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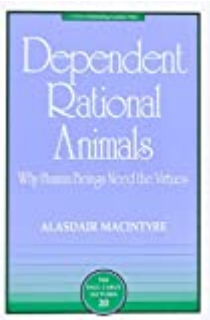

Alasdair MacIntyre. *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues.* The Paul Carus Lectures. Chicago: Open Court, 1999. xiii + 172 pp. $26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8126-9452-9.

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Vulnerable Citizens

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Aristotle gave his *Nicomachean Ethics* as lectures, and had as his subject elucidating the virtues of the excellent Athenian citizen. His later compiled lectures became one of the great works of moral philosophy in the world, and inaugurated the systematic treatment of the virtues in light of human flourishing. For the past twenty years, what is–still contentiously–known as "virtue ethics" has tried to bring back the approach to moral philosophy Aristotle inaugurated, and to have it supplement and challenge rights- or duty-based (deontological) and interest maximization (utilitarian or consequentialist) approaches to moral theory. Alasdair MacIntyre was one of the earliest proponents of this reemergence of attention to the virtues, in his *After Virtue* (1981), and worked throughout the 1980s, especially in his *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988), to open up the resources available in our conflicted cultural universe for philosophizing in this ancient manner. In 1997, he gave the prestigious Paul Carus lectures at the Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association, and these were later published as *Dependent Rational Animals*.

This book, quiet in tone and manner, attempts to replace the vision of the excellent Athenian citizen Aristotle introduced into moral philosophy with a vision of a vulnerable citizen, whose virtues are correspondingly modified to fit her vulnerability. In effect, the book amounts to a rewriting of central stretches of the *Nicomachean Ethics* from the standpoint of humans who encounter illness, disease, disability, and aging in their lives, and so must not only strive for self-sufficiency in order to flourish, but must strive as well to have what MacIntyre calls the "virtues of acknowledged dependence" on others. In this way, MacIntyre's is a subtle and grand undertaking, deeply revisionary in scope. At the same time, MacIntyre's book is fascinating from an ecological point of view, because it begins by conceiving of humans as animals, dependent on our bodies, and associated biologically in different ways with other members of the animal kingdom. In this, it remains Aristotelian, faithful to Aristotle's keen biological eye.

The book's thesis can be broken up into two negative arguments pushing us towards an account of the virtues of acknowledged dependence and a multi-part positive

account of what these virtues and their surrounding communal life are. The first negative argument canvasses the first six chapters of the book and tries to discredit the assumption MacIntyre finds in Western moral philosophy that, since we are *un*like animals, we are not open to our own bodily and vulnerable nature, nor to our emotional intelligence. MacIntyre argues against this assumption by trying to show how the line separating humans from other animals is blurred, and suggests ultimately that we, being animals too, exist along a continuum of capabilities shared by some of the other animals (or all of the other animals, if the capabilities are rudimentary enough–a point MacIntyre does not discuss). The suggested result is to have us *conceive* of ourselves as animals, and so be more open to our bodily and vulnerable nature as well as to our emotional intelligence. In order for MacIntyre to blur the line between humans and other animals, he spends most of these chapters addressing the charge that animals lack intelligence because, lacking language, they lack beliefs as well as practical reason. He tries to show, using an argument originated by John Searle, that there can be a form of belief without linguistic capability, that some animals seem to have linguistic capability anyway, and also that some animals (e.g., dolphins) have what seem to be creative practical reasoning capacities. He also points out that in infant-toddler care, we rely on emotional cues to bring infants into our world, and use practices not unlike animal training. In fact, emotional intelligence remains important our whole lives, as do some forms of emotional training.

The second negative argument, canvassing the seventh through eleventh chapters of the book, tries to show that (a) given that we are disabled or in need of help often in our lives (e.g., during childhood, old age, and illness, not to mention when permanently disabled), (b) an account of the virtues promoting human flourishing that does *not* acknowledge the disability in human life is inadequate. What is called for, rather, is a robust account of the virtues acknowledging both our independence and our dependence on others. MacIntyre discovers inspiration for this project in Aquinas's subtle modification of Aristotle via the virtues of commiseration (a secular virtue) and also of charity.

