

From Decision to Vision: Virtue, Community, and Hauerwas' Critique of Fletcher's Situation Ethics

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Abstract: In the 1960s and 70s, Joseph Fletcher's "situation ethics" (or "new morality") emerged as a prominent attempt to loosen Christian moral reflection from inherited legalism and dogmatism amid new dilemmas in medicine and public life. While influential, it also provoked sustained criticism from many Christian ethicists, not least because its appeal to love risked reinforcing a decision-centered account of moral agency. This essay reconstructs that debate and highlights Stanley Hauerwas's early engagement with Fletcher in *Vision and Virtue*, where Hauerwas affirms the ambiguity of moral notions yet resists reducing ethics to case-by-case adjudication. Drawing on Iris Murdoch and Wittgenstein, Hauerwas describes Christian ethics as an "aesthetics" in the limited but important sense that moral life depends on trained perception: we can act only within the world we are able to see. Crucially, such "vision" is not an individual achievement but is learned through participation in the community of believers – its narratives, practices, and disciplines – that forms the virtues by which the world can be truthfully described. The result is a reorientation from deciding well in isolated cases to becoming the kind of people who can see and live faithfully.

Keywords: New Morality; Situation ethics; Community; Narrative; Moral vision

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Introduction

Situation ethics emerged as a product of the New Morality Movement in the 1960s and 70s in American Christianity, representing the latest trend in Western religious ethics and the broader field of ethics. During this era, as scientific development advanced, it profoundly influenced people's life and moral perspectives, raising moral dilemmas such as abortion, organ transplantation, and euthanasia. These shifts began to affect the realm of religious ethics, prompting ethicists to critique the inadequacy of existing Christian ethics in addressing these new issues, and to seek change.¹ Fletcher, as a leader in this movement, recognized that to address these modern

1 Junren Wan, *History of Modern Western Ethics II* (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2010), 824–825.

challenges, existing moral principles and Christian doctrines like legalism and dogmatism were insufficient. He emphasized that moral guidance must stem from human situations.² His ideas were chiefly expressed in his 1966 publication *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*. Although termed “new morality,” it wasn’t entirely novel. Durant Drake, in 1928, published a book titled *New Morality*, critiquing authoritarian and supernatural ethics under practical naturalism. In 1963, French priest Ignace Lepp also used the term in his book, not to harshly criticize principles but to explore the conditions under which normative moralism contradicts good conscience and humanitarian values, thus advocating for flexible moral thinking.³ That same year, Bishop John Robinson’s work *Honest to God* included a chapter titled *New Morality*.⁴ In 1964, Douglas Rhymes’ *No New Morality* strongly opposed the notion that Christian morality must be rule-based, advocating for a foundation in love rather than any law.⁵ Furthermore, situation ethics as an ethical type was influenced by modern relativism, existentialism, and pragmatism. It was reflected in Dewey’s pragmatic utilitarianism and the theological thoughts of Protestant ethicists like Barth, Brunner, Niebuhr, with Fletcher’s situation ethics representing a refinement and public expression of these ideas.⁶

Stanley Hauerwas, a prominent North American Christian ethicist and theologian, whose work spans the late 20th and early 21st centuries, critically examined Fletcher’s situation ethics in one of his early works, *Vision and Virtue*. In this book, he built upon Fletcher’s approach to develop his own ethical path. He argued that the predominant debate in American ethics during the 1960s and 70s, whether moral dilemmas should be resolved through norms or context, was misguided. In his view, it’s crucial to focus on the appropriateness of specific moral judgments, which are not mere calculative abilities in different situations, but rather akin to an “aesthetic taste.”⁷ This article argues that Hauerwas’s critique targets not merely Fletcher’s conclusions but the decision-centered picture of moral agency

2 Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, trans. Lixian Cheng (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1989), preface.

3 Harvey Cox, *The Situation Ethics Debate* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 102–103.

4 John Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 105.

5 Douglas Rhymes, *No New Morality* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill Company), frontispiece.

6 Wan, *History of Modern Western Ethics* II, 826.

7 Brad Kallenberg, *Ethics as Grammar* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 51.

that situation ethics tends to encourage. It proceeds by (1) locating "new morality" within its broader debate, (2) reconstructing Hauerwas's analysis of moral notions, and (3) presenting moral vision, virtue, and community as the integrated grammar of Christian moral life.

New Morality is Not Entirely New

Although Fletcher's situation ethics became famous with the publication of "Situation Ethics: The New Morality" in 1966, he had actually begun to express these ideas in an article about the new face of Christian ethics written in October 1959.⁸ In 1963, Fletcher revisited his views, this time using the term "new key." In February 1966, he officially employed the term "new morality" in the magazine *Commonweal*.⁹ Similar to the fate of previous 'new morality' thinkers, he received criticism from the academic community and within the church. However, many people, especially the general non-believing public and laypeople, appreciated his courage in opposing the constraints of rule-based ethics and his contributions to relieving unnecessary burdens on people's consciences.

