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Gerald W. Healy, S.J.

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Situation Ethics: A Summary

GERALD W. HEALY, S.J.

"FEW of the many dangers besetting the faith of the young today are as great or as heavy with consequences as those which the 'new morality' creates. . . ."¹ This solemn judgment pronounced by Pius XII in 1952 sounded a warning and alerted Catholic writers around the globe. A veritable flood of articles appearing in Catholic journals testified both to the sympathetic appreciation of the Pontiff's warning and to an alerted understanding of this new attack on traditional Christian morality.² "Situation ethics", as the new doctrine is often called, has been studied quite thoroughly and perhaps a summary would now be timely and useful.

The clearest delineation of this new doctrine has been given to us by the same Pius XII when he pointed out as the distinctive mark of this new morality that it is not based upon universal moral laws such as the Ten Commandments but on the real and concrete conditions in which men must act and according to which the conscience of the individual must judge and choose. The proponents of this doctrine assert, as Pius XII points out, that these circumstances of the concrete situa-

¹ Allocution of April 18, 1952 to delegates to the International Congress of the World Federation of Catholic Young Women, *ACTA APOSTOLICAE SEDIS* 44 (1952), 419.

² Cf. *THEOLOGY DIGEST* (Winter, 1954), pp 24-32, for a selected bibliography together with an introduction and three articles on Situation Ethics. Cf. also *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES*, "Notes on Moral Theology", December, 1957; June, 1958; December, 1959.

tion are unique and applicable only once for a given human action. From such a premise they conclude that the decision of conscience cannot be commanded by ideas, principles and universal laws.³

As specific examples of this new morality the same Pontiff notes that its advocates would justify a person in abandoning the Catholic faith and joining another religion if a seriously trained conscience decided that such a step would bring it closer to God. Another example is the corporal and spiritual gift of one's self among young people. In such cases a seriously trained conscience could decide that physical and sensual intimacies are in order because of sincere mutual inclinations. As another example Pius XII offers the case of married people who would be said to be the final judges of the liceity of contraception in their own case. It would be left to the serious and upright consciences of the parties, in case of conflicts, according to the demands of each concrete situation, to decide whether or not they might frustrate directly the realization of biological values, for the benefit of personality values.⁴

Existentialist literature offers two examples which may also serve to illustrate this doctrine.⁵ Two girls involved in illicit love affairs with married men arrived at diametrically opposed moral positions by resorting to the new morality. One girl gave up the man since he was already married; the other continued the liaison because for her the one thing that counted in life was the *grand amour*. The situationalists would approve of both solutions as morally correct since both girls acted according to their consciences, forming a sincere judgment that this was the proper thing for them to do in this concrete existential situation which was unique and thus fell under no universal laws or principles.

³ AAS 44 (1952), 414.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 415.

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'EXISTENTIALISME EST UN HUMANISME* (Paris: Ed. Nagel, 1951), pp. 86-88.

Kierkegaard's analysis of the scriptural account of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac is also situationalist.⁶ In this interpretation Abraham manifested his willingness to act against the universal moral law because through faith he recognized a higher relationship — the direct confrontation of the individual with his Creator. According to Kierkegaard the moral law itself was a temptation to Abraham but he rose above the temptation by conforming to the will of God as manifested to him in that particular situation through faith. The advocates of the new morality make much of this Kierkegaardian interpretation of Scripture.⁷ For Kierkegaard "subjectivity is truth" and "Christianity is subjectivity". Man's ethical effort, therefore, must center on becoming subjective; there is a suspension of ethical right and wrong once faith is achieved.

We have examples of lawyers advocating this existential approach to legal matters. They show a preference for a philosophy which affirms the particular and unique nature of any concrete case of ethical or legal judgment. They claim that one falsifies the very nature of any dispute if one attempts to resolve it by recourse to universal principles, thereby treating it as if it were like other disputes.⁸ Treating each dispute as something unique they would defend a type of positive-law philosophy which dispenses with legislative statutes, legal principles, and litigation in order to settle disputes by the methods of arbitration and mediation. In classical Confucian China this was the preferred method, and at one time Gandhi turned to it also. One author sees a trend in this direction:

With the present vogue of philosophical existentialism, nominalism, and ethical subjectivism, accompanied by the increasing influence of Asia with its anti-litigational, mediational ethic of peace-making,

