

# MORAL RELATIVISM AND THE LOSS OF ETHICAL ANCHORS: A MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHICAL RESPONSE TO CONTEMPORARY ADVERSITIES

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## ABSTRACT

In the modern era, moral relativism has become a dominant cultural paradigm, challenging traditional ethical frameworks and creating uncertainty in both private conscience and public morality. This paper addresses the contemporary scourge of moral relativism through the lens of medieval philosophy. In particular, the paper draws on the thought of Augustine, Bonaventure, and Thomas Aquinas. Rooted in a synthesis of classical reason and Christian theology, these thinkers offer a robust framework for grounding ethics in universal truths. The medieval view of the human person, created in the “*imago Dei*” and oriented toward the good, provides a metaphysical and moral anchor that is often lacking in relativistic ethics. For example, Aquinas’s theory of natural law asserts that moral truths are objective, intelligible through reason, and ordered toward human flourishing (the beatitudes). Augustine’s emphasis on the restless human heart seeking truth and Bonaventure’s integration of divine illumination emphasize that authentic moral life is grounded in transcendence. In contrast to today’s fragmented moral landscape, this medieval legacy offers a coherent ethical order that upholds the integral dignity of the human person. By drawing on this insight, we can resist nihilism and reestablish a shared moral vocabulary rooted in reason, virtue, and the transcendent good. This paper argues for the recovery of medieval moral philosophy as a crucial resource for reconstructing moral meaning in a post-truth world.

**KEYWORDS** - Moral Relativism, Natural Law, Medieval Philosophy, Ethical Foundations, Aquinas and Augustine

## INTRODUCTION

The contemporary world is facing a moral crisis marked by the widespread rise of moral relativism. This is because moral judgments are based on individual or cultural perspectives and lack universal validity (Duncker, 1939). In a world shaped by secularization, pluralism, postmodern skepticism, and digital fragmentation, many have questioned whether shared moral foundations can exist at all (Kasselstrand et al, 2023). This situation is particularly acute in public discourse, education, and policymaking, where consensus on right and wrong seems increasingly blurred (Macintyre, 1981). The resulting loss of moral anchors has profound consequences for human dignity, justice, and social cohesion (Jackson, 2024).

Moral relativism is often expressed through subjective ethics, the erosion of objective moral norms, and the prioritization of personal or group identity over universal human values (Duncker, 1939). While such pluralism may arise from a desire to respect diversity, it can also lead to moral paralysis and a breakdown in collective responsibility (Taylor, 2007). As moral decision-making becomes more individualized, society struggles to address global issues that demand shared moral vision, such as environmental responsibility, bioethical dilemmas, and political corruption (Brodeur, 2012).

This paper suggests that medieval moral philosophy, especially as articulated by thinkers such as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Bonaventure, provides essential resources for rethinking ethics in a relativistic age (Kent, 1995). These philosophers affirmed a vision of man as a moral agent directed toward objective truth and ultimate goodness, based on reason and transcendence (Smith, 2021). In particular, Aquinas's natural law theory, Augustine's theocentric ethics, and Bonaventure's doctrine of illumination provide solid foundations for moral reflection and action (Wawrykow, 2005). This foundation is confirmed even in the face of contemporary crises, as natural law protects moral norms (Finnis, 2011).

The aim of this study is to critically examine the contemporary moral crisis through the lens of medieval thought. By drawing on the moral frameworks of these thinkers, we argue that a new moral realism, anchored in metaphysical and theological commitments, can counter the disintegration of the moral order in the postmodern world. Despite changing cultural and historical contexts, essential insights from medieval moral reasoning remain particularly relevant today and can help restore moral coherence and integrity.