The multi-part positive account in favor of the virtues of acknowledged dependence overlaps with the second negative argument and canvasses chapters seven through thirteen (the last chapter in the book). In the first part, MacIntyre explores not only how much of our lives must deal with the vulnerability of our bodily (which includes our mental health) condition, but he also discusses how we are raised through our limited capacities as children to become independent practical reasoners. In effect, he retraces the central topic in Aristotle's account of the virtues–practical reasoning–from the standpoint of possible blocks to our independent exercise of it, and suggests further that the very development of its healthy exercise emerges, from out of childhood, in dependence upon others who augment one's limitations as a reasoner. In the second part, MacIntyre moves out from marking our dependence on others to discuss the vision of community it implies, namely, a community in which people must rely on each other at crucial junctures of their lives so as to flourish and even reason well. This vision, in effect, subverts the image of cooperative society in Aristotle's account of the virtues, which is of a society of nobles aspiring to magnanimity who positively decry dependence on others (because it shows they are less than self-sufficient, and so in Aristotle's mind less than the most virtuous they might be). In the third part, MacIntyre briefly tries to show that the vision of the *common* good he has thus extrapolated from acknowledged dependence involves shared rational inquiry, not simply about what each vulnerable citizen must do for those with disability, but also about other areas of shared practical life. Here, he suggests that a community of vulnerable citizens must be Aristotelian friends with each other–looking out for each other's goods by reasoning together about what is good–not simply out of noble choice but also out of necessity.

MacIntyre's first negative argument, on humans and other animals, is the weakest argument in the book, even though it provides thought-provoking subjects. It is unclear what the exact link is between not seeing ourselves as animal and seeing ourselves as self-sufficient. Is the claim that because we don't see ourselves as animal we won't admit we have vulnerabilities? This seems false. But to the degree it is, the first six chapters of the book are argumentatively unmoored. Also confusing is why showing animals are like *us* should make us think we are like *them*. Why not begin by showing we *are* animals? Next, it is unclear whether the strongest import of MacIntyre's argument is to extend moral standing to more animals. But that seems a tangential issue to the main argument of the book (notwithstanding the link between respect for the disabled and other animals in animal liberation literature–something MacIntyre does not explicitly address). Finally, MacIntyre wants to emphasize our use of the emotions, such as sympathy, in raising and living with each other. But there are many "animal" emotions, and it is unclear why *sympathy* should represent our an-

imality as such.

Much stronger is MacIntyre's second negative argument, and it is the real argumentative center of the book. Clearly, we humans do experience disability or limited capability for a good portion of our lives–in childhood, old age, and in any short- or long-term illness or disability. An ethics of human flourishing that is blind to that is blind to our humanity, and so is not a good candidate for a successful ethics of *human* flourishing. From out of this second and successful negative argument, MacIntyre's positive account of the virtues of acknowledged dependence is strong. Especially strong are the first and second parts of the positive account, detailing virtues in child rearing (e.g., good mothering or fathering and good teaching), commiseration, and even in the care of the severely infirm or disabled. Also brought on stage here is what does seem to be called for given such virtues, namely a community of *inter*dependent citizens who help each other out when each is disabled or limited in capacity. Given our life-cycles and human fate, it is right to claim we need a community that weaves together people through the virtues of acknowledged dependence, such as those just alluded to. In this positive account, the third part is the weakest, for all his argument from disability has solidly grounded so far is the need for common reasoning about how to care for disability, so that norms of care are at large and shared in a community. Other areas of common reasoning seem beside the point, as his first negative argument was.

For those interested in a broadly ecological orientation to life, MacIntyre's book may prove suggestive, even if his central contention concerning our likeness with many other animals seems unnecessary for his overall argument. MacIntyre sets up his book with a picture of humanity in mind. This picture dawns slowly across the whole of the book, and is largely tacit. MacIntyre envisions humanity as living *within* the animal kingdom, in close biological affiliation with other animals. This affiliation occurs through attention to our bodies, which bear the marks of our similarity to other animals, and remind us especially through our vulnerability–but one could also add our pleasure and vitality–that we are subject to the conditions of life. The upshot of this vision of humanity is to unsettle a number of important visions in the history of Western philosophy, from Plato's vision of our humanity residing in a soul detachable from our bodies, to Descartes's vision of our separate, rational being, to Kant's understanding of our humanity residing in our rational nature–a nature seemingly separable from our bodily drives and being. In this way, while MacIntyre's book is most successful as a revisionary work in virtue ethics, it is also helpful in filling out, indirectly, a picture of a more ecological humanity.

In sum, what is remarkable about this book is what it does in its second negative argument and in the first two parts of its positive account of the virtues addressing human disability. These parts of the book in themselves promote a deep reorientation of virtue ethics, away from a strictly Aristotelian inheritance and toward a more Thomistic one. This is timely. Only recently, political and moral theory have seen a flowering of work on disabled lives, from Eva Feder Kittay's work on raising disabled humans, to Martha Nussbaum's presidential address to the 2000 Central Division American Philosophical Association Meeting criticizing John Rawls for his blindness to this issue, to recent interdisciplinary publications, such as an issue of the journal *Public Culture* devoted exclusively to disability criticism. MacIntyre should be commended for not only helping to inaugurate virtue ethics in 1981, but for now challenging virtue ethics to be more human, attentive to the life-form of our animal species. Even more important is his challenge to moral philosophy today to work with a truth of the human condition, and so to begin by acknowledging that we are vulnerable.

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