

Introduction to Ethics – Contemporary Ethical Theories

HPRS4092

Dr Angus M Slater



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

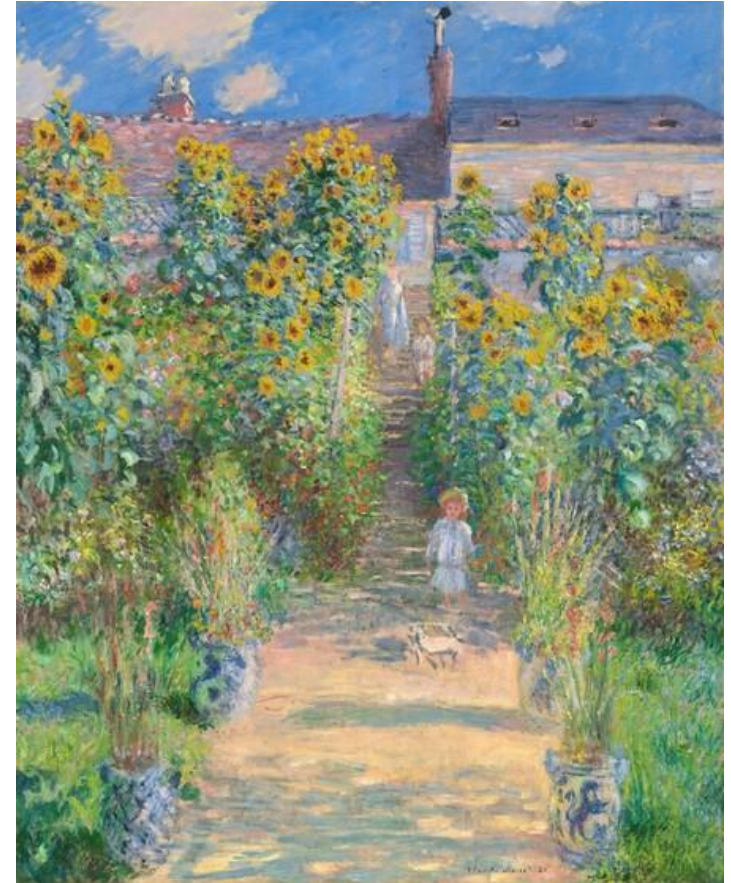
Llambled^{est}
Lampeter 1822

Contemporary Ethical Theories

In the previous section, we explored a few of the distinctive qualities of Protestant ethics, as well as some of the ways in which these distinctive qualities have raised issues in the interpretation and application of Scripture. This arises from the emphasis on Scripture within Protestantism, in contrast to the emphasis on tradition within the Catholic tradition.

In this section, I want us to examine two particular 'systems' of ethics that are often a part of Christian ethical and moral reflection – virtue ethics and situation ethics. In each case, these systems attempt to provide a holistic method for understanding ethical claims on our actions not just instance by instance, but as part of a broader ethical whole.

We begin by examining the characteristics of the historical period in which we find ourselves, before considering the ethical ramifications.



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Llambled^{est}
Lampeter 1822

Modernity



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Llambled^{est}
Lampeter **1822**

