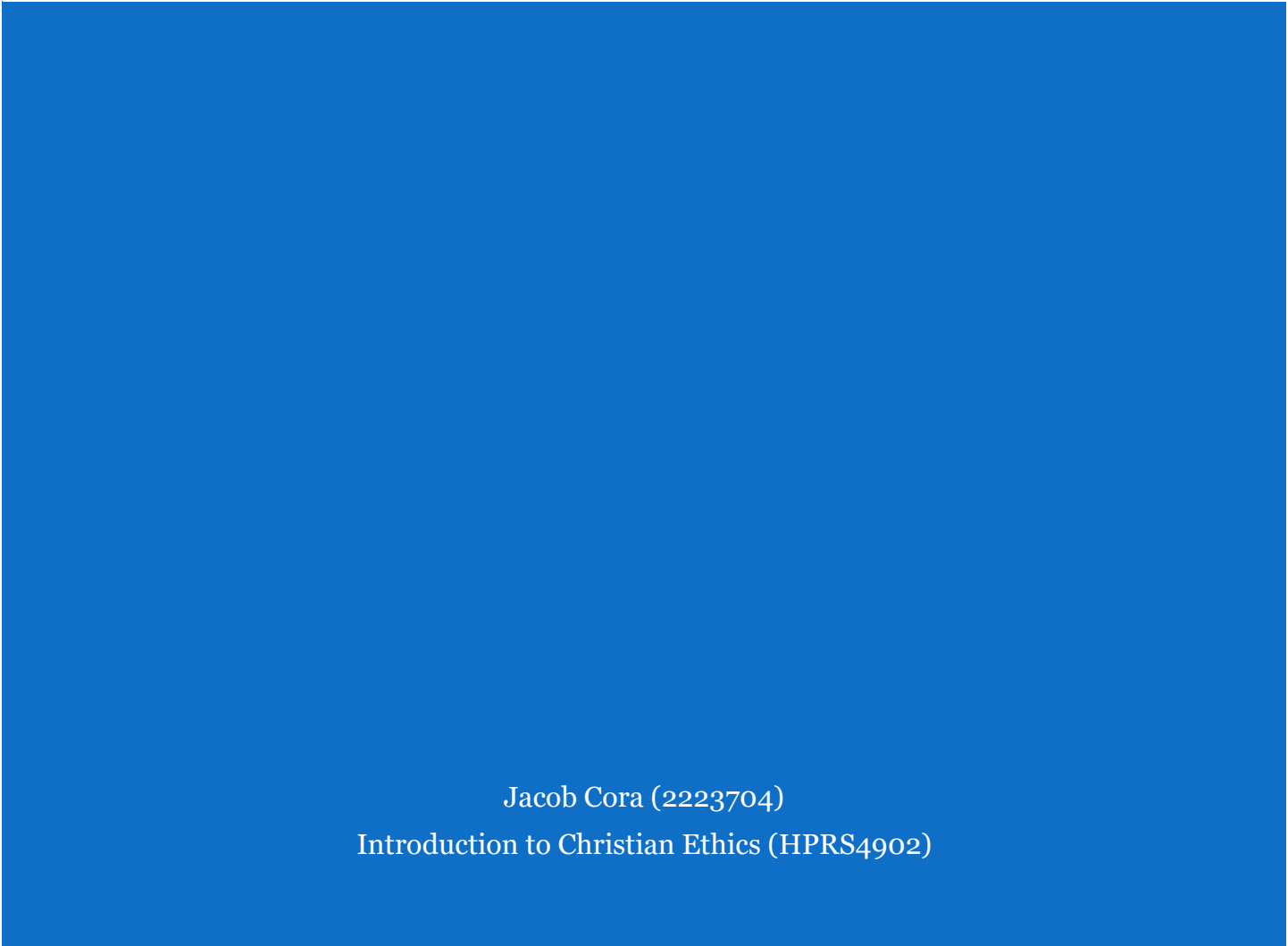




DROWNING-MAN DILEMMA



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INTRODUCTION

What transpires when the principles of love find themselves entangled in conflict? Can the ethical conception of Christian love guide us to the optimal resolution in a life-or-death scenario? In the forthcoming paper, we will explore what I have termed the “drowning-man dilemma.” This idea stems from profound insights gathered by examining the practical dimensions of Christian ethics, particularly situation ethics and the central role of love within the Protestant tradition. To narrow our focus, we center our attention on the Christian concept of “love” and its practical implementation within a hypothetical moral dilemma, facilitating a clear analysis.