A Brief Review of New Morality

At the beginning of *Situation ethics*, Fletcher quotes a passage from Paul Tillich's *Systematic Theology* I:

The law of love is the ultimate law because it is the negation of law; it is absolute because it concerns everything concrete [...]. The absoluteness of love is its power to go into the concrete situation, to discover what is demanded by the predicament of the concrete to which it turns. Therefore, love can never become fanatical in a flight for an absolute, or cynical under the impact of the relative.¹⁰

Fletcher constructs his situation ethics method with the normative ideal of love, which can be termed as an ethics of love.

First, he clarifies how he uses the term "situation," as, in his view, Paul Lehmann assigns two different but often confused meanings to it. The first meaning of situation refers to the Christian action being carried out within

⁸ Joseph Fletcher, "The New Look in Christian Ethics," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 24/1 (1959), 7–18.

⁹ Joseph Fletcher, "Love Is the Only Measure," *Commonweal* 83/14 (1966), 427–432.

¹⁰ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 152.

a theological reference system, within fellowship, against the backdrop of faith. The second meaning refers to Christian action adapting to the objective environment, i.e., the situation. Fletcher employs the term in this latter, deliberately “thin” sense: by “situation ethics” he does not mean an approach that carries any intrinsic commitment to Christian doctrine, but rather a general method of context-sensitive moral reasoning that can be taken up under very different ideological banners.¹¹ In effect, he presents it as a portable decision-making logic, one that could be practiced within explicitly theological frameworks or within non-theological ones. Similarly, “love” is also a semantically confused term with many expressions. Christian ethics sometimes only uses the love (Agape) of the New Testament, or express it in forms like C-Love. But for Fletcher, outside of the professional significance of New Testament theology, love has many important and reasonable meanings that should not be mercilessly discarded. The rich meanings of love should be preserved.¹²

Fletcher outlines three paths for moral decision-making: legalism, antinomianism, and situationism. Legalistic decision-making is based on a set of pre-established rules and regulations that directly govern decision-making behavior. For people, solutions are predetermined, as if they can be found in a book.¹³ Christian traditional legalism takes two forms: the Catholic route is based on natural or natural law legalism, and the Protestant route is based on the gospel preachers and apostles of the Bible – words of the law and the prophets. Fletcher considers them one rationalistic and one scriptural; one natural, the other biblical, but both legalistic.¹⁴ Antinomianism is the opposite of legalism, with its decision-making not based on any principle or rule, claiming that in every “existential moment” or “unique situation,” people must rely on the situation itself to arrive at a moral solution on the spot.¹⁵ Regarding antinomianism, Fletcher discusses three forms, including two primitive forms of Christianity opposed by Paul – liberalism (believing that salvation comes through grace, new life in Christ, faith, and hence laws and rules no longer apply to Christians) and Gnosticism (claiming to possess

11 Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 14.

12 Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 15.

13 Ibid., 17–18.

14 Ibid., 21.

15 Ibid.

special knowledge, knowing what is right when needed, thus rendering principles and rules unnecessary), as well as existentialist ethics (rejecting all principles, 'universally valid' ethical norms or axioms, absolutizing universal principles into law).¹⁶

Fletcher presents situationism as a *via media* between legalism and antinomianism. It grants a significant role to reason in moral judgment (in a way loosely reminiscent of natural-law reasoning), yet it refuses any account of the good as inherently fixed in the nature of things. Likewise, it is willing to appeal to "revelation" for moral orientation, but it rejects revelation as a binding legal code; in practice, only the single imperative of love – loving God through the concrete neighbor – functions as the norm that governs biblical morality. Hence traditional moral rules are not discarded, but treated as presumptive guides drawn from a community's inherited wisdom: they illuminate deliberation, while remaining revisable and even suspendable whenever they appear to conflict with what love requires in a particular situation.¹⁷ Therefore, in Fletcher's view, the decisions of situationists are hypothetical, not absolute. Only the commandment of love is an absolute norm or principle; other norms or principles are only effective when serving love – the overarching commandment of loving God and neighbor.

Fletcher uses the example of abortion to illustrate the application of situation ethics. In 1962, a state mental hospital patient raped a severely schizophrenic unmarried girl. The victim's father accused the doctor of negligence and demanded an immediate abortion at an early embryonic stage. The hospital, citing criminal law that prohibits all abortions except 'therapeutic' ones when the mother's life is threatened, refused the father's request. Against this background, Fletcher presents the moral decisions of legalists, antinomians, and situationists. He believes legalists would refuse abortion because killing is inherently wrong, evil, and this case does not present a legal justification for abortion. Even if many doctors take a flexible view of life and defend abortion, it is still fundamentally an evil act, only excused. Catholic moral theology even goes beyond strict legalism, denying all exceptions and absolutizing the prohibition of abortion. For antinomians, Fletcher notes that it is unpredictable, as by its nature and definition, antinomian ethics are beyond generalization, and all one can do is make reasonable guesses.

¹⁶ Ibid., 22–24.

¹⁷ Ibid., 26.