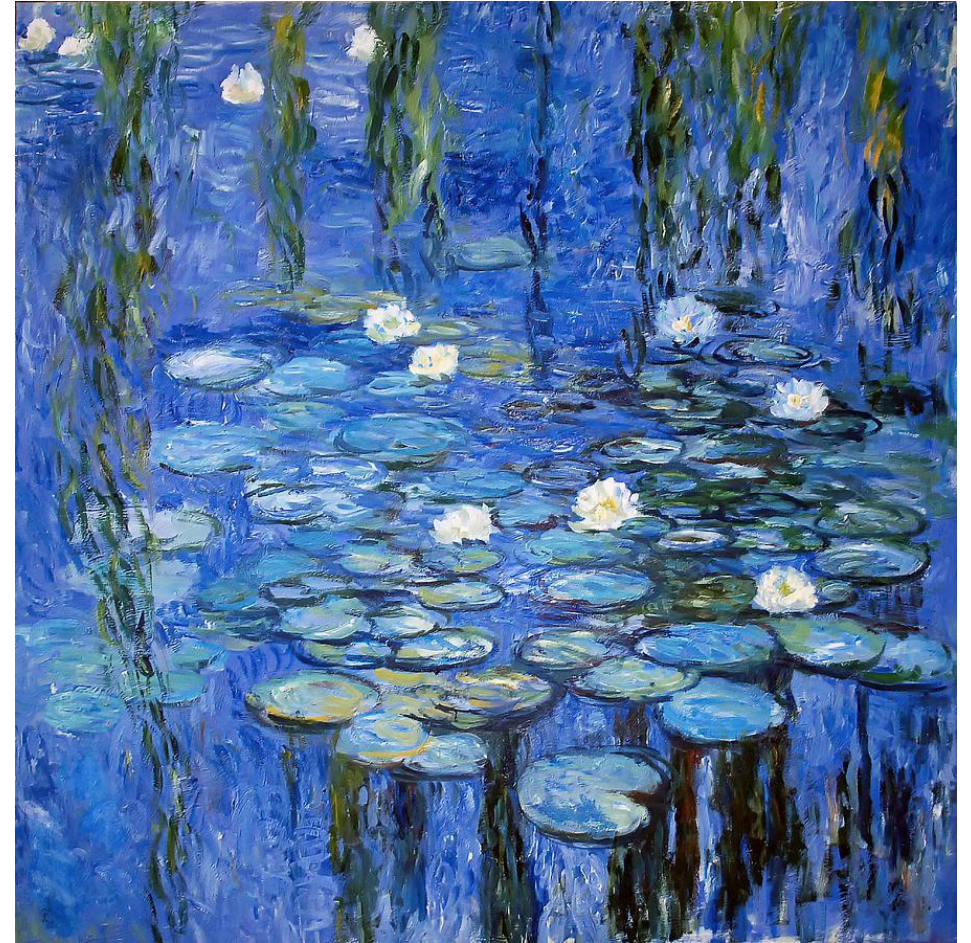
Modernity

Generally in social-scientific approaches to religion, the modern period begins with the turn to rationality during the European Enlightenment and extends to around the 1970's.

This is a fuzzy description as the processes and characteristics identified as modern naturally extend both before and after this period – there is no hard boundary and these periods elide into one another.

But what are the characteristics of the modern age?

Although not the focus of this module, I want us to take the time to lay out the groundwork for the characteristics of modernity here as it will come in useful later.



Self

Individualism -- growing stress on individuals as opposed to meditating structures such as family, clan, academy, village, church

Disenchantment of the world -- the loss of sacred and metaphysical understandings of all facets of life and culture

Subjectivism -- the turn inward for definitions and evaluations of truth and meaning

Economy

Commodification -- the reduction of all aspects of life to objects of monetary consumption and exchange

Rationalization -- the world can be understood and managed through a reasonable and logical system of objectively accessible theories and data

Secularization -- the loss of religious influence and/or religious belief at a societal level

Society

Alienation -- isolation of the individual from systems of meaning--family, meaningful work, religion, clan, etc.

Nationalism -- the rise of the modern nation-states as rational centralized governments that often cross local, ethnic groupings

Urbanization — the move of people, cultural centres, and political influence to large cities

Thought

Linear-progression -- preference for forms of reasoning that stress presuppositions and resulting chains of propositions

Objectivism -- the belief that truth-claims can be established by autonomous information accessible by all

