

## Natural law and feminism: a critical examination

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Опубліковано	Секція	УДК
25.12.2024	Право	340.12

**DOI:**<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14567173>

**Abstract:** This article explores the relationship between natural law theory and feminist philosophy. Natural law has historically been invoked to justify gender roles and inequalities, particularly in its classical forms associated with thinkers such as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. However, contemporary feminist philosophers have challenged these traditional interpretations, arguing that the concept of natural law can be reinterpreted to support gender equality. This paper critically examines both the historical and contemporary intersections between natural law and feminism, evaluating the potential for natural law theory to contribute to feminist thought in its struggle for gender justice.

Although natural law has historically been intertwined with patriarchal structures and used to justify gender inequality, thinkers have demonstrated both the limitations and potential of natural law theory. Traditional interpretations of natural law have been used to uphold gender hierarchies, but contemporary feminist critiques and reinterpretations of natural law offer a way forward, emphasizing justice, equality, and human flourishing. Natural law theory, through a feminist lens, can serve as a valuable tool for addressing gender inequality and advocating for a more inclusive, just society. However, this requires a radical rethinking of the fundamental assumptions of natural law, a departure from essentialist notions of gender, and an acceptance of the diversity of human experience. By challenging the historical use of natural law and promoting feminist reinterpretations, philosophers can contribute to a more just and egalitarian vision of the world that recognizes the dignity and equality of all people, regardless of gender.

Natural law remains a viable and necessary area of philosophical inquiry, one that holds the potential to both critique and reshape entrenched systems of gender-based oppression. Through a careful reevaluation of natural law's ethical foundations, we can forge a new vision of justice that honors the dignity and rights of all individuals, irrespective of their gender.

**Key words:** Natural law, feminism, equality, human rights, justice, legal norms.

### Природне право і фемінізм: критичний аналіз

**Анотація.** У статті досліджується взаємозв'язок між теорією природного права та феміністською філософією. Природне право історично слугувало для виправдання гендерних ролей і нерівності у суспільстві, особливо в його класичних інтерпретаціях, пов'язаних із такими мислителями, як Аристотель і Фома Аквінський. Однак сучасні мислителі кинули виклик цим традиційним ідеям, стверджуючи, що концепцію природного права можна переосмислити для підтримки гендерної рівності. У статті критично розглядаються як історичні, так і сучасні перетини між природним правом і

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фемінізмом, оцінюючи потенціал теорії природного права як внеску у феміністичну думку в її боротьбі за гендерну справедливість.

Хоча природний закон історично переплітався з патріархальними структурами та використовувався для виправдання гендерної нерівності, мислителі продемонстрували як обмеження, так і потенціал теорії природного права. Традиційні інтерпретації природного права використовувалися для підтримки гендерних ієрархій, але сучасна феміністична критика та переосмислення природного права пропонують шлях вперед, наголошуючи на справедливості, рівності та процвітанні людини.

Теорія природного права, крізь призму фемінізму, може слугувати цінним інструментом для вирішення проблем гендерної нерівності та захисту інтересів більш інклюзивного, справедливого суспільства. Однак це вимагає радикального перегляду основоположних припущень природного права, відходу від есенціалістських уявлень про гендер і прийняття різноманітності людського досвіду. Кидаючи виклик історичному використанню природного права та просуваючи феміністські реінтерпретації, філософи можуть зробити внесок у більш справедливе та егалітарне бачення світу, яке визнає гідність і рівність усіх людей, незалежно від статі.

Природне право залишається життєздатною та необхідною сферою філософського дослідження, такою, яка має потенціал як для критики, так і для зміни укорінених систем гендерного гноблення. Завдяки ретельному перегляду етичних основ природного права ми можемо виробити нове бачення справедливості, яке поважає гідність і права всіх людей, незалежно від їхньої статі.

**Ключові слова:** природне право, фемінізм, рівність, права людини, справедливість, правові норми.

## Introduction

Natural law theory has its roots in classical philosophy, with Aristotle and later thinkers like Thomas Aquinas providing foundational interpretations. Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics* [1], argued that human beings were naturally inclined to form families and political communities, and within these, the roles of men and women were deemed essential and hierarchical. According to Aristotle, women were naturally inferior to men in terms of rational capacity and leadership. This view influenced Western thought for centuries, and natural law became a tool for maintaining gendered inequalities in political, legal, and social systems.