⁶ John C. Ford, S.J., and Gerald Kelly, S.J., *CONTEMPORARY MORAL THEOLOGY* (Maryland: Newman Press, 1958), p. 129. Cf. also an interesting analysis of the test of Abraham by Denis A. Goulet, "Kierkegaard, Aquinas, and the Dilemma of Abraham" in *THOUGHT* 32 (1957) 165-188.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ F.S.C. Northrop, "Philosophical Issues in Contemporary Law", *NATURAL LAW FORUM* 2 (1957), 45.

this positive legal method is likely to take on increasing importance in the days to come.⁹

A strong "flavor" of situational morality, if not open espousal of its tenets, is to be found in the stand on contraception of the 1958 Lambeth Conference of the Bishops of the Anglican communion. Taking the establishment of the practice of contraception as a *fait accompli* to which Christian life must accommodate itself, the bishops declared that clinical methods of contraception become a positive good if the circumstances require their adoption.¹⁰ The individual is left to make the decision in the light of the circumstances of his case; contraception is no longer judged to be an action which is objectively evil independently of any and all circumstances, as the Catholic Church teaches.

A specialized plea to remove sex morality in particular from the sphere of objective morality and to turn it over to individuals "operating in a context of mutual love, respect and reverence" appeared not so long ago in THE LADIES HOME JOURNAL (October, 1959). Using the cloak of religion in advocating a "biblically oriented viewpoint", the author argues that the personal decisions of conscience should not be submitted "to an infallible Book, to an infallible Church, or to an infallible law". The only norm or measuring rod for sexual morality will be, then, *agape*, which is identified with "responsible love"—"respect, reverence and concern for persons". Following this out logically, in the name of *agape* the author should conclude that "anything goes" in sexual self-expression. The author of this unusually naive and frank bit of pleading is a Professor of Religion at Williams College, Dr. William C. Cole.¹¹

ORIGIN OF SITUATIONAL ETHICS

Whence came this doctrine so fraught with danger? It evolved from and matured in the womb of existentialism. Since

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63. Here also will be found the appropriate references to the original works or articles that lend support to the statements made about this aspect of existential legal positivism.

¹⁰ Joseph Christie, S.J., "The 1958 Lambeth Conference", AMERICA (Oct. 4, 1958), pp. 10-11.

¹¹ Editorial, AMERICA (October 17, 1957), p. 66.

the child kept the religion of the parent, we have atheistic, Protestant, and "Catholic" forms of situational morality. All of them have been condemned by the Catholic Church, as we shall see.

Best known under the title of "situation ethics", the new doctrine has been called by many names: "ethical existentialism", "ethical actualism", "ethical individualism", "personalist ethics", "intuition ethics", "morality of freedom", "morality of the law of the spirit", "circumstance ethics", "ethics of the moment", "ethics of the here-and-now", "morality of the situation", "the new morality", etc.¹² Allowing for the difference in religion of the ones advocating this new doctrine, we may still say that these names apply to substantially the same method of settling moral problems.

Situation ethics appeared in post-war Europe. It was presented as an attempt to find a solution to the innumerable moral problems that arose during and after World War II and caused acute anxiety and anguish of conscience for countless people in every walk of life. Among these problems were the following: cooperating with the enemy during the occupation with the complications of *de facto* as against *de jure* government; joining and cooperating with resistance movements; the black market; the problems of retaliation, of avoiding torture, of professing the faith in the face of diabolical torture, of observing pre-marital chastity when almost every form of innocent recreation seemed beyond the reach of youth, of observing rigid laws of conjugal chastity in the midst of the direst poverty, bombed-out cities and the ubiquitous housing shortage. These and many other problems became part and parcel of everyday life. We should add to this the effect on whole nations of the Nazi and Communist rejection of moral standards.¹³

Sympathetic writers tried to find a solution to these moral problems, a solution that would be geared to the modern mind

¹² We should not confuse this "new morality" with the legitimate efforts to reexamine our whole approach to moral theology to see whether or not it has become too legalistic and juridical.

