

JOHN MACMURRAY: A NEGLECTED PHILOSOPHER

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A search for John Macmurray's name in John Passmore's 100 Years of Philosophy is enough to establish that he is neglected by the establishment of academic philosophers. Macmurray rates one mention, in a footnote only; a footnote which implicitly dismisses him as an eccentric Scot. The one work of his referred to is incorrectly dated: The Boundaries of Science was published in 1939, not 1931. Karl Popper praises Macmurray's philosophy of science, and rejects his views on history, in The Open Society and its Enemies, but otherwise there is an almost universal neglect of his writings on the part of his fellow philosophers. Any recognition is rather from psychologists - Laing and Esterson mention him as someone whose work represents a rare British link with existentialism; and from theologians, notably J. A. T. Robinson in Honest to God.

There are a number of reasons why Macmurray should have been neglected by academic philosophers, and concern with existentialist themes is an obvious one. His recognition of philosophy's historical basis is another. Before looking at his work in the light of his own personal history, let us take an example of this. The student of Kant at a British university will use as one of his staple textbooks The Bounds of Sense, by P. F. Strawson. The assumption running throughout this book is that Kant was dealing with certain epistemological problems that are perennial, but which are being dealt with rather more effectively by the contemporary Oxbridge philosophers. Strawson removes Kant's thought from its historical context. In chapters 2 and 3 of The Self as Agent, however, Macmurray gives an analysis of Kant's philosophy in relation to the development of Romanticism, and shows how the Critical philosophy was developed as a response to a philosophical romanticism that Kant believed to have dangerous implications - the Faith philosophy of Hamann and Herder. He shows how Kant stands at the watershed in the history of philosophy between mechanistic and organic philosophies, and sees the political risks of romanticism, despite his admiration for Rousseau and belief in the justifiability of the French Revolution. Such an approach to Kant is of course very different from Strawson's, and comes closer to the significance of Kant's thought.

Autobiographical Philosophy

Macmurray is, with Collingwood and Russell, one of a small number of philosophers to have written autobiographically. In his book Search for Reality in Religion he tells of the way in which his philosophical writings were inspired by his own experiences. That this should be so is another reason for his difference from most philosophers.

Macmurray, who was born in 1891, was brought up in a strict Scottish Calvinist family. He took Classics at Glasgow University, but also had a keen interest and strong ability in science. He was able to persuade the authorities to include Geology in his course, and, the only arts student among engineers, he was the most successful in the group. He found Geology particularly valuable because it necessit-

ated using knowledge of other sciences, and their techniques. From Glasgow he went to Oxford but after he had been there one year the Great War broke out and his Finals were postponed until 1919.

As might be expected, the intervening years were crucial. He fought in the trenches, including on the Somme, and won the Military Cross. The experiences of this terrible war affected his thought chiefly in two ways, both of which in turn influenced his philosophy. Where religion was concerned he came to view the churches as 'the various national religions of Europe',¹ disgusted by their attitudes, although he did not cease to be a believer. Closeness to death and acceptance of it as a reality removed his fear of it, at the same time making life more precious and urgent. This is a recognisably 'existential' experience, and Macmurray says of it: 'Without this knowledge of death, I came to believe, there can be no real knowledge of life and so no discovery of the reality of religion.'²

As well as giving impetus to his religious concerns, his experiences of the war and its aftermath developed his political awareness. He shared in the general postwar disillusion, losing faith in the society he had fought for, and in its leaders, who he believed either fools or knaves, and probably the latter. He writes of the purpose of his philosophizing as being the eradication of war, and says: 'To this task I brought a mind that had become deeply sceptical of the principles underlying the European civilization in which I had been brought up and which had issued in the savage destruction and stupid waste in which I had played my part. Convinced that the source of the error must be deeply hidden, I decided, as a rule to guide my search for it, to distrust and question especially those principles of whose truth I should find my elders most unshakeably convinced.'³ Not long after the war, Macmurray was invited to a conference the result of which, for him, was to lead him to undertake a thorough study of Marx's early writings to try to discover the relation between Marxism and the Christian tradition. He was convinced by Marx that idealism must be rejected, and that an idealist religion is unreal. But he did not believe all religion to be idealist, particularly not Old Testament Judaism, and so could not accept Marx's rejection of religion in toto. Nonetheless, the influence of the early Marx remains considerable in his philosophy, particularly in his analysis of the relation between theory and practice, thought and action.