Thomas Aquinas, in his synthesis of Christian theology and Aristotelian philosophy, further entrenched these hierarchical views by asserting that men and women were created for complementary but distinct roles in the family and the wider society. Aquinas framed the natural law as the divine order that governs human conduct, and while he advocated for a certain respect for women, his framework reinforced the notion that their primary role was in the domestic sphere, whereas men were meant to engage in public and intellectual life [3].

Throughout the medieval and early modern periods, natural law was invoked to rationalize the subjugation of women in both law and practice. The "natural" differences between men and women were often used to justify exclusionary practices, from limited access to education and property to outright legal disenfranchisement.

## Results

Feminist philosophers have long critiqued the use of natural law to justify gender inequalities. One of the earliest and most significant feminist critiques of natural law can be found in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Wollstonecraft rejected the assumption that women's nature was inherently suited to subordination. She critiqued the natural law-based argument that women were morally and intellectually inferior to men, calling for the equal education and rights of women based on the idea that both sexes were equally capable of rational thought [13].

At the dawn of the 20th century, natural law remained a dominant philosophical framework, particularly in Christian and Aristotelian traditions. In the context of gender, natural law was often used to reinforce the belief that men and women have distinct, complementary roles rooted in "nature."

In the early 20th century, this critique expanded, especially with the rise of liberal feminism. Philosophers like Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1949), argued that women's position as the "Other" in relation to men was not the result of biological imperatives but of cultural conditioning. De Beauvoir's existentialist feminism questioned essentialist views of gender, rejecting the idea that women's roles in society were natural or necessary. Rather, she emphasized that gender was a socially constructed category, a key idea that would later shape feminist critiques of natural law [4].

Feminists of this period also critiqued the connection between natural law and patriarchal religious traditions, particularly Catholicism, which justified women's subordination on the basis of divine law. This critique extended to the ways in which natural law was used to deny women access to reproductive rights, education, and political participation.

The post-war feminist movement in the mid-20th century deepened the rejection of natural law's essentialist assumptions, particularly regarding gender. Simone de Beauvoir's rejection of "biological determinism" influenced second-wave feminism, which increasingly viewed traditional gender roles as constructed rather than biologically determined. Feminists like Betty Friedan, in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), challenged the notion that women's fulfillment was bound to motherhood and domesticity, arguing that such roles were socially imposed and not a product of women's "natural" essence.

This period saw a growing skepticism toward natural law, particularly in its claim to objective, universal moral truths. Feminists began to challenge not only the supposed naturalness of gender roles but also the very notion of an immutable moral order that could be extracted from nature. For many feminists, the idea of natural law became increasingly difficult to reconcile with the lived experiences of women, who faced legal, social, and economic inequalities despite the supposed universality of natural rights.

At the same time, thinkers like John Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice* (1971), argued for a conception of justice that focused on fairness and equality rather than any metaphysical notion of natural law. Rawls' theory, which emphasized the importance of "justice as fairness" and the "veil of ignorance," found favor among feminists seeking a more equitable framework for understanding gender justice [11].

In the 21st century, feminist engagement with natural law took a more complex turn. While earlier feminist theories had largely rejected natural law as a patriarchal tool, contemporary feminist philosophers began to reconsider the potential of natural law to support gender justice, if properly interpreted. This shift was particularly influenced by feminist legal theorists and those advocating for a broader ethical framework that would integrate the feminist concerns for autonomy, equality, and human dignity.

One of the most significant contemporary developments in feminist natural law theory comes from philosophers like Martha Nussbaum, who argues for a "capabilities approach" to justice. Nussbaum's theory, while not a traditional natural law theory, draws from Aristotelian ideas about human flourishing and suggests that a just society must ensure that all individuals—regardless of gender—have the basic capabilities to live a fulfilling life. In her work, *Creating Capabilities* (2011), Nussbaum emphasizes the need for a political system that promotes not just formal equality, but the material and social conditions necessary for individuals to realize their full potential [10]. Her approach aligns with natural law's concern for human dignity but frames it in a more contemporary, context-sensitive way that challenges the historical gender biases inherent in traditional natural law theories.

Another important contribution comes from scholars such as Elizabeth Anscombe and Judith Jarvis Thomson, who have re-examined aspects of natural law with an eye toward

feminist concerns. For example, in her work on ethics, Anscombe critiques modern legal positivism and reasserts some elements of natural law while emphasizing that the natural law tradition must evolve in order to account for contemporary moral and social issues, including those concerning women's rights [2].

