

Ascendant Realism

*A Philosophy of Purposeful Growth,
Virtue, and Control*

by

Craig S. Wright

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Preface

This is a book written against erosion. Not only the erosion of culture, but of clarity; not only of beauty, but of belief; not merely of form, but of the faculty to recognise form as meaningful. It is a work against the slow dissolution of foundations—the hollowing out of judgement, purpose, proportion, and presence. It is written in the conviction that a civilisation dies not when it is defeated from without, but when it forgets what it is for.

Ascendant Realism stands as a reclamation: of value, of hierarchy, of intelligible order. It argues not for the past as such, but for what the past preserved and articulated—those first principles that bind metaphysics to matter, morality to design, and culture to truth. The chapters herein are not arranged as a technical manual or a detached philosophical meditation, but as a liturgy of recovery: of the good, the beautiful, and the true in their embodied, civic, and architectural forms.

Modernity has made a cult of inversion. Ugliness parades as authenticity; fragmentation as freedom; ambiguity as depth. In such an age, realism—properly understood—is not an aesthetic stance, but a metaphysical rebellion. It refuses the fiction that all values are negotiable, all standards arbitrary, all ends subjective. It insists that reality is structured, that form follows nature, and that to live well is to live in accordance with what is.

This work is not neutral. It takes sides—openly and unapologetically—for civilisation against barbarism, for design against entropy, for meaning against the void. Its realism is ascendant not because it flees transcendence, but because it roots itself in it. In an age intoxicated by

novelty, we contend here for wisdom. In a culture that prizes disruption, we write in defence of continuity. And in a time when purpose is outsourced to algorithms, this book is a call to responsibility: to build, to judge, to preserve, and to elevate.

What follows is not merely argument. It is architecture-moral, spatial, aesthetic. It is a scaffold for those who would restore, not merely critique; who would inherit, not merely improvise. It is offered not to the distracted, but to the disciplined. Not to the passive consumer, but to the steward and the builder.

The task of our time is not to invent civilisation. It is to remember it. And then, to rise.

Part I

Prelude: Ontological Foundations and the Moral Frame

Chapter 1

Metaphysical Realism and the Moral Order

The Nature of Being and the Possibility of Ethics

Ethics begins not with prescriptions but with ontology. The question of what one ought to do is unintelligible until we first settle what it means to be.¹ To act morally, one must exist as a being capable of directed action, of rational orientation, and of self-reflective judgement. Hence, ethics cannot be disentangled from metaphysics. All ethical thought presupposes a structure of being in which the concepts of purpose, agency, and identity are possible. Moral action assumes an actor—a unified entity with continuity, with will, with identity over time—and it assumes that this actor exists within a world that is not merely a flux of subjective appearances, but a coherent, intelligible reality.²

Modernity's rejection of metaphysical realism undermines the very ground upon which ethics must be built. When the real is treated as unknowable, when the world is taken to be a mere projection of mental states, then ethics collapses into preference. The *is* becomes

¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970). Murdoch argues that moral philosophy cannot be discussed without reference to the nature of reality, stating that we must define man's nature before we can define his good.

² Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). Taylor argues that human agency is constituted by "frameworks" of qualitative discrimination, and that to be a self is to be oriented toward the good.

severed from the *ought*, and no bridge is left.³ But being and value are not so easily prised apart. To be is to be something rather than nothing, and what something is determines what it is for. A knife is for cutting because of its form. Likewise, a man's nature-the structure of his rationality, will, and appetite-sets the conditions for his flourishing. Teleology, thus, reasserts itself not as mysticism but as necessity.⁴

This is not to reduce ethics to biology or to strip it of its normative force. Rather, it is to affirm that morality must be rooted in the nature of things. The alternative is a morality unmoored from reality, a floating abstraction subject to the winds of sentiment and the whims of ideology. One cannot derive duty from chaos. One cannot bind the will to an illusion. It is only within a structured order of being-where entities possess natures, and those natures entail proper modes of functioning-that normativity becomes intelligible.⁵

This ontological grounding of ethics does not eliminate freedom but defines its boundaries. A human being acts freely only when he acts according to his nature-not merely in line with impulse, but in accordance with the form of a rational agent. This, then, is the condition of moral responsibility: that man is a being capable of knowing the good and orienting his action toward it. Without such a being, the entire edifice of ethics collapses. With it, the door to virtue

³ G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy" (1958). Anscombe critiques the modern separation of fact and value, arguing that moral terms like "ought" lose their meaning when severed from the teleological or divine law contexts that gave them substance.