If they live by the norm of love, then in this situation, they would tend to support abortion. Situationists, if their norm is the Christian commandment to love one's neighbor, would almost certainly favor abortion in this case, supporting the girl's father's request, as this is the most loving (correct), responsible decision.¹⁸

As a "method" rather than a "system," situation ethics draws on past intellectual resources. Fletcher points out that situation ethics operates on four presuppositions: pragmatism, relativism, positivism, and personalism. Under these operating principles, six propositions of situation ethics emerge, explaining how love functions in ethical decision-making. Fletcher notes that too many people yearn for a predetermined moral-ethical system, relying on strong rules.¹⁹ Adhering to certain rules can bring a sense of security, a lesser psychological (conscience) burden. But Fletcher's situation ethics is not intended to build a new ethical system to replace the old ones, as he pointed out, situationism aims to rescue people from the death of stubborn law and live like a free person. Of course, freedom will be accompanied by ambiguity, and moral life is destined to be an adventure.²⁰

Intense Criticism

Ironically, the term "new morality" originated from its critics. Pope Pius XII, in a speech on April 18, 1952, condemned what he called existentialist or situation ethics (he considered them synonymous). Four years later, he gave it the new name of "new morality" and banned it from all Catholic colleges and seminaries.²¹ Beyond the Catholic Church's criticism, there were many insightful and influential critiques.

Robert Fitch, born in Ningbo, China, and later the dean of the Pacific School of Religion, vividly described the core critique of situationism: there is a Catholic force called order, a Catholic disease called tyranny, a Protestant force called freedom, and a Protestant disease called anarchy. He noted that the Roman Catholic Church has always been preventing this disease and ensuring freedom within order. Protestantism is indeed moving towards strengthening order at the political and church structural levels, but in theology and ethics – at least on the Anglo-American level – it has been

¹⁸ Ibid., 37–39.

¹⁹ Ibid., 134.

²⁰ Ibid., 135.

²¹ Cox, *The Situation Ethics Debate*, 215–216.

moving towards a strengthened disorder. In ethics, its name is situationism; in theology, it is atheism or Christocentric humanism.²²

In 1971, the famous philosopher and theologian John Montgomery had a fierce debate with Fletcher at San Diego State University, later published as *Situation ethics: True or False? A Dialogue Between Fletcher and Montgomery*. Montgomery pointed out that Fletcher seemed to give love a certain degree of concrete content, sometimes defining love, i.e., as exemplified by Jesus, equivalent to Jesus' teachings and practices. However, Fletcher's understanding of love was not derived from general Biblical teachings or specific works of Jesus; he was essentially a mid-20th-century Marcionite. Montgomery believed Fletcher accepted radical New Testament critical techniques, eliminating his ability to recognize Jesus' ethics. If Fletcher took the entire New Testament seriously, he would find that it, no less than the Old Testament, insists on absolute moral standards.²³ When Fletcher equated justice with love, giving content to love, it quickly led to justice being absorbed into the vagueness of love, without revealing the content of love. Additionally, he noted Fletcher committed a category mistake, like Gilbert Ryle's example of the legal entity (University of Oxford) being confused with its concrete constituent colleges.²⁴

Montgomery listed Fletcher's most concrete description of love: regardless of whether people like their neighbors, love benefits the neighbor. However, this turned Fletcher's action – Agapeism – into Bentham-Mill style utilitarian ethics, spiced up with a lot of theological charm. Thus, the problems plaguing utilitarianism also beset situation ethics, and the flavor of love could not change this situation, such as which neighbor's interests matter, what exactly are the neighbor's interests. Montgomery believed that although the demon of explicit normative ethics was exorcised by situation ethics, it brought seven more demons of implicit, self-evident principles, making the moral situation worse.²⁵

Ethicist Paul Ramsey agreed with some of Fletcher's basic views on situation ethics, such as "love with concern and then do what you want".²⁶

22 Robert Fitch, "The Protestant Sickness," *Religion in Life* 35/4 (1966), 498.

23 Joseph Fletcher, John Warwick Montgomery, *Situation ethics; true or false? A Dialogue between Joseph Fletcher and John Warwick Montgomery* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship), 36–37.

24 Fletcher, John Warwick Montgomery, *Situation ethics*, 38.

25 Ibid., 39.

26 Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 55.

However, he pointed out two unexamined assumptions worth noting: first, that Christian love itself lacks the breadth and depth to match individual depth, thus lacking the implied force of rules; second, that the “home” of love is only in the reality of the neighbor, at that moment of concern.²⁷ Ramsey believed that, unlike emphasizing ethics as a product of social evolution or a general assertion of human values, Christian ethics (as per the authors of the Bible) established ethics in the nature and activity of God. Appreciation for rules is based on appreciation for the actions themselves, so Ramsey rejected any teleological or goal-pursuing ethics. In his view, God calls people to obey in love, so Christians’ responses to God’s commands are not isolated situational decisions, but based on a tradition of action and faith. Ramsey’s understanding of Christian love was deontological, where the motivation behind acts of love is not evaluated by achievements attained. Christian love is manifested in love for the neighbor, not in the general sense for all humanity, nor in the special sense for the individual. Therefore, Ramsey saw situation ethics as a form of “selfish sociability,” misunderstanding the meaning of selfless love shown in the New Testament.²⁸

Other critics, like Bernard Meland, worried that supporters of new morality were trying to secularize Christianity, and their anti-authoritarian stance would ultimately lead to a radical subjectivism (or pure relativism) spirit.²⁹ James Gustafson, who initially sympathized with contextualist approaches, later argued that the sharp opposition between “context” and “principles” was itself a mis-framing of the issue. In his view, “contextualism” had become an overextended label: it gathered together theorists whose positions differed markedly from one another, sometimes no less than they differed from so-called defenders of principle-based ethics.³⁰ As a result, the debate increasingly generated more heat than light, since the category had grown so elastic that it no longer marked a coherent methodological stance or a genuinely fruitful line of disagreement.

