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# 1

## The Morality Gap

IN CHICAGO a business firm entitled "Term Paper Research, Inc.," is open for orders. Charging \$3.85 per page, the agency guarantees that experienced researchers will write term papers for college students who discover near the end of the semester that they possess more cash than ambition. A student who hired the firm to write one of his term papers was asked whether the practice should be considered immoral. His answer: "No. Each student has to evaluate his priorities; if he has more important activities to do, then having someone do his term paper is not wrong."

In Los Angeles a group of businessmen and their wives gather for a party every Saturday evening. Before all leave for home, the names of the wives are placed into a hat and passed around the room. That evening each man goes home with the wife whose name he selected. When asked whether wife-swapping is immoral one man answered, "It's not wrong as long as we have a meaningful relationship; furthermore, we can do what we want as long as we don't hurt anyone."

In Washington a group of protesters planted a bomb in the nation's Capitol. A few minutes after it went off, a letter was received by the Associated Press which said that the Capitol was chosen because it is the symbol of the government. The system is so corrupt, the protesters argued, that the only solu-

tion was to burn it down. If the evils of the establishment can be eliminated by demolishing banks, universities, and federal buildings, it's worth the price.

In these and countless other similar situations, the gap between traditional morality and the modern avant-garde approach is widening. The number of people who follow absolute moral principles is diminishing. This fact is used as added ammunition against traditional morality. "Everybody's doing it," is an old but popular argument. Those who predicted that there was a rumbling in the mountain of moral relativism can now proclaim that the avalanche is here. "Hardly anyone under thirty believes your view anymore," a teenager tells his parents, and he in part speaks the truth. The generation gap has become the morality gap. Insisting on personal freedom, children are urged to make their own moral decisions without accepting the values of the past.

This new emphasis on personal freedom has had some startling consequences. According to a Gallup poll taken in 1971, more than four college students out of ten have now tried marijuana. This is double the number of a year ago and eight times the number in 1967.<sup>1</sup> Paralleling this is the remarkable increase in the use of heroin and other hard drugs. The number of drug users is on the increase, even though medical authorities have proved that even a limited number of trips can have devastating consequences.

Statistics also indicate that major crimes have increased 284% since 1962.<sup>2</sup> Many people live in constant fear of being mugged, robbed, or raped. For this reason the safety of the nation's streets has become an issue in political campaigns. In addition to violent crimes, a variety of other offenses such as thefts and forgery, has skyrocketed in recent years. In 1971 a group of the nation's bankers met in Chicago to discuss the problems they share. They reported that embezzlement alone increased one hundred percent in the past year. The President's commission on law enforcement reports that in the



grocery trade, the theft estimates for shoplifting and employee theft are almost equal to the total amount of profit.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most obvious changes in moral standards has occurred in the area of sexual freedom. Pornographic literature is sold openly, contraceptives are readily available, and books are written which describe in detail the proper procedures for having an illicit sexual affair. The movie industry has discovered that obscene films banned ten years ago are now eagerly accepted, and not even churches are complaining.

Jack Houston, in an article entitled "Profits Prove SeX-Rated Films Not A Public Gripe" stated: "Ironically, as movies have become more expressive in the exploitation of sex, agitation against their showing in neighborhood and suburban theaters has become almost nil."<sup>4</sup> Objections to sexual exploitation in the movie industry have become hushed, if not completely muted. Houston goes on to say that "the church, which traditionally had voiced its objection to some or all movies, depending on its particular brand of Christianity, also has become silent."<sup>5</sup>

Parents who have insisted on chastity are discovering that a new generation is arising which does not accept moral absolutes. A generation ago it was possible to legislate certain moral principles by stressing that morality "pays." Parents warned their children of the consequences of sexual permissiveness. But we are living in a new day. Medical science has supposedly reduced the fears that once accompanied premarital and extramarital sex, so the old arguments are no longer effective. As Pierre Burton points out in *The Comfortable Pew*, "Scientific advances have conspired to remove for many people (eventually I suggest for all people) two of the major concerns surrounding extra-marital or premarital relations: the fear of pregnancy and the fear of venereal disease."<sup>6</sup> He states that the deans in colleges report that traditional threats about what happens to "loose" girls no longer are effective. Then he adds, "The church, then, must be prepared to come up with other

valid and logical reasons why continence should be observed outside the marriage bed.”<sup>7</sup>