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I. The "ergon" (function) argument establishes that the good of a thing is found in the excellent performance of its characteristic activity-for man, activity of the soul in accordance with reason.

⁵ Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001). Foot defends a naturalistic ethics where moral evaluations are akin to judgments about natural defects or excellences in living things.

opens. Thus, the possibility of ethics rests squarely on the nature of being. And it is only by returning to this foundation that any coherent moral philosophy may proceed.⁶

Universals, Particulars, and the Shape of Moral Truth

The modern mind finds itself caught between two errors: the denial of universals in the name of empiricism and the elevation of abstraction detached from form. Yet moral truth—if it is to be truth at all—must exist in a structure where the universal and the particular meet. No moral claim can have validity if it is either entirely relative to the individual case or so generalised that it loses all contact with the lived reality of human life. Universals without particulars are sterile. Particulars without universals are blind.⁷ It is only in their union that meaning arises.

Truth is not atomised; it is structured, ordered, and apprehensible. The universal gives shape to what would otherwise be chaos. It is the form without which no particular could be recognised as meaningful. A particular, divorced from any intelligible form, is a brute fact—uninterpretable, unrelatable, inert. Yet the universal without its manifestation in particular things remains abstraction, unable to touch the world. The moral life requires both: universals that give

⁶ Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966). Jonas argues for a teleological understanding of life that grounds ethics in the ontology of organic being, without theological presuppositions.

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Kant's dictum "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" parallels this realist insistence that the universal form and the particular instance must co-inhere for meaning to exist.

meaning, and particulars that challenge us to instantiate value in the concrete.

Universals, rightly understood, are not Platonic ideals floating in some inaccessible realm. Nor are they mere linguistic conventions. They are the patterns embedded in reality, discoverable by reason and instantiated in the concrete. To say that justice exists is not to invoke a phantom but to point to the order by which acts are measured.⁸ The just act is a particular realisation of the universal structure of justice, just as the triangle drawn in ink partakes of the essence of triangularity.

Moral truth, therefore, takes the form of the universal in the particular. One does not apprehend courage in isolation from situations of fear and risk; one sees it expressed in the soldier who holds his post, the mother who protects her child, the witness who speaks when silence would be safer. These are not accidents of history. They are instantiations of a structure that transcends them. Moral knowledge grows as we discern these forms-not merely repeating slogans but perceiving the shape that gives meaning to action.

To reject universals is to destroy the possibility of moral progress. There can be no justice without a conception of what justice is. No virtue without an enduring standard. A society that denies the existence of universals cannot appeal to rights, to dignity, to the good. It drowns in a sea of preferences.⁹ In contrast, a realism that affirms

⁸ This reflects the moderate realism of Aristotle and Aquinas (hylomorphism), rejecting both the separate Forms of Plato and the nominalism of Ockham. Universals exist *in re* (in the things themselves).

⁹ Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948). Weaver identifies the "defeat of logical realism" (the denial of universals) as the primary cause of Western cultural decline, leading to a fragmented world where only "brute facts" remain.

the reality of both the universal and the particular anchors ethics in the world as it is and enables it to guide us toward what ought to be.

