

BOOK REVIEW

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**Biological Ground of Virtue Ethics**

Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals:  
Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*,  
Chicago, Ill.: Open Court Publishing, 1999

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How should we act? How should we live? Ethics claims to deal with these questions and seeks to provide the criterion of the good. On the one hand, utilitarians find the criterion of the good in the utility of the action. On the other hand, Kantians claims that the criterion of the good lies in the will or motivation of the agent. Whereas these two theorists only deal with the principle of the good action, virtue ethicists seek the criterion of the good according to our understanding of meaning, purpose, and end of human life. Some might question the difference between purpose and end of life. The difference between purpose and end might apply to only those who believe in the essential nature of human being. They might answer that purpose of life depends on the particular person who tries to live or lives his or her life in a certain way. The end of life, they might

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continue, exists regardless of any particular person's intention of motivation. The end of human life is dependent on the specific nature of human being. It is built in human species and identifies what kind of life is good and determines whether a certain way of life is good or not. Then, we might ask whether there is an end of human life and, if any, what it is. Virtue ethicists have been asked what the good life is. If we can define a good life, we can determine the good action in the light of our understanding of good life. Accordingly, virtue is defined as human characteristics which help us to live good life whereas vice is human characteristics which deter or prevent us from living a good life. Therefore, according to virtue ethics, the discussion of the good life should be prior to the determination of principles of moral action. The difficulty of virtue ethics lies in the fact that the definition of good life relies on the definition of human nature. When virtue ethics faces with the task of defining human nature, it receives the criticism of indeterminacy of good and obscurity of moral criterion.

Alasdair MacIntyre has been one of the major advocates of virtue ethics since he published *After Virtue*. His understanding of virtue ethics has been clarified and explicated throughout his consequent writings, including *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry. Dependent Rational Animals* is a continuation and a correction of his previous three books. MacIntyre attempts to describe the end of human life in the light of the biological status of human being. When we are reminded of his emphasis on social teleology and his previous rejection of so called Aristotle's

metaphysical biology, his conversion toward Aristotle's natural teleology is regarded as somewhat an act of embarrassment.

Alasdair MacIntyre, in the preface to *After Virtue*, diagnoses the absence of a moral standpoint as the moral calamity of modern society. He finds the cause of this phenomenon in the domination of liberal individualism. Liberal individualism, according to him, emphasizes the importance of human freedom and autonomy but abandons the discussion of the human good which human freedom pursues. Moral debates in liberal individualism are presented in terms of various individual wills and their competition for power. The seriousness of this problem is revealed in interminable moral disagreements. MacIntyre argues that liberal individualism threatens the moral status of a human being by denying the presence of an objective and rational criterion. MacIntyre accuses liberal individualism as presenting a distorted image of human life and threatening human relationships.

Pre-modern societies, according to MacIntyre, share the understanding of the good and provide the definition of the virtue and lists of particular virtues. In other words, pre-modern societies shared the criterion of the good and the standard of excellence in the light of their understanding of human nature. Accordingly the role and place of particular virtues are dependent on the particularity of their social and historical context. Virtues are seen in their relationship to the social order and embody the particularity of the social and historical context. Modern society, MacIntyre claims, does not have shared understanding of the good due to the dissolution of community. Individuals, he points

out, claims or tends to exist as a rational judge who can be separated from his or her particularity of social and historical context. There have been criticisms against MacIntyre that his virtues ethics will end in relativism or Kantian perspectivism. MacIntyre extinguished those accusations by converting toward Aristotle's natural biology in *Dependent Rational Animals*.

MacIntyre, in *Dependent Rational Animals*, presents animality, dependency, and rationality as three distinctive characteristics of the human species. Animality, according to him, is the human condition which necessities the formation of community.<sup>1</sup> Our bodily nature reminds us of our vulnerability and dependence on others. Due to our vulnerable nature, human beings need others' care either at a certain moment of their lives or for their entire lives. We are dependent on our parents or teachers before we become independent practical reasoners. Dependency might be continued due to physical immaturity or mental retardation. Both vulnerability of human life and practical reasoning, MacIntyre points out, manifest the necessity of social relationship for the good and for the flourishing of the individual life. The solidarity of social relationships, MacIntyre concludes, motivates us to exchange benefits and makes us feel another's good as our own good.