Universalism -- application of ideas/claims to all cultures/circumstances



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

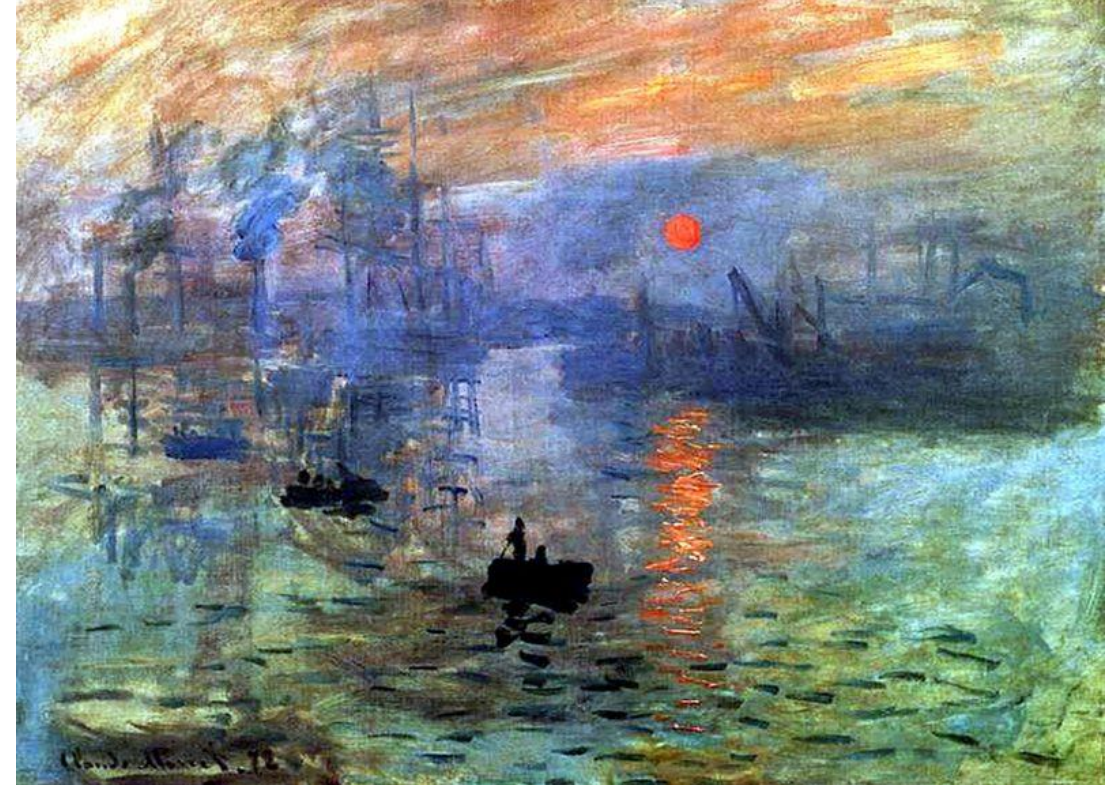
Llambled^{est}
Lampeter 1822

Modernity

All of these characteristics and processes that are intimately involved in the construction of the “modern” produce a story about what our society is and where that society is going.

This is called a “narrative” – an explanatory story for the shape of our societies that attempts to explain aspects of our societies – for example, the narrative of scientific progress explains our attitudes toward science – that science is a good thing that can eventually be harnessed to provide for all human needs.

These over-arching stories that explain the entirety of society are called meta-narratives. This term stems from its use in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* by Jean-Francois Lyotard in 1979 where it is used to help clarify the difference between “modernity” and “post-modernity”.