Scholarly engagement with moral relativism has now expanded, particularly in philosophy, theology, and ethics, but its implications are still contested. Works such as MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981), critique and argue that the abandonment of Aristotelian and Thomistic teleological ethics has eroded moral discourse, leaving behind moral languages that are incompatible with modern societies. Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007) similarly identifies the informal nature of the modern moral imagination, rooted in secularism and excessive individualism, and demonstrates that it has eroded shared ethical frameworks. More recently, Kasselstrand, Zuckerman, and Cragen have examined how secularization exacerbates this problem in *Beyond Doubt* (2023), arguing that pluralism and the decline of religious authority contribute to the uncertainty of public morality. Liz Jackson's *Why Educate? Competing Ethical Frameworks in the Practice of Education* (2024) highlights this crisis in education even more clearly. Together, these studies emphasize the urgent

need to reclaim ethical foundations that can sustain justice and social cohesion, where the lack of shared values undermines coherent moral construction.

One major response to relativism has been the revival of natural law theory and virtue ethics. Servais Pinckaers argues in *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (1995) that the rejection of classical natural law in favor of legal or subjective approaches has deepened moral confusion. John Finnis's *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (1980; 2011) provides a rational, objective basis for moral norms that are consistent with pluralism, and Robert P. George's *In Defense of Natural Law* (1999) defends natural law as a resource for contemporary legal and political debates. These works reveal that medieval moral theories are not obsolete but retain relevance for modern moral challenges such as human rights violations, bioethical dilemmas, and political corruption.

In addition, scholarships have increasingly explored the enduring importance of medieval thinkers themselves. Bonnie Kent's *Virtues of the Will: The Transformation of Ethics in the Late Thirteenth Century* (2002) shows how late medieval transformations of ethics illuminate enduring questions about the will and virtue, and Joseph P. Warrickow's *The Westminster Handbook to Thomas Aquinas* (2005) presents Aquinas as a key resource for understanding the integration of reason and morality. More recently, Russell B. Smith's chapter on *Aquinas, Sermo Modernus—Style Preaching, and Biblical Commentary* (2021) demonstrates the continuing influence of academic methods in theology and moral reasoning. Thus, while medieval philosophy is recognized for its rigor, Augustine, Aquinas, and Bonaventure have offered studies that apply directly to the contemporary problem of moral relativism.

This paper contributes to filling the above-mentioned research gap by providing systematic engagement with these three medieval thinkers. By reclaiming their insights into natural law, transcendence, and divine illumination, it seeks to demonstrate how medieval philosophy can serve as an effective response to the moral disorientation of the postmodern era.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a philosophical and historical-analytical methodology designed to compare medieval moral frameworks with contemporary moral dilemmas within a qualitative research methodology. The research problem is investigated through four stages.

1. **Textual Analysis of Primary Sources** - Augustine's Confessions, Bonaventure's Journey of the Mind to God, and Aquinas' Summa Theologica (I-II, q. 94, a 2-5 especially on Natural Law) are used as primary sources. These texts are read for their central moral statements, with attention to their metaphysical and theological presuppositions.
2. **Conceptual clarification** – Extracting key principles such as natural law, divine illumination and the orientation of the will towards God and situating them in their medieval intellectual contexts.
3. **Comparative evaluation** –Placing these medieval concepts in dialogue with contemporary accounts of moral relativism, drawing on contributions by MacIntyre,

Taylor, Finnis and recent contributions by Smith, Kasselstrand, Jackson and others, and highlighting both continuities and tensions in these comparisons.

4. **Critical application** – Assessing the relevance of medieval insights to today’s pluralistic and secular societies. This involves asking not whether medieval norms can be transplanted wholesale, but how their underlying principles, such as reason, virtue and transcendence, can be reformulated as resources to address ethical fragmentation.

This methodology ensures that the study avoids both uncritical nostalgia for medieval frameworks and a simplistic denial of their relevance. Instead, it adopts a balanced and reflective approach that draws on lasting ethical insights while recognizing their contextual limitations.

## RESULTS

The current study identifies three fundamental ethical principles in medieval philosophy that challenge modern moral relativism and provide a framework for ethical renewal.