27 Paul Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics* (London: Oliver and Boyd Press, 1965), 17.

28 Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1950), 100.

29 Joseph Fletcher, *Memoir of An Ex-radical: Reminiscence and Reappraisal* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 31.

30 James Gustafson, “Context Versus Principles: A Misplaced Debate in Christian Ethics,” *Harvard Theological Review* 58/2 (1965), 173; Joseph Fletcher, *Memoir of An Ex-radical*, 32.

Hauerwas' Critical Analysis of "New Morality"

Hauerwas believes that the debate on new morality seems to be drawing to a close, despite generating many valuable reflections on the nature of moral life.³¹ However, the issue hasn't been resolved; rather, people's interests have shifted. He outlines two reasons for revisiting situation ethics or new morality: first, he agrees with most of the critiques of Fletcher's position, such as the criticism of Fletcher's oversimplification of 'love', but he believes the main thrust of Fletcher's argument is essentially correct; second, rearticulating the issue from the nature of moral notions can provide important insights for theological ethics.³²

"Love" is Not All You Need

Hauerwas uses a story from C. S. Lewis' classic children's book *The Silver Chair* to assess themes related to the 'revival of moral theology'. The story synopsis is as follows: Aslan, the creator and protector of Narnia, gives two children, Jill and Scrubb, a daunting task – to go to the underworld to find Prince Rilian, who was kidnapped by a witch. Narnia faces the dilemma of being without a king as his father is near death. In their quest to find the prince, they encounter the Marsh-wiggle Puddleglum and embark on a journey together. When they find the prince, who has been enchanted to forget his identity and free him from the silver chair, the witch appears. Instead of using violence, she quietly casts a spell that almost convinces them that Narnia only exists in dreams, the sun is merely a legend, and only the lamp in the room is real.³³

Hauerwas points out that in the enthusiasm for new morality theology, people tend to stay in illusions, thinking that only the lamp and the cat are real, while the sun and the lion should be forgotten. People assume that their lives can easily reflect and embody goodness, transforming themselves into loving people overnight by blindly imposing love, goodness, justice, even

31 Hauerwas gave an example of high-quality articles collected in "Norms and Context in Christian Ethics" edited by Outka and Ramsey; Gene Outka, Paul Ramsey (eds.), *Norm and Context in Christian Ethics* (New York: Scribner, 1968).

32 Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 11–12.

33 C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (London: Bles, 1950), 155–167; Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, 93–94.

Jesus. In reality, to truly see the world as it is, the self must be transformed, and it may require patience to endure the pain of becoming real.³⁴

New morality emphasizes love as the core of moral life, i.e., love as the sole norm for deciding moral actions and judgments. Love is both a universal attitude and sufficient as a guide for actual moral actions. Hauerwas notes that the significant impact of new morality is not just because Fletcher wrote a book on it, but because this emphasis on love as the essence of Christian behavior is correct in people's experiential impressions. People know that they rarely encounter situations that can be decided based on some law or rule; moral life needs a flexibility that only love can guide. Moreover, the insights of new morality seem more in line with the essence of the Gospels.³⁵ However, Hauerwas clarifies from both theological and ethical perspectives that new morality has serious flaws in its description of Christian ethics and the nature of Christian behavior, and theological faith cannot be reduced to an ethic of love.³⁶

Theologically, love indeed holds an important place in the Gospels, especially in the Great Commandment. However, love itself is not an end in itself or a universal policy. The command of love that Christians are concerned with cannot be separated from the person commanding the love – Jesus. Jesus himself shows the righteousness of God's kingdom, making love possible. Also, the ethics of the Gospels cannot be separated from God's story of salvation, and Christians themselves are part of that story.³⁷ Thus, in Hauerwas' view, the command of love is not the moral ultimate of this story, as new morality suggests, but rather the story itself is the moral meaning of love.³⁸ Therefore, when Jesus is the best example of love, it is not his work that defines the essence of love, but love becomes the norm defining his work.³⁹ Therefore, Jesus' death not only shows that love is not an easy thing – this is the consequence of treating love as an abstract thing – but also indicates that the essence of the Gospels is not love but Jesus himself and his work (redemption and the establishment of the kingdom of righteousness).

34 Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, 96.