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Llambod^{est}
Lampeter 1822

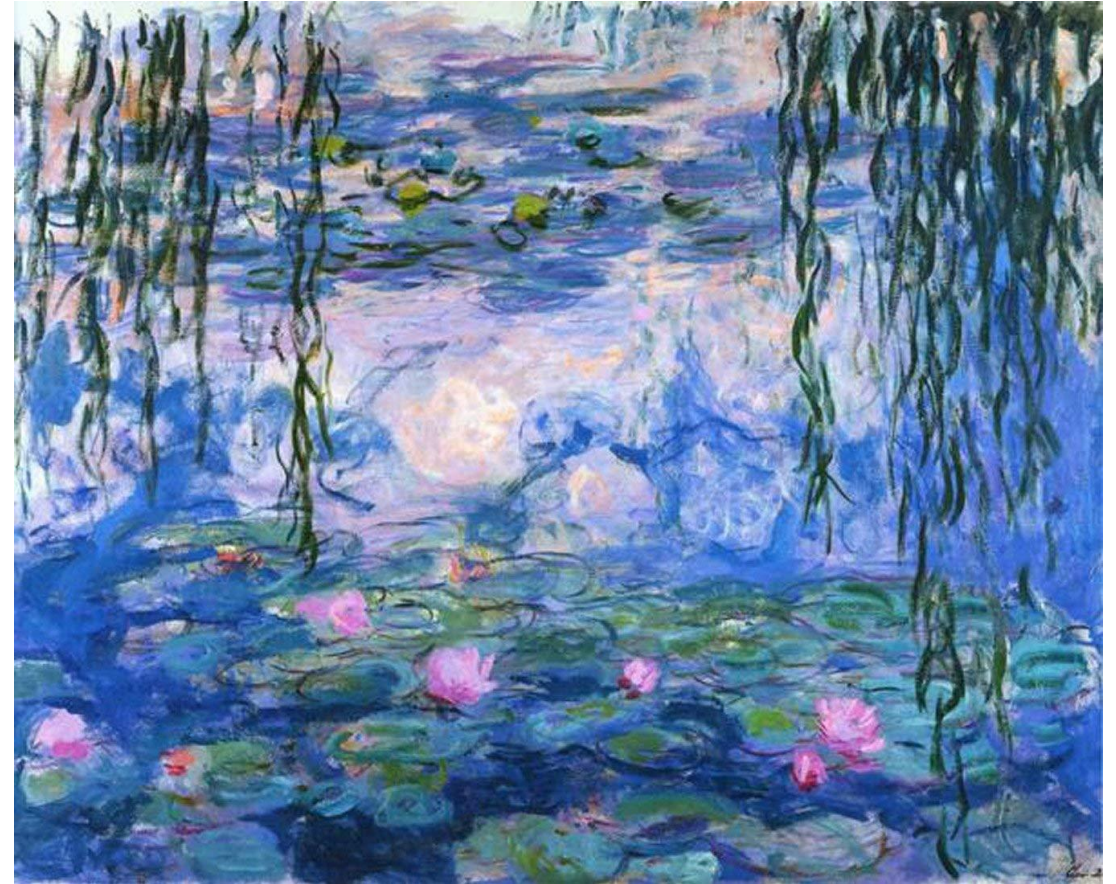
Modernity

The metanarrative that Lyotard sees as having been most important in modernity is a belief that:

- history is progressing towards social enlightenment and emancipation, and;
- knowledge is progressing towards totalisation.

Modernity is defined by Lyotard as the age of metanarrative legitimation – an age where the persuasive power of the meta-narrative is strong and compelling for us, and offers significant explanatory power for the way things are.

Does this describe your experience of the contemporary world?



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Llambod^{est}
Lampeter 1822

Post-Modernity

Lyotard famously defines the postmodern as 'incredulity towards metanarratives', where metanarratives are understood as totalising stories about history and the goals of the human race that do not adequately persuade us any more.

Through his theory of the end of metanarratives, Lyotard develops his own version of what tends to be a consensus among theorists of the postmodern – that postmodernity is an age of fragmentation, pluralisation, and characterised by the processes of modernity taken to the extreme.

Urbanisation (MOD)



Hyper-Urbanisation
(PMOD)



Alienation and *Anomie*
(Durkheim, 1897)

Individualism (MOD)



Hyper-Individualism
(PMOD)



Distrust and the rejection of
universalism (Weber, 1920)