1. **Objective moral order:** Thomas Aquinas grounded morality in natural law, understood as a rational participation in eternal law (*Summa Theologica* I-II, s. 94). According to Aquinas, moral truths are universal and can be discovered through reason. Moreover, they are aimed at human well-being. These contrast sharply with relativism, which views morality as culturally contingent or subjective (Youvan, 2024). Principles such as human dignity and justice reflect objective goods inherent in human nature, not merely social constructs. In contemporary debates on human rights, bioethics, and social justice, Aquinas’s rational framework provides a stable basis for dialogue and policymaking (Xuan Dung, 2022).
2. **Moral Orientation Towards the Divine:** Augustine emphasizes the existential dimension of morality, stating that human fulfillment lies in orientation towards God (Confessions I.1). Unlike relativism, which privileges individual autonomy, Augustine’s theocentric view asserts that authentic freedom aligns the will with divine truth. This perspective addresses modern moral disorientation. By situating ethics, especially in secular, consumerist societies, it highlights that rational systems alone cannot fully account for human moral experience (McDowell, 2022).
3. **Moral Knowledge as Illumination:** Bonaventure points out that moral understanding requires divine illumination along with reason (The Journey of the Mind to God). Ethics is therefore relational and transformative, combining reflection and humility with rational inquiry. In doing so, it resists the reduction of morality to opinions or procedural reasoning. It demonstrates that spiritual insight is essential to the construction of a holistic ethic (Sontag & Roth, 2022).
4. **Towards a Coherent Contemporary Framework:** This insight synthesizes reason (Aquinas), transcendence (Augustine), and illumination (Bonaventure) into a unified framework that resists relativism. The rational basis of Natural Law offers universal principles for justice, such as grounding environmental ethics in the intrinsic goodness and

order of creation, not mere utility (Youvan, 2024). Meanwhile, Augustine's emphasis on the heart's restless search for truth provides existential meaning in secular contexts that often suffer from moral disorientation. Finally, Bonaventure's doctrine of illumination offers a non-reductionist model for moral education that develops both intellect and character by demanding spiritual insights beyond procedural reasoning (Valco et al, 2015).

- 5. Implications:** Medieval moral thought provides practical resources for contemporary moral renewal. It supports shared values based on reason, virtue, and transcendence, and allows for dialogue across cultural and religious divides. It avoids reductionism or authoritarian impositions. This integrated model reaffirms moral truth, human dignity, and the transformative potential of moral life and demonstrates their enduring relevance in addressing modern moral challenges.

## DISCUSSION

Findings suggest that medieval moral philosophy offers an intellectually robust and spiritually rich alternative to contemporary moral relativism. The appeal of relativism lies in its tolerance and flexibility (Taylor, 2007). However, its lack of a moral foundation often undermines public discourse, moral construction, and social justice. In contrast, the medieval view insists that moral truths are real, objective, and accessible, and that they are oriented toward transcendence and human flourishing (Pinckaers, 2001).

The reclaiming of natural law theory is particularly relevant in today's fragmented world. As John Finnis and Robert P. George argue, natural law can serve as a rational basis for rights, justice, and the common good without relying on religious principles (Finnis, 2011; George, 2004). Thus, natural law can be adapted even to pluralistic contexts. However, medieval ethics reminds us that moral knowledge is not purely procedural; it is existentially transformative, as Bonaventure's mystical vision and Augustine's inner search reveal (Kent, 1995).

On the other hand, Aquinas presents a detailed account of natural law as rationally intelligible and objective, serving as an anchor for human behavior. Although the principles of natural law can be known only through reason, Aquinas grounds this law metaphysically as a rational participation in the eternal law of God (Dimmock & Fisher, 2020). He asserts that complete and ultimate happiness (beatitudo) is ultimately unattainable in this life, thus directing moral life toward transcendence. This subtle distinction allows his ethical framework to remain spiritually profound while still being accessible to non-theological reasoning (Floyd, 2022).

