

# Reviews

**DEPENDENT RATIONAL ANIMALS: WHY HUMAN BEINGS NEED THE VIRTUES** by Alasdair MacIntyre *Gerald Duckworth & Co, London, 1999. Pp. 183, £14.95 hbk.*

Every ethic depends, explicitly or implicitly, on beliefs about what sort of thing a human being is. A Kantian identifies impartial rationality as the most significant human characteristic, a classical utilitarian our capacity for pleasure or pain. The tradition running from Aristotle through Aquinas assumes a more complex picture: our physicality, animality, sociability, rationality, imagination and capacity for prayer are all important. That is why (as Gerald Vann pointed out in *Morals and Man*) Thomism is a richer and more flexible philosophy, able to incorporate the genuine concerns of the narrow, fragmentary, theories that have dominated English-speaking moral philosophy until recently.

Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981) was a major catalyst of the recent revival of Aristotelian ethics. Twenty years on, MacIntyre looks back over his own work on the tradition of virtue ethics and identifies an important omission. Both Aristotle and Thomas took very seriously the fact that we are actually animals. From that follows many facts which most mainstream philosophers have brushed aside: we begin life as children, we grow old and die, we are vulnerable to sickness, injury and disability, we stand in fundamental need of each other's care. This observation leads MacIntyre to ask two questions: 'Why is it important for us to attend to and understand what human beings have in common with members of other intelligent animal species?' and 'What makes attention to human vulnerability and disability important for moral philosophers?' In answering these, he points contemporary Thomism in a valuable new direction.

MacIntyre uses the example of dolphins to explore the nature of intelligent but non-linguistic rationality. He provides some sharp arguments against the attempts of both Anglo-American and continental philosophers to deny that other animals can have thoughts, beliefs, or rich 'worlds'. Furthermore, intelligent non-human animals are not so much non-linguistic as pre-linguistic: they already possess certain capacities that we humans need in order to learn to talk. To be rational is not to cease to be animal, but to be an animal in a particular way. Much of this will be familiar to readers of Stephen Clark and Mary Midgley (see her seminal *Beast and Man*, 1979, and, recently, *Utopias, Dolphins and Computers*, 1996). Here, perhaps, contemporary Thomism is doing some necessary catching-up.

Because of the complexity of human ways of flourishing, we need not only intelligence (like dolphins), but also practical reason. We both become and remain independent practical reasoners, MacIntyre argues, by thoroughly social means: early on we need teachers with the generosity to encourage our intellectual independence, while as adults we need to discussion with others in order both to understand and to correct our reasoning.

The exercise of independent practical reason requires a traditional range of virtues such as justice, courage and wisdom. What of the dependence that comes from our physical, mental and emotional vulnerability? Human life is only made possible by networks of giving and receiving, and these require what MacIntyre terms 'the virtues of acknowledged dependence'. We should not, like Aristotle's 'magnanimous' man be ashamed of our neediness, but rather recognise it with honesty, gratitude and reciprocal generosity.

Particularly illuminating is MacIntyre's insistence that our giving must be uncalculated: for none of us knows in advance who will need us, how much and when. Even those commitments that we choose, or acknowledge, are open-ended; otherwise, they would not be genuine commitments. In addition to these, however, we may also find ourselves responsible for helping those in urgent need. MacIntyre explains this idea with the help of Aquinas' analysis of *miser cordia*.

Finally, what are the political implications of all this? Neither the nation-state nor the family seems adequate to provide the common goods we need, though both are necessary. MacIntyre highlights instead the importance of a range of intermediate communities: towns, clubs, workplaces, parishes and so on. Such communities are cooperative where the modern state is competitive, and more attentive to the needs of children and the disabled. However, political representation is needed for those whose participation in political decisions is prevented by disability, and MacIntyre explores here the possible role of proxies.

Inevitably so fertile a book raises further questions. For instance: do we in fact have two roles, each with its own virtues, as 'independent practical reasoners' and as 'dependents', or are we rather *interdependent*, in both our rationality and our animality? Can our duty to support the severely handicapped depend simply on the thought that 'it might have been me', or does it need a stronger underpinning (for example, Thomas' idea that we should love others because they are loved by God)? Can Thomist language of the common good, tied rather rigidly in Thomas to political institutions, be adapted to accommodate a range of levels of community, of authority and of law? *Dependent Rational Animals* sets an original lead, and much interesting work remains for those who are prepared to follow.

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