35 Ibid., 111–112.

36 Ibid., 112, 114.

37 Ibid., 115.

38 Ibid., 115.

39 Ibid., 116.

Ethically, the ethics of love, by advocating a return to an ethic of understanding and acceptance between people, reinforces people's illusions, as if moving from "me" to "you" is the highest realm of human achievement. Hauerwas points out that as a social being, a person is not just an interaction between individuals; the social issues faced require justice, not love. Moral life is not about whether the question of love is always ethically constitutive, but who will be harmed. The command to love every relevant person does not help solve this problem because the issue is not about harming or not harming, but about who to harm justly.⁴⁰ Resorting to an ethic of love is just a way to alleviate this pain. People are willing to indulge in illusions mainly because they refuse to face the fact that even goodwill cannot avoid harming others.⁴¹

On the surface, Hauerwas seems to still stay in the old morality's understanding of the relationship between love and justice. However, Hauerwas' view is neither the natural-supernatural form nor the law-gospel separation form, but that even in interpersonal relationships, if there is no manifestation of justice, love is sentimental and destructive, rather than realistic and constructive. Because without respect, there can be no love, and respect must be built on the perception of the other's right to exist, because 'he' is 'he', not because 'he' is valuable to 'me'. The assertion of new morality that love is the center of Christian ethics is, in Hauerwas' view, just a satisfaction with an analysis of reality. It should be clear that love, if it represents truth and respects the other, might require people to do things that seem unloving. However, he further proposes that even if love is freed from such sentimentality, it is still not a sufficient principle. The Gospels cannot be simplified into a single formula or generalized image of moral life; Christian ethics and Christian life are as rich and varied as the stories people hold and the real lives they must live.⁴²

The Experiential Significance of Moral Notions

In Hauerwas' view, what Fletcher really should have focused on is the applicability of people's moral notions in various situations, which can be convincingly derived from common experiences (such as lying not always being wrong). However, he mistakenly equated his position with situationism.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 118–119.

⁴¹ Ibid., 119.

⁴² Ibid., 119–120.

When Fletcher used his theory of moral behavior to explain this aspect of moral experience, he risked destroying any meaningful moral discourse.⁴³ Most critiques target his oversimplification of moral life factors and his failure to explain the importance and diversity of principles and rules that determine moral behavior.⁴⁴

Hauerwas notes that Fletcher correctly identified the ambiguity of moral notions, but didn't adequately consider the richness of people's moral experiences, many aspects of which are not accurately reflected in moral language. In fact, moral life, especially in its theological understanding, is mostly an effort to constrain people's moral notions. However, Hauerwas argues that Fletcher didn't clarify this because he focused on the situational nature of moral decisions rather than moral notions.⁴⁵ This is mainly because Fletcher viewed decision-making as the core of ethics, suggesting that moral life ultimately depends on decisions. Hauerwas doesn't deny the importance of decisions but points out that neither moral life nor moral philosophy can be based solely on the concept of decision. Before deciding, one must first have moral notions. In other words, decisions must be made within the framework of their moral notions. Hauerwas notes that Fletcher's tendency to simplify the importance of moral notions into an overly simplistic rule concept led him to miss this point.⁴⁶

To address this, Hauerwas explores the nature of moral notions, noting their many similarities with descriptive categories.⁴⁷ He uses the concept of a table as an example, employing Julius Kovesi's distinction between form and matter to articulate his point. He notes that this distinction is often misunderstood as relating material elements to the physical properties of an object and formal elements to the object's shape. However, material includes not just the physical properties but also the variations an object can undergo and still be recognized as itself, such as still being considered a table despite changes in shape. Therefore, Hauerwas believes the shape of an object is also part of its material elements, introducing a new concept of form – an aspect of an object that allows people to group different objects together based on experience. Thus, a backhand miss or failure to hit a tennis ball into the court

43 Ibid., 11.

44 Ibid., 12.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., 12–13.

47 Ibid., 14.

both fall under the concept of "error." Hauerwas says that formal elements are the result of situations.⁴⁸ This way of conceptualizing moral notions avoids breaking down moral life into isolated situations, instead considering the applicability of moral notions across different situations. Had Fletcher realized this, he could have avoided the critiques raised by Montgomery and Ramsey. Thus, a person is not a series of isolated decisions but has narrative continuity, hinting at Hauerwas' future development of narrative ethics.

Moreover, Hauerwas points out that moral notions can be classified as complete or open. Open moral notions require further norms for people to make judgments about a specific action. Complete moral notions already contain these further norms. In other words, complete moral notions include everything needed to judge an action as good or bad in itself. Most moral notions are of the open type, as people's daily experiences do not require the strict certainty envisioned in complete moral notions.⁴⁹ On this level, Hauerwas sees the correctness of Fletcher's position. His use of situations is a way of positioning uncertainty, which typically involves the formal elements of moral notions, by raising questions or denying the appropriateness of certain concepts to cover specific situations. Fletcher explained the fact that some important moral experiences cannot be covered by moral notions.