Simultaneously, feminist philosophers like Kimberlé Crenshaw, whose work on intersectionality has become foundational to contemporary feminist thought, highlight the limitations of both traditional natural law and its feminist re-imaginings [6]. Crenshaw argues that the focus on universal moral principles often neglects the complexities of how gender, race, class, and other social categories intersect. Intersectional feminism critiques both the liberal feminist focus on individual rights and the universalizing tendencies of traditional natural law, urging a more nuanced approach to justice that accounts for multiple and intersecting forms of oppression.

One of the most significant contemporary debates surrounding natural law and feminism involves the recognition of gender diversity and reproductive justice. Traditional natural law theories have been critiqued for their rigid understanding of gender as binary, viewing men and women as fixed, complementary opposites. Feminist theorists have increasingly challenged this binary view, emphasizing the fluidity of gender and the importance of recognizing non-binary and transgender identities.

In the area of reproductive justice, feminist critiques of natural law have focused on the control of women's bodies and reproductive rights. Traditional natural law has often been used to restrict women's access to contraception, abortion, and reproductive healthcare, under the assumption that women's roles are naturally oriented toward motherhood. Contemporary feminist approaches to natural law, such as those proposed by Nussbaum and other legal scholars, argue for a rethinking of these moral principles to ensure that women's reproductive autonomy is recognized as a basic human right.

The rise of transgender rights has further complicated traditional natural law's assumptions about sex and gender. A feminist natural law that truly supports gender equality must acknowledge and protect the rights of transgender and non-binary individuals, moving beyond essentialist views of gender rooted in biological determinism.

Feminist political philosophy has often been concerned with how to structure a society that is just, equitable, and inclusive. Natural law theory, in its traditional form, has typically been critiqued for supporting social structures that privilege men, often at the expense of women and marginalized genders. However, when considered from a feminist standpoint, natural law can also provide a grounding for theories of justice that transcend the limitations of pure legal positivism, which is more often concerned with the letter of the law than its moral underpinnings.

Contemporary feminist thinkers, particularly those advocating for justice in social and political realms, suggest that a feminist interpretation of natural law could provide the ethical foundation for political systems that prioritize equality of all people. One of the key contributions of feminist reinterpretations of natural law is the argument that law must be informed not just by the concept of objective moral principles, but also by the lived experiences of individuals—particularly those who have been historically marginalized.

Feminist theorists like Iris Marion Young [8] and Nancy Fraser [14] have critiqued the historical disconnect between formal justice and substantive justice, where formal equality under the law often fails to result in equitable outcomes for women and others facing oppression. A feminist reading of natural law would necessitate a shift from an abstract conception of rights based on rigid, pre-determined notions of what humans "naturally" are, toward a conception that focuses on the realization of equitable opportunities and outcomes. This includes considering the social and material conditions that women face and ensuring that the law addresses the intersectional dimensions of their experiences.

In this regard, natural law can serve as a tool for ensuring that gender justice is not just a theoretical ideal but also a concrete and actionable framework within legal and political systems. Rather than focusing on the inherent moral order that justifies patriarchal hierarchies, a feminist approach to natural law might advocate for a moral order that affirms human dignity, autonomy, and equality for all genders.

One of the most pressing issues in contemporary feminism is the recognition and affirmation of gender diversity. Traditional natural law, with its essentialist notions of binary gender roles, has often been used to marginalize non-binary, gender-nonconforming, and transgender individuals. However, feminist theorists have begun to examine how natural law might evolve to support the rights and dignity of individuals whose gender identities fall outside the male-female dichotomy.

For instance, philosophers such as Sally Haslanger have argued that a feminist conception of natural law must challenge essentialist assumptions about sex and gender and embrace a more flexible, social constructionist view of gender. Haslanger's work on gender as a social construct - where gender is not a fixed natural fact but a category shaped by social norms and power relations - can serve as a powerful tool for reimagining natural law in a way that respects gender fluidity and non-conformity [9].

By rejecting the premise that gender roles are dictated by biological "facts," feminist natural law theorists can advocate for a framework where the law recognizes gender as a spectrum and affirms the rights of individuals to define their own gender identity and expression. This would mark a significant departure from classical natural law theories that use biological determinism to justify rigid gender categories. A feminist natural law would call for legal recognition of diverse gender identities and work toward the eradication of legal and social discrimination based on gender.