The networks of giving and receiving, according to MacIntyre, serve as the starting point of practical rationality. The relationship of giving and receiving, he claims, is distinguished from the relationship of mutual exchange according to the market economy. Individualism

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<sup>1</sup> MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago, III, Open Court, 1999), 49.

reduces a human relationship to its romantic and competitive aspects.<sup>2</sup> The relationships of uncalculated giving and graceful receiving are dependent on “attentive and affectionate regard for one another” as well as upon physical care and intellectual instruction, which provide guidance for action.<sup>3</sup> Humanity, he points out, is the common character to which any social relationship is made by appealing to others and allowing different people to join.<sup>4</sup> The individual, MacIntyre explains, can articulate what he or she has learned only when he or she identifies his or her status within the network of givers and receivers and understands the inseparability of one’s own individual good from the achievement of the common good.

MacIntyre emphasizes the importance of acknowledging our vulnerability and dependence in the identification and pursuit of the human good. He presents the virtue of acknowledged dependence and the virtue of independence as virtues that allow us to survive so-called liberal individualism. A society can contribute to the flourishing of human being or threatens the survival of human life by motivating and forcing a certain way of life. In other words, a society which denies human nature and tries to design it in a different way is doomed to fail. In this respect, any endeavor to separate morality from human emotion and ground it upon detached rationality fails. We can stray only so far as we keep our integrity and constancy as human beings. In other words,

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<sup>2</sup> MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 117.

<sup>3</sup> MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 122.

<sup>4</sup> MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 123.

we can lead our lives in the way we like, but whether we will flourish or deteriorate depends on the appropriateness of the life we choose according to our nature. If the form of life fits human predisposition, we will thrive, but if not, vice versa.<sup>5</sup> In addition, it should be noted that the character which has been built upon individual decisions and habituation is also regarded as second nature and determines the way in which the individual lives his or her life. The understanding of human nature gives warning to any society which does not protect and preserve human life and threatens human beings.

What kind of life preserves and protects human nature and helps human flourishing, whereas what kind of life threatens human life and survival? MacIntyre's understanding of human nature as that of dependent rational animal will give a direction to any scientific and social research and contribute to designing a desirable life. He emphasizes the importance of our initial animal state in the development of the human being into an independent rational agent. Reflection on the continuity between our animality and rationality, he points out, will help us characterize practical rationality as reasoned desire and identify the end of human life. The difference between the nonhuman intelligent animal and the human intelligent animal, MacIntyre notes, lies in both human language and practical rationality.<sup>6</sup>

Humans at times cannot flourish without arguing with others and learning from them about human flourishing. And so everything that

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<sup>5</sup> De Waal, *Our Inner Ape* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 223.

<sup>6</sup> MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 74.

can inhibit, frustrate or damage the exercise of the powers of reasoning is a potential threat. Toxic substances, diseases, injuries, predators, and lack of food threaten dolphins, humans, and other species equally. But the development of human beings into effective practical reasoners is threatened in additional ways.<sup>7</sup>

MacIntyre's presentation of virtue allows us to extend our understanding of the good human life and contribute to human flourishing. He presents, in particular, the virtues of acknowledged dependence and independence as necessary for acting as independent practical reasoners in modern society. His comparison between Aristotle's *megalopsychos* (great soul) and Aquinas's *miseriordia* (compassion) invites us to understand the necessity of human relationships in order to both exercise sound practical reasoning and achieve human happiness. Whereas *megalopsychos* does not recognize our dependency on others, *miseriordia* allows us to identify another's suffering with our own and does justice to our relationship as dependent human beings. A community can flourish when it provides a social and political structure in which the members can acknowledge their interdependence and pursue their own good as a constitutive part of the common good.

MacIntyre's conversion toward natural teleology helps us identify the roots of our morality and recover the wholeness of human life. The discussion on good life can start with the definition of human being as dependent rational animal. In other words, the search for the good

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<sup>7</sup> MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 68.

human life should start with the recognition of human needs and desires. Considering the fact that the human beings have both social and biological needs and desires, we should continue our ethical enquiry by asking what principles a particular society is directed toward and what it proposes as desirable and good life. MacIntyre claims that the relationship between virtue, community, and the good should be understood within the particular social and historical context. Only when a particular moral value is located within a particular social and historical context can it be intelligible and justifiable. To present a certain moral belief within a particular historical context is to represent it within a certain narrative form. Therefore, the pursuit of good in virtue ethics has a meaning only in the process of asking and leaves the task of seeking as the role of individual moral agent.