

Sherel Jeevan Joseph Mendonsa,
*Alasdair MacIntyre's Views and Biological Ethics:
Exploring the Consistency,*
Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022,
xi+260 hlm.



Jeevan Mendonsa's *Alasdair MacIntyre's Views and Biological Ethics* rightly points at a major gap within the MacIntyrean enquiry after what could be called its "biological turn" in the late 1990s. In *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999), MacIntyre claims that ethics should not be separated from biology; and yet, he scarcely, if ever, discusses Darwin's theory of evolution. However, it does seem that a radical inconsistency of his biologically grounded ethics with Darwin's theses would seriously challenge its credibility. Establishing the compatibility of MacIntyre's moral theory with post-Darwinian biology thus becomes vital to argue for its relevance. Mendonsa's book undertakes this important task. His choice to name the matter of his research "biological ethics" instead of using the more common label "evolutionary ethics" is a significant one: it makes explicit, from the outset, a strong divide in evolutionary ethics between, on the one hand, reductionist, deterministic, and at times relativistic approaches of morality, and, on the other hand, anti-relativist, biologically-informed defenses of objective morality. The author is committed to this latter perspective and he attempts to reveal its possible consistency with a MacIntyrean take on practical rationality.

The book follows a clear-cut, straightforward outline: the first part displays a synoptic overview of MacIntyre's account of practical rationality, part two presents and discusses major trends in evolutionary ethics. The third and final part identifies conflict and contact zones between MacIntyre's philosophy and evolutionary ethics, arguing that the discrepancies between these theories are not sufficient to undermine a compatibilist project. In the first chapters, emphasis is laid upon the differences between MacIntyre's earlier, tradition-based and his later, biologically-grounded accounts of practical rationality. Mendonsa makes a stimulating interpretive claim by suggesting that MacIntyre's theory it-

self underwent an “epistemological crisis”, to borrow one of MacIntyre’s own core concepts, as MacIntyre realized that his earlier moral theory neglected the central facts of dependence, vulnerability, and disability. This led him to transcend the limitations of his previous account of morality to integrate a universal, biological basis for morality. According to Mendonsa, this shift is one more ground to defeat the objection that MacIntyre’s position would be relativistic or incompatible with Thomism.

In the second part of the book, Mendonsa offers a synthetic presentation of modern and contemporary versions of evolutionary ethics. Evolutionary ethics is the domain of ethics that “explores how the process of biological evolution as proposed by Charles Darwin has influenced the formulation of ethical norms and ethical behaviour in human beings” (p. 103). Among other concerns, a central challenge raised by evolutionary ethics is what Mendonsa refers to as the “contingency challenge”: “Does evolutionary ethics debunk objective morality? (...) Do our genes totally determine the way we perceive morality today?”. Against the determinism of Edward O. Wilson, Richard Alexander, and Michael Ruse, the author embraces the views of evolutionary ethicists such as Stephen Rose, Stephan Lewontin, and Leon Kamin, arguing that the objectivity and justification of our moral beliefs can be warranted even in the framework of evolutionary biology.

The third part of the book begins with exploring the possible convergences between MacIntyre’s stance and biological ethics. Comparing MacIntyre’s historicism and Darwin’s natural history, Mendonsa highlights the strong continuity that both theories recognize between human beings and other animals, and he suggests the biological and evolutionary dimensions of some virtues such as empathy. The author then proceeds to examine the divergences between the MacIntyrean and the evolutionary approaches. The most prominent conflict between them obviously lies in the role of natural selection in the formation of human morality, as MacIntyre would certainly disagree with any attempt to ascribe an instrumental role to such a blind and arbitrary force. Consequently, the disagreement also pertains to the issue of the rational justification of moral beliefs.

The answer Mendonsa provides to these difficulties runs as follows: “the forces of natural selection have led to the development of cognitive capacities the exercise of which has led us to have moral beliefs which are objective and which can be rationally justified” (p. 229). We are cognitively apt to recognize objective moral truths, and the fact that this aptitude is a product of an evolutionary process does not weaken the objectivity nor the justification of these moral beliefs. Mendonsa makes the same point about our other objective beliefs, whether in the field of mathematics or of natural sciences.

Practical Rationality and Biological Ethics offers a welcome contribution to the ongoing enquiries fostered by MacIntyre’s works. Not only does it provide a fine discussion of *Dependent Rational Animal* and a very good synthesis of MacIntyre’s overall account of practical rationality: it also thoroughly discusses a very large range of recent contributions in evolutionary ethics and courageously attempts to reconcile MacIntyre’s insights with some of these theories. Some of Mendonsa’s claims would indeed deserve further discussion. In particular, and although some existing literature can support this claim, the paradoxical assertion that Darwin’s theory of natural selection can be made compatible with an Aristotelian teleological conception of natural beings would at least need more space to be truly convincingly demonstrated. Nevertheless, the points that Mendonsa makes, drawing on James Lennox, on the biological aspects of some virtues such as generosity is fascinating. Overall, this book makes a stimulating and valuable contribution to the field of moral philosophy, based on the firm conviction that any attempt to radically reject evolutionary ethics or to embrace it blindly in its strongest versions is “an exercise in futility” (p. 127).

(*Ostiane Lazrak, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Prancis*)