¹³ Ford-Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

and thus readily find acceptance. Protesting that the Church seemed too rigid in judging anything connected with pleasure and somewhat indifferent to, or lax on, problems of justice and property, the situationalists offered a solution that would free men from many frustrations and solve hitherto insoluble problems. Their solutions were proposed as moral solutions; they did not admit to any abandonment of traditional moral teaching nor would they claim to be hedonists or opportunists. The cloak of morality made their doctrine respectable and thus all the more insidious and dangerous.

The existentialist genesis of situation ethics was pointed out by Pius XII and other writers and is evident from a cursory glance at some of the main tenets of the existentialists. While stressing the freedom of the individual the existentialists insist that each should take into his own hands the complete responsibility for his personal life. The man who acts and thinks like everyone or anyone else has become "a mere statistical unit, a grain of sand, a sheep in the herd".¹⁴ Only that man has a right to say "I" who judges for himself even if it means going against the accepted position and leads to grave risks. In a word, he is the one "who commits himself and who, by that very fact, modifies the existing situations and forms his own personality."¹⁵ There must be commitment, personal creation, something truly "subjective" and therefore incommunicable and non-transferable. "Existentialist philosophy is interested in the human subject who is always unique and has to complete his own creation by his free action."¹⁶ In opposition to every form of totalitarianism and to determinist doctrines of every sort the existentialist philosophers all agree in affirming the freedom of the individual. In this they concur with the traditional scholastic doctrine, but they go far beyond it in seeking a false liberty, a freedom from all restraint and control imposed by universal law.

This preoccupation of existentialism with the freedom of the individual, with the defense of freedom in the face of the

¹⁴ Roger Troisfontaines, "What is Existentialism?", *THOUGHT* 32 (1957), 518.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 523.

massive modern tendency towards political and social totalitarianism, has been clearly pointed out by Father Copleston.¹⁷ At one stage the Marxists represented the existentialism of Sartre as being the "philosophy of the dying bourgeoisie, the last convulsive effort of an outmoded individualism."¹⁸ In the religious stage of existential thought, Kierkegaard reveals the individual not subordinated to an impersonal universal law but standing in an immediate relation, affirmed by faith, to the supreme Subject, the personal Absolute, God. He realizes what he is, a finite individual, a creature, and affirms this self before God. In the deepest sense he can be said to choose for himself, and Kierkegaard speaks as though, in the affirmation of his relationship to God, man transcends the universal.¹⁹

LITERARY FORMS USED

Derived as it is from existentialism we are not surprised to find the New Morality appearing in the literary forms introduced into philosophy by existentialism, i.e. the play, the novel, diaries; in short, any form which enables a person to say "I".²⁰ These literary forms reached a far bigger audience than would any purely philosophical writings and easily gained a sympathetic hearing. There was no attempt to present the doctrine as a formal treatise although we can now point out its leading proponents.²¹ Because of the informal mode of presentation it is always difficult to detect the presence of true situation ethics; but once detected, it is not hard to refute.

WHAT SITUATION ETHICS IS NOT

It might help towards clarity if we first dispose of certain theories which might be mistaken for situation ethics. There

¹⁷ Frederick Copleston, S.J., *CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY* (Maryland: Newman Press, 1956), p. 138.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 138-139.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

²⁰ Roger Troisfontaines, *art. cit.*, p. 525.

²¹ Cf. Robert W. Gleason, S.J., "Situational Morality", *THOUGHT* 32 (1957), 550. Cited as the leading situational moralist is E. Grisebach; as contributing to the movement without being identified with it are Martin Buber and F. Ebner, while H. Thielicke and E. Brunner are said to be strongly influenced by situational ethics.

are many degrees within the various tendencies of the situationalists; not all the advocates are as easy to identify as Dr. Cole. Some writings may have the "flavor" and yet be capable of an orthodox explanation.

Anyone who believes that he is following traditional, objective, essential morality cannot be labeled a situationalist, no matter how erroneous his solution to a problem may be and even if it is a solution that situation ethics would approve. If such a one is in good faith, has erred in applying traditional morality to a particular case, is subjectively right but objectively wrong, and would be willing to correct his fault if discovered, then no matter what else he might be he is not a situationalist. Known only to God is the number of those who have erred in judging an excusing cause to be present and thus freed themselves of the burden of the law in good faith. They were not situationalists. But if this is true of excusing causes, it is *a fortiori* true of the use of that last resort of traditional morality—*epikeia*.

