself, which may be an exceptional set of circumstances requiring, for the fullest expression of love, an exceptional way of acting. Action which the rules would call wrong will yet be right if analysis shows it to be the most loving thing to do. For no types of action, as such, can be said to be immoral; only failures of love in particular situations can be called immoral or thought of as forbidden, inasmuch as the fullness of loving action is the whole of what God commands.\(^6\)

\(^6\) Fletcher writes: ‘As a “Scripture” for the open-endedness of situation ethics turn to Romans 14:14. When Paul said, “I know. . . that nothing is unclean of itself”, what he meant by “unclean” (once we step out of the situation in and to which he spoke), and what he could well have said, is “immoral”. Nothing is immoral in itself, intrinsically. What love is, what morality is, always depends on the situation’ (Norm and Context in Christian Ethics, p. 349). The text does not prove Fletcher’s point, for Paul’s ‘nothing’ denotes foodstuffs, not types of action, whereas Fletcher’s ‘nothing’ signifies, apparently, types of action viewed formally and externally without reference to their motive and purpose (e.g. shaking hands, or signing one’s name, or speaking, or keeping silent, or copulating). Nor in any case is Fletcher’s external concept of an action always adequate; some types of action, e.g. rape and torture, are only definable in terms of an unloving and therefore (for Fletcher, as for everyone else) immoral motive and volition, so that to say that rape and torture are not ‘immoral. . . intrinsically’ would be self-contradictory. Robinson, trying to have it both ways, achieves this self-contradiction explicitly, affirming both that ‘nothing can of itself always be labelled as “wrong” and that there are actions of which ‘it is so inconceivable that they could ever be an expression of love—like cruelty to children or rape—that they are. . . always wrong’ (Honest to God, p. 118; Christian Morals Today, p. 16 and also Christian Freedom in a Permissive Society, p. 16): which, as Paul Ramsey notes, is simply saying that they are ‘inherently’ wrong, wrong in themselves, . . .
How, then, should we decide what to do in a given situation? Here the ways part. The rational situationism of the Anglo-Saxon Anglicans Fletcher and Robinson offers us a method of calculation; the existentialist situationism of the big Bs of continental neo-orthodoxy—Barth, Bonhoeffer, Brunner, Bultmann—takes the line of attuning us for particular self-authenticating commands from God which will reach us via Scripture, though they will not be identical with, nor will they be simply applications of, moral principles stated in Scripture. Neither position (be it said) is intentionally lax or antinomian (that is, opposed to law); both think they achieve what the law in Scripture is really after; the differences between them, and between them both and Christian ethical stances which would not call themselves situationist, are theological. This chapter is most concerned with the former type of situationism, but we shall grasp it better by comparing it with the latter, and this will be our next step.

Pure situationism

Neo-orthodox situationism may be called ‘pure’ as distinct from ‘principled’. Its main thesis is that as I face each situation, taking its measure and noting its complexities, God will speak, in some sense of that word, directly. The determining factor here is the dynamism or ‘actualism’ of the neo-orthodox conception of God: that is, the insistence that the Creator-God, who is transcedent, sovereign and free, is known to us and reveals his command to us only in the particularity of the present moment. So the generalized ethical injunctions of Scripture are understood not as formulae embodying the fullness of God’s will for all time, but as so many indications of the lines along which, or within which, particular commands of God may be expected to come. God’s revealed will never takes the form of a universally valid rule for us to apply to all relevant cases, but only of particular summonses. ‘God’s commanding can only be this individual, concrete and specific commanding,’ says Karl Barth. Formally, then, the Christian ethic is obeying God in a most direct way; and materially it is neighbour-love, in whatever mode God’s self-authenticating command specifies here and now. Thus Brunner writes: ‘Nothing is good save obedience to the command of God, just because it is obedience. No reasons of determination from content here come under consideration, The “form” of the will, obedience, is all. But to be obedient means: “love your neighbour!”’

because of the lovelessness that is always in them’ (Deeds and Rides in Christian Ethics, Oliver and Boyd, 1965, p. 28). For clear discussion with a situationist, the first question one should ask is how he defines an action.

7 K. Barth, Church Dogmatics, II.2 (T. & T. Clark, 1957), p. 673. Barth continues: ‘We must divest ourselves of the fixed idea that only a universally valid rule can be a command.’ See the whole section, pp. 661-708; op. cit., III.4, pp. 1-23; and D. Bonhoeffer, Ethics (Fontana, 1964), pp. 278, 285.