We can form a picture of Macmurray, then, as he began his career as a professional philosopher: a Classical scholar, yet with practical scientific experience at university level which will give him some entitlement to write on the philosophy of science; concerned that his studies will have a purpose and help to change European society; interested in the relation between ideas and historical events; prepared to study philosophers outside the British academic boundaries; with the experiences of trench warfare in his memory, and with the religious and existential awareness resulting from those experiences. Clearly, here is a man better equipped to

think philosophically than the majority of academics at any time. He decided that he would allow himself time to formulate his ideas, and would not publish a book until he was over forty.

His career can be outlined fairly rapidly: at Manchester university (1919); Professor at Johannesburg (1919-1921); Fellow of Balliol College (1921-1928); Grote Professor at London until 1944; Professor at Edinburgh until his retirement in 1958. During the thirties he was President of the Froebel Society; he was involved in Left Book Club circles, and during the Second World War was one of the founders of the Common Wealth Party, which put up independent socialist candidates against Labour Party coalition candidates. His first book, Freedom in the Modern World, was published in 1932, and several others appeared during the thirties, dealing with different areas of philosophy. His most comprehensive work is The Form of the Personal, published in two volumes: The Self as Agent (1957) and Persons in Relation (1961). Any philosophical fame is likely to rest on this series of Gifford Lectures.

It appears that Macmurray had decided on the main outline of his philosophical system by about 1930, and that he developed particular sections of it in detail over the next twenty years or so. The Gifford Lectures were given in 1953-54, and although they do not contain all Macmurray's thought, they do reveal the form implicit in the earlier work, and cover the widest spectrum.

A Point of View

Macmurray's desire to see things as a whole differentiates him from the piecemeal philosophers whose analysis dominates the academic world. It is not entirely accurate to speak of his work as a 'system'. Although it is definitely systematic, he would not wish to claim any finality for it; it is a 'pioneering venture', in his own words - it 'seeks to establish a point of view.'⁴ If it has the appearance of system-building (something he considers an essential part of philosophy) it is because the new point of view must be tried in all the different departments of human life.

All writing about philosophy is bedevilled by the way in which philosophical ideas are interconnected, and this is a major problem in writing about Macmurray's work. It is difficult to take any one idea out of context without thereby making it hard to understand, or perceive its significance. But, as has been mentioned, Macmurray's philosophy is rooted in awareness of the discipline's historical context, and this provides a starting point.

In his first book, Freedom in the Modern World, he draws a distinction between academic philosophy and living philosophy. The former consists of 'scholarly acquaintance with the philosophy of other people or of argument about traditional problems for the sake of argument, full of very acute and learned subtlety of thought... But it has no vital significance whatever.'⁵ Philosophy proper is 'the attempt to understand the meaning of human experience in the world'.⁶ It is an essential exercise, because life presents problems to individuals and societies, and philosophical thought tries to solve them. Here we can see the existential and political concern of Macmurray's philosophy, and also an idea central to his work, that thought must refer back to action and be tested against experience.

Philosophical problems, then, change as life, whether individual or social, presents new problems. But, says Macmurray, in our age the very nature of philosophy is problematic. Logical empiricism

appears to have abandoned the traditional problems altogether, content with formal analysis; existentialism continues to deal with the problems but abandons philosophical forms and methods in favour of literature and paradox. Macmurray himself can embrace neither alternative, and seeks a new philosophical form capable of dealing with the problems.

The dominant philosophical tradition since the Renaissance has failed for a number of reasons, he says. It has been egocentric, individualist and theoretical. The Self has been considered only as a thinking, mental subject, isolated from the world and other people, an approach that has led to scepticism and the absurdities of solipsism. In addition to this central error, two forms have been used which have proved inadequate. The first, from Descartes to Hume, attempted to explain the world and the human individual, in mechanistic terms, with 'substance' its key concept. Historically, this dominated because of the rise of physical and mathematical science. The rise of biological science saw the dominance of the second form, the organic, with 'organism' its central concept. This philosophical form has continued into our century (Whitehead's work is an example), but, just as Hume demonstrated the inadequacies of the concept of substance, so the concept of organism was rejected in different ways by Comte and Kierkegaard. They found it useless for explaining either social or personal life, Comte abandoning metaphysics for empirical sociology because he found the content of the organic philosophy inadequate; and Kierkegaard abandoning metaphysics for religion, philosophy for faith. The latter spoke of the human being as a 'dialectic without a synthesis', a contradiction to be resolved by choice.

The development of the sciences of sociology and psychology, dealing as they do with personal life, ought to be paralleled, Macmurray suggests, by a philosophical form of the personal, with 'personality' as its central concept. It is this form which in his Gifford Lectures he outlines in its greatest detail. An earlier and shorter work, Interpreting the Universe, however, gives a valuable summary of his ideas on the nature of philosophical thