

BOOK REVIEW

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Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues. Alasdair Macintyre

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Macintyre provides a lengthy discussion of man in relation to the animal kingdom. He notes that issues of vulnerability to physical and mental dangers and harms, and dependence, are important to comprehend if we are to move on to function as rational beings. One must be both independent and dependent to exist in the human social order and, Macintyre argues, to contribute to the common good. He believes that this occurs through our social relationships.

Macintyre posits that much of how we behave and/or react to situations is learned, beginning in infancy and extending over our lifetime. He uses the example of language which begins as mimicry of our caregivers verbalization. But learned behavior goes beyond our linguistic abilities. We quickly learn how to elicit responses of others. But Macintyre would argue unlike the animal kingdom.

He cites much of the research being conducted with dolphins as important in teaching us lessons in language development and in behavioral changes. Dolphins appear to direct many of their actions purposely toward goals, using any means possible to achieve their goal-oriented ends. While not citing Machiavelli, this is certainly indicative of a similar ethos. Macintyre comments on "goods" as the commodity that provides for the flourishing of both humans and other animals.

Throughout the book Macintyre compares Aristotle and Aquinas, along other ethical theorists, frequently pitting the two against each other. Early in the text he even sets Aristotle against Aquinas in the debate. Aquinas is cited as one who believes that, lacking language one cannot give reasons for actions and only those who can give reasons can act for reasons. Aquinas says that humans are rational, reason-giving animals; other animals are not. Animals, according to another ethicist, Kenny, cannot ask if their actions were for good reasons therefore, they cannot have a reason. Additionally, the ability to construct sentences (language possession) is the ability to use judgment or to have reasons for actions. However, Macintyre remains skeptical about the absolute necessity for language in communication.

Challenging Davidson's treatise that a creature cannot have thoughts unless it is as an interpreter of the speech of another, Macintyre states that language is *not* necessary to determine elementary truths and falsities and that, indeed, non-human animals correct beliefs all the time as

evidenced by their actions. He would, however, be more likely to agree with Stich, who offers that this population cannot distinguish different psychological modes of belief, i.e., tentative belief, or belief without reservation.

What are virtues (as Aristotle searched for) and what kind of life is required to exercise those virtues? MacIntyre says that the animal state (child or non-human) does have reasons for acting in one way rather than another. He says that an adult human advances to rationality by being able to evaluate reasons, to revise or abandon these reasons and to replace them with others if necessary.

Additionally, in order for humans to flourish, MacIntyre says that we must develop some range of intellectual and moral virtues in order to first achieve and continue in the exercise of practical reasoning...or, we cannot adequately care for and educate others so that they first achieve and are then sustained in the exercise of practical reasoning, (pgs. 97-98). He also says that without the virtues we cannot adequately protect ourselves and each other against neglect, defective sympathies, stupidity, acquisitiveness and malice (p. 98).

Flourishing humans also enter relationships for personal well-being (using certain individuals who can give us what we need) and ideally, for the common good as well. This, MacIntyre believes, is important as both virtues and rule-following are necessary to achieve the common good. The common good may take form as mutually advantageous relationships or as urgent necessities on the part of another. When the latter occurs, our actions/reactions are rooted in charity and become communal relationships through the virtues of giving and receiving.

MacIntyre envisions a form of political society in which disability and dependence on others is taken for granted. He states, dependence is something that all of us experience at certain times of our lives...and so we are interested in the needs of the disabled the whole society the common good (p. 130).

Many of our goods, MacIntyre claims, are shared with the governments of the modern states. He offers the idea that local communities share a rationality of the common good. He cautions that there may be competing interests in this environment. MacIntyre requires these communities meet the needs of both children and the disabled unconditionally, without restriction or expectation of these two populations making any return on the goods received. For MacIntyre, meeting this type of responsibility without a shadow of a doubt about what we ought to do is a touchstone of character. He further acknowledges that moral commitment to giving and receiving is not an external constraint but a condition of enquiry and criticism.

Where we differ from the non-human animals, MacIntyre argues, is in the chain of sound justificatory reasoning that runs from the nature of the human good to the need for each of the virtues and from what the virtues require to answer the question of what action should be performed in these particular circumstances by me here and now. And the soundness or otherwise of that chain of reasoning is what makes it practically rational or irrational to act in this way or that (p. 159).

MacIntyre challenges us to look to the very core of our being and to make us take responsibility for our actions in terms of how they affect other humans, and therefore, the common good. MacIntyre might say that the animal kingdom does react for the common good, but, as

humans, we also have an overlay of virtues that should make us far more reliable and responsible. Macintyre claims that we need the virtues of the independent practical reasoner and the virtues of acknowledged dependence. We need a “good” that has regard for every vulnerability to which our animal identity and our animal nature and our human condition expose us.