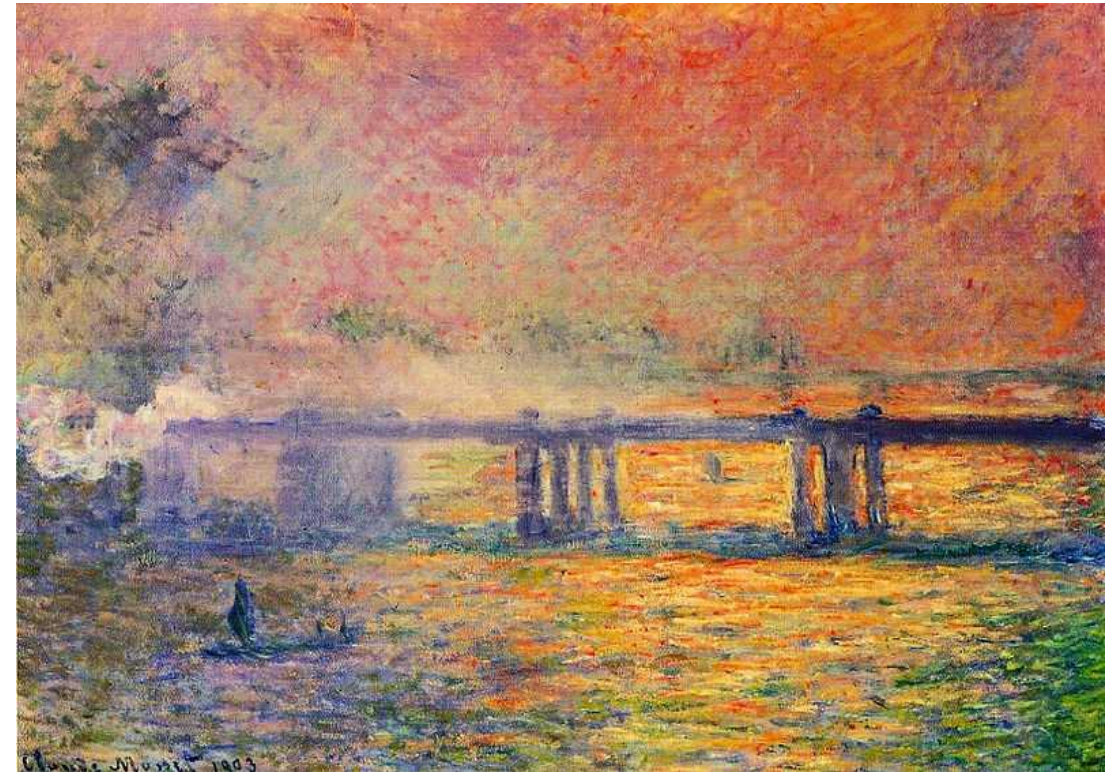
Christian Ethics in (Post-)Modernity

Christian theology and by extension, Christian Ethics, has had an ambivalent relationship to postmodernism.

On the one hand, some Christian traditions have appropriated aspects of the postmodern intellectual currents in engaging in theology.

More traditional schools of theology, however, have tended to be more critical of the tendency toward relativism within the more dominant forms of postmodern thought.

Post-modernity's rejection of universalism is difficult to navigate for a religious tradition that is founded on the universal applicability of its beliefs.



Situation and Virtue Ethics



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Llambed^{est}
Lampeter 1822

Situation and Virtue Ethics

I want to turn, in this second half, to looking at two systems of ethics that have become popular ways of systematising and thinking through moral and ethical reflection in the Christian tradition in the contemporary period.

There are two – situation ethics and virtue ethics – that have both received a great deal of attention and work from within the Christian community.

They also approach the notion of ethics from different perspectives – a useful exploration before we turn to looking at specific ethical contexts through a Christian lens.