This dilemma sheds light on the occasionally paradoxical and relative nature of love when fundamentally examined. It emphasizes the crucial role of intricate and nuanced ethical decision-making when we are confronted with challenging circumstances. To begin, we will first present the dilemma itself, peeling back its layers to reveal the foundational ethical complexities it entails.

Subsequently, we will delve into the processes and ethical understanding that contribute to the emergence of this dilemma. This exploration will involve a comprehensive analysis of the fundamental nature of love within the realm of Christian ethics, as well as its practical manifestation within situation ethics. Additionally, we will turn our attention to alternative ethical frameworks that might offer potential resolutions to this ethical puzzle or potentially provoke further questions. With this conceptual groundwork firmly established, we can begin.

THE DILEMMA

Picture a man struggling in the water while you stand on the shore, contemplating a risky rescue that could jeopardize your own life. Now, let us delve into this scenario from the perspective of Christian ethics, focusing on the profound Christian concept of love.

As the one contemplating intervention, your aim is to embody love by sacrificing your own safety for the drowning man's sake. Initially, it seems natural to assume that if you were in the drowning man's position, you would undoubtedly yearn for rescue. However, is this assumption universally valid? Consider if the drowning man also embraces a Christian understanding of love. This introduces a multifaceted predicament. If you were the one in distress in the water, would allowing the potential rescuer to save you be at odds with a fundamental Christian conception of love? Could it be that, from your perspective, much like the person on the shore, authentic love mandates prioritizing someone else's well-being above your own safety?

Consequently, allowing the person on shore to refrain from rescuing you to safeguard their own well-being might conceivably be perceived as the ethically justified path. It is possible that signaling to them not to risk their own life for your sake embodies both sacrificial love and aligns with what you would hope for if the roles were reversed.

Should this be the situation, shifting focus to the person standing by the water introduces an additional layer of contemplation. Picture them mentally immersing themselves in the mindset of the drowning man, attempting to embrace the principle of love by treating others as they themselves would desire to be treated. Taken literally, this notion becomes complicated. Given the opportunity, the person on the shore might reach the same conclusion as the one struggling in the water. This, in turn, deepens the dilemma: does the act of selflessly sacrificing one's safety for the drowning person's well-being become paramount?

Alternatively, do you put yourself in the shoes of the person in peril, arriving at the realization that if you were in their dire situation, you would not want someone on the shore to risk their life to save you? What if the drowning man genuinely desires your assistance, yet your adherence to the principle of love inadvertently leads you to abstain from rescuing them? In such a case, does your decision still align with moral correctness? What if both individuals act out of sacrificial love, effectively canceling out each other's ethical actions?

THE RESPONSE OF LOVE

With the dilemma laid out, it is essential to delve into the various facets that shape this dilemma. Before we explore possible solutions to this dilemma, it is crucial to establish a clear definition of the concepts of love which form the foundation of the hypothetical situation.

In essence, two distinct notions of love are under consideration. The first centers around a love that finds its articulation within the scriptures, commonly referred to as the "Golden Rule." This axiom notably finds expression in the New Testament's Matthew 7:12-13, which imparts, "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."¹ This very notion of love is integral to the dilemma at hand, wherein the drowning man reaches a profound realization. Driven by an altruistic love, he arrives at the conclusion that he would not desire anyone to save him. This realization precipitates the dilemma itself, as the person on the shore grapples with the intricacies of a situation wherein, once again, he envisions himself in a similar predicament and questions whether he, too, would wish for a non-intervention motivated by the same love.

¹ The Holy Bible: New International Version, 1984, Matthew, 7:12-13.
<https://doi.org/10.1604/9780310903260>.