However, Hauerwas notes what Fletcher didn't clarify: attempting to limit the applicability of certain moral notions in situations is different from trying to render a moral concept meaningless based on specific situations. Clearly, examples of special situations can only be described within the scope of moral notions, which doesn't mean that understanding situations necessarily determines the decisions that agents must make. The decision must still be the agent's decision. Crucially, the importance of moral notions is not negated by special situations, because without such moral notions, it wouldn't be possible to consider the situation special.⁵⁰ Therefore, in Hauerwas' view, what Fletcher failed to see is the experiential life of moral notions and their place in the entire way of life. By denying moral experience in the name of situations, he also denied the moral way of life. Hauerwas states: "The question therefore of various moral notions and rules is primarily the question of the significance of particular kinds of human action. As such the question is

⁴⁸ Ibid., 15–16.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 23.

not adhering to rules or to the situation, but what the situation is and how it should be correctly understood.”⁵¹

In Hauerwas’ perspective, the dominant debate in 20th-century American ethics about whether moral dilemmas are resolved through norms or situations is misguided. What’s truly important is whether a particular person’s moral judgment is appropriate (the applicability of moral notions), not a calculative ability in different situations, but a skill akin to aesthetic taste.

Moral Life as Life in Vision

Hauerwas believes that the current difficulties in Christian ethics stem from many philosophers and religious ethicists accepting too narrow a concept of moral experience, limiting ethics to the analysis of the justification of specific actions. This approach makes Christian ethics difficult to understand. Therefore, he attempts to develop a positive methodology, making various claims about the nature of Christian moral life more comprehensible. In his view, the Gospel’s discourse includes but transcends judgments of specific actions and practices regarding the self. Utilizing the concept of “vision” from Murdoch’s viewpoint, Hauerwas highlights the importance of seeing and training vision through metaphors and symbols, thus directing attention to moral notions rather than the significance of decisions. He perceives moral life, first and foremost, not as a life of choice – decision is not supreme – but as woven from the concepts people use to see and shape the situations they face. Therefore, ethics and moral life are best understood as the training of moral vision; moral life is a life of vision, as its task is to see the world, self, and others accurately, without any illusion. This true vision requires discipline and training, primarily achieved through community participation in narratives, and necessitates self-transformation to see correctly in a contingent world.

Seeing Correctly, Not Just Deciding

In Hauerwas’ view, Christian ethics has succumbed to the modern understanding of humans as agents and self-creators. Thus, God is relegated to the universe of the wholly Other, and humans must decide the world’s fate through their absolute freedom. Or, even if God exists, He is only the God of history, merely confirming the continuous development of human creativity.

51 Ibid., 24.

Consequently, the goal of moral life becomes acting correctly, reducing moral life to a matter of choice.⁵² However, inspired by Murdoch, Hauerwas sees the view of humans as self-creators as an illusion. Murdoch argues that the definition of humans is their inability to bear reality. Modern humans optimistically combine a naive faith in science with the assumption that humans are entirely rational and free, leading to an exaggerated understanding of the self. The reality is that human choices are severely limited, and the contingencies of life and the constraints of death constantly trouble humanity. Faced with these unpleasant realities, humans begin to create illusions for a sense of security, like continually telling themselves they can always freely make choices or decide. Murdoch's point is that the ordinary self is neither highly free nor reliably lucid: the range of genuine choice is usually narrow, and consciousness tends to drift into fantasy and daydream in order to avoid pain. Seen this way, the modern confidence in decision and autonomy is itself part of the problem, because it masks how perception is already distorted by fear and self-protection. This is precisely why an ethics centered on "making the right choice" can be misleading: before decisions, there is the harder moral task of learning to see reality without illusion.⁵³

For Murdoch, the logical picture presented by modern moral philosophy is such: all moral agents live in the same factual world, and people are indistinguishable in morality, except for differences in actions and choices.⁵⁴ However, she notes that differences can also exist as complete differences in moral vision:⁵⁵

When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praise-worthy, What they think funny: in short, the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation.⁵⁶

This influences Hauerwas' view of moral life, pointing out that morality is not just about following universal rules but includes people's experiences,

⁵² Ibid., 31.

⁵³ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge Great Minds, 2014), 77.

⁵⁴ D. F. Pears (ed.), *The Nature of Metaphysics* (London: ST Martin's Press, 1966), 116.

⁵⁵ Pears (ed.), *The Nature of Metaphysics*, 116.

⁵⁶ Ian T. Ramsey (ed.), *Christian ethics and Contemporary Philosophy* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 202.

parables, beliefs, images, concepts, and monologues.⁵⁷ Therefore, for Murdoch and Hauerwas, people's moral differences are not just because they make different choices from a common factual world, but because they see different worlds. Thus, moral life is not just about thinking clearly and making rational decisions; it is also a way of seeing the world.

This 'seeing', if it is to be real, must abandon the modern human illusion that the world has universal coherence and unity and recognize the world in its contingency. Most modern philosophers would consider the contingency of the world to mean the impossibility of transcendence, while Murdoch believes that when people gaze at and affirm contingency, transcendence becomes possible. For her, the metaphor that embodies this possibility of transcendence is the (Platonic) concept of the Good.⁵⁸ Hauerwas understands this to mean that when people's vision centers on the Good, human subjectivity can be overcome, and the objectivity of the particularity of others can be affirmed.⁵⁹ However, Hauerwas might lean more towards focusing vision on God, especially the incarnate God's life, death, and resurrection.