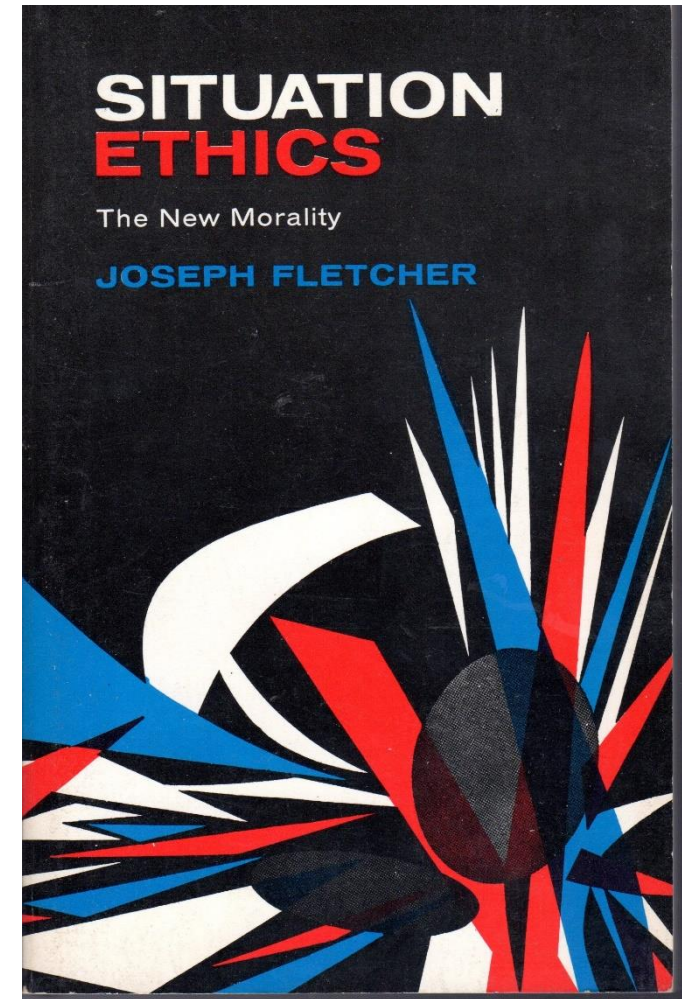


Situation and Virtue Ethics

Situation ethics is an approach to Christian ethics which argues that the rightness or wrongness of an action cannot be determined in advance of the actual concrete situation wherein those acts will take place.

This approach stresses the contextual nature of ethical instances – each ethical quandary comes from within a specific and particular set of contextual factors which must have an influence on the way we reason about the ethical quandary.

The book “Situation Ethics: The New Morality” by John Fletcher (Westminster John Knox, 1966) is generally considered the classic text on the subject.

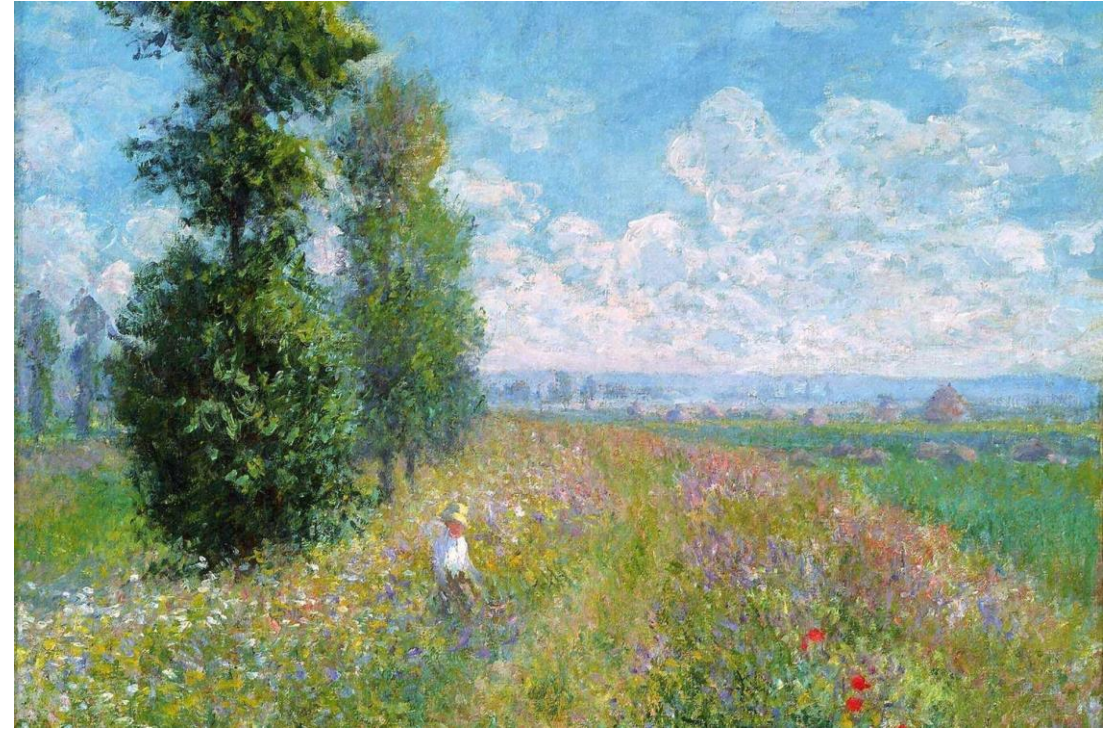


Situation and Virtue Ethics

Fletcher considers that the New Testament grounds a Christian ethic of love over any form of legalism – the expression of love in a particular instance can provide the ethical grounds to overcome any set ethical laws or regulations.