Epikēia is an interpretation of a law in a particular case against the letter of the law but in accordance with its spirit as reasonably supposed to exist in the mind of the legislator. It is Aristotle's "correction of the law" and "application of good sense to practice." It is not strictly an interpretation of the law nor a presumed dispensation from it but rather an interpretation of the mind and will of him who made the law. It supposes that a solid argument exists to justify the deviation from the letter of the law because its observance would now be sinful or excessively difficult or contrary to the presumed intention of the legislator. It also supposes that the deviation from the letter of the law is within the power of the legislator to grant. An abuse of the application of *epikēia* does not make a situationalist; *epikēia* is part of the standard equipment of traditional morality, even though its application sets many a snare for the unwary.

In the conflict of interests and laws a man may fail to appreciate the logic of universal moral laws. He may start the logical process of the application of universal laws to a concrete

case and before he has finished make a lyric leap to the conclusion that his emotions dictate and his heart desires. He has erred, but the fault is in his logic not in his system of ethics. Subjectively right, he is objectively wrong, but he has not rejected the solution of traditional morality. It is more accurate to say that he never knew the solution based on objective morality than that he rejected it. Thus we might, though with difficulty, explain the action of a Catholic seeking an abortion or sterilization when there appears no other way to preserve the life of the mother for the good of the family. Most probably such a person had never really grasped the nature of an absolute prohibition, of a negative law which admits of no exceptions because the act is intrinsically evil and in opposition to an immutable relationship established between God and creatures by their very natures. But once a person is informed of the teaching of the Church in this grave matter and brought face to face with the correct teaching of traditional morality, then to refuse to accept such a solution, to insist on the operation because "God understands" and "I just *know* it is all right in my case", would place one in the camp of the situationalists at least in practice.

This confrontation, at least implicit, with the solution of objective morality is necessary before a person can be accused of embracing situational ethics. It will be all the clearer when someone is aware of the teaching of the Church as regards, e.g., contraception, but sincerely believes that they are not bound by that teaching, that they are justified in the practice. Most Catholics, it would seem, who fall into this detestable vice know it is wrong and have a guilty conscience about it, as is proven by the fact that they stay away from the sacraments. Like all sinners they make some effort to rationalize their position but do not succeed in convincing themselves that it is objectively right, as a situationalist would.

In short a confrontation with traditional morality must precede the personal confrontation with God to seek for another answer, a so-called "higher morality". Without this awareness of the correct teaching of traditional morality a man should be presumed to be in the ranks of those who have erred about

an application of traditional morality to a particular case. A classical example is provided by those who in the fervor of war-time patriotism would consider as an act of heroic self-sacrifice the taking of a lethal dose of poison by an agent captured behind the enemy lines and afraid of revealing valuable information under torture. In reality it is illicit suicide, objectively immoral but presumably done in good faith due to an incorrectly formed conscience.²²

Another modern tendency which might be confused with situation ethics is the attempt to diminish subjective responsibility for human actions. Solving this problem according to traditional moral theology in the light of modern research in psychiatry has proven very difficult. Two leading moralists admit the difficulty of the problem and affirm that it is theologically sound to conclude that we should judge much more leniently than we have in the past a great many cases of human misconduct and frailty.²³ But this is not an attempt to deny the application of a universal moral law to a particular case. It is an inquiry into the individual's fulfillment of the prerequisites for full responsibility for an act forbidden by the universal moral law. Some psychologists have erred in claiming that the full observance of the law is impossible and would excuse from subjective sin; the situationalists attempt to do away with the moral law itself, at least in its absolute universality, and so do away with both subjective and objective sin.

DOCTRINE OF THE SITUATIONALISTS

As existentialists, biased against all systems founded on objective essences with their immutability, tending always towards the personal, the singular and the subjective, the proponents of situational morality cannot very well admit that their position is a system, for then it would take on the appearance

²² John R. Connery, S.J., "Notes on Moral Theology," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 16 (December 1955), 570.

