On the Theoretical Demands of Real Life

A Review Essay

William McDonough

. . . the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. . . . But, soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil (Keynes, 383–84).

Academic scribbler Alasdair MacIntyre's new book Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues is astoundingly good. It is his best and most important book so far, in that it demonstrates John Maynard Keynes's point above and gives contemporary practical morality a less defunct idea from which to start than the reigning sociological half-truth that morality belongs to and is made possible by groups.

MacIntyre himself has long insisted on the connection between ideas and practical life. He had articulated the Keynesian point in his A Short History of Ethics:

Philosophy leaves everything as it is—except concepts. And since to possess a concept involves behaving or being able to behave in certain ways in certain circumstances, to alter concepts, whether by modifying existing concepts or by making

William McDonough is assistant professor of theology at the College of St. Catherine in Minnesota.
new concepts available or by destroying old ones, is to alter behavior. . . . It is important to allow the history of philosophy to break down our present-day preconceptions, so that our too narrow views of what can and cannot be thought, said, and done are discarded in face of the record of what has been thought, said, and done. (MacIntyre, 1966, 3-4).

Already in 1966, though, MacIntyre saw that the influence of ideas and practical life was more mutual than Keynes had articulated: “It is all too easy for philosophical analysis, divorced from historical inquiry, to insulate itself from correction” (MacIntyre, 1966, 3). In his new book MacIntyre has allowed his moral theory to be corrected by what he calls our “animal identities and animal histories” (MacIntyre, 1999, 82; all subsequent parenthetical references containing only numbers are to pages in MacIntyre’s new book). MacIntyre has allowed himself to be corrected by real life, and we should welcome his move as helpful to us all.

This essay comprises three sections and a brief conclusion. First, I explain a fundamental shift MacIntyre has made in his moral theory; the move can be summarized as a shift from sociology to biology as the ground of morality. Second, I briefly demonstrate the fruitfulness of this shift for practical thinking in economic, medical and sexual morality. Third, I show that this shift is welcome news for practical church ministry, which needs help rethinking its identity and purpose. The conclusion returns to the mutual relationship between the theory and practice in morality.

MacIntyre’s Shift from Sociology to Biology as the Ground of Morality

Dependent Rational Animals begins with an admission of theoretical error: “In After Virtue I had attempted to give an account of the place of the virtues . . . within social practices, the lives of individuals and the lives of communities. . . . I now judge that I was in error in supposing an ethics independent of biology to be possible” (x). MacIntyre’s admission about the error of his earlier and very influential volume is made dispassionately, but it has far-reaching implications.
He and, with him, much of contemporary morality have been wrong about where morality comes from. Below I will say more about the practical effects of this theoretical error and the promise held out by its correction; but, first, what does it mean to say that MacIntyre now wants to ground morality in biology and not sociology?

The opening page of Dependent Rational Animals claims that two biological facts are “of singular importance” for moral thinking: first, human beings are born vulnerable and subject to affliction; second, we are dependent on others for our very survival (1). Next, after claiming that these facts have been almost ignored in the history of moral philosophy, MacIntyre gives his book’s “central thesis”: “. . . the virtues we need . . . (are) the distinctive virtues of dependent rational animals, whose dependence, rationality and animality have to be understood in relationship to each other” (5).

The most basic truth about every human being is a biological one: “from the outset she or he is in debt” (100). Dependence is universal and “. . . there is a scale of disability on which we all find ourselves” (73). In what may be the most beautiful prose of the book, MacIntyre writes:

It matters . . . that those who are no longer children recognize in children what they once were, that those who are not yet disabled by age recognize in the old what they are moving towards becoming, and that those who are not ill or injured recognize in the ill and injured what they often have been and will be and always may be. It matters also that these recognitions are not a source of fear (146).

We make a theoretical error (with devastating practical results) about who we are unless we acknowledge these “facts of affliction and dependence” (6); for morality is reasoning about human flourishing, which “is in itself a question of fact” (64). I multiply MacIntyre’s references to fact to show how far he has moved away from his very odd 1988 claim (and its sweeping corollary) that “facts, like telescopes and wigs for gentlemen, were a seventeenth-century invention. . . . There are in fact no nontrivial statements which have appeared evidently true to all human beings of moderate intelligence” (MacIntyre, 1988, 357, 251).