He is critical of both deontological (duty) and consequentialist approaches to ethics, arguing that the only moral duty for the Christian is the duty to love God, by loving the neighbour.

Whereas, deontological forms of Christian ethics like those which draw upon a Kantian moral philosophy in arguing that certain moral principles are categorically imperative, Christian situation ethics argues that in some circumstances some usually right act may, if performed, be 'bad', and vice-versa.



Situation and Virtue Ethics

Situation Ethics is informed by the American pragmatist philosophical tradition, in that that emphasis is on expediency and generally the 'good' is connected to the 'useful'.

It is also connected to forms of relativism, in that the rightness and wrongness of a particular action are always relative to context in which that action is to be performed, rather than to some timeless universally binding moral code.

As part of this, Situation Ethics is also connected to forms of personalism, that is a focus on the individual, rather than on an external law. What is right is what makes sense to the individual, rather than necessarily what the individual is told.



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Llambled^{est}
Lampeter 1822

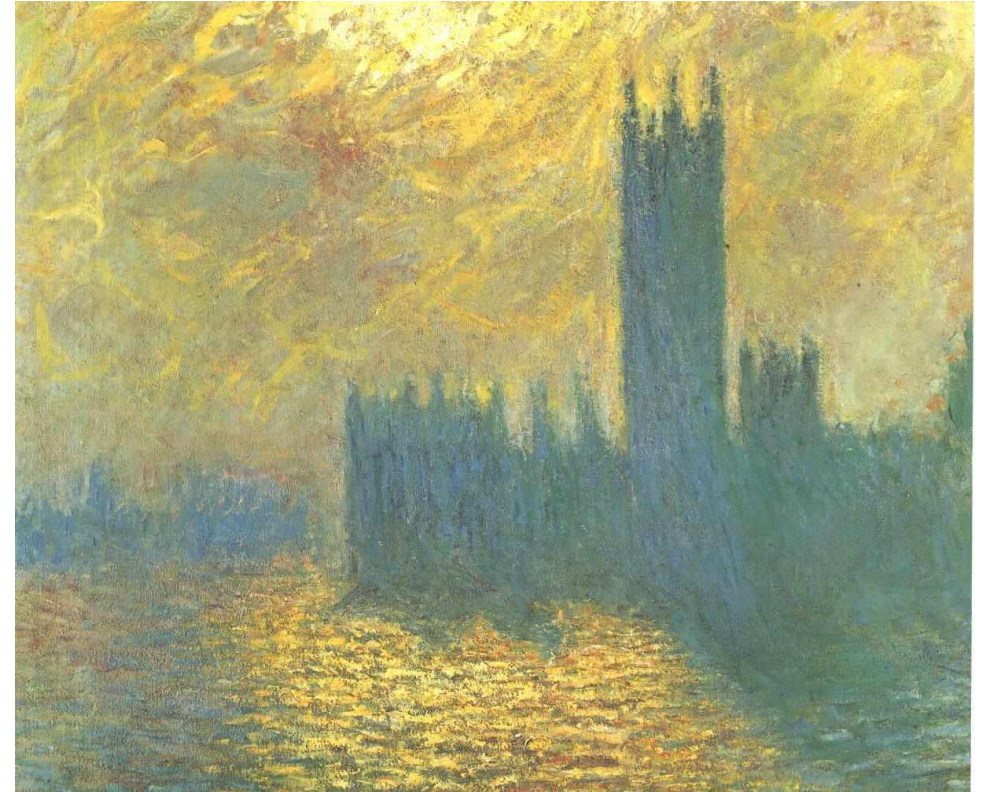
Situation and Virtue Ethics

In contrast, Virtue Ethics argues that the kind of persons we are is a more fundamental question than the kind of moral acts we perform.

For while we may, under some circumstances, do 'good' acts, these do not necessarily make us good persons.