The shape of moral truth lies in the alignment of the particular with the universal, the contingent with the permanent, the moment with the enduring. To live well is to bring these into harmony-not by arbitrary choice or collective consensus, but by discerning the form within the real and conforming to it with integrity and reason.¹⁰

Teleology Without Theology

Teleology, rightly understood, need not rely on religious dogma to be meaningful. The concept that entities possess ends, purposes, or natural functions-especially human beings-is grounded in the structure of reality itself. It is not the imposition of belief upon nature but the recognition that nature, as it is, exhibits intelligible order. The seed strives toward the tree, the eye exists to see, and the rational soul tends toward knowledge and virtue. These are not projections of faith but observations rooted in metaphysical realism.¹¹

In this framework, teleology functions independently of theological premises. It arises from the recognition that to understand a thing fully, one must understand its purpose, its proper function-its *telos*. This understanding is not confined to biology but extends to ethics, education, politics, and the very question of what it means to live well. Human beings, as rational and volitional agents, are not merely

¹⁰ John McDowell, *Mind and World* (1994). McDowell argues for a "second nature" where moral perception is the recognition of reasons in the world, blending universal norms with particular situations.

¹¹ Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (2012). Nagel argues for a secular, natural teleology, suggesting that the principles of physics and chemistry alone are insufficient to explain the emergence of life, consciousness, and reason; the universe must have a bias toward value.

collections of impulses or biological mechanisms; they are creatures whose fulfilment depends on acting in accordance with their nature.¹²

Teleological ethics holds that goodness is found in the fulfilment of potential. A knife is good if it cuts well. A teacher is good if they cultivate wisdom. A life is good if it embodies the virtues proper to rational creatures. This is not theological assertion but philosophical clarity. It anchors morality not in opinion or consensus but in the objective structure of what it means to be human.¹³

Modernity's moral confusion stems from its abandonment of this vision. Detached from teleology, ethics becomes arbitrary, reduced to preference, utility, or assertion. But when we return to the idea that man has a nature-and that this nature has an end-we recover the ground upon which moral reasoning can stand. Teleology thus provides a path to objective values without requiring theological presuppositions, not by rejecting the sacred, but by establishing first principles upon which any further claims must rest.¹⁴

The Real as the Ground of the Good

All moral reasoning ultimately stands or falls on the nature of reality. When the good is detached from the real, ethics becomes unmoored-reduced to preference, power, or sentiment. But to speak of the good

¹² Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (2001). Foot argues that moral judgments are a species of "natural goodness," akin to how we evaluate the roots of a tree or the hunting of a wolf; vice is a "natural defect" in the human form of life.

¹³ Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life* (1966). Jonas recovers the "intrinsic purposiveness" of the organism, arguing that life asserts itself against non-being, thus introducing "value" into the cosmos fundamentally.

¹⁴ Edward Feser, *Aristotle's Revenge: The Metaphysical Foundations of Physical and Biological Science* (Editiones Scholasticae, 2019). Feser defends Aristotelian teleology as essential to science and ethics, independent of theology.

intelligibly is to make a claim about what is, not merely about what is desired. The good is not an abstraction hovering above the world; it is embedded in the structure of being itself.¹⁵

The realist affirms that things have natures-determinate forms, functions, and ends-and that to flourish is to act in accordance with what one is. The knife that cuts cleanly is a good knife because it realises the potential embedded in its design. Likewise, a human life is good not because it follows impulse or satisfies appetite, but because it accords with the teleological structure of rational and relational being.¹⁶

In this light, moral failure is not merely a violation of social convention but a disfigurement of reality-a deviation from the form of the good rooted in the nature of things. The path to virtue begins not in choice but in recognition: to see clearly what a thing is, and therefore what it ought to be. This is not a circular claim but a metaphysical necessity. Ought flows from *is* only when the *is* in question is a nature, a purpose-bearing reality.¹⁷

The rejection of realism leads inevitably to moral disintegration. Without a ground in the real, the good becomes whatever a will declares it to be. This is not freedom; it is fragmentation. Only when

¹⁵ Josef Pieper, *Reality and the Good* (1967). Pieper elucidates the Thomistic principle *omne ens est bonum* (all being is good), arguing that the good is that which is in accord with reality, and evil is a defect or privation of being.

¹⁶ John McDowell, *Mind and World* (1994). McDowell argues for a re-enchantment of nature, suggesting that our "second nature" (conceptual and cultural formation) allows us to perceive the moral demands of the world as objective features of reality.

