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I Am My Animal Body

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MacIntyre, Alasdair, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Open Court, 1999).

A picture of a human being that our modern moral language and modern institutions presuppose, a picture that goes back to Descartes, Kant, and Adam Smith, has held us captive: that of an autonomous rational individual. It is rationality, we are told, that makes a human being different from other animals. Heavy emphasis on this distinguishing factor allowed rationality to be thought of as separate from a human person's animality. What we are left with is a picture of a human being detached from one's bodily existence and therefore forgetful of how one's dependency and animality are essential to being rational. It is this picture that Alasdair MacIntyre, a well-known critic of modernity, criticizes in *Dependent Rational Animals*, developing and correcting his thoughts from his earlier writings to provide an ethics grounded in the metaphysical biology of the human person. What MacIntyre tries to undermine is "the cultural influence of a picture of human nature according to which we are animals and *in addition* something else. We have, on this view, a first animal nature and in addition a second distinctively human nature" (49–50). He provides a picture of a human being that allows us to think of rationality in a way that is not separated from animal nature.

One reason why philosophers detach the human person from her animality is because exaggerated attention has been paid to what distinguishes human beings and nonhuman animals, namely, language (12). This exaggeration partly comes from a misunderstanding of nonhuman animals, especially intelligent nonhuman animals. MacIntyre counters such an exaggeration by relying on modern scientific animal research, especially of dolphins, to show the resemblance between humans and nonhuman intelligent animals. The extensive studies done about dolphins reveal the numerous similarities between them and humans, making them the perfect example for his proposal. So what do we find in dolphins? They "live together in groups and herds with well-defined social structures," "they excel at vocal learning and communicate with one another in a variety of ways," "they are subject to fear and stress," "they are purposive, they are playful, and they engage purposefully in play," not to mention that they hunt together and even interact with other animals such as humans (21–22). Furthermore, those

who had the privilege of interacting with dolphins have concluded that they possess abilities such as “perception, perceptual attention, recognition, identification and reidentification,” as well as “having and exhibiting desire and emotion, of making judgments, of intending this and that, of directing their actions towards ends that constitute their specific goods and so having reasons for acting as they do” (27). This leads MacIntyre to conclude that dolphins, like many other intelligent animals, have thoughts, beliefs, and reasons for their actions.

Such a conclusion is controversial since many philosophers, especially from the analytic tradition, do not ascribe thoughts, beliefs, and practical reasons to animals because they do not possess language. Yet, the lack of linguistic capabilities is not sufficient for MacIntyre to conclude that intelligent nonhuman animals do not have thoughts, beliefs, or practical reasons. Take John Searle’s example of a dog barking at a cat in a tree. The dog stops barking at the tree and then runs towards the neighbor’s yard. The reason is because the dog saw and smelled the cat run into the neighbor’s yard. This is an example of a dog changing its beliefs because of what it perceived. In this example, it seems that language is unnecessary to ascribe belief to the dog. It seems that there is an elementary capacity that a dog has: the ability to distinguish between truth and falsity based on perception (36). MacIntyre calls such a capacity “prelinguistic,” a capacity that he finds in human infants before they can linguistically articulate their beliefs. It is better, MacIntyre contends, to think of other nonhuman intelligent animals as prelinguistic rather than nonlinguistic. Prelinguistic capacities are sufficient to ascribe thoughts, beliefs, and reasons for actions to animals just as they are sufficient to ascribe thoughts, beliefs, and reasons for actions to human infants. These capacities, such as being able to recognize, distinguish, classify, identify, etc., are what humans share with other intelligent animals, and humans never outgrow these capacities but depend on them constantly even when they are able to use language. To reflect linguistically about reasons for a human action, for example, is to reflect on prelinguistic reasons for such an action. “It is because,” as MacIntyre contends, “any exercise of the power to reflect on our reasons for action presupposes that we already have such reasons about which we can reflect, prior to our reflection” (56). These reasons that are reflected on emerge from prelinguistic or animal capacities and there is never a time in this present life when a human person can detach herself from them. Rather, these animal capacities are the precondition of human rationality. Human rationality, then, is conceived as being dependent on prelinguistic or animal capacities; animal intelligence is intrinsic to human rationality.