Despite the promise of a feminist reinterpretation of natural law, challenges remain in reconciling natural law with feminist principles. One of the primary challenges is the persistent tension between universalism and particularity in natural law theory. Natural law traditionally claims to offer universal moral principles applicable to all human beings, yet feminists often emphasize the importance of context, difference, and lived experience. The risk of imposing a one-size-fits-all solution to complex social and political problems is particularly acute when discussing issues like gender, which is deeply entangled with culture, race, class, and historical context.

Furthermore, the very notion of "nature" itself remains contentious within feminist philosophy. Some feminist scholars, especially those influenced by postmodern and poststructuralist thought, argue that "nature" is a socially constructed category, often used to legitimize unequal power dynamics. The appeal to "natural" gender differences has historically been a tool of patriarchy, and some feminist philosophers question whether the concept of natural law can ever be fully divorced from its historical associations with oppression.

Despite these challenges, feminist philosophers continue to engage with natural law, seeking ways to repurpose its foundational ideas to challenge injustice rather than perpetuate it. This may involve drawing on aspects of natural law that emphasize human dignity, moral reasoning, and the recognition of human autonomy, while rejecting the essentialist and patriarchal elements of its tradition.

For a feminist natural law framework to be fully realized, several key considerations must be addressed. First, it must prioritize human dignity and equality as foundational principles, recognizing that all individuals - regardless of gender, race, or class - are entitled to the same moral and legal rights. This requires a departure from essentialist views that fix human nature along rigid gender lines, in favor of an understanding of humanity that embraces diversity and autonomy.

Second, a feminist natural law framework must account for intersectionality, acknowledging that individuals' experiences of gender are shaped by multiple factors, including

race, class, sexuality, and ability. Rather than relying on abstract universal principles, feminist natural law must be responsive to the specific material conditions and social contexts that affect individuals' lives.

Finally, a feminist natural law must be dynamic, evolving to meet the changing needs and realities of society. This involves recognizing that gender norms are not static, and legal and moral systems must adapt to reflect these shifts. By embracing a more flexible, inclusive understanding of human nature and social justice, feminist interpretations of natural law can play a crucial role in advocating for gender equality and social transformation.

The relationship between natural law and feminism has been fraught with tension, as natural law has historically been used to justify gendered inequalities. However, feminist philosophers have demonstrated that natural law is not inherently oppressive, and its principles can be reinterpreted in ways that support gender equality and social justice. By rejecting essentialist notions of gender and embracing a more inclusive, intersectional, and flexible approach to natural law, feminist theorists have the potential to transform this tradition into a tool for promoting human dignity, autonomy, and equality. The feminist reinterpretation of natural law is not only an intellectual endeavor but a practical one, offering a path toward a more just and equitable society for all individuals, regardless of gender.

The feminist reinterpretation of natural law has significant implications for the future of legal systems. The traditional use of natural law to justify gender-based hierarchies has long influenced the formulation of laws regarding marriage, reproduction, labor, and personal autonomy. In order to advance gender justice, feminist natural law must offer a vision of law that is not only theoretical but practical.

One of the fundamental contributions of feminist natural law theory to legal frameworks is the emphasis on human dignity as a foundational moral principle. Legal systems must move beyond a mere formal equality approach - where men and women are treated the same under the law - and instead focus on substantive equality, which ensures that laws and policies account for the historical and social contexts that create disparities between genders. This shift requires recognizing that while women and men may formally share the same rights, they often do

A feminist interpretation of natural law would advocate for legal reforms that recognize the reality of gender inequality and actively work to dismantle it. For example, issues such as reproductive rights, workplace discrimination, gender violence, and the division of labor within households must be addressed not just through the lens of formal legal rights, but with an understanding of the material conditions that contribute to these inequities. Feminist natural law theorists would argue that legal systems should not only protect the rights of women but also create mechanisms that enable women to participate fully in social, political, and economic life.

For instance, laws regarding reproductive rights could be reconceptualized from the standpoint of autonomy and bodily integrity, emphasizing the right of individuals to make decisions about their own bodies free from patriarchal interference. Similarly, feminist natural law would demand reforms in labor laws to address the gendered nature of the workplace - where women often perform undervalued care work and are disproportionately affected by wage gaps and glass ceilings.

Moreover, a feminist approach to natural law in legal systems would focus on the intersectionality of various forms of oppression. Laws must be designed to reflect not only the needs of women but also those of marginalized groups, such as women of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and women with disabilities. The feminist natural law perspective would argue that justice requires addressing multiple, overlapping axes of oppression, and that any legal framework that fails to consider the complexity of these intersections is insufficient.