Bonhoeffer says this most starkly, forbidding us to ask ‘What is the will of God for this particular case?’ because the question embodies ‘the casuistic misinterpretation of the concrete. The concrete is not achieved in this way... The will of God is always concrete, or else it is not the will of God... the will of God is not a principle... which has to be applied to “reality”.’ These negations sound startling; but the guidance that Bonhoeffer takes away with the one hand, by denying that God reveals principles, he effectively restores with the other, by his teaching on the ‘mandates’—church, government, labour and culture, and marriage and the family, spheres of delegated divine authority which the Reformers also recognized. ‘Mandate’ (which term Bonhoeffer preferred to the more usual ‘orders’, because it denoted a God-given task) meant for him ‘the conferment of divine authority (i.e. the right to command obedience as God’s representative) on an earthly agent’, and ‘the formation of a definite earthly domain by the divine commandment’; and the mandates themselves, conservatively conceived, define closely the limits within which God’s concrete will is expressed and encountered. Barth and Brunner speak similarly. Barth also affirms that, while God’s demand cannot be anticipated in abstraction, his constancy of character revealed in Christ means that like demands will be made in like situations: for Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and for ever, is ‘the ground, content and form of God’s command’.

In all this neo-orthodoxy is polemicizing against what Barth calls a ‘theoretical casuistry’ which assumes that the whole of God’s command consists of a legacy of general principles left us in the Bible, to be applied by our own best wisdom. Their motive—a proper one—is a desire to display Christian obedience as direct response to God’s present, personal address. But as anyone with a ripe doctrine of the Holy Spirit can and will make that point without denying that in what God says today he applies what he has said in Scripture once for all, so the ‘pure’ situationism to which these men resort seems to turn God’s command, at least in its details, into an uncheckable private revelation every time. Nor (to their

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12 This brings ‘pure’ situationism into line with the position of sixteenth-century Anabaptists and seventeenth-century Quakers who relied on what they took to be immediate promptings of the Holy Spirit, not related to the Word in any direct or testable way. A similar tendency appears on occasion in charismatic circles, and in Knowing God (Hodder, 1975, pp. 263f.) I cite three horror stories along the same line from the ‘fanaticism papers’ which Hannah Whitall Smith compiled from her experience among American evangelicals a century ago. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit which underlies expectations of immediate guidance by private revelation is not so much ripe as overripe, and can be expected to produce ethical instability.
credit!) do they sustain in practice the daunting notion which they profess. Thus, Bonhoeffer’s concept of the command of God, which if it is not ‘dear, definite and concrete to the last detail . . . is not God’s command’, receives a crippling qualification when he admits that God’s will ‘may lie deeply concealed beneath a great number of available possibilities’, so that ‘the whole apparatus of human powers must be set in motion when it is a matter of proving (i.e. discerning, as in Romans 12:2) the will of God’.  

These admissions, and the whole excellent section on ‘proving’ from which they come, recognize realistically the perplexities which ethical choices involve, but hardly square with ‘clear, definite and concrete to the last detail’. And Barth’s treatment of areas of ethical decision in terms of God’s work in Christ (which, he holds, is the basic subject-matter of ethics) differs little from the kind of casuistical reasoning which he professes to abhor.

The most problematical version of neo-orthodox situationism is Rudolf Bultmann’s. Here the existentialist motif is strongest (for man’s existence consists wholly in his possibility of existence, and he is always seeking authentic selfhood by choosing who he is); here, too, God and his will are most elusive, for God is silent, and ‘Jesus teaches no ethics at all in the sense of an intelligible theory valid for all men concerning what should be done and left undone’, and obedience itself must be understood in a ‘non-objectifying’ way, not literally, that is, as response to God’s command, but in a Pickwickian, that is, private and unnatural sense as decision in the situation, whereby authentic existence is achieved. The whole ethical process in man is reduced to successive crises of new decision each present moment. ‘A man’, Bultmann insists, ‘cannot in the moment of decision fall back upon principles, upon a general ethical theory which can relieve him of the responsibility for the decision . . . man does not meet the crisis of decision armed with a definite standard; he stands on no firm base, but rather alone in empty space.”

Newness of decision is called for each new moment, for each new moment the situation itself is new.