To admit the intrinsic relationship between human rationality and animality does not mean that there are no differences between humans and other intelligent animals. Human beings are able to, through language, reflect on their reasons for their actions (56), detach themselves from immediate desires (68), and imagine alternative possible futures (74–75). These are what MacIntyre calls the capacities of independent practical reasoners (83); and the exercise of these capacities is essential to human flourishing. Yet, humans do not lose their animal condition even with these specific human capacities. The development of just such unique capacities, therefore, requires understanding human beings in the condition that they share with other intelligent animals. Dolphins, for example, are vulnerable to sickness, injury, danger, and other disabilities; they are not, therefore, able to flourish without the help of other dolphins. Humans are no less different in that they too are vulnerable to disability and require the help of others to flourish as humans.

Moral philosophers too often conceive of the human person as an independent adult related to other independent adults. Childhood and old age seem to be neglected, as if these are moments when humans are less human because they do not exercise middle-aged capacities. Any kind of disability, a disability that ruins the image of an independent self-sufficient adult, seems to be thought of as secondary to human nature. However, disability, according to MacIntyre, is not a property of an unfortunate class of people that simply requires the sympathy of those who are healthy and self-reliant. Disability is what humans share with other intelligent animals and with each other insofar as they are embodied beings. He says, "Disability is a matter of more or less, both in respect of degree of disability and in respect of the time periods in which we are disabled. And at different periods of our lives we find ourselves, often unpredictably, at very different points on that scale" (73). A proper understanding of a human being (including at its highest levels) and her flourishing requires acknowledging her vulnerability, those that she shares with other nonhuman intelligent animals and those that are specific to being human such as "autism, anxiety-engendering insecurity, conditions that render a child unable to control its aggression, too much fear, insufficient hopefulness" (72). When we acknowledge these disabilities, we begin to see that becoming a practical independent reasoner depends largely on others who help her exercise human specific capacities in the disabled condition she finds herself.

Take the example of the growth of a child. A child, like other intelligent nonhuman animals, receives care from the network of relationships she finds herself in. She, like other intelligent animals, has immediate bodily needs such as food, warmth and security, and sleep. But in order for her to become an independent practical reasoner, it is essential that she is able to (linguistically) evaluate the reasons for her actions, distancing herself from her immediate desires so as to evaluate what good is to be done in a particular situation. Even the development of this specific human capacity requires the help of others, indeed even more so. What the child needs is someone who is able to teach her that there are goods beyond the satisfaction of immediate desires. For example, she will need to be taught to give up her immediate desire to eat chocolate every time she sees it because she recognizes the good of her health. What is necessary to redirect and transform a child's desire, according to MacIntyre, is the development of intellectual and moral virtues. And to develop these virtues, the child's parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, teachers, etc., will need to possess those virtues if they are to educate her in practicing them. To be able to teach a child temperance, for example, requires the possession of that virtue. So what we see in this example is how the development of specifically human capacities, such as being able to distance oneself from one's immediate desires, depends on others who exercise those same capacities. As MacIntyre says, "There is no point then in our development towards and in our exercise of independent practical reasoning at which we cease altogether to be dependent on particular others" (97). Rationality, the ability to reflect on reasons, is intermingled with animality (immediate desires, prelinguistic capacities, vulnerability) and dependency on others. It is what one receives from and gives to another.

What is also developed from the understanding of the vulnerability of the human person is an account of virtues that gives justice to such a condition. A proper understanding of one's vulnerability means that one can reasonably expect to receive attentive care from others (108). Along with the traditional intellectual and moral virtues, MacIntyre adds virtues of "exhibiting gratitude, courtesy towards the graceless giver, and forbearance towards the inadequate giver" (126). It is an account of virtues that does not fall into the mistake of Aristotle's idea that one

who receives benefits from others is inferior to the one that gives them. Both virtues of giving and receiving are important to sustain the relationships that allow humans to develop and flourish. Acknowledgement of the human person's animal/vulnerable condition, then, allows MacIntyre to reconceive the network of relationships that is necessary for human flourishing and the virtues needed within those relationships.

The alternative picture of a human being that Alasdair MacIntyre presents is a vulnerable rational animal whose flourishing is dependent upon receiving care and education from other vulnerable rational animals and upon giving care and education to other vulnerable rational animals. What he has provided us with, through his understanding of nonhuman intelligent animals, is an image of a human person as a creature in need. It is a conception of the human person undetached from her evolutionary and bodily history, and embedded in relationships that helps her to think of herself as being bound to her history of relationships. It reconceives human rationality as intrinsic to animality and dependency. To be a rational human being, then, is to be at home in one's animal body and in one's need of others.

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