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Paper Proposal for *Modernity*

Everyone Is Wrong, and So Am I: Socratic Irony against the Lonely Philosopher

In *Dependent Rational Animals*, Alisdair MacIntyre identifies a two lacunae in Western ethics: an acknowledgment of (1) human animality and (2) vulnerability and dependence. He attributes these gaps to ancient and modern writers alike, emphasizing how recognition of our animality and dependence on others elucidates our common good and natural development. In all their activities, human beings must account for their dependence to achieve the rational independence that constitutes their good.

Focusing on dependence, I will consider how and why Descartes, in his methodological program for modernity, marginalizes dependence in favor of exuberant philosophical autonomy. Disillusioned by unresolved, and apparently unresolvable, rational disagreement among individuals and cultures, Descartes elects himself, not as arbiter of rival positions, but as architect for a wholly new philosophical edifice, for which he appeals solely to his own good sense. In doing so and in justifying his presumption, he depends on three major assumptions: (1) He presumes that there are no genuinely shared ends or common goods, (2) He assumes he is immune to those criticisms that, in his estimation, devastate others, and (3) He equates rational maturity with a fanciful ideal of rational autonomy. Each of these claims, I argue, involves a rejection of an essential element of the human condition, that is, human vulnerability and dependence.

To rescue humanity from the narcissistic vortex Descartes proposes, I turn to Plato, for whom human dependence is a fundamental premise in both methodology and arguments from the outset. While MacIntyre applies Aristotle in arguing that human dependence is an important premise in practical reason, I argue that Plato offers equally rich possibilities, although MacIntyre only cites Plato critically in *Dependent Rational Animals*. Plato's narrative form, the dialogue, contrasts Descartes's insulated discourse, and Socrates defends his self-doubt and open-ended, cooperative approach against Thrasymachus's impatience in *The Republic*. Furthermore, Socrates's interest in the human possibility of being mistaken or incapacitated leads him to conclude that the ideal community is one in which individuals help each other to grow in virtue.

Like Thrasymachus, Descartes is impatient with seemingly endless disagreement, and as prophet of modernity, he replaces the arduous road of virtue with an ephemeral promise of success and certainty. To overcome the shackles of excessive autonomy, modern humanity must reengage past, present, and future; we must acknowledge ourselves as part of a tradition, as part of a community or communities, and as engaging in an inherently open-ended project to which others will contribute after us. Only such awareness makes possible our flourishing as dependent rational animals.