So how should we act? First, we must realize the necessity of meeting the demands of the moment, for it always carries eschatological, that is, ultimate, significance for our existence; second, we must realize that each moment calls on us not just to do something but to be something—namely, persons who love their neighbours as themselves. We know how we love ourselves and how we want others to love us, so we already know how to love others. Jesus and Scripture do not therefore tell us what things love should make us do (that, if attempted, would be legalism); all we are told is that we should love, and that is all we need to be told, for ‘if a man really loves, he knows already what he has to

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and he knows it, ‘not on the basis of any past experience or rational deductions, but directly from the immediate situation.’

General strictures on situationism will come later, and general criticisms of Bultmann on God, Christ and Scripture would not be in place here, but some particular shortcomings of his ethic may be noted at once. First, he takes an over-optimistic view of man. Does one who ‘really loves’ thereby always know what to do? Does real love keep us who are naturally daft from speaking and acting in character? Second, Bultmann takes an over-simplified view of situations. Do not most perplexities in moral decision stem, not from lack of loving intention or will to obey God, but from ignorance of past and future facts, so that one cannot with confidence calculate consequences? Is it not daunting to note, with Thomas Oden, that Bultmann lacks ‘realistic understanding of the intense and endless conflicts of values and interests and obligations that characterize human existence’? Is it not disastrous that Bultmann neither will nor can develop a social ethic? Third, Bultmann gives an over-simplified account of the moral life, reducing it to a series of isolated decisions and allowing no significance to factors like character, habit, aspiration and growth (all of which find a place in the New Testament!). Fourth, Bultmann gives an unrealistic account of moral decision itself, speaking as if there never need be—indeed, never should be—any doubt in a Christian’s mind as to what he should do this moment, for if his heart is right God will have made the right course clear to him. I do not always find that, nor do you; who does?

Principled situationism

Set beside this, now, the ‘principled’ situationism of Fletcher and Robinson—‘principled’ because it offers a constant method of deciding in each case what love demands. We may state it thus:

a. Neighbor-love is God’s absolute and only demand in each situation. God does not require invariable performance of particular types of action, as such, whatever the simple reader of the Decalogue and the ethical parts of the New Testament might think; he calls simply for love, first as a motive (good will) and then as beneficent behavior, of whatever form the situation requires. ‘Love is both absolute and relative by its very nature. An

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16 Ibid., p. 94. ‘The demand for love needs no formulated stipulations; the example of the merciful Samaritan shows that a man can know . . . what he has to do when he sees his neighbour in need of his help. The little words “as yourself” in the love-commandment pre-indicate both the boundlessness and the direction of loving conduct’ (Theology of the New Testament, I, SCM Press, 1952, p. 19).
17 Jesus and the Word, p. 88.
unchanging principle, it nevertheless always changes in its concrete application.”

b. ‘Old’ Christian morality lapses into Pharisaic legalism and so sins against love, because in determining how to act it ‘begins from the deductive, the transcendent and the authoritative. It stresses the revealed character of the Christian moral standard, . . . (and) starts from Christian principles which are valid “without respect of persons”.

The ‘new’ morality, by contrast, starts from persons rather than principles and from experienced relationships rather than revealed commandments, and in and from the situation itself works out, by reference to personal claims and probable consequences, what is the most loving thing to do. Fletcher, stressing that love maximizes good for all, assimilates love and justice and affirms a Christianized utilitarianism so calculating that one reviewer called his book ‘blood-chilling’ and asked: ‘Does this “calculus” of love not, in effect, dehumanize love?’

Robinson, by contrast, seems to think that the discerning of love’s demands will occur spontaneously, through intuition rather than calculation. ‘Love alone,’ he writes, ‘because, as it were, it has a built-in moral compass, enabling it to “home” intuitively upon the deepest need of the other, can allow itself to be directed completely by the situation. . . . It is able to embrace an ethic of radical responsiveness, meeting every situation on its own merits, with no prescriptive laws.’ At all events, it is part of the optimism of situationist faith that, by one means or another, love will be able to see what the personal claims in each situation require, without needing to run to God’s law for guidance.

c. Love may dictate the breaking of accepted moral rules of the ‘do this’, ‘don’t do that’ type. These rules, both in Scripture and in life, are no more than rules of thumb (‘maxims’, Fletcher calls them; ‘working rules’ is Robinson’s phrase); they give preliminary guidance as to how love will normally be expressed, but sometimes for the sake of persons different

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19 P. Tillich, *Morality and Beyond* (Fontana, 1969), p. 37. Tillich was a situationist of a kind, but he anchors morality in a private doctrine of ‘Being’ which sets him apart from Trinitarian Christianity.