Burton may not be entirely right. The fact is that venereal disease is reaching epidemic proportions. In Los Angeles, fully one in five of the city's high school students will have contracted gonorrhea or syphilis by the time he graduates. As an infectious disease, VD is outranked in incidence only by the common cold. Furthermore, there is evidence that those who engage in sex outside of marriage find that such conduct has other undesirable consequences. A number of psychotherapists have found that the psychological effects are damaging, and many people who have sex more discover that they are enjoying it less. But Burton is not entirely wrong. With contraceptives available and proper medical remedies for venereal disease, the arguments based on fear have lost their sting. At least a large segment of the population is not buying the “you will get into trouble” package.

The same may be said of other moral issues. Moral conduct has frequently been instilled because of the penalty involved if a principle is violated. “Honesty is the best policy” is an expression that was heard a generation ago. Today it is seldom repeated for one good reason: thousands of people are realizing that it is *not* wise to be honest (at least not in financial terms). The crook generally becomes wealthy; the honest man becomes poor. Criminals are discovering that crime (unlike the fluctuating stock market) pays handsome dividends. This has caused perceptive individuals to ask, “If it doesn't pay to be honest, why bother?” *That* is an excellent question.

Since the argument from consequences no longer has retained its force, many—especially young people—who at one time intended to live within the confines of absolutes, have climbed on to the moral toboggan slide. Rather than living by fixed principles, decisions are now made situationally. Recently a coed, when deciding whether to cheat, asked an interesting philosophical question: “Which is the greater evil—



to cheat, or to flunk out of college?" For her the latter was the greater evil, so she made her decision accordingly.

Such reasoning is based on what has become known as *situation ethics*. No longer are decisions made on the basis of principle, but rather on the basis of desired results. If the old form of morality (eg., honesty, faithfulness, and continence) does not pay, perhaps it is time to have a moral theory which does. Situation ethics, by teaching that love must replace law, promises that morality can indeed pay. The value of moral actions is no longer judged in accordance with fixed rules; now only that which is loving becomes moral. In an age that cries, "Make love, not war," such an ethic may indeed appear appropriate.

However, in order for any moral viewpoint to commend itself, it must of necessity be evaluated both philosophically and theologically. If ethics is a study designed to tell people what they *ought* to do, every ethical theory must be carefully analyzed. It is hoped that this book will in a measure meet this need. The purpose of the investigation is to find the answer to three questions: Can situation ethics give guidance in making ethical choices? If so, can these choices be justified rationally? If not, is there an alternative approach which can give guidance and yet survive rational analysis?

Three further comments are necessary before the issues are fully discussed. First, no attempt is made in this book to differentiate between the new morality and situation ethics; the terms are used interchangeably. Those who insist that the new morality is limited to sexual conduct while situationism covers all aspects of morality may be partially correct. The important point is that the arguments used to determine what is moral and what is not are identical in both cases. All ethical systems which reject moral absolutes and judge conduct by its consequences or intentions have a commonness which binds them together. The playboy who justifies his relationship with a girl practices the same philosophy as the man who tells a lie to get

ahead in business. The chief spokesman for situation ethics, Joseph Fletcher, has seen the point clearly. His book *Situation Ethics* properly covers a wide range of ethical issues including sexual conduct. Appropriately the subtitle of the book is *The New Morality*.

Second, *The Morality Gap* is largely an analysis of the writings of Joseph Fletcher. Mistakenly, some conclude that he is the only articulate situationist, but he is its leading proponent. Bishop John A. T. Robinson in *Honest To God* popularized this new approach to ethics, and in his own way Bishop Pike made a contribution to the situational milieu. However, Fletcher was selected because his writings provide the clearest statement of the new morality (as Bishop Robinson acknowledges), and the popularity of his book *Situation Ethics* elevated him to the position of chief spokesman for the situationists.

