MASTIC BEACH, LONG ISLAND

Colin McGinn

This thought-provoking piece by philosopher Colin McGinn is an unusual in that it is not, strictly speaking, a work of philosophy. It is, rather, a true story – a story that raises some important philosophical questions. It is the kind of story that those who use philosophy in the classroom often present as a catalyst for discussion. It is in the same spirit that I offer it here. Some sample questions are included at the end.

The first thing that confronted us on our return to Long Island, after eleven months away, was a rat in the sofa. More precisely, the nest, remnants, and droppings of what was most likely a rat (the squirrel hypothesis had a moment in the sun). The rat had obviously come into the house during the winter and made a nice little home for itself; much the same thing had happened five years earlier. We had even left a large supply of cat food for it to feed on – and its little ones too, in all probability. The home was a pocket sized hole in the cushioning, carefully constructed, quite cozy looking – with bits of stuffing torn out and mingling with the dried droppings behind the sofa. Cathy was highly displeased, not to say disgusted, and wanted to spend the night in the car, in case our guest felt like returning. But she relented, firmly closing the bedroom door instead. The next day I cleaned up the mess with brush and pan and lugged the heavy sofa outside, to be picked up by the town council. You expect some animal inconvenience in Mastic – but rats in the sofa?

Two days later, with the house now moderately habitable, we were driving up our street on the way to Westhampton, where I planned to buy some especially nice pants, or several pairs, from Impulse for Men. Out of the corner of my

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eye I saw something I never expected to see anywhere, or at least I thought I did. I stopped the car and backed up, telling Cathy that I had just seen something extraordinary. My eyes had not deceived me: it was a raccoon with its head stuck inside a transparent bottle. Crossing someone's lawn, in the early afternoon, there it was – a raccoon, somewhat groggy, clearly distressed, with its whole head jammed inside a plastic container, the head drooping, slow moving. Evidently it had poked its head in there to lick out some morsel of food, and then found that it couldn't get it out again. The animal halfheartedly scratched at the enclosing container, a bit like a spaceman's helmet, I thought, only smaller, more confining.

I got out of the car and gingerly approached it. Surprisingly, it didn't make off immediately, but swayed around, obviously disoriented. Raccoons are notoriously vicious when cornered, so I was cautious; but with its head stuck in a bottle, how much damage could it do? The claws, though . . . I stooped down and grasped the container, amazed I had got in that close. I pulled at it, but it stayed firm: a mayonnaise jar maybe, with a wide neck. The animal squirmed and muffled sounds came from within container. It wasn't going to come off that easily. I hesitated a second before deciding to apply my right hand behind its neck to gain some purchase. The claws came up when I did so, though rather feebly. I never thought I'd ever have to grab a raccoon by the scruff of the neck. It felt rougher than a cat's, and not meant for the human touch. I pulled again. The animal squirmed some more and there was more muffled wailing, high-pitched this time. What happens when it comes off – will the animal bite the hand that saves it? But it didn't come off, nowhere near. It was jammed on tight: no wonder the unfortunate creature had been unable to pry it off by itself. I let go, partly for fear of the claws, and the animal scurried across the road, into somebody's front yard. I considered giving chase, but didn't want to invade their property, and anyway what else could I do? That bottle wasn't releasing its captive without the animal's neck being broken, or something close.

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I got back into the car, defeated. Cathy immediately called Animal Rescue: she was as distressed as me. We resumed our drive to Westhampton in quest of pants. She was referred to five different people, all of whom denied that it fell within their jurisdiction. The last woman she spoke to said you need a special license to deal with raccoons, which she didn't have, and besides there had been a confirmed rabies case in a raccoon in Hampton Bays. Sorry, nothing could be done. Helpfully, though, she suggested that if we wanted to take it into our own hands we might try throwing a blanket over the animal and pouring cooking oil on its neck as a lubricant – yeah, I thought, that should work, sure. We drove on, feeling frustrated and upset. It was a pitiful sight all right – an animal with its head trapped like that, no food, no water, not much oxygen. How long could it last? Had I done enough? Maybe I should have been more forceful, less afraid of the claws and the bared teeth that might result. It didn't look like a full-grown raccoon, according to my limited knowledge of raccoon zoology, and it hadn't done me any harm yet, weakened as it was. Over in Westhampton, at Impulse for Men, I told Roy, the owner, about what we had just experienced; he seemed to think it was best left well alone. Then I bought five pairs of pants, by Alberto of Germany, coming in at around a thousand bucks.