But now it seems facts exist after all, nontrivial biological facts that carry with them far-reaching practical moral implications. From these facts MacIntyre begins to sketch a universal morality of what he calls “the virtues of acknowledged dependence” (119). To thrive as a human being is to acknowledge dependence, which itself entails at least two practical habits. First, we must learn to practice “just generosity” (129). Second, we must develop in our lives an “elementary truthfulness” that disallows us from taking a final stance of ironic detachment in relation to ourselves or others (150–52).
I will say more about justice below, but first more on truthfulness. Where contemporary moral philosopher Richard Rorty defends ironic detachment as a “realization that anything can be made to look good or bad by redescription” (151), MacIntyre sees it as a denial of the facts of human vulnerability. Like dolphins, we are born vulnerable and in need of protection; but unlike them we are “able on occasion to ignore or to conceal from (our)selves this fact, perhaps by thinking of (our)selves instead as Lockean persons, or Cartesian minds or even as Platonic souls” (82–83).

MacIntyre had critiqued these theorists in the past: he saw Plato's aristocratic idealism as “irrelevant” for the practical lives of real human beings (MacIntyre, 1966, 60); he thought Descartes was responsible for generating a whole genre of falsely objective moral encyclopedias (MacIntyre, 1990, 58–60); and he thought John Locke's theoretical idea of “entitlement” served as a moral cover for property holders unwilling to acknowledge that the lands they held had been stolen from someone else (MacIntyre, 1981, 251).

It was a largely negative critique posed in sociological terms: MacIntyre claimed that, in trying to account for everything, these thinkers were not self-critical about where they themselves stood. Trying to explain everything, they ended up standing nowhere. After Virtue took this negative critique furthest: in practice, such moral reasoning from nowhere has broken down our moral communities leaving us with protest as our only remaining moral language (MacIntyre, 1981, 71). The book concluded with the melodramatic and vague claim that we are in the “new dark ages. . . . (and) what matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community” where moral reasoning might again be possible. “We are waiting . . . for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict” (MacIntyre, 1981, 263). In response to a flawed and self-interested moral sociology, MacIntyre proposed instead localized, authority-driven communities. Dreamy moral sociology was offered as a way out of self-justifying moral sociology.

Dependent Moral Animals, at last, offers both a clearer negative critique and a coherent positive alternative to the reigning moral sociologies. Negatively, Plato, Descartes, Locke, and so much of the rest of moral philosophy went wrong by failing to tell the truth about human biological vulnerability: we are going to die, and no moral philosopher can think this truth away. Positively, MacIntyre now
sees the seeds of an at least partly universal morality in any moral theories that take our biology seriously. Feminist (3, 164), Native American (120), Confucian (123), ancient Greek tragic (123), and Augustinian-Thomistic (124) theory and practice have in common an acknowledgment that morality is not learned “by theoretical reflection, but in everyday shared activities and the evaluations of alternatives that those activities impose” (136). They also know that moral teachers are more like parents and mentors than like professors (89). In a word, they ground morality biologically and not sociologically.

Just here, we can notice the depth and promise of his shift. The same MacIntyre who had held us incapable of talking to each other now finds every single human being with an inborn capacity—which we must learn to exercise —to grasp our “initial directedness to certain goods,” namely those of caring for and being cared for by others (72). This truth is built into dolphins, gorillas, bats, and other creatures whose biology is destiny (59, 82). It is built into us also, but deeply enough buried that we will learn it only from parents and mentors who “have in significant measure the habits that they try to inculcate” (89–90). If we did not have such teachers early on, “analysts” can help us find a “sense of self sufficient for an increasing degree of independence in practical reasoning” (85).