21 ‘Justice is Christian love using its head . . . coping with situations where distribution is called for. On this basis it becomes plain that as the love ethic searches seriously for a social policy it must form a coalition with utilitarianism,’ taking over ‘the strategic principle of “the greatest good of the greatest number”’ (*Situation Ethics*, p. 95).

22 Norman F. Langford, in *The Situation Ethics Debate*, p. 63. Amazingly, Fletcher’s reply is: “All right, we accept that. Cold calculation for love’s sake is indeed the ideal model...” . . . the “warmer” love’s calculations are, the more apt they are to be only interpersonal or even individualistic’ (p. 261). Comment seems superfluous!

23 *Honest to God*, p. 115.
action will be called for. This, however, presents no problem theoretically, for what the rules forbid is forbidden only because it is ordinarily unloving, and nothing that actually expresses love in a particular situation is actually wrong. 'Apart from (love) there are no unbreakable rules.'\textsuperscript{24}

Love as the end justifies its means; nothing is intrinsically evil, since what makes for good in a situation thereby becomes good in that situation. Fletcher notes that Paul rejects all thought of doing evil that good may come (Rom. 3:8), but sees Paul as here 'victimized' by 'the intrinsic theory', that is, the false notion that things are good or evil in themselves.\textsuperscript{25}

d. No situation ever faces us with a choice of evils; the traditional view to the contrary is one more product of the mistaken 'intrinsic theory'. 'The situationalist holds that whatever is the most loving thing in the situation is the right and good thing. It is not excusably evil, it is positively good.'\textsuperscript{26}

To illustrate, Fletcher is ready with blandest aplomb to justify—not as lesser evils, but as positively good—such acts as killing one's baby (p. 125), abortion (pp. 37ff.), therapeutic fornication (pp. 126ff.), patriotic prostitution (pp. 163ff.), adultery to induce pregnancy (pp. 164ff.), premarital sexual intercourse (p. 104), sacrificing lives on your own side in time of war (p. 98), suicide and euthanasia (pp. 66, 74, 165ff.), and distribution of contraceptives to unmarried women (p. 127; \textit{Moral Responsibility}, pp. 139ff.). He also insists on saying that 'in principle, even killing "innocent" people might be right', and 'in some situations lying and bribery and force and violence, even taking life itself, is the only righteous and good thing to do in the situation'.\textsuperscript{27}

Situationism evaluated

Christian situationism claims to distil essential biblical teaching about decision-making. This claim must now be tested.

Let it first be said that fair dealing with situationism is not easy, for it is a very mixed bag. Viewed as a reaction of protest against the all-too-common legalism which puts general principles before individual persons and whose zeal for God ousts neighbour-love from the heart, it commends itself as making a healthy biblical point, namely that only by love and care for others can we acceptably serve God (\textit{cf.} Rom. 13:8-10; I Cor. 13:1-3; Gal. 5:14). But viewed as a method

\textsuperscript{24} Christian Morals Today, p. 16, and also Christian Freedom in a Permissive Society, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{25} Situation Ethics, p. 123.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 65; Fletcher's italics.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Situation Ethics}, p. 75; \textit{Moral Responsibility}, p. 181.
to guide us in choosing our behaviour, it appalls, particularly when Fletcher cracks it up as the panacea for all moral perplexity, delivering us from centuries of Christian ethical error. When situationists detect provincialism, shallowness, negativism, thoughtlessness and lovelessness in our ethical thought and practice, we must humbly take the criticism, and be grateful for it. But when they treat God’s revealed directives as working rules only, and invite us to hail as good what God calls evil, a different response is called for.

Situationists are right to stress that each situation is in some respects unique, and that only by concentrating intensely on it shall we ever see what is the best we can make of it. Rightly too do they stress that love always seeks the best for all parties, and is betrayed if we settle for mere formal correctness, or avoidance of wrongdoing, without asking whether we could not do something better. Insistence that real love is creative, enterprising and unwilling to settle for the second-best in relationships is a substantial grain of truth in situationism, as is its further insistence that the lovingness of loving action should be thought out and spelt out in terms of the relationship itself. Robinson’s casuistry of premarital sex, for instance, runs thus: “To the young man asking in his relations with a girl, “Why shouldn’t I?”, it is relatively easy to say, “Because it’s wrong” or “Because it’s a sin”—and then to condemn him when he, or his whole generation, takes no notice. It makes much greater demands to ask, and to answer, the question “Do you love her?” or “How much do you love her?”, and then to help him to accept for himself the decision that, if he doesn’t, or doesn’t very deeply, then his action is immoral, or, if he does, then he will respect her far too much to use her or take liberties with her. Chastity is the expression of charity—of caring, enough.”