Fletcher's new morality or situation ethics centralizes decision-making in moral life, but for Hauerwas, what kind of person one becomes precedes the question of what one should do. If one starts with decisions, as in new morality, it tempts people to think that moral situations are abstracted from the kind of people they have become and from history. Defining ethics as concerned with dilemmas or situations reflects an understanding of oneself as a group of people without history. Conversely, the situations people face are as they are because they are first of a certain kind. Situations are not just there to be seen but are created by what kind of people they are.⁶⁰ Taking abortion as an example, Hauerwas notes that people (Christians) have forgotten that to describe an action as abortion itself presupposes a certain moral tradition (e.g., life as a gift from God), and they are no longer a group of people with such active commitments, making the prohibition of abortion difficult to comprehend. Through this example, Hauerwas aims to show that people have not just changed their view of a specific action called abortion, but by changing their understanding of abortion or eliminating the concept

57 Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, 35.

58 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 90–93.

59 Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, 37.

60 Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 116.

of abortion, they have actually changed themselves, losing the ability to see truly.⁶¹

In summary, Murdoch's analysis of the limits of human knowledge led Hauerwas to conceptualize moral life as an 'aesthetics' of seeing, focusing on the vision and virtues of people as agents, not just the decisions of people as spectators.⁶² Accordingly, "aesthetics" names one aspect of Christian ethics: the cultivation of truthful vision. Yet for Hauerwas this cultivation is inseparable from virtue and ecclesial formation, since the habits required for seeing rightly are learned through the narratives and practices of the community of believers.

Casuistry as the Art of Narratives

Fletcher termed his new morality as a new form of casuistry, which is a utilitarian calculation of love based on situational factors. However, Hauerwas proposes casuistry as a community narrative. This casuistry is not just about adjudicating difficult cases of conscience within a system of moral principles but is a process in which a tradition examines whether its practices are consistent (or truthful) with its fundamental habits and beliefs, or whether these beliefs call for new practices and actions. Casuistry is a community's reflection on its experiences, especially in enacting its narratives, imaginatively exploring the often overlooked and unacknowledged implications within its narrative commitments.⁶³ Therefore, Hauerwas argues that casuistry should not be limited to considering cases or situations but should also use imagination to examine the differences between people's life habits and a good, virtuous life with others.⁶⁴ In such examinations, people have to anticipate what kind of situations their narratives and community might entail and in what particular ways the virtues required by the narrative are manifested. These virtues shape not only what people do but the manner in which they do it. In this sense, narratives are not mere background stories; they school moral perception and train the capacity to see truthfully. For Hauerwas, the central work of Christian ethics is therefore pedagogical: it aims to form agents who can perceive the world rightly, since action is always constrained

⁶¹ Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 117.

⁶² Brad Kallenberg, *Ethics as Grammar* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 51.

⁶³ Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 120.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

by what one is able to see. Yet such vision is not acquired simply by “looking.” It is learned through disciplined practices and habits of attention cultivated by initiation into a community’s narrative, where believers are trained in the skills required to recognize what is real and what faithfulness demands.⁶⁵

The appeal of new morality to some lies in its clear direction for people in situations and its liberation of their consciences long constrained by legalism. As Fletcher says, “Love with care and then what you will, do.”⁶⁶ Thus, Hauerwas points out that some may question this method of studying ethics, emphasizing the narrative form of moral beliefs and virtues as a backdrop for decision-making, as people still have to make decisions. This method seems unable to help answer questions like what decisions should or should not be made and how to justify those decisions.⁶⁷ Hauerwas notes that emphasizing narratives and virtues does not deny that we still have to make decisions and that we are often asked to justify why we do so. However, these decisions do not hold the status in ethics that is often assumed, as ethics overlooks the importance of virtues. Virtue ethics at least partly aims to liberate people from the often-accepted assumptions of ‘necessity’ and ‘givenness’ that are part of the decision-making process. People often do not have to make decisions, at least not in the assumed ways.⁶⁸ The often-used format by these questioners is, “If [...] what would you do?” Hauerwas cites Yoder’s words:

If I turn the machine one way it will follow one course inevitably, and if I push a different set of buttons the machine will clearly operate in another direction. It is assumed that I am the only party making decisions in the total process [...]. Nor are there elsewhere in the total situation other persons whose actions might get in the way of the outworking of the mechanism, which I am therefore solely responsible to steer.⁶⁹

For Yoder, this challenge assumes that the relationship between people is mechanical. Concerning violence, once such a route is established, violence becomes the only choice.

However, Hauerwas points out that if people (Christian Community) are truly non-violent, they can no longer decide to use violence, even if the

65 Stanley Hauerwas, “The Demands of a Truthful Story: Ethics and the Pastoral Task,” *Chicago Studies* 21/1 (1982), 65–66.

66 Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 79.

67 Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 121–122.

68 *Ibid.*, 123.