However, there are challenges. Applying medieval thought today requires translating metaphysical assumptions into understandable frameworks in secular or interreligious dialogue (Macintyre, 1981). Moreover, the risk of individualistic nostalgia or authoritarian coercion that moral relativism fosters must be avoided (Taylor, 2007). The goal is not to return to medieval Christendom, but to recover timeless moral understandings that are consistent with contemporary norms of human dignity and reason (Kent, 1995).

A particular strength of the medieval view is its integration of reason, will, and love (Wawrykow, 2005). In a time when moral confusion often leads to apathy or nihilism, the medieval emphasis

on the unity of virtue, teleological ethics, and truth provides a powerful counterpoint (Kent, 1995). Rather than moral fragmentation, it suggests a moral coherence rooted in the very nature of the human person (Langan, 1977).

## LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES

While medieval philosophy offers a powerful corrective to moral relativism, several challenges must be acknowledged.

- First, its frameworks assume a metaphysical and theological worldview that is not universally shared today. In secular or interfaith contexts, divine illumination or theocentric ethics may be questionable. Thus, translating these concepts into philosophical language is necessary to satisfy a variety of audiences (Dunhua, 2021).
- Second, moral relativism itself often emerges from positive motives such as respect for cultural diversity, resistance to authoritarianism, and acceptance of human fallibility. Any recovery of medieval insight must take these concerns seriously. Moral realism could be mistaken for rigid fundamentalism (Dominici, 2018).
- Third, there is a methodological risk of timelessness. Applying premodern categories too simply to postmodern contexts can distort both. To guard against this, medieval thought should be used as a resource rather than a ready-made solution, with careful attention to historical differences (Haaparant, 2012).

Finally, the scope of this study is limited to three major thinkers: Augustine, Aquinas, and Bonaventure. Further research could broaden the analysis to include figures such as Duns Scotus or William of Ockham, or to explore cross-cultural perspectives that could enrich the dialogue between medieval moral philosophy and contemporary ethics. By acknowledging these limitations, the study underscores its balanced approach; it is able to affirm the relevance of medieval insights while being attentive to the complexities of their modern application.

## CONCLUSION

The contemporary adversity of moral relativism reflects not just a theoretical dispute, but a living crisis of moral orientation in both individual and collective life. Without common standards of right and wrong, societies are vulnerable to fragmentation, injustice, and secularization in the face of urgent global challenges. This paper argued that the medieval moral philosophies of Augustine, Aquinas, and Bonaventure provide the intellectual and spiritual resources with which to resist such breakdown. By grounding morality in objective truth, rational inquiry, and transcendence, these thinkers provide a framework that secures human dignity and moral responsibility. Augustine's theology of the restless heart, Aquinas's natural law, and Bonaventure's doctrine of illumination together suggest that the moral life is relational, rational, and ultimately oriented toward the common good.

However, important limitations remain. Medieval frameworks assume a theistic worldview that is not immediately convincing in secular or interreligious contexts. Translating metaphysical

assumptions into terms accessible to pluralistic societies is, therefore, very necessary. Moreover, the appeal of relativism, namely its tolerance, flexibility, and respect for cultural diversity, cannot be ignored. Renewed moral realism should learn from these insights, affirming shared truths that sustain justice and solidarity while avoiding authoritarian impositions.

Future work should focus on interdisciplinary dialogue, integrating medieval moral philosophy with contemporary developments in political theory, education, and bioethics. In particular, a critical research agenda should explore ways to translate metaphysical assumptions into rational frameworks that are accessible to secular and interfaith audiences. Such an effort at translation could refine natural law reasoning to articulate objective norms for human rights, social pluralism, and the global common good.

Rather than advocating a nostalgic return to medieval Christendom, the aim is to reclaim enduring principles—reason, virtue, and transcendence—that can enrich modern moral discourse. By reconnecting with this medieval heritage, we can resist nihilism and reestablish moral coherence in a world searching desperately for moral anchors.

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