²³ Ford-Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 247. Cf. also John R. Connery, S.J., "Notes on Moral Theology", *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 18 (December 1957), 560-561, for examples of books and movements reputed to be tainted with situationalism by some but defended by other Catholic writers.

of fixed rules and norms — the very thing they are reacting against. Actually it is not proposed anywhere as a system. The Holy Office in its condemnation (1956) called it a system; Pius XII called it “a series of tendencies”. It seems that it can be called a system in the broad sense of the word, but it is really more an ethical mentality than a system.

The situationalists fall into three convenient groupings according to their religious convictions or lack thereof. There is an extreme *atheistic* position with its complete denial of God and all moral law. The sole ruling norm for such situationalists is the personal sincerity of the individuals acting according to their convictions. There is also a *Protestant* position which holds that actions are subjectively and objectively moral when judged to be so under the influence of an intellectual illumination granted to the individual in his personal confrontation with God. Some Protestants wish to uphold the validity of the moral law but not to the extent that it would have absolute binding force for every concrete case. To them, this would seem to conflict with the liberty of God. To solve this conflict they appeal to a higher law, the law of love which they say is superior to all moral laws. The example of Abraham and Isaac as interpreted by Kierkegaard would express their position quite well. The will of God is expressed to the individual in the depths of his soul, through an “intuition of love”. Needless to say not all Protestants hold this or any other form of situation ethics, although it takes root and blossoms easily in the Protestant soil of private interpretation.

Catholics who have fallen into the errors of situation ethics uphold the validity of the moral law and its application to most problems, and the right of the Church to teach and guide consciences. But in the last analysis the moral law and the teaching of the Church are merely guideposts; they are not premises from which normative conclusions are to be drawn. The words of Pius XII well express the position of these Catholics:

Let the Church — they do not hesitate to say — propose her doctrine, pass her laws as norms of action. Still, when there is question of practical application to each individual's life, the Church must not interfere; she should let each one of the faithful follow his own con-

science and judgment. They declare that this is all the more necessary because the Church and her ministers are unaware of certain sets of circumstances either personal or extrinsic to individuals; in them each person has been placed and he must take his own counsel and decide what he must do. Such people moreover are unwilling in their final personal decisions to have any intermediary or intercessor placed between them and God, no matter what his rank or title.²⁴

These same Catholic situationalists talk about the need of being adults, of putting away excessive dependence on others in moral matters. They speak of attaining to the true "liberty" of the children of God, of the need of being "creative", of having "personal initiative" in moral matters.

MAIN PRINCIPLES OF SITUATION ETHICS

Pius XII singled out the removal of all objective norms of morality as the central weakness of the new morality. Personal feelings, convictions, sincerity, are substituted for objective norms. An inner light, an intimate conviction, a personal evaluation, are sufficient to make a judgment that is both subjectively and objectively correct.

The situationalists deny that there are any acts so intrinsically evil that no circumstances can ever justify them. They insist on the primary role of the circumstances and motive in determining morality. It is not so much the action that God considers but rather the intention. Anything else, they say, would tie God's hands and as it were subject Him to the "natural law". The example from existentialist literature mentioned earlier brings out this point very well: two girls are carrying on illicit love affairs and solve their moral problem in opposite ways but both solutions are judged correct by the situationalists. The only logical corollary to this teaching is that the end justifies the means.²⁵

²⁴ CATHOLIC MIND 53 (1955), 317. Cf. AAS 46 (1954), 673. In this address to some 250 cardinals, archbishops and bishops on November 2, 1954 (*Magnificate Dominum*) Pius XII explained and vindicated the true teaching authority of the Church, a subject he had treated previously in *Humani Generis*.

²⁵ Kenneth Moore, O. Carm., "Situational Ethics, AMERICAN ECCLESIASTICAL REVIEW (July 1956), p. 33.

The situationalists insist on the law of freedom and love as driving forces of moral life. To free consciences from "oppressive overseeing by the authority of the Church" and thus return to the primitive simplicity of the early Christians is one of their goals. They also make much of the "liberty of the children of God" to be found in their new morality. Another of their aims is to achieve autonomy for the arts and sciences and public life, freedom from the domination of morality and religion, in order that they may be guided only by their own laws. According to one explanation liberty means acting with joy and spontaneity; there is no liberty in acting out of a sense of duty, in "going against the grain". The Church teaches with such phrases as "you must", "you may not", producing a "suffocating climate of morality by command", they say. The situationalist would assume full responsibility for his own moral life and thus play a "creative role" instead of a merely passive one, being molded by others, not making himself what he is, being led as a child instead of acting as an adult. From such ideas the reader can easily see how this doctrine would lead to what is known as "sin mysticism", that is, the exaltation of the "noble" or "tragic" sinner usually by using a dull, unlovable but morally upright character as a foil.²⁶