At dinner, Cathy and I discussed the situation: perhaps we should get back to Mastic and have another go – equipped with blanket and cooking oil, and some safety gloves too. We left Westhampton and drove back to the place where the animal had been sighted. In the street were a couple of black kids, on bikes, messing around. I asked the boy in the do-rag and baggy jeans – he looked about fourteen – if he'd seen a raccoon with its head stuck in a bottle. He said no, but that his uncle had mentioned seeing just such a thing two days earlier. That's valuable information, I replied. I asked him if he would keep an eye out and let me know if he spotted it. He nodded. That meant it had survived in that condition for at least two days and so would not be in imminent danger of death – unless, of course, it had now reached its limit. No

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food, no water, little oxygen, diminished senses, unprotected. Returning home, we assembled a couple of blankets, some gardening gloves, and a bottle of Canola, along with a knife in case it proved necessary – and possible – to cut the plastic prison off. Up the street we went, in the failing light, sprayed to deter the mosquitoes, ready to try again. But nothing appeared. It had gone to its burrow, or wherever raccoons go to sleep – unless, of course, it was lying dead or dying in the long reeds that line the road. We searched for about an hour; then gave up. Maybe later would be better, when darkness fell – the time raccoons are usually seen abroad. I had often watched them crawl down my neighbor's drainpipe at dusk, burly forbidding things with deceptively sweet eyes, strong claws, leaving their home in the roof, preparing to scavenge through the local trash cans. Then there was the time I found three of them clawing at the screen on the back window, because the kitchen trash was inches away on the inside. You have to tie down the lids of your garbage cans outside with bungee cords, nice and tight, or they will rip them off and leave half-eaten garbage strewn all over the road – for you to clean up the next day by hand. These are not trivial animals.

At around eleven at night we set off again, with flashlight, and the other equipment for getting raccoon's heads out of bottles. We drove slowly up and down the most likely roads, stopping occasionally to get out of the car to peer into the reeds; we saw the odd raccoon ambling around, but none with its head in a jar. Then, at last, we saw it, right in our headlights, meandering around in someone's front yard, still with the drooping head, the uneven gait. I grabbed the blanket and gloves. Cathy had the oil. I approached it – but it scampered off into the bushes. I was reluctant to give chase, even if I could, because of the delicate issue of prowling around someone's yard at eleven thirty at night in Mastic Beach, with a flashlight. We went back to the car and waited for it to reappear, when I would try to act with more promptness. But it didn't; not there anyway. We drove around some more, shining our head lights into people's yards, stopping in

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front of their houses and staring, mistaking distant cats for raccoons. I am amazed no one came out with a shotgun. People in Mastic don't take kindly to night intruders – who are not exactly scarce in those environs. After half an hour, we gave up again. There was no telling whether it would survive till the next day, and of course much misery would have to be endured in the interim. But how much more can you do? Should we have stayed out there all night, on the off chance that it might show up again – or the police arrive? And if it did, wouldn't it just make off again? And even if it didn't, what chance was there of getting its head free? How much time should you put into trying to save a raccoon that you probably can't save anyway?

The next morning I was writing and didn't want to be disturbed; but I felt a tug from up the street, where the raccoon might be pointlessly wandering. Cathy drove up to check at around ten, while I stayed home; if it was around, I could go up there myself and see what I could do. But she saw nothing. After lunch, though, we got into the car again, just in case. As we were leaving the driveway, crunching the pebbles, one of the girls we had met the day before was coming down the road on her bike – a slim, soft-spoken girl of about twelve years old. Excitedly, she told us they had just seen the raccoon in their front yard, bottle and all. I stepped on the gas. When we got there, however, it had disappeared again. But it was definitely around, and not dead, willing to show its face (or what you could see of it: what if the bottle had been opaque?). In the girl's front yard, we camped out, waiting to see if it would emerge again. Other children joined us – five altogether. We had the idea of using bait, and the slim girl went inside and brought out an opened can of asparagus, saying they didn't like it anyway. I laid bits of asparagus around the yard, strategically placed. Someone produced a kind of cage that we might use to trap the raccoon in; I put some asparagus inside. Surely the smell of it would bring the starving animal out – but then, how well could it smell, with its nostrils covered like that? Accompanied by sundry

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children, I prowled around the adjoining streets, hoping for a glimpse. I felt fairly confident that I would see it again.

