

*Dependent Rational Animals*, by Alasdair MacIntyre

reviewed by [Don Browning](#) in the [May 17, 2000](#) issue

Are humans really different from animals and, if so, how? And what difference does the answer make for our understanding of human morality? Through questions such as these, Alasdair MacIntyre brings his philosophy into dialogue with recent studies of dolphins, gorillas and other animals.

At first glance, these look like new interests for MacIntyre, who is widely known for his contributions to narrative ethics and his belief that moral reason is always nestled within the folds of tradition-based communal practices, virtues and stories. MacIntyre is credited with providing the philosophical foundations for the narrative ethics of Stanley Hauerwas and for the theory of the social sciences undergirding Robert Bellah and colleagues' *Habits of the Heart*.

A trenchant critic of modernity and liberalism, MacIntyre is known for his rejection of all modern ethics of principle, be it the categorical imperative of Immanuel Kant or the concept of utility of John Stuart Mill and other modern utilitarians. He has criticized liberal Protestantism, Marxism, Hegelianism, naturalism and deconstructionism. He has, in short, been provocative.

MacIntyre's comparison of humans with animals is not surprising if one remembers that he has always situated ethics in the affective life. In his *Short History of Ethics* (1966), MacIntyre claimed that ethics is eudaemonistic--it is about the quest for the good life and the satisfaction of our basic needs. In *After Virtue* (1981) he referred to the human being as a "story telling animal." MacIntyre follows Aristotle in viewing humans as rational animals. But he adds something that Aristotle neglects, the view of humans as "dependent" rational animals.

Dependency and vulnerability become for MacIntyre the great keys unlocking the secrets of human morality. All humans are dependent, not only as infants but also as they become sick or grow old. In fact, a community's care for its dependent ill and disabled is for MacIntyre a fundamental measure of its moral stature. Humans learn to become moral creatures through their long years of dependency. On this point MacIntyre agrees with Freud, although the latter is nowhere mentioned in this book.

Other animals that experience extended childhood dependency, such as dolphins and gorillas, also exhibit the elementary moral characteristics of cooperation, mutual protection and care for the disabled. We humans become "independent practical reasoners" (MacIntyre's term for mature people) because we first of all are dependent and needy animals. In the end, independence and dependence are not mutually exclusive; in fact, dependence is the presupposition for the possibility of independence. Furthermore, independence is never without its dependencies. Finally, practical reason and the affections are not contradictory alternatives. Practical reason is an extension and reworking of prelinguistic and prerational affective needs and motivations--needs and motivations that humans share with animals.

MacIntyre creates his own strongly psychological developmental theory of how we become independent practical reasoners. He uses object-relations theory, especially the writings of Donald Winnicott, in showing how "good enough parents" transform their impulsive and egocentric infants into mature adults. But he does not speak of maturity in terms of health, ego strength, generativity, self-actualization, identity or self-cohesion--the various modern and allegedly value-free psychological concepts that we use to talk about competent adulthood. MacIntyre switches the terms and the frame of reference in arguing that not psychological balance but the capacity for independent practical reason is the end of human development and the hallmark of maturity.

Ministers, pastoral counselors and secular clinicians should read this book and discuss together whether they could, for a season, give up the language of psychological health and use instead the language of practical reason--i.e., practical wisdom or phronesis--to talk about adult maturity. The language of practical reason or wisdom, not the language of health, characterized the classical antiquity that surrounded early Christianity and served as the background to more focused definitions of Christian maturity.

MacIntyre says that as infants we bring our animal desires into our trusting relationships with parents and everyday communities--the people who first meet our needs and dependencies. To keep their love, we inhibit and gain distance from our more impatient and disruptive needs. While still children, we experience the practices of giving and receiving and then internalize them--making them our own. Finally, we learn how to reflect both on our needs and the communal practices that meet our dependencies. In short, we learn how to evaluate these needs (something

even the higher animals never master) and to adjust them to the needs of others. In so doing, we become independent practical reasoners. The virtues--from traditional ones such as temperance to newly named ones such as "just generosity"--are important because they sustain independent practical reasoning. We learn these essential virtues by internalizing, reflecting on and evaluating the practices of giving and receiving that we find in our various communities.

Though there is little in this book that MacIntyre has not said before, it does amplify old themes in important ways. Some of his familiar ideas, however, are not very visible here. The ideas of narrative and tradition are hardly mentioned. MacIntyre does mention that for communities to have relatively coherent practices of giving and receiving, they must have some shared vision or culture. But he does not tell us where this vision might come from; his usual arguments about the role of traditional narratives in creating shared values are absent here. Nor is there any reference to religion, let alone Christianity. This is rather odd in light of MacIntyre's recent conversion to Roman Catholicism.

This neglect leaves MacIntyre without answers to crucial questions. If children must trust their parents in order to be able to evaluate and modify their immature needs, MacIntyre believes, parents must first love their children "unconditionally." But what are the grounds of such love? Natural affections may not provide a sufficient explanation; evolutionary psychologists tell us that parents love children as extensions of themselves rather than as unconditioned ends. Don't we need a narrative that tells us, as Aquinas once said, that our children are also extensions of the goodness of God and therefore should be loved as reflections of the Divine goodness?