CONDEMNATION BY THE CHURCH

Situation ethics was condemned explicitly by Pius XII at least twice in 1952.²⁷ A formal condemnation was issued by the Holy Office on February 2, 1956 in an Instruction in which it was stated that "many things set forth in this system of situation ethics contradict the truth of the matter and the dictates of right reason, betray traces of relativism and modernism, and wander far from the Catholic doctrine handed down through the centuries. In not a few assertions they are akin to various systems of non-Catholic ethics." Finally, the Instruc-

²⁶ For an explanation of "sin mysticism" see Dietrich Von Hildebrand, *TRUE MORALITY AND ITS COUNTERFEITS* (New York: David McKay, Inc., 1955) chapter VIII.

²⁷ AAS 44 (1952), 270-278; 413-419. Pius XII referred to these talks explicitly in 1954: AAS 46 (1954), 673-674.

tion forbade the teaching or defense of this doctrine "by whatever name it may be designated".²⁸

DOCTRINAL REFUTATION OF SITUATION ETHICS

Even before he singled out the removal of all objective norms of morality as the central weakness of the new morality Pius XII had struck at its source in the basic tenets of existentialism. Labeling atheistic existentialism as an offshoot of crass evolution in his encyclical *Humani Generis*, he went on to call it an

erroneous philosophy which, opposing itself to idealism, immanentism and pragmatism, has assumed the name of existentialism, since it concerns itself only with the existence of individual things and neglects all consideration of their immutable essence.²⁹

Once the immutable essences had been shoved out to the periphery and the individuating circumstances had been placed in the center of the philosophical world, the next step was easy: morality likewise would have to grant the primacy to the consideration of circumstances and personal elements. The situationists followed through logically from the false premises.

Traditional morality is nothing if it is not objective. The norm of morality which constitutes the intrinsic goodness or malice of an act is objective human nature. This is the classical scholastic position which demands that each human act be considered in its relation with the objective reality which is human nature to see whether or not it conforms to all the exigencies of that nature. If it so conforms it is morally good; if there is a lack of conformity it is a morally bad human act. The preceptive norm of morality, the law of God (eternal and natural), is likewise objective and imposes the obligation that we act in conformity with that law. Feelings, subjective dispositions, personal desires and circumstances, must take a secondary position when we are seeking objective morality.

It is in the traditional sources of morality — the object, the circumstances and the purpose of the act—that every hu-

²⁸ AAS 48 (1956), 144-145.

²⁹ AAS 42 (1950), 563; CATHOLIC MIND 48 (1950), 689.

man act must pass the objective test of conformity to human nature considered in its totality. If in any one of these three aspects it fails the test the act must be condemned as immoral. There can be no correct view of man's moral life without the correct view of the whole of reality and this view of reality must be objective. A phenomenological analysis of morality may add further insights and new appreciations, but in order to do so it must be faithful to a reality which is objective. The principal concepts of existential philosophy have their counterpart in the Christian philosophy of life, as for example, concrete existence, responsibility and anguish, mystery in the face of the unknown.³⁰ In a philosophy that is objective and based on nature these key-concepts are discoverable without distortion and without doing violence to essential relations for the sake of an apparent subjective good.

To wander away from the security of immutable objective essences and natures in search of a seemingly more secure basis of morality can lead only to error. If purely subjective methods of perceiving moral values were a safe norm, how explain the great variety of opinions? If reason is excluded from the analysis of morality how can one refute a false morality? To leave the final judgment to feeling leads to relativism. Any such system would fail in the face of a serious conflict between feelings and duty; a vague intuition of what befits human nature would not suffice in such a crisis.³¹

To deny that there exist intrinsically evil acts that no circumstances can ever justify is to fly in the face of tradition and common sense. The Church has always taught that there are certain acts whose morality can be judged *ex objecto*, in themselves, without reference to the circumstances or the motive for the act. Pius XII reaffirms this position in language and with examples that are unmistakably clear.