The feminist reinterpretation of natural law has global implications, as gender inequalities are not confined to Western societies but are present worldwide. Feminists

working in postcolonial contexts have highlighted how natural law has been historically intertwined with colonialism, with European legal systems being imposed on diverse cultures that had their own understandings of justice and gender roles. The feminist critique of natural law, in this context, must also account for the ways in which Western notions of gender and morality have been used to justify the oppression of non-Western societies.

Feminist natural law, then, offers a global vision of justice that is sensitive to cultural differences but also committed to universal principles of human dignity, autonomy, and equality. It offers a framework that seeks to address gender-based violence, exploitation, and discrimination in various cultural contexts while also acknowledging that local communities have their own ways of understanding and resolving gender issues. Feminist natural law must work toward a global understanding of justice that can be adapted to specific cultural and historical contexts, ensuring that legal systems around the world move towards gender equality and human flourishing.

While feminist natural law offers an important critique of traditional natural law, it is not without its own limitations and challenges. One of the primary criticisms that arises from feminist philosophers is the tension between the appeal to "natural" moral principles and the goal of achieving gender justice. The concept of "nature" itself has historically been used to justify inequalities, and feminist theorists often question whether natural law's reliance on an objective moral order can ever fully align with feminist ideals of social transformation.

Critics argue that any reliance on "natural" principles risks reinforcing deterministic views of gender and sexuality, which may undermine the flexibility and diversity central to feminist thought. For example, while feminist natural law might advocate for the equal rights of women, it may inadvertently reinforce the idea that there is a "natural" essence of womanhood that needs to be protected, which could marginalize those whose gender identity does not fit into this framework. This concern has led some feminists to call for a more radically constructivist approach to justice, one that focuses less on natural principles and more on the social, historical, and political processes that shape gender relations.

Additionally, there is the risk of universalizing experiences and imposing a single vision of justice on people with diverse backgrounds. While feminist natural law seeks to provide a universal ethical framework, the lived experiences of individuals are shaped by intersecting factors such as race, class, sexuality, and geographical location. Therefore, the challenge remains in developing a feminist natural law framework that is both universal in its commitment to equality and justice while also sensitive to the nuances and particularities of individuals' lived realities [7].

Finally, feminist natural law must grapple with the tension between individual autonomy and collective social responsibility. Feminist theorists often emphasize the importance of social structures that enable individuals to live dignified and fulfilling lives. However, the traditional conception of natural law as primarily concerned with individual rights and moral autonomy may conflict with feminist calls for collective action and structural change. Feminists have long argued that social justice requires not only the protection of individual rights but also a deep transformation of societal norms and institutions. A feminist natural law must, therefore, engage with questions of social justice on both an individual and collective level.

### **Conclusions**

Despite its limitations, feminist natural law remains a compelling avenue for reimagining legal, ethical, and political systems that have long been shaped by patriarchal assumptions. Through its focus on human dignity, equality, and autonomy, feminist natural law offers a framework for dismantling gender-based oppression and promoting justice. By challenging traditional conceptions of gender roles and embracing the diversity of human experiences, feminist natural law can help create legal systems that not only protect women's rights but also advance the rights and dignity of all marginalized groups.

Natural law remains a viable and necessary area of philosophical inquiry, one that holds the potential to both critique and reshape entrenched systems of gender-based oppression. Through a careful reevaluation of natural law's ethical foundations, feminists can forge a new vision of justice that honors the dignity and rights of all individuals, irrespective of their gender.

Through its continued evolution, feminist natural law holds the potential to provide a rich, transformative framework for addressing issues of gender, justice, and equality in both philosophical and practical terms. It is a critical tool for achieving the kind of world where all individuals, regardless of gender, have the opportunity to live full, free, and dignified lives [12].

Moving forward, feminist theorists must continue to critically engage with natural law, ensuring that it evolves in ways that align with feminist values of intersectionality, inclusivity, and social transformation. This requires a commitment to rethinking the foundational assumptions of natural law, exploring the complexities of gender and justice, and pushing beyond traditional notions of "nature" to develop a more dynamic, socially responsive legal framework. Ultimately, feminist natural law has the potential to contribute significantly to the ongoing struggle for gender equality and social justice, offering a vision of law and morality that affirms the dignity of all individuals.

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