Book Review: Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need The Virtues

Nicholas Meriwether
mere historical work to be traced back to sense datum but rather a meeting point in which the human and the divine come together. The language is mystical, experiential, and spiritual. Hedley’s masterful mapping of Coleridge’s linguistic account dovetails with the speculative account of the will in a fruitful fashion that I think merits close attention. Hedley’s book is a dense work, closely argued on both historical and philosophical grounds and will richly repay a close reading. It will undoubtedly stir controversy among those who, for whatever reasons, conceive of metaphysics as alien to the gospel or as moribund. Hedley introduces a rich cast of characters, especially the Cambridge Platonists and, in particular, Ralph Cudworth. Moving these characters to the foreground is enriching both as history of philosophy as well as philosophy proper. Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion is a refreshing foray into speculative metaphysics going full tilt. It is heartening to find a willingness to sort through Platonism with a charitable eye. Hedley turns up old resources that are under appreciated and offers a fresh current of life moving within the Neo-Platonic tradition and Trinitarian speculation. Were a list of worthy Platonic scholars being compiled today, Hedley might be the next in the line of those “brisk young thinkers rendering fine things to a reluctant generation.” Heartily recommended.


NICHOLAS MERIWETHER, Shawnee State University

Those whose familiarity with the work of Alasdair MacIntyre is limited to his highly influential critique of modern ethical theory, After Virtue, may be forgiven for finding his recent publication, Dependent Rational Animals (henceforth: DRA), a somewhat puzzling departure. The reason DRA would appear to represent such an abrupt change is his assertion in After Virtue that an account of Aristotelian practical reasoning must relinquish any reference to a natural telos, or “metaphysical biology.” However, in subsequent works incrementally, and now most emphatically in DRA, he has fully embraced the view that metaphysics grounded in human biology is ineliminable from a complete account of the ethical life.

In his rich and provocative work since After Virtue and prior to DRA, MacIntyre has sought to provide a comprehensive ethical theory and moral epistemology on the basis of the phenomenon of practical reasoning. In its Aristotelian embodiment, practical reasoning describes the process by which the individual pursues goods internal to social practices by acquiring virtues, e.g., wisdom, honesty, and justice, and orienting action to those goods virtuously, i.e., in an excellent manner. This process is inherently social because the novice serves as apprentice to those who have mastered the practice, though this does not preclude the possibility that the novice will one day through acquisition of the relevant virtues exceed or
advance the practice through better reasoning about the achievement of the goods internal to it.

Now in DRA, Maclntyre examines the implications of practical reasoning for the political life of a community, and in so doing, he finds that the proper understanding of the relationship between the purely biological, hence metaphysical, needs of our species and the nature of our socialization into a community as independent, rational actors is essential to a virtue-centered ethic. Maclntyre delineates a central thesis of DRA as follows:

...the virtues that we need, if we are to develop from our initial animal condition into that of independent rational agents, and the virtues that we need if we are to confront and respond to vulnerability and disability both in ourselves and in others, belong to one and the same set of virtues, the distinctive virtues of dependent rational animals, whose dependence, rationality and animality have to be understood in relation to each other (5).

Thus, the Maclntyre of DRA is concerned with returning a concept of metaphysical biology to his neo-Aristotelianism. (Indeed, his return to biological metaphysics radically reduces the need for the qualifying prefix.) The reasons he cites for the return have to do with inadequacies and obscurities in his previous non-metaphysical account of practical inquiry that can only be addressed by taking into consideration our socio-biological condition, and hence our biological vulnerability. Attending to our biological inter-dependence reveals inter alia that Aristotle was in error to insist that the man possessing magnanimity “is ashamed when he receives benefits,” (Nichomachean Ethics 1124610) since receiving good is proper only to the inferior person. Rather, the receiving as well as the giving of benefits (goods) and our acknowledgement of our need for the benefits that only others can give is central to the acquisition of virtue, and hence to the moral life.