Four hours later, hot, harassed by mosquitoes, frustrated, I had seen nothing. I had, however, got to know one of the boys quite well – Markel, by name – who stuck close by me most of the afternoon. He was the slim girl's twin brother, and her name, I learned, was Monica. Markel loitered with me in the yard, asking me questions like how long an anaconda is and had I seen the film *Jackass*. It was not the way I usually spend my afternoons. Monica asked Cathy if her mom could use her phone, since hers had been cut off. She had a problem with her car, which was about to be scrapped. So far the mom had stayed inside the house, though she did wave to me from the front door – this strange white guy searching for a raccoon in distress, hanging out with her young children. Cathy ended up driving her to the garage with the two girls, while I hung out with Markel and his big brother (Jaleel, by name – he of the do-rag and big jeans). They were eager to find the raccoon, just like me, but by the afternoon's end we were stumped, and the topics of conversation were wearing thin. Cathy and I were due to have our friend Danny over for dinner at seven, whom we hadn't seen for a year, and so when she got back with Monica's mom – her name was Karen – we left the family and went back to our house at around six-thirty. It was a relief not to be fruitlessly searching any longer.

As we drove home, Cathy told me that Karen was a thirty-five-year-old single mother with six children and another one on the way. Her children had three fathers between them, and none of them was in residence. She was wondering whether it might best to give the new baby away when the time came.

Dinner was on the way, and I was telling Danny about our recent adventures. He is a sixty-three year old Yorkshireman, who has lived in Mastic Beach for the last thirty years, and a lifelong kayaker. He'd seen those kids around too. I was gulping down a sizable vodka tonic, trying to make the story sound credible. I felt excited and miserable

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at the same time, and a bit drunk. Just before the food was about to be served, Monica showed up on her bike, telling us the raccoon had been spotted again. I was in no mood to go pointlessly up there again, and did not immediately jump into the car. I felt skeptical, and hungry. Reluctantly, however, I agreed to make the drive, just to see if the animal were still visible, and maybe try something if it was; otherwise we'd come straight home again and eat. Danny decided to accompany us, unenthusiastic as he was. When we arrived, the animal was nowhere to be seen; with some irritation I started walking back to the car. Yet another false alarm, dead trail, failed effort. This was never going to get anywhere. That animal was going to die in misery and there was nothing any of us could do about it, not with all the good will in the world. It was hard, but it was true.

Suddenly Monica appeared and announced that she had located it. (As I learned later, she had been with Cathy when Cathy spotted it, sending Monica over to inform me.) Carrying my blanket and gloves, I ran over to the place she indicated. And yes, there it was, in a clearing in a wood, head still entombed, stumbling slightly, staring through plastic. There were now four black children in that clearing, ages from five to fourteen, and three white adults, none very young. Danny was the clear outsider, a Johnny-come-lately to the proceedings. I had one of those it's-now-or-never sensations. I felt the weight of the kids' eyes, the gravity of their expectation. I approached the animal slowly, telling the others to stand well back – in order not to spook it and in the interests of safety. It didn't run away. It seemed spent, resigned almost. I threw the blanket in its general direction and to my surprise covered it. I flung myself on top of the blanket and briskly wrapped the raccoon up inside it. It struggled a little, but as the woman on the phone had said, it seemed calmed by the dark. I held it steady, searching for the head. Then I pulled the blanket back to expose its neck, after grabbing it by the bottle through the blanket. I had my thick gloves on. Cathy stood by and poured some oil at the place on its neck where the bottle gripped.

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I tugged hard at the bottle, holding the animal's body under the blanket. But it was still on very firmly. Had the head swollen with blood because of the pressure at the neck? How hard should I pull? How strong *is* a raccoon's neck? I twisted the bottle around its neck; at least it moved that way. I told Cathy to pour on a lot more oil, soaking the neck, as the creature squirmed and writhed. I twisted and pulled, kept twisting and pulling. The raccoon backed away from the stress. I decided to give it a really hard pull – I had come this far. It was on so tight. Then, suddenly, impossibly, the bottle popped off its head. The animal looked around, as if stunned, took its first real breath in days, and then ran off, not too swiftly, pausing briefly to glance back before it vanished into the bushes.