From the essential relationships between man and God, between man and man, between husband and wife, between parents and children,

³⁰ Jeremiah Newman, "The Philosophy of Existentialism", *IRISH ECCLESIASTICAL RECORD* 77 (May, 1952), 321-333; 77 (June, 1952), 421-432. Cited from *THEOLOGY DIGEST* 2 (Winter, 1954), 31.

³¹ Aidan M. Carr, O.F. M., "Morality is No Chameleon", *HOMILETIC AND PASTORAL REVIEW* 56 (August, 1956), 933.

from the essential community relationships found in the family, in the Church, and in the State, it follows among other things that hatred of God, blasphemy, idolatry, abandoning the true faith, denial of the faith, perjury, murder, bearing false witness, calumny, adultery and fornication, the abuse of marriage, the solitary sin, stealing and robbery, taking away the necessities of life, depriving workers of their just wages (James v, 4), monopolizing vital foodstuffs and unjustifiably increasing prices, fraudulent bankruptcy, unjust maneuvering in speculation—all these are gravely forbidden by the divine Lawmaker. No examination is necessary. No matter what the situation of the individual may be there is no other course open to him but to obey.³²

No matter how extreme or pitiful the case, “no matter what the situation of the individual may be”, it is clear that the teaching of the moral law in these matters admits of no exception. This could sound heartless and cruel only to someone who does not understand that the moral law is proof of God’s love, His way of guiding us to our true goal, and the observance of the moral law is offered by Christ Himself as the touchstone of love: “He that hath my commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me” (John xiv, 21).

Situationists of the more moderate persuasion would admit that such actions are immoral in the essential order of objective morality, that is to say, according to traditional norms of morality. But they would allow their conscience to persuade them that in the circumstances of the moment, in the exigencies of the here-and-now, in this unique situation in which they and they alone are found, such actions would be objectively in accord with God’s will if they sincerely judged them to be so.

A false sentimentalism, an imprecise way of thinking, or a perverted sense of pity can lead to situational solutions of certain difficult cases. Ultimately this is due to a failure to grasp the implications for the practical order of the evil intrinsic to certain human acts — failure, in other words to appreciate the full significance of an absolute natural-law prohibition. Under the pressure of suffering or of the desire to save another from mental anguish, even priests have sometimes wondered if some of these actions might not be allowed as a

³² AAS 44 (1952) 417.

last resort in extreme cases.³³ For those who fail to grasp the full import of the argument from unchangeable law based on immutable essences as ordered by an infinitely wise and loving God, the words and authority of Pius XII should put an end to all such speculation about exceptions to these laws.

Traditional morality is well equipped to take care of all true exceptions to universal laws. Under the aegis of the virtue of prudence each act must be considered as it exists in its particular set of circumstances for this or that individual. The possibility of excusing causes and even of *epikeia* must be considered; but all must be done according to principles and objective norms, not merely according to subjective desires or feelings or some vague "intuition". Moralists will admit that there is a strong tendency to categorize human actions without a reference to the individual situation, to concentrate more on the abstract nature than the concrete individual even though the law itself will call for an examination of the individual situation. The tediousness of the process of weighing inconvenience, excusing causes and circumstances before giving a moral judgment can understandably lead to a temptation to circumvent them by resorting to simple, abstract classifications. This is precisely the tendency that has brought against traditional morality the charge that it ignores *homo ut hic*, the existential, individual person who is unique.³⁴ If situational ethics makes the moralist aware of this failing it will have served a good purpose. But no deviation from traditional morality is necessary or allowed in order to deal adequately with the moral problems of the individual.

The most insidious aspect of this new morality is its claim to be "biblically oriented", to be in accord with the true Christian spirit of liberty of the early Church before legalism and a juridical approach to life began to harden the arteries

³³ John J. Lynch, S.J., "Notes on Moral Theology," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 19 (June, 1958), 169.

³⁴ John. R. Connery, S.J., "Notes on Moral Theology", *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES*, 18 (December 1957) 561. For the role of prudence in Christian morality consult this same periodical (1952) 564-582, also by Father Connery.

and chill the members of the Mystical Body. In truth this situational approach would water down all prescriptive morality in Scripture to the level of counsel, making a mockery of the "narrow gate" and the "straight way" that leads to life. It would enfeeble the Church of Christ, deny its universal teaching authority, make forever unintelligible the words of Christ: "going therefore teach ye all nations . . . teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matthew xxviii, 20) not to mention a host of other texts about the fulfillment of the Law and its observance as a proof of love.