The effects of this honesty will be a growing sense of justice, MacIntyre’s other central virtue. For we will have learned the biologically-grounded fact that “the good of the individual . . . (is neither) subordinate to the good of the community nor vice versa” (109). In saying this MacIntyre stands on theoretical ground previously held by Aquinas: nothing that is truly good is in conflict with anything else that is good. It is a simple truth, not contradicted by how hard it is to live: afraid ourselves and surrounded by others who are afraid, we most often speak not our own moral “voice but an echo” (148); and we do each other great harm.

Our shared biological vulnerability, not communal practices, ground MacIntyre’s two virtues of truthfulness and justice. The same MacIntyre who before called for the construction of local forms of community now warns against what he calls “the communitarian mistake” with its “cult of the local community” (142). Communities, he sees, are all too often the places where scared humans gather to insulate themselves from the truth about themselves as well as from the needs of other human beings, and thereby “continue to lead distorted lives” (137).

We could hardly be further away from the concluding lines of After Virtue. It is not St. Benedict we are searching for, but “ordinary, good” parents and teachers (89). Such parents and teachers can be found anywhere human vulnerability is being acknowledged and practically responded to; we have no more important task in our lives than to find these teachers for our own sakes and to become more like them for the sake of others.
Some Practical Implications of MacIntyre’s Shift: economic, medical and sexual

MacIntyre’s abandonment of sociology for biology is timely: contemporary sociologically grounded ethics has been a practical disaster on every front. In this section of the review, I first explain this bold claim and then demonstrate the helpful alternative MacIntyre’s theoretical move is for us by applying his logic to three practical issues in morality.

My claim is that sociologically-grounded ethical approaches have not worked. Postmodern secular ethics has retreated from a search for shared human value, while so much religious ethics has become either boring and irrelevant or punishing in its attempts to impose practical moral uniformity within communities of faith. Catholic theologian and bishop Walter Kasper summarizes well where Catholic concern for our own communities has landed us:

Most of our inner-church struggles are of little interest to the great majority of human beings. They are the more or less esoteric concerns of insiders. Most human beings have other, more pressing concerns. In fact while the house is burning down, we are fighting about which picture frames should be dusted first, by whom and how. We forget that the church is not here for itself (Kasper, 44).

It is not that morality can do without well-ordered communities: MacIntyre makes a very good case that only “communal relationships that engage our affections” will enable us to become practical moral reasoners (126). But, where MacIntyre’s sociologically-grounded communitarian ethic was romantic and self-referential, his shift to biology gives a clear and non-romantic criterion: no community is worthy of our allegiance that does not teach the virtues of acknowledged dependence. Neither Rorty’s loosely affiliated liberal community nor a sectarian religious one passes the test: neither demands or makes possible that we should give “hospitality to passing strangers” (126).

I now suggest the practical work MacIntyre’s theory could do for us, by looking at issues in economic, medical and sexual morality. First, MacIntyre works out the practical implications of his theory most directly for our economic life. In doing so, he lands a mortal blow to Adam Smith’s free market ethics which, MacIntyre shows, is based on a theoretical mistake. That defunct economist Smith, it turns out, acknowledged that it is a “deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind” (2). That is, Smith saw that wealth and greatness simply do not address the deepest longings of vulnerable human beings. But he found this deception useful, at least for the short run of life in which (some) human beings are able to ignore their mortality.
MacIntyre points out where we are led practically by Smith's half-truth that "it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest." Glosses MacIntyre:

But if, on entering the butcher's shop as an habitual customer I find him collapsing from a heart attack, and I merely remark 'Ah! Not in a position to sell me my meat today, I see,' and proceed immediately to his competitor's store to complete my purchase, I will have obviously and grossly damaged my whole relationship to him, although I will have done nothing contrary to the norms of the market (117).

Actually, I will have harmed also my relationship to myself. For Adam Smith offers human beings something we do not really want, and if I take it I will get more and more deceived about the meaning of my own life. To be less deceived about who I am, I must rather seek that "there should be relatively small inequalities of wealth" (144). I must seek some "settings—households, workplaces, schools, parishes—in which resistance to the goals and norms of a consumer society is recurrently generated" (145).