A constituent feature of DRA is his treatment of the uniqueness of human reason-giving. At the same time, he avers that like other advanced animal species, our reasoning cannot be and should not be separated from our animality. (The indissoluble link between our rationality and our animality on the example of the animal kingdom is the subject of chapters 2. through 6.) His conclusion is that despite our superior powers of reasoning and justification, “we remain animal selves with animal identities” (49). But whereas advanced animal species have reasons for communal actions such as hunting, shelter-building, and mating, human beings are uniquely capable of evaluating reasons, of deciding, e.g., whether the reasons provided are sufficient to justify the actions taken. In short, by dint of our superior communication skills we are able to provide reasons for our reasons. According to Maclntyre, this ability makes it incumbent upon us to engage in socially-shared moral inquiry, since on the one hand, like other animal species, we need one another to flourish biologically and socially, but in light of the human capacity (and need) for justifying our reasons for acting, we must in addition achieve shared agreement as to what constitute good reasons for acting. For those familiar with Jürgen Habermas's theory of
communicative action, there are interesting parallels here with the latter's insistence that norms are communicatively achieved, with the significant distinction that Habermas rejects the possibility of consensus about the nature of the human good in favor of formally procedural norms.

So, because we are biologically and socially inter-dependent, we must share a range of communal goods, including certain virtues that impel us to cooperate, to share, and to have concern for others. These virtues, which we also acquire though our inter-dependence, enable us to achieve the communally-shared and -justified good, both for ourselves and for others.

Having established that human flourishing is both communal and distinctly rational, MacIntyre then turns to the question of independent reasoning. While the term "independent practical reasoning" suggests for most contemporary readers a notion of moral autonomy, for MacIntyre, it refers to "the ability and willingness to evaluate the reasons for action advanced to one by others, so that one makes oneself accountable.... One cannot then be an independent practical reasoner without being able to give to others an intelligible account of one's reasoning." (105). There is unquestionably some circularity in a "social" account of independence so construed. How precisely does our being independent thinkers require an understanding of social dependence?

He first acknowledges the argument from expedience, viz., that if a person is not in a communal network of giving (care) and receiving (benefits), then that person can have no confidence that others will provide the care he needs at times of illness or injury, and such uncertainty in the light of the vagaries of human existence necessarily inhibit the practice of critical inquiry. But the requirement that I continually have for others to care for my urgent need should it arise does not bear significantly upon my acquiring the communal virtues of independent practical reasoning wherein I see my own good and the good of the community as one and the same. It is after all merely a consideration from strategic self-interest that I care for others because I may require their care for me.

But if we view independent practical reasoning as "essentially social," that is, that one cannot come to know one's own good without undertaking critical inquiry with others, we can see that the sort of relationship one would have to have with other persons must to some extent be characterized by virtues that enable him to seek out and accept criticism from others, viz., truthfulness, mutual recognition, and openness to refutation, what MacIntyre refers to as the "communicative virtues" (156, 161). And the way the individual acquires these inquiry-friendly virtues is characteristically by realizing his dependence upon the sacrifices of others for his health, his education, his safety, etc. Moreover, he is best able to appreciate the sacrifices others have made to his well-being, and also to overcome his natural shallowness and self-regard, through a proper concern and care for those who are dependent upon him, i.e., the infirm, the injured, and the ill (136-7). Besides the communicative virtues, the virtues that make the proper care and concern possible include the unique virtue of just generosity, along with more familiar virtues such as pity (misericordia) and benevolence.

Thus, the basic idea is that in order to become an independent practical reasoner, one must acquire certain virtues, and it is only possible to acquire
these virtues if he is in relationships of giving and receiving with a distinct community sharing a vision of the common good (since one cannot inquire collectively about the good without a common vision of the good). Most importantly, proper concern for those who are ill, infirm, or mentally handicapped will issue in political engagement, since the independent practical reasoner is aware that the good of those with whom he shares relationships of giving and receiving requires more than what any immediate family can provide.

I suggest it does not tax the imagination to see how MacIntyre’s account of rational practical inquiry would, if sound, contribute significantly to the deliberative virtues necessary for a democratic political order. Fairness, open-mindedness, tolerance, inclusiveness, and even the readiness to engage in political affairs are all as it were by-products of the process by which the individual grows into a citizen who is at once giving, nurturing, and capable of independent practical reasoning. Most importantly, in contrast to justifications for political engagement based upon strategic self-interest individualistically conceived, the goal of this reasoning is necessarily the greater good. Unless one is virtuous in the acknowledged-dependence sense, he cannot find the moral good for himself, and unless this good is one that is shared, it is in fact not the good. Moral commitments are hence not external to the process of critical inquiry, but constitutive of it (162).