This idea is one I hope you recognise from touching on both Aristotle and Aquinas in previous sections, but has had a significant upswing in interest in recent years amongst Christian ethicists and theologians.

The moral philosophical work of Alasdair MacIntyre has been influential in informing this renewed appreciation of the virtues in recent Christian Ethics.



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Llambled^{est}
Lampeter 1822

Situation and Virtue Ethics

Initial forms of virtue ethics emphasised the development of character as the central theme of ethics, rather than trying to define 'goodness' or 'rightness'.

It is a *eudemonistic* theory as it holds 'happiness' to be the highest goal for human flourishing.

According to Aristotle, we attain happiness by cultivating both intellectual and moral virtue. We become virtuous by habit: we deliberately and consistently choose the mean between excess and deficiency until it becomes second-nature.

“We are what we repeatedly do.

Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Llambled^{est}
Lampeter 1822

Situation and Virtue Ethics

For Aristotle, although we are naturally suited to moral goodness, we do not have an innate inclination towards them.

Rather, your habits and inclination develop with practice, and with practice and diligence you can develop a habitual and natural tendency towards right action.

The ideal action, for Aristotle, is doing the right thing because you want to do the right thing – you desire to act virtuously, and so you do.

If you act selfishly, then you will become a selfish person. Eventually, what feels right to you may be very wrong.

Thus, we must choose to be virtuous – our desire and our judgement must come to be in agreement.



Situation and Virtue Ethics

Why this contemporary alignment with virtue ethics among Christian thinkers? Virtue Ethics has become a popular topic of study because it offers a number of differing attitudes to moral reflection:

It provides new insights into moral education

Approaches moral learning as a skill
Involves the whole self: attitudes, knowledge, skill, emotion

It reorients moral theory toward excellence

Utilitarianism and deontology tend to focus on the moral minimum—what is the least we should be doing

It reorients moral thought from the actions we perform to ourselves as agents

Not, is this action right or wrong, good or bad but...

Can this action be integrated into the moral career of a good, virtuous, person?



Virtue Ethics

MacIntyre's virtue ethics argues that moral communities and the particularistic narratives by which they story themselves are crucial for the formation of moral agents.

It is not enough to merely do one or two good acts in disconnected instances, but we must seek to build moral character through our moral choices. By developing our ability to apply our ethical principles to new situations, we are able to craft and practice our ethical judgement and develop the virtues that the tradition values.

“A key part of my thesis has been that modern moral utterance and practice can only be understood as a series of fragmented survivals from an older past and that insoluble problems which they have generated for modern moral theorists will remain insoluble until this is well understood. If the deontological character of moral judgements is the ghost of conceptions of divine law which are quite alien to the metaphysics of modernity and if the teleological character is similarly the ghost of conceptions of human nature and activity which are equally not at home in the modern world, we should expect the problems of understanding and of assigning an intelligible status to moral judgements both continually to arise and as equally to prove inhospitable to philosophical solutions.”

MacIntyre, After Virtue



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Llambled^{est}
Lampeter 1822

Situation and Virtue Ethics

This notion of community, and its tradition, is incredibly important for the attraction of Virtue Ethics for the Christian tradition.

MacIntyre brings out the communitarianism seen in Aristotle, and argues that the perfection of moral behaviour occurs only within structured and coherent traditions – we learn how to do good, by imitating and reacting to those around this.

This makes the Christian community the pre-eminent field for the perfection of Christian moral behaviour and makes the ecclesiology (reflection on the nature and makeup of the Church) of Christianity vitally important.

“A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tend to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.”

MacIntyre, After Virtue



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Llambled^{est}
Lampeter 1822

Reading

The compulsory reading for this section is:
Gill, R (2017) 'Cult books revisited: Joseph Fletcher's *Situation Ethics*', *Theology*, 120:2, pp. 93-99

Sanford, Jonathan J. "INTRODUCTION." In *Before Virtue*, 1-20. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2015

I would also recommend both "Origins of Contemporary Virtue Ethics" and "Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Virtue Ethics" in the same volume. All are available on the Moodle page.



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Llambled^{est}
Lampeter 1822