As regards the sufficiency of a good intention we have the simple and clear statement of Pius XII: "We grant that God wants, first and always, a right intention. But this is not enough. He also wants the good work."³⁵ As has been pointed out, the opponents of Christianity have come the full circle with regard to this particular error, for the Pharisees merited the condemnation of Christ for being satisfied with the external performances, caring naught for the interior state of their soul, for their intention. Now the situationalists claim that God cares naught for the external action but only considers the intention.³⁶

The total failure of the situationalists to understand the role of conscience is obvious. They would make conscience a source of law, its own lawmaker, rather than a transmitter of law with the intellect discovering what objective reality demands of us in each actual situation. From universal law as the major premise, and the objective circumstantial here-and-now as the minor premise, the intellect can logically conclude whether or not this act that is to be done is conformed to objective morality and thus moral or immoral. For the situationalist this would be acceptable for ordinary cases but it must admit of exceptions since it gives insufficient enlightenment to the individual in difficult circumstances.³⁷ For those who accept the traditional doctrine which alone squares with exper-

³⁵ AAS, 44 (1952), 417. Cf. Ford-Kelly, *op. cit.* p. 118.

³⁶ Thomas A. Wassmer, S.J., "A Re-Examination of Situation Ethics", CATHOLIC EDUCATIONAL REVIEW 57 (January, 1959), 35.

³⁷ Gleason, *art. cit.*, pp. 551 ff.; Hildebrand, *op. cit.*, pp. 138 ff.

ience and common sense conscience passes judgment but does not legislate; it applies the given law to the individual case. Conscience may err and must be properly trained and guided until capable of judging correctly. In some cases it may have to admit its inability to judge and accept the guidance of duly constituted authority; in no case can it abandon the objective moral order to follow inner lights and feelings, no matter how sincere, without running the risk of delusion, relativism and, finally, moral bankruptcy. It is pointless to speak of a serious and right conscience as indispensable to the correct application of this new ethic, because there cannot exist a right conscience without objective and universal principles.

As a final reply to the situationalists with their erroneous concept of freedom and undue stress on circumstances in the difficult situations which life may bring, we offer the challenge of Pius XII. Speaking of the martyrs who found themselves in a unique situation, when their very lives were at stake, he asks: "Did they, in the face of the 'situation' in which they found themselves, uselessly or even mistakenly incur a bloody death?" And Pius XII answers his own question: "No, certainly not, and in their blood they are the most explicit witnesses to the truth against the 'new morality'."³⁸

On a previous occasion the same Holy Father, speaking on conjugal chastity, expressed the belief that modern men and women are not slaves to their passions but are truly free. He defended the reputation of modern Christians when he said that "it is wronging men and women of our times to deem them incapable of continuous heroism," the heroism of complete abstinence from the complete exercise of their conjugal rights when necessity dictates it. In the rush of modern life we are liable to forget how much heroism our day has witnessed, heroism due to hard necessity, as in time of war or enemy occupation or imprisonment, or even heroism in the service of injustice, such as many communists have practised during the past half-century. Pius XII reminded all that "heroism is exercised [today] to a degree and to an extent which would have been thought impossible in days gone by." And he asks: "Why,

³⁸ AAS 44 (1952), 418.

then, should this heroism, if the circumstances really demand it, stop at the borders established by the passions and inclinations of nature?"³⁹

CONCLUSION

This "new morality" is thus shown to be no morality at all, to be destructive of all true morality. It is insidious because of its frequent use of an evangelical facade; it is especially appealing because of its insistence on freedom and responsibility; it is dangerous because of the difficulty of detection due to its choice of literary forms as vehicles of propaganda, and because its proponents can pick and choose positions according to their likes and dislikes. It must be attacked ruthlessly and fearlessly as one of the greatest moral dangers of our age.

³⁹ Address to the Italian Catholic Union of Midwives, October 29, 1951, AAS 43 (1951), 847; CATHOLIC MIND 50 (January, 1952), 58-59.