Although much of the debate which initially surrounded Fletcher's writings has subsided, the philosophy of situationism remains with us. Many who have never heard of Fletcher or the word *situationism* employ his *method* of making moral decisions. The clerk who weighs with his thumbs, the mechanic who needlessly replaces parts, and the secretary who dishonestly punches her time clock—these people accept the presuppositions of the new morality, even if they have not fully considered its implications. For this reason, an analysis of situationism is ever relevant.

Finally, the reader will discover that this book is not primarily concerned with specific ethical issues. The disagreement that exists as to what actions are right or wrong can only be settled by answering a more fundamental question, namely, What *makes* an action right or wrong? Whether cheating, wife-swapping or destroying public property is moral or immoral is dependent on the criteria used to judge moral actions. This book is intended to help solve this problem. Only when this



question is successfully answered can specific ethical issues be evaluated with understanding.

Today a gap exists between those who believe that morality should be based on divine legislation and those who insist that man must decide for himself the difference between right and wrong. On the surface, these two views might not seem to be greatly opposed to each other; or at least it might be thought that man left by himself can arrive at some sort of a workable ethical system. Meanwhile, the gap continues to widen. But how different are these two positions? Could they ever be reconciled? Or are they so divergent that each individual must choose one or the other as the basis of his ethical philosophy?

Socrates frequently urged his companions to be patient in philosophical discussions. Sometimes when one side of an argument is presented, it sounds plausible until other arguments are considered. Since the total picture is so necessary in any discussion, the advice of Socrates is indispensable. It is hoped that the reader will follow the discussion carefully; this can only be done by reading the argument patiently to the end.



## 2

### What Is the New Morality?

AT THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE, a Mr. Bergmeier was captured by the Russians and taken to Wales as a prisoner of war. Later his wife was picked up by a Soviet patrol and taken to a prison in the Ukraine. When Mr. Bergmeier was returned from Wales, he began looking for their children. Two of them were found in a detention school run by the Russians. The oldest, Hans, age fifteen, was found hiding in a cellar. They had no idea where their mother was but kept searching, hoping to find her.

While in prison in the Ukraine, Mrs. Bergmeier learned that her husband and family were looking for her. She longed to return to them but could only be released if she became ill or pregnant. After some contemplation, she asked a German guard to impregnate her, and he consented. A few months later she was sent back to Berlin and joined her family. They were overjoyed that she had returned, and welcomed her, even though she told them how she had managed it. When baby Deitrich was born, they loved him because he had brought the family back together. Did Mrs. Bergmeier do the right thing?

Joseph Fletcher in his book *Situation Ethics* uses this story to illustrate how the new morality is to be applied.<sup>1</sup> According to him there are basically three approaches in making moral decisions. All of the ethical systems of the past can be classified according to these three categories.

The first is *legalism*. Fletcher describes it as follows:

With this approach one enters into every decision-making situation encumbered with a whole apparatus of prefabricated rules and regulations. Not just the spirit but the letter of the law reigns. . . . Solutions are preset, and you can "look them up" in a book—a Bible or a confessor's manual.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, a legalist would insist that Mrs. Bergmeier did evil when she committed adultery with the German guard. The seventh commandment, "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (Ex 20:14), would be regarded as a universal law which does not permit exception. (Whether the application of this commandment constitutes legalism will be considered later.) Traditional Christianity has regarded the precepts of the Bible as having binding authority in all situations—even when a mother is locked in a Russian prison and separated from her family. Legalists believe they know in advance whether a given act is right or wrong quite apart from the context of a given situation. The new moralists insist that such knowledge is impossible. They maintain that legalism must be rejected because it is more concerned with the law than it is with people. Rather than judging each situation individually, legalism even condemns those who break the commandments because of loving concern.

On the opposite end of the moral spectrum are the advocates of *antinomianism*. This term simply means "against law." Antinomians believe that there are no rules to follow in making ethical decisions. Each individual is thrown into a world which he cannot comprehend rationally; he is caught in a universe which gives him no principles by which he can judge moral actions. Fletcher says that the Gnostics are an example of antinomianism since their ethical decisions "are random, unpredictable, erratic, quite anomalous. Making moral decisions is a matter of spontaneity; it is literally unprincipled, purely *ad hoc* and casual."<sup>3</sup> Contemporary existentialists are also antinomian. Sartre believes that the world cannot be comprehended rationally, therefore there can be no objective criteria



for good and evil. But, he insists, an individual must decide; he cannot evade his freedom. *What* a man chooses is not important; the fact that he *does* choose is significant. The existentialists do not attempt to formulate a world view; such an ideal is regarded as impossible. The universe is basically absurd.