Though weakened by Robinson’s unwillingness to declare sex relations apart from the full bed-and-board commitment of marriage wrong as such, this is surely right-minded. No; it is only in its denial that any particular action is intrinsically immoral, evil and forbidden that situationism goes astray. Unfortunately, this one mistake is ruinous.

Whence does it spring? Partly, from an unbiblical habit of defining actions externally, in merely physical terms, abstracted from their motive and purpose, partly, from misconceptions about the place of the law of God as such. The New

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28 Fletcher the situationist is a convert turned evangelist. ‘After forty years’, he wrote in 1963, ‘I have learned the vital importance of the contextual or situational—i.e. the circumstantial—approach to the search for what is right and good. I have seen the light; I know now that abstract and conceptual morality is a mare’s nest’ (quoted in The Situation Ethics Debate, p. 113; cf. Situation Ethics, p. 41). Robinson, by contrast, is concerned to claim that ‘this “new morality” is, of course, none other than the old morality, just as the new commandment is the old, yet ever fresh, Honest to God, p. 119.

29 Honest to God, p. 119.

30 See note 6 above.
Testament says that while our relationship to God is no longer determined by law (Rom. 6:14), Christ having freed us from law as a system of salvation (Rom. 7:1-6; 10:4; Gal. 3:23-26), we are ‘under the law of Christ’ (I Cor. 9:21; cf. Gal. 6:2) as a standard of sanctification; Robinson, however, seems to infer from the end of the law for salvation that it has no place in sanctification. The continentals, conceiving God’s command as essentially specific and concrete, deny that the Bible’s moral teaching, which was specific and concrete for its own situation, can be directly applied to ours.

The effect of denying that there are universal God-taught prohibitions is to enmesh love (good will, the commanded motive) in perplexities. How am I to love my neighbour now? By attending to the situation, I am told. But how should I define ‘the situation’? Any circumscription of it will be arbitrary and open to challenge; I could always have included more, or less. And however I define it, how can I be sure what is really the most loving thing to do in it? By trusting my ‘built-in moral compass’? I do not know whether Robinson risks trusting his, but I dare not rely on mine. My love is often blind, or at least goofy, partly through sin, partly through natural stupidity (two factors with which situationism fails to reckon). Also, I know by experience that in moments when I have to make decisions the factors that ought to count most, and the long-term implications of this or that way of handling the situation, are often far from clear to me. So am I to calculate my way through all possible alternatives, both those which stick to the rules and those which break them? But time, brains and factual knowledge fail me; and in any case it is plain that, whatever I do, whether I keep the rules or break them, uncertainty about the consequences I calculated will leave me still unsure whether I did the most loving thing. James Gustafson observes that “love”, like “situation”, is a word that runs through Fletcher’s book like a greased pig—how does one catch and tie down such slippery items? Fletcher’s method, which in intention makes things easy and, as Gustafson notes, ‘omits any possibility of a bad conscience’, actually makes it impossible for me to know whether I have ever done what I should, and so leaves me with an anxious conscience every day. The way of relating love to law which requires the former to do duty for the latter does not make the life of Christian obedience easier for anyone.

But how are love and law related in the Bible itself? As follows:

First, no doubt ever appears about the universal applicability and authority of laws commanding and forbidding particular things—promise-keeping, payment of debts and care of one’s children, for instance, in the one case; murder, adultery and theft, for instance, in the other—and John tells us ‘this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments’ (I Jn. 5:3; cf. 2:3-5; 3:21-24, and Jesus’ words,

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31 The Situation Ethics Debate, p. 81.
32 Ibid., p. 80.
Jn. 14-15, 21; 15:10). In 1957, before the situationist storm broke, John Murray wrote: ‘It is symptomatic of a pattern of thought current in many evangelical circles that the idea of keeping the commandments of God is not consonant with the liberty and spontaneity of the Christian man, that keeping the law has affinities with legalism. . . .’ He then quotes the passages referred to above, beginning with John 14:15, ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments’, and ending with 14:21, ‘He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me’, and concludes: ‘When there is a persistent animosity to the notion of keeping commandments the only conclusion is that there is either gross ignorance or malignant opposition to the testimony of Jesus.’

It is hard to see how this can be gainsaid.