Next, MacIntyre's virtues of acknowledged dependence offer something to our stalled conversations in medical and sexual morality. MacIntyre develops the particular implications of his theory less in these areas, but significant practical conclusions flow from a claim near the heart of his biologically-based morality. He connects two human needs, arguing that the first is most fundamental but that a second follows immediately after:

What someone in dire need is most likely to need immediately here and now is food, drink, clothing and shelter. But, when these first needs have been met, what those in need then most need is to be admitted or readmitted to some recognized position within some network of communal relationships in which they are acknowledged as a participating member of a deliberative community, a position that affords them both empowering respect from others and self-respect (127).

In medical morality these connected human needs add up to two related practical norms: I must care for you, and I must not promise more care than one dependent rational animal can give to another.

So I must know that you will be there, at times when you have promised to be there. I must know that you will not make promises that it would be unreasonable for you to make. I must know that in emergencies you will do what is needed and that you will not flinch when some task for which you have taken responsibility turns out to be much more unpleasant—coping with vomiting or persistent bleeding or screaming, for example—or much more burdensome than expected (110).
Though he mentions neither of the following issues, MacIntyre’s theory exposes the folly both of physician-assisted suicide, which is a failure to be present to another human being; and of a no-holds-barred intensive care vitalism, which makes unreasonable promises to human beings who are dying. MacIntyre’s insights about our mutual needs to care and be cared for should lead us to support and participate in forms of healthcare that promise neither too much nor too little to dependent rational animals.

Third, in family and sexual morality, MacIntyre’s shift to biology again brings clarity to real-life practical debates. “All happy families are not alike,” says MacIntyre (134); and he adds a practical criterion for judging when a family exists: the purpose of a family is to give a child “unconditional care (as a) human being as such, whatever the outcome” (100). Could same-sex partners lead a family? MacIntyre’s criterion suggests we are once again at a question of fact: if children can flourish in such an environment, a family is present.

Though he says nothing at all about the subject, MacIntyre’s biologically-based truth that “having been cared for, (we) care for others” (82), is the ground from which we could think more deeply about homosexual sexuality. After making the point about care cited just above, MacIntyre immediately rejects as a mistake the Stoic idea that human beings are able to offer “disinterested friendship” to other human beings (82). To be a dependent rational animal is to be incapable of disinterest in relation to others. What matters and is humanly possible is that others take an interest in us so that we become capable of caring.

Just here, the Roman Catholic Church would do well to think further, for in its Catechism (par. 2359) it calls on homosexual persons to renounce sexual relations and “by the support of disinterested friendship . . . resolutely approach Christian perfection.” The teaching rests on a theoretical mistake made by the Stoics; to follow it means to seek happiness outside of one’s own life, another triumph of sociology over biology.

I do not know that MacIntyre would join me in these practical conclusions. They are, however, extensions of his remarkable theoretical shift in seeking a more biological ground for morality. How helpful for us if we thought further about the practical look of a morality that arises from our mutual vulnerability.

MacIntyre’s Shift as a Practical Challenge to the Churches

Here I suggest MacIntyre’s great relevance for thinking about theology and ministry in our churches. In a recent article, theologian Gilbert Meilaender critiques MacIntyre’s philosophical stance as ultimately unhelpful to Christian believers. Meilaender writes that, while philosophers may understand morality in terms of mutual responsibilities and obligations, believers know it is founded
in self-surrender and self-sacrifice. Citing MacIntyre’s critique that self-sacrifice “is as much of a vice, as much of a sign of inadequate moral development, as selfishness,” (160) Meilaender responds: “When a Christian writer makes such a statement, I think we may safely say that something has gone awry” (Meilaender, 54).

But Meilaender’s rejection distorts MacIntyre’s point and could short-circuit the very self-reflection to which we in the churches should be led by *Dependent Rational Animals*. MacIntyre is right to dismiss self-sacrifice as a mistake: human vulnerability and dependence are common to all of us, so the deepest good of one dependent rational animal cannot be gained at the cost of another’s self. To be a believer is not to sacrifice one’s self; it is rather to try to practice in one’s living what one holds as true and good for all human beings.