This addition to MacIntyre’s already-significant corpus is, like much of his work, arresting and infinitely suggestive, but there remain serious problems. For the sake of space, I will only outline one such problem, having to do with the nature of benevolence. Perhaps the more serious problem has to do with reconciling the realism assumed in his metaphysical biology with the tradition-bound epistemology developed in his previous work, but an adequate treatment of this would require more space than is available in a short book review.

MacIntyre distinguishes between what he calls the virtue of just generosity and the vice of altruism by casting the latter as based upon a misconception of human beings as divided in their inclinations between self-regarding and other-regarding inclinations (160). In the altruist, other-regarding inclinations prevail and issue in self-sacrificial acts. This is flawed because on an Aristotelian understanding, the individual acquires the virtue of just generosity, which inter alia informs him that the good of his community just is his good, and thus his actions for the sake of others are always at the same time actions for himself. Acting against the good of one’s community, and by extension one’s own good, is thus unjust. This uniting of individual with the common good is often observable in immediate family members, and one can at least envisage how this uniting can obtain as well for a small community, say the members of a religious sect or the inhabitants of an extremely close-knit fishing or farming community.

Moreover, that communal networks of genuine giving and receiving are necessarily small entails that the collective pursuit of a common good is out of the question for the nation-state. Hence the insistence on local communities as the source of the good can more effectively account for the need for neutrality on the part of the nation-state regarding the communities within its borders. In other words, the nation-state would merely pro-
tect from harm or danger its diverse communities of giving-and-receiving without privileging or adopting the good of any particular one. According to MacIntyre, when the nation-state attempts to formulate or impose a vision of the good on its diverse communities, it makes the “communitarian mistake” of “infusing the politics of the state with the values and modes of participation in local community” (142). MacIntyre thus restricts the goods of the nation-state to public security, for “the shared public goods of the modern nation-state are not the common goods of a genuine nation-wide community.” The extension of the goods of “kinship and locality” to the entire population produces what MacIntyre ominously refers to as the fiction of a Volk, which is characteristically “an ideological disguise for sinister realities” (132).

But herein lies the problem for a community-generated ethic: What of large-scale social movements which require a concern not just for those living within one’s community, but for those who are both geographically, culturally, and ethnically outside of that community? Here one can cite the anti-slavery and civil rights movements, or the pro-life movement as examples. What seems to have motivated activists in these exemplary causes is less a communally-motivated notion of the good as a conception of a moral obligation to human beings as such, one which holds regardless of the fact that those they sought to help were alien to their community.

Here MacIntyre has recourse to the virtue of misericordia. Misericordia “has regard to urgent and extreme need without respect of persons,” it is, in short, the virtue of “humanity” extending assistance and goodwill to all persons as such (123-4). Elsewhere, MacIntyre speaks of need as providing sufficient justification for action, but in context this applies only to an emphatically local community (108).

How then does misericordia provide the needed justification for moral action outside of one’s community boundaries? Since the “just good” for MacIntyre must be tied to the community and ultimately back to the individual, his first argument relies on the transparency of community boundaries, i.e., that we are often in more than one community, and we typically move in and out of them over the course of a lifetime. Secondly, since we can always find ourselves in a position in which we require care appropriate to our need and not to our status or desert, we can only rely on others within our communities to the extent that they exhibit the virtue of misericordia. So because of the demands of communal flourishing, we must recognize in the alien someone whom we should call “neighbor” or “friend,” and thus someone whose good is indissolubly linked with “ours and mine.” Indeed, according to Aquinas, misericordia “may on occasion be rightly judged to outweigh the claims of familial or other immediate social ties” (125).

I suggest, however, that the attempt to stretch the good of the community to include the alien or stranger is deeply problematic. First, the rational justification for giving charitable assistance is ultimately shifted from the good of the recipient to the good of the giver and his community, and this places severe limits on charity. But this is of course MacIntyre’s point in contrasting the virtue of just generosity with altruism, viz., it is unjust to be overly generous, and overly generous is defined as those acts of generosity
that do not redound to the good of my community and by extension to me. So while it is no doubt true that in order for me to feel secure that the members of my community will react appropriately to my urgent need, I would need to see them express this generosity toward the alien or stranger in our geographical midst, I would not need to see them act this way toward the needy living at any sort of distance to have this security. In fact, as an independent practical reasoner, I might reasonably fear that too much concern for such persons will detract from the quality of care I might receive were I to require it.