¹⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (1981). MacIntyre revives Aristotelian teleology to bridge the is-ought gap, arguing that modern ethics fails because it abandons the concept of human function.

the good is anchored in the real can human life be oriented, purposeful, and coherent. The good is not imposed upon being; it emerges from it. In recognising what truly is, we begin to discern what truly ought to be.¹⁸

¹⁸ David S. Oderberg, *Real Essentialism* (Routledge, 2007). Oderberg defends essentialism, arguing that essences ground normative truths about how things ought to behave or function.

Chapter 2

Human Nature and the Framework of Virtue

The Faculties of the Soul: Reason, Will, and Appetite

Human nature is not a *tabula rasa*¹, nor is it a chaotic flux. It is structured. The soul, in its operational unity, manifests through distinct faculties—reason, will, and appetite. These are not isolated compartments but integrated modes of being that together shape the moral potential of the person.

Reason is the faculty of understanding, discernment, and judgment. It apprehends the real, abstracts the universal, and orders particulars. Through reason, man distinguishes cause from effect, means from ends, and the good from the merely desirable. It does not invent morality but uncovers it, not by mysticism but by clarity of thought and intellectual rigour. Reason is the architect—it designs the blueprint of a life well-lived².

The will is the faculty of directed volition. It is not mere desire, nor is it blind force. It is the executive power of the self, aligning choice with judgment. The will does not operate independently of reason; it draws its legitimacy from it. To act well is not simply to will strongly but to will in accordance with the structure of the good as discerned by

¹ For the classical rejection of the blank slate in favor of innate potentiality, see Aristotle, *De Anima*, III.4, 429b-430a. Cf. Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Viking, 2002).

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 90, a. 1; John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

reason. In its integrity, the will resists tyranny-whether internal from appetite or external from coercion. It asserts moral agency³.

Appetite, though subordinate, is not evil. It is the seat of inclination, attraction, and instinct. Without it, life would be inert. But appetite left ungoverned becomes a force of dissolution. It must be disciplined, not suppressed; ordered, not eradicated. Its function is not to rule but to serve. When appetite is harmonised with reason and will, it enriches the moral life with energy, passion, and vivacity. When it dominates, it dissolves the soul into servitude⁴.

These three faculties form the architecture of the moral self. Reason sees, the will chooses, and appetite responds. Disorder arises when the hierarchy is reversed-when appetite dictates, the will is fractured, and reason becomes rationalisation. But when ordered rightly, the soul becomes a site of harmony, power, and purpose. This is not a state to be assumed, but an order to be cultivated. The noble life is the work of internal architecture-disciplined, refined, and oriented toward the true.⁵

The Structure of Virtue in Rational Creatures

Virtue is not an ornament of character nor a mere set of social conventions-it is the internal form of excellence appropriate to a rational being. It is structured, hierarchical, and developmental. Its foundation lies in the capacity of reason to discern ends worth pursuing and to order actions toward those ends through right

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III.5, 1113b; Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁴ Plato, *Republic*, IV, 442a-d; C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001).

⁵ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970).

judgment and disciplined will. In this sense, virtue is not innate, nor is it simply the absence of vice; it is the cultivated habit of alignment with the good.⁶

Every rational creature possesses the latent potential for virtue, but potential is not actuality. Virtue requires training, habituation, and above all, orientation. The cardinal virtues—prudence, courage, temperance, and justice—represent the architecture of a morally coherent life.⁷ Prudence aligns action with truth; courage steadies the will in the face of fear; temperance governs appetite under reason; justice orders the self in relation to others. These are not isolated traits, but interdependent faculties operating in an integrated moral organism.

Virtue is both functional and teleological. It equips the agent to perform the functions that accord with human nature—rational deliberation, free choice, creative productivity, and relational responsibility. But it also directs the self toward its telos: to flourish through disciplined excellence. Thus, virtue is not merely rule-following. It is a mode of being—a habitus⁸—forming the character of a life that wills the good because it sees the good.

Crucially, virtue is not an abstract ideal but a lived architecture. It begins with the internal hierarchy of the soul. Reason must govern; will must follow; appetite must be trained. From this ordering flows an outward harmony with the moral order of reality. A virtuous person is not simply one who acts rightly, but one whose being has

⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II.1, 1103a.

⁷ Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966).

⁸ Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); cf. G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958).