Secondly, we have a sacrificial love that resonates prominently throughout the scriptures of the New Testament. I find this concept aptly encapsulated for the present dilemma within the words of John 15:12-13: "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends."² This sacrificial love, too, plays a pivotal role within the confines of the dilemma. Both the drowning man and the person situated on the shoreline are driven by this very love. The drowning man is inclined to display sacrificial love by prioritizing the safety of the person on the shore, while simultaneously, the individual on the shore contemplates the prospect of sacrificing their own life to rescue the person in distress within the water. This interplay of sacrificial love leads to a complex dynamic, almost resulting in a mutual nullification of their intentions.

With the delineation of the different types of love, let us now turn our attention to when these actions are to be taken into consideration. To start, it is crucial to grasp that within the context of scripture and the fundamental principles of Christian ethics, with a notable emphasis in the realm of Protestantism, both of these expressions of love carry significant weight. In fact, the scriptures themselves uphold these concepts, as evidenced when Jesus was asked about the means to attain eternal life within Matthew 19:16. His response underscored the importance of abiding by the commandments, as he stated, "If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments."³

This connection is further elucidated by revisiting the passage from John 15:12-13, wherein Jesus delineates His commandment that we should love one another as He loved us, exceptionally to the extent of sacrificing oneself. Consequently, this injunction points towards the necessity of a sacrificial form of love, even as a requisite for attaining eternal life. Similarly, in Matthew 7:12, which prescribes treating others as we ourselves would wish to be treated, we encounter a mandate rooted in the essence of the "Law," synonymous with God's commandments.

With a clear understanding that both forms of love are esteemed as commandments essential for spiritual advancement into eternal life, it is pertinent to consider a contemporary ethical perspective. Joseph Fletcher's situation ethics, while not inherently Christian in totality, aligns in the belief that the principle of Christian "love" holds paramount importance. However, the question arises: to what degree? In his work *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*,⁴ Joseph Fletcher delves into the concept of the "Primacy of Love." He asserts that love stands as the sole absolute within the realm of ethics. This underscores his belief that ethical decision-making should be profoundly influenced by the importance of love. Fletcher suggests, "Only one 'thing' is intrinsically good; namely, love: nothing else at all."⁵

² Holy Bible, John, 15.12-13.

³ Holy Bible, Matthew, 19.16.

⁴ Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*, 1966 <https://doi.org/10.1604/9780664246914>.

⁵ *Situation Ethics*, p. 56.

Here, he refers to the concept of “agapē” (ἀγάπη in Greek), a love derived from the original language of the New Testament. Agapē signifies a sacrificial love, one given unconditionally.⁶ Expanding on the notion that love is the only intrinsic good, Fletcher's second proposition asserts, "The ruling norm of Christian decision is love: nothing else."⁷ This proposition illuminates that love not only supersedes all other virtues in terms of value but also takes precedence in ethical decision-making. The question of when love should be applied is addressed in Fletcher's sixth proposition, which states, "Love's decisions are made situationally, not prescriptively."⁸ In essence, this implies that love must be applied situationally, tailored to each unique circumstance and ethical quandary.

In summary, Fletcher's perspective advocates for an agapē sacrificial love that occupies a paramount role in ethical decision-making. This love is to be applied to its maxim within the context of any given situation, thereby forming the crux of his ethical framework. In the context of our drowning-man dilemma, the significance of agapē love within situation ethics comes to the forefront. While Joseph Fletcher's emphasis leans more towards sacrificial agapē love rather than a literal interpretation of the verses advocating reciprocal self-treatment, it still pertains to the essence of our dilemma. Both the drowning man and the person on the shore, guided by the application of sacrificial agapē love, arrive at distinct ethical action relative to them despite facing the same scenario.

This situation brings to light a potential weakness within Fletcher's situation ethics and, perhaps, within the broader prevailing Protestant perspective. The inherent relativity of love, particularly in a life-or-death parallel dilemma like this, emerges as a central aspect of the same ethical predicament, potentially yielding divergent resolutions. Having briefly examined and grasped the essence of Christian love, as well as its association with situation ethics, it is worthwhile to explore specific situational instances that introduce additional layers to our current dilemma and attempt to find a satisfactory outcome.

⁶ Love-Agape (Greek Word Study) | Precept Austin, Love-Agape (Greek Word Study) | Precept Austin [https://www.preceptaustin.org/love-agape#:~:text=Love%20\(26\)%20\(agape\),5%3A22-note](https://www.preceptaustin.org/love-agape#:~:text=Love%20(26)%20(agape),5%3A22-note), [accessed 17 August].

