

# Paraphrasing 'principled relativism'

## Answer sheet

**Here are some extracts from Joseph Fletcher's Situation Ethics.**

**Try paraphrasing what he says in your own words, using as few words as possible.**

1. Situation ethics goes part of the way with natural law, by accepting reason as the instrument of moral judgment, while rejecting the notion that the good is "given" in the nature of things, objectively. It goes part of the way with Scriptural law by accepting revelation as the source of the norm while rejecting all "revealed" norms or laws but the one command—to love God in the neighbour. The situationist follows a moral law or violates it according to love's need.

### **Example answer**

Situation ethics argues that goodness is not found in nature. It also accepts one part of Scripture – that love is the key value (norm) and we must obey the command to love our neighbour. However, any command can be broken (violated) if love demands it.

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2. As we shall see, Christian situation ethics has only one norm or principle or law (call it what you will) that is binding and unexceptionable, always good and right regardless of the circumstances. That is "love"—the agape of the summary commandment to love God and the neighbour. Everything else without exception, all laws and rules and principles and ideals and norms, are only contingent, only valid if they happen to serve love in any situation.

### **Example answer**

Only one norm (value) cannot change with the circumstances – the value of love which is absolutely good. Everything else depends on circumstances (is contingent).

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3. It is relativistic. As the strategy is pragmatic, the tactics are relativistic. To be relative, of course, means to be relative to something. To be "absolutely relative" (an uneasy combination of terms) is to be inchoate, random, unpredictable, unjudgeable, meaningless, amoral—rather in the anti-nomian mode. There must be an absolute or norm of some kind if there is to be any true relativity. This is the central fact in the normative relativism of a situation ethic. It is not anarchic (i.e., without an ordering principle). In Christian situationism the ultimate criterion is, as we shall be seeing, "agapeic love." It relativizes the absolute; it does not absolutize the relative!

### **Example answer**

There is a relativistic aspect to situation ethics because we make a judgment tactically about how to apply love in each situation, but everything is relative to love – so it isn't anarchic in the sense that anything goes, because every action must fulfil the demands of love. In this sense it is 'principled relativism'.