When I stood up I felt perhaps the most intense elation of my life. I lost all sense of self-consciousness. The two girls spontaneously came into me for a hug and I kissed each of them in turn, a kiss of profound relief and gratitude, utterly unforced. Jaleel stood back, smiling, happy, and I pulled him in for a hug too – a real one, not one of those fake manly efforts. Cathy was beaming euphorically. Danny looked amazed. Tears formed in my eyes, as I picked up my trusty blanket, removing my gardening gloves, and we all walked back towards their house, where the red car was parked. I kept congratulating them for finding the raccoon at last ("You did it, Monica, *you*") and thanking them for coming down to get me; though I was happy to receive their commendation too. Otherwise, we all knew, it certainly would have died. When we got back and told Karen of our success, she was puzzled that we didn't have the raccoon with us, as she assumed we had wanted it for a pet. After a short while, we returned to our house for dinner and I spent one of the happiest evenings of my life. Why? Because I never thought it would work. I thought it was futile, a waste of time and emotion; yet I kept trying, and failing. It seemed so improbable that we would succeed – but it came out right in the end, amazingly. And everyone played their part – including the woman on the phone.

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We didn't see the children for a couple of days and even wondered if perhaps they had been evicted and returned to a shelter (which they had lived in before). We also wanted them to report that they had seen the raccoon, going about its proper business of making a nuisance of itself by knocking over their garbage can. But they came back soon – they'd been on some sort of sleep-over. They asked if they could come over to our house for a visit. Cathy gave them ice pops and I let them play my drums, dispensing some elementary lessons in rhythm. Every now and then one of us would mention the raccoon and wonder what it was doing now and what it must have been liked to have its head trapped in a bottle. I reminded them of the vital part they had played in saving it, with their patience and enterprise and concern. After that we began seeing them almost daily, usually two at a time. I played ping pong with them, giving them some much-needed pointers. We talked less and less about the raccoon, but it was always in the background. I even signed one of my books for them; Karen said she wanted to read it.

One night, driving by their house, on the look-out for raccoons as always, we saw a youngish one dart out from between some garbage cans into our lights, the eyes blinded and staring, ringed with black. We wondered if that was "our" raccoon (Danny had spoken darkly of it probably dying anyway from weakness – I doubted it). But then another one darted out too, and then another, until there were four, all looking very much alike. Was ours one of them? Were these its brothers and sisters, temporarily estranged while its head was imprisoned? (Speaking of prisons, the father of Karen's unborn baby had apparently argued that he couldn't be the father, because he'd done the math and had been released from jail two days too late for that to be possible.) Did it even remember its ordeal, or its rescue? Would it refrain from any similar exploits in the future? How often did this happen to raccoons anyway?

It came time for us to leave. Cathy was throwing out clothes that no longer fit her and she gave some to the

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family. Monica showed up proudly in black Everlast pants and a sparkly top that fit her just right. I gave Jaleel a sheepskin jacket that I no longer needed. We had a lot of food left in the fridge and Cathy had heard from Monica that they were a bit short in that department and had to avail themselves of the free "pantry" on Neighborhood road (she was surprised Cathy hadn't heard of it). Supplementing the food we had with some freshly bought stuff, we emptied our fridge and freezer into bags and gave them to the kids to take home. Karen in return gave us some pictures of each child with their names written on the back. She took our phone number in Miami. We said goodbye on our porch.

Before we left we decided to put the house on the market. Now that we were living the good life in Florida, we really didn't need it any more. We plugged up the place where we thought the rat had got in and turned our backs to the ever-present mosquitoes. I wish now I'd saved that plastic bottle, but I'd thrown it to the ground in jubilation as soon as it popped off. I left it where it dropped.

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Four questions:

(I) *Was Colin McGinn under any moral obligation to save the raccoon?*
(II) *Some may question whether it is morally proper to expend so much energy on saving the life of a mere animal when we do so little to relieve the suffering of our human beings. Did Colin have his priorities all wrong?*
(III) *How would a Kantian, a utilitarian, and virtue ethicist view Colin's actions, and why?*
(IV) *Who benefited the most in this story: the raccoon, the children, or Colin?*

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