What would the existentialists say about Mrs. Bergmeier? Presumably they would see nothing wrong with her illicit relationship. The prohibition regarding adultery would not necessarily be valid in *any* situation. Since they reject all moral principles, they have no basis to determine whether the act was moral or immoral. Furthermore, it would not really matter. The fact that she made the decision is to her credit; what she decided is a matter of indifference.

The third choice, *situationism*, better known as situation ethics or the new morality, promises to find a middle path which rejects both legalism and antinomianism.

Advocates of the new morality reject both legalism and antinomianism. Fletcher repudiates legalism because it puts principles ahead of people and emphasizes the letter of the law rather than love. Those who hastily put the new moralists into the antinomian camp have construed the new morality to be something which its adherents disavow. Antinomianism is rejected by situationists because antinomians refuse to think seriously about the demands of love. They scorn any criterion for judging a moral act.

Situationism does not reject the moral rules of the past, but neither is it bound by them. It seeks to use the rules whenever they are useful; but it discards them if they happen to conflict with *love*, which is regarded as a higher principle than law. Specifically,

The situationist enters into every decision-making situation fully armed with the ethical maxims of his community and its heritage, and he treats them with respect as illuminators of his problems. Just the same he is prepared in any

situation to compromise them or set them aside *in the situation* if love seems better served by doing so.<sup>4</sup>

As a situationist, Fletcher would condone the action of Mrs. Bergmeier in the Russian prison camp. After reciting the story near the end of his book, he permits his readers to decide whether she did right or wrong; but for him the answer is obvious: she did a good and right thing. While other acts of adultery may be immoral, this one was moral because of the *situation*.

It must be emphasized that Fletcher does not merely believe that Mrs. Bergmeier committed what moral theologians frequently refer to as "the lesser of two evils." For Fletcher, such a concept has no place in morality. Mrs. Bergmeier did not do something which was both loving and wrong. If adultery, lying, or stealing is done lovingly, it is right and not the "lesser evil."

What then makes an action moral? Bishop Robinson in *Honest to God* was one of the first scholars to popularize situation ethics. For him the sole arbiter in any moral situation is love. It alone decides the morality of an act. He asserts, "If we have the heart of the matter in us, if our eye is single, then love will find the way, its own particular way in every individual situation."<sup>5</sup> No commandment can infringe on what love demands. Sex relations outside of marriage are not intrinsically wrong; the only intrinsic evil is lack of love.

Joseph Fletcher, whose book *Situation Ethics* is regarded by Robinson as the best articulation of the situationists' viewpoint, likewise adopts love as the only moral criterion for ethical decisions. Since he holds that love may frequently conflict with the moral laws of the Bible, he accepts only the *summary* of the law as binding. He never tires of quoting Romans 13:8: "Owe no man anything, but to love one another; for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law." Similarly, Christ said, "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God, with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. . . . Thou shalt love thy



neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Mt 22:37-40). For situationists this summary is the only absolute. No universal rules can be derived from the universal commandment of love. Every one of the Ten Commandments is subject to exceptions. The situationist says it is his *duty* to break any or all of them if love demands it.

Situationism therefore operates as a middle-of-the-road ethical theory. It repudiates legalism and antinomianism and asserts that "everything else without exception, all laws and rules and principles and ideals and norms, are only *contingent*, only valid *if they happen* to serve love in any situation."<sup>6</sup> Adultery, lying, and murder are not always wrong; in some situations they may be loving acts.

Situationism has a *prima facie* claim to plausibility. Traditional Christianity, with its belief in universal moral values, has often justified evil in order to avert greater evil. If love alone is the basis for moral decisions, such contradictions might be avoided. Is it not reasonable to consider the consequences of an act rather than judging the act *itself* moral or immoral? But before the relative merits of each system are evaluated—and before the question of the universal validity of the Ten Commandments be considered—the discussion must turn to a careful study of *love*, the basis of situationism.