⁷ Situation Ethics, p. 69.

⁸ Situation Ethics, p. 134.

DEEPENED DILEMMA, AND POSSIBLE ETHICAL SOLUTIONS

Conceiving of a hypothetical situation like the drowning-man dilemma is relatively straightforward, often guided by predetermined paths. However, let us pause to contemplate a variant: What if the drowning man in peril was not a mere stranger, but instead someone deeply cherished? The fundamental ethical challenges remain constant when seeking to embody an act of love within the framework of Christian ethics, yet the stakes would intensify considerably. What might initially appear as a far-fetched, detached-from-reality dilemma now gains a more relatable dimension. Once again, I pose the question: what if the drowning loved one similarly wishes to embody an *agapē* sentiment?

Consider the ages of the individuals within this dilemma. Age can significantly alter the ethical calculus. If the drowning person were an infant or a young child incapable of making rational decisions, the responsibility for the decision would shift to the person on the shore. In such cases, the inherent duty to protect and care for a vulnerable life could compel the individual on the shore to intervene, regardless of the expressed desire of the drowning person.

However, if both parties were adults with full agency, a more sophisticated web of considerations emerges. Here, the principles of autonomy and respect for the drowning person's wishes come into play. The ethical path becomes less clear-cut, as the person on the shore must weigh their moral obligation to honor the other person's autonomy against their inherent human instinct to preserve life. Though countless ethical scenarios could be formulated for this dilemma, the situation only grows more problematic. Perhaps the solution to the drowning-man dilemma lies outside of sole Christian ethics.

Delving into these distinct ethical frameworks reveals their strengths and limitations in addressing the drowning-man dilemma. Consequentialism provides a lens through which we weigh potential outcomes, but it requires careful calibration to avoid neglecting fundamental human values. Prioritizing life, as advocated by some ethical perspectives, underscores the intrinsic worth of individuals, yet its application must navigate potential infringements on personal autonomy.

Deontology's emphasis on duties instills a sense of moral obligation, yet its practicality becomes more sinuous when duties compete. In our dilemma, the absence of a clear hierarchy of duties underscores the challenge of applying deontological principles to complex real-life situations. Virtue ethics extol virtues like compassion and courage, yet it lacks a clear demarcation for distinguishing when courage transitions into the excess of foolhardiness. By contemplating various ethical perspectives, we could arrive at an educated decision, but does it truly align with what is the right one?

CONCLUSION

This brings me to a conclusion I often find in ethical dilemmas like this one, even if it is one of my own creation. There is not a single definitive answer or solution. Akin to the life of a philosopher, what emerges is the recognition that the application of a fluid spectrum of conceptions is requisite. Amidst this contemplation, my inclination resonates with the notion that love ought to assume a paramount role. Perhaps, at its essence, love embodies the capacity to transcend singular principles, striving for the optimal outcome.

Central to our exploration lies the Protestant prominence of love—a love stemming from New Testament teachings and characterized by self-sacrifice, exemplified in Christ's ultimate act. This love, *agapē*, surpasses personal desires, embodying the essence of Christian ethics. Yet, as our inquiry deepened into the drowning-man dilemma, we encountered the paradoxical tension arising when this sacrificial love converges with the intricacies of real-world impasses.

This ethical dilemma's uniqueness lies in its simultaneous examination of both individuals' perspectives, encapsulating the essence of the problem, can love solely be the answer? However, as we navigate this elaborate situation, we recognize the absence of a single ethical theory capable of furnishing a conclusive answer. To me, the absence of absolute solutions underscores the journey that is ethical decision-making—a journey necessitating ongoing reflection, dialogue, and compassionate appreciation for diverse viewpoints.

In the midst of grappling with this dilemma, perhaps there lies insight in the very absence of a definitive ethical resolution. The nature of love, it appears, is inherently relative, situational, and often elusive. Our departure from this discussion should be marked not by a sense of closure, but by a deepened awareness of the ongoing, evolving nature of ethical discourse. The uncertainties we encounter within such dilemmas reflect the intricacies of the human experience itself—an experience shaped by diverse beliefs, values, and circumstances..

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