Now it may be argued that the virtue of misericordia qua disposition to act in such-and-such a manner will of itself issue in charitable acts toward those located spatially and culturally outside my immediate community as a kind of contingent feature of having the virtue. We might refer to this phenomenon as “the spill-over effect,” i.e., a virtue intended specifically for purpose (x) cannot really serve that purpose unless it applies to all instances relevantly similar though not identical to (x). Moreover, MacIntyre points out that in order to express the virtues of just generosity and misericordia appropriately, the charitable person acts to meet the needs of others without calculation (159). Let us grant to MacIntyre that the expression of a virtue, which according to Aristotle is constituted by reason (Nichomachean Ethics 1107a), can nevertheless be exercised on occasion without deliberation or calculation. Perhaps the reason for this lies in the fact that one initially acquires the habit to act in such-and-such a manner by consideration of the mean, but will eventually act habitually and thus no longer with calculation. Notwithstanding the fact that the exercise of virtue can be without deliberative reason, however, the exercise of virtue cannot be contrary to reason. And to the degree that virtues are dispositions to act excellently, and excellence is defined by a localized communitarian understanding of the good, actions based upon neither the common good nor upon my good are in fact “altruistic,” and thus vices (160). Moreover, my concern that these non-communal acts of misericordia may redound to my harm is indeed warranted under the communally-restricted conditions of justice. The only way an act of misericordia can be directed toward those outside my local community and be part of my own good is if the communal good somehow extends to the whole of humankind. But this goes so far beyond any sort of concrete, flesh-and-blood network of giving and receiving within a context of a communally-shared notion of the good that it is hard to properly designate it Aristotelian, as MacIntyre defines it.

A solution to this problem may lie in other features of MacIntyre’s work. Whereas early in his accounts of practical reasoning, he refused any sort of support through metaphysics or natural law, by the early ’90’s, he had begun to view a teleological ethic as necessitating not only metaphysical claims, but theistic metaphysical claims. The story of the person who achieves his good is one that can only make sense if the achievement of the good is in fact true and not merely a story, “but such explanations will be true if and only if the universe itself is teleologically ordered, and the only type of teleologically ordered universe in which we have good reason to believe is a theistic universe” (The MacIntyre Reader, Kelvin Knight, ed.)
The traditional conceptions of theism, based as they are on the book of Genesis, contain within them the seeds of a universal love, one which extends one’s understanding of what sort of person is to be the object of my benevolence to all of humankind based upon each person’s possession of the *imago dei*, and not just upon the contingent features of virtues I require for flourishing. For Christians, the parable of the Good Samaritan underscores that it is the enemy I encounter along the way, and not just the stranger happening into my community, that is the object of virtuous neighborliness. Thus, while one could make the case for placing normative priority upon family and friends in most instances, the reach of misericordia extends to the entire community of divine image-bearers, and can necessitate departure from if not harm to that local community, as is the case with a Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Mother Teresa, or a William Carey.


BRIAN DAVIES, Fordham University

If there is a problem of evil, how should we state it? And how should we deal with it? A common line of thinking holds that the problem is either a logical or an evidentialist one, that it can be summarized by questions like “Can we consistently believe both in the reality of God and in the reality of evil?” or “Does evil render God’s existence improbable or unlikely?” But how should we engage with the problem of evil considered in these terms? One way would be to start with a definition of the word “God” and with one or more premises concerning what the definition entails when it comes to what might or might not be expected in a world made by God. One might then seek to show either that evil is impossible or unlikely in such a world (our world), or that it is possible or even positively explicable.

Yet what should we take “God” to mean? And what premises might we subsequently invoke so as to challenge or defend belief in God’s existence? For many contemporary philosophers “God” means “an all-powerful, all-knowing, morally impeccable person who will always prevent evil if morally obliged to do so and if able to do so.” Much recent discussion of the problem of evil has therefore been concerned with suggesting that God either lacks or has morally sufficient reason for permitting the evil that occurs. Evil, so it is frequently said, is of two kinds: moral (the morally bad choices of created agents, together with their consequences) and natural (naturally occurring states or processes of an undesirable kind). To some philosophers it seems that both moral and natural evil could have no place in a world governed by an all-powerful, all-knowing morally impeccable person (the conclusion being that God cannot or probably does not exist). To others it seems either that evil is not demonstrably incompatible with the existence of such a person, or that such a person has good moral reason for permitting it (the conclusion being either that evil and God are compossi-