Second, love of God has priority over neighbor-love. Jesus categorizes love of God as the great commandment, which comes first (Mt. 22:37f.). Scripture is full of instruction on how to trust, fear, praise and serve the Lord, and for this we may be grateful—no utilitarian calculus could possibly take its place! It is odd that situationists regularly ‘write as if love of God is wholly a matter of loving one’s neighbor, but in Scripture it is certainly not so.

Third, neighbor-love is to be directed bylaw. So far from seeing an antithesis and possible clash between the claims of persons and of principles, Scripture assumes that we can only meet the claims of persons as we hold to the God-taught principles in dealing with them, and the principles take the form of directives as to what should and should not be done to them. The theology, in a nutshell, is that God our Maker and Redeemer has revealed the unchanging pattern of response that he requires, and that man needs if he is to be truly himself. The pattern is both an expression of God’s own moral character, an indication of what he approves and disapproves, and also a due to man about his own nature and that of his neighbor. By adhering to the pattern we express and further our own true humanness on the one hand, and true love for our neighbor on the other. Our fellow man is always something of an enigma to us, just as we are something of an enigma to ourselves, but our Maker who knows our true nature and needs has told us how we are to do ourselves and each other real good. So love and law-keeping are mutually entailed, as Paul shows in Romans 13:8-10. The sixth, seventh, eighth and tenth commandments prohibit particular actions and attitudes (murder, adultery, theft, covetous jealousy) and Paul quotes them to make the double point that when we keep these commandments we love our neighbor as ourselves, and when we love our neighbor as ourselves we keep these commandments. The point is confirmed by John’s striking reasoning in I John 5:2: ‘By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.’ Neighbor-love fulfils the law.

Biblically, then, there is no antithesis between the motive of love and the divine directives which tell us what kinds of action on man’s part God approves and disapproves. Situationism is, after all, gratuitous.

The lesser evil

But if God’s laws, and the actions which they prescribe and prohibit, have fixed intrinsic values, as expressing God’s unchanging will for mankind, what are we to think and do when we find ourselves in situations where we cannot move at all without transgressing a divine prohibition, so that the best we can do is evil from one standpoint? Briefly, love’s task then is to find how to do the most good, and the least evil; doing nothing is rarely the answer! Rightly, different principles come out on top in different situations: two Christians armed with ‘honour your parents’ and ‘do not steal’ might well act differently if one could only prevent his parents dying of hunger by stealing, while the other was being told to steal by his heavily gambling father. We may agree with the situationist that love for persons must arbitrate between the conflicting claims of moral principles, that doctrinaire decisions in such cases will not make the best of the bad job, and that unwillingness to face the situation’s full complexities, and insensitivity to the variety of rules and claims that apply, will lead straight into ironclad Pharisaic legalism. But we shall reject Fletcher’s grotesque idea that in such situations adultery, fornication, abortion, suicide and the rest, if thought the best course (which arguably in Fletcher’s cases they might be—we will not dispute that here), thereby become good: which valuation, as Fletcher himself emphasizes, leaves no room for regret at having had to do them. Instead, we shall insist that evil remains evil, even when, being the lesser evil, it appears the right thing to do; we shall do it with heavy heart, and seek God’s cleansing of our conscience for having done it.

In the film of Nicholas Monsarrat’s novel The Cruel Sea, a destroyer commander had to decide whether to drop a depth-charge that would kill dozens of desperate seamen struggling in the icy North Atlantic, but might also (might—there was no certainty) destroy the U-boat waiting on the sea floor to ravage the rest of the convoy. The alternative was to stop and pick up the swimmers. He headed through the men in the water and dropped the depth-charge. One of his men yelled, ‘Bloody murderer!’ He did not know if he hit the U-boat. The experience temporarily shattered him. He said: there are times when all we can do is guess our best, and then get down on our knees and ask God’s mercy. This is the most painful form of the lesser evil situation, that in which knowledge is limited and one does the evil that seems best knowing that it may not turn out best at all. The poignancy and justice of the commander’s words need no underlining. The most distressing feature of Fletcher’s often distressing book (in which, incidentally, there is a reference to this episode) is that, if he knows what Christian men feel at such times, he keeps quiet about it, and writes as if a dose of situationist casuistry will make them proof against it. One can only say: God help them if it
does. Yet this is where situationism logically leads; Fletcher is only being clear-headed in pointing it out.

Cried Mr. Hardy to Mr. Laurel, not once nor twice, ‘Here’s another fine mess you’ve gotten me into!’ Might not one have to say the same to any teacher who won him over to situationist ethics?