The same MacIntyre who rejects self-sacrifice makes clear that he is calling for something at least as demanding as what Meilaender sees at the heart of Christianity. To live the “just generosity” that is fundamental to MacIntyre’s morality will make the following demand on me: “I will have learned to act without thought of any justification beyond the need of those given into my care” (159).

Far from having gone awry, MacIntyre’s claim is clarifying for us in the churches. Indeed, do our churches exist for any other reason than to help us see we are more deeply “given into (each others’) care” than most of us realize most of the time? The perfectly coherent, if difficult theoretical philosophical claim that we are equally vulnerable and in need of care gets extended, not negated by theology. Theology and the churches want to demonstrate how (infinitely) far we have already been given into the care of others (and of Another). To universalize this theoretical philosophical point we in the churches need only practice ever-broader care.

Where Meilaender wants theology *a priori* to win a theoretical argument, MacIntyre shows that the problem lies elsewhere. There is something “deeply awry,” but it is in our own practices and not in MacIntyre’s theory. Above I quoted Walter Kasper to argue for MacIntyre’s relevance in re-thinking communal life in the churches. Here I specify the point: our church teaching and ministry has gone awry in a way MacIntyre’s theory can help us see. MacIntyre criticizes a “blandly generalized benevolence”:

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The limitations and blindnesses of merely self-interested desire have been catalogued often enough. Those of blandly generalized benevolence have received too little attention. What such benevolence presents us with is a generalized Other—one whose only relationship to us is to provide an occasion for the exercise of our benevolence, so that we can reassure ourselves about our own good will—in place of those particular others with whom we must learn to share common goods, and participate in ongoing relationships (119).

Something like this has crept into ministry and teaching in our churches. Once we forget our own dependence, ministers and teachers can easily (mis)understand ourselves as Platonic rulers; or as Cartesian minds giving principles and directives for others; or as entitled Lockean holders of intellectual property. But to become in practice any of these is to undo with our lives the central theoretical truth claim of the churches.

**Conclusion:**

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I conclude by noting a further theoretical reflection I want from MacIntyre. It is a reflection on the universality of the problem of coming to have a voice. MacIntyre should name more clearly and think through more rigorously that none of us yet fully has a voice; we are all echoes more or less on our way honestly to acknowledging our dependence.

A text from the opening and one from the closing pages of his book support this claim. In the book’s beginning, MacIntyre says some human beings, for example, women and physical laborers, often find themselves in positions in which the universal human “facts of affliction and dependence are most likely to be undeniable” (6). Such people as these are dependent, but is it really an acknowledged dependence? Does not a lack of voice in the form of discouragement or depression or marginalization more often than not characterize the very people who know in their bodies the facts of dependence? Acknowledgement is the problem here.

In the book’s closing, MacIntyre deals with the many of us who need to be taught these “facts.” To men with well-paying jobs who are able for a time to deny the facts of our dependence, MacIntyre says: “. . . what we should have learned from the virtues of acknowledged dependence is that this is a respect in which men need to become more like women” (164). But the truth is we have not yet learned it. And ours is the flip side of the problem of the marginalized voiceless: we who have voices, or who are at least making the loudest sounds, are not anxious to talk about our dependence. Dependence is the problem here.

I am pointing out that human voices are universally distorted by echo. MacIntyre knows this, but needs to be more rigorous in thinking it through. In a word, he
needs to think further about the fact of exploitation, which is the corollary of unacknowledged dependence. The term exploitation is used only once in the book as far as I can tell (102). In theology, exploitation and its universal effects go by the name of original sin. Whatever it is called, its long history of damage has deprived all human beings of voice, exploiters no less than the exploited: it “debase(s) perpetrators more than victims,” said Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (par. 27).

I end with this not to undermine the welcome and ordinary changes MacIntyre’s morality of acknowledged dependence is asking of us, but to highlight that we are all scared and need each other in the tasks we face. Alcoholics Anonymous has good words for what I would like more help from this academic scribbler in thinking about: our challenge may be simple, but that does not at all mean it will be easy.

References