69 John Yoder, “What Would You Do If?,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 2/1 (1974), 82–83; Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 123.

situation seems to necessitate it.⁷⁰ The same goes for abortion; abortion is not merely the physiological act of removing a fetus before full term.⁷¹ The moral discourse conveyed by communal narratives profoundly shapes how members describe contested acts such as abortion or violence; and those descriptions already carry value judgments and imply particular ways of life. For Hauerwas, this is why "narrative" is not peripheral to moral reasoning but internal to it. What often passes as ethical rigor – abstracting concrete acts into "cases" and then adjudicating them by overriding principles, whether deontological or consequentialist – misses what is most decisive: the narrative setting that makes an act intelligible as this kind of act in the first place. "Situations" are not simply given data awaiting neutral assessment; they are rendered meaningful within larger stories.⁷² Consequently, the most formative ethical question is not only which principle should govern a choice, but which narrative has trained us to see and name the situation as we do.

Thus, in his view, when people have the descriptive skills provided by true narratives and view situations from a new perspective, this casuistry can be defeated, enabling people to do or not do things in a manner consistent with their moral commitments.⁷³

Furthermore, the casuistry proposed by Hauerwas clearly has a communal (ecclesial) aspect, diverging from the individualistic assumptions implicit in traditional casuistry. He mentions that the very nature of Christian faith makes any self-centered decision-making process problematic.⁷⁴ For the Christian community, casuistry is not an optional technique but a necessary practice, precisely because it provides a concrete way to "test" whether members are faithfully performing God's story within the church's shared narrative. Such testing is not a straightforward move from biblical text to discrete actions, as if the community merely applies a rule to a case. Rather, it is a communal work of discernment: believers who have been formed by the same story examine one another's practices, habits, and choices, sometimes recognizing patterns of unfaithfulness, sometimes identifying more truthful and fitting ways of life.⁷⁵ In this sense, casuistry functions less as an

70 Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 123.

71 Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, 55.

72 *Ibid.*, 125.

73 *Ibid.*

74 *Ibid.*, 130–131.

75 *Ibid.*, 132–133.

abstract method of moral adjudication and more as an ecclesial discipline of mutual accountability, through which fidelity and infidelity are disclosed and the community's moral vision is refined.

Moreover, casuistry also inspires the community and its members' imagination to envision new forms of response necessary to be a peaceful people in a violent world. Thus, for Hauerwas, casuistry is a necessary activity, not the domain of a few experts, but an activity of the entire community. Moreover, the best casuists in this community might not be those who exhibit the strongest rational skills; those with intuitive gifts may simply know better than they can articulate.

Conclusion

In the mid-twentieth century, some ethicists – Fletcher most notably – advanced situation ethics as an attempt to loosen Christian moral reflection from inherited legalism and dogmatism, especially in the face of new dilemmas raised by emerging technologies in the 1960s and 1970s. This “new morality” did not aim to install a wholly new system so much as to foreground *agape* as the governing norm, drawing selectively on existentialism, relativism, pragmatism, and theological resources from figures such as Barth, Brunner, and Niebuhr. Yet it is important to note what kind of ethicists these were: many Christian ethicists were, on the whole, sharply critical of Fletcher's proposal, and the debate that followed was marked more by sustained objection than by broad ecclesial consensus. Alongside influential critiques from Montgomery, Ramsey, Meland, and others, Hauerwas offered a distinctive diagnosis. He appreciated Fletcher's awareness of moral ambiguity; however, by tying moral judgment to “situations,” Fletcher still risked an ethics centered on decision-making. In conversation with Murdoch and Wittgenstein, Hauerwas therefore recast Christian ethics around moral perception and formation: moral life depends on learning to see the world truthfully, without illusion, through participation in the narratives and practices of a community. The decisive question becomes not only what one chooses in a case, but what kind of person one is being formed to become – and thus what one is actually able to see.

Precisely here lies the ongoing relevance of the 1980s discussion for today. Contemporary Christians confront moral conflict not only in bioethics (from end-of-life decisions and reproductive technologies to genetic screening and

enhancement) but also in digitally mediated life, political polarization, and a culture trained to treat life as a matter of autonomous decision-making. Yet the very "cases" that demand our decisions are rarely neutral givens. Social media platforms and algorithmic feeds pre-shape what appears urgent, who counts as victim or threat, and which options seem "realistic," thereby training habits of attention long before explicit moral reasoning begins. Likewise, in polarized public discourse, questions about abortion, violence, migration, or national security are often framed in ways that already imply a moral world – what counts as "life," "freedom," "security," or even "neighbor" – so that competing narratives quietly determine what can be seen and named. Hauerwas' emphasis on vision therefore redirects Christian ethics toward the church's formative practices – worship, confession, reconciliation, hospitality, and peacemaking – that shape what can be truthfully seen and said. These practices do not simply add "religious motivation" to otherwise shared moral techniques; they train a distinctive capacity to describe the world, to resist convenient illusions, and to inhabit time patiently rather than reactively. They also clarify the church's posture toward the world: not moral expertise detached from a way of life, but a public witness whose judgments gain credibility only insofar as they arise from a community learning to see reality without illusion. The lasting question, then, is not merely how to decide well in hard cases, but how the church forms people capable of seeing and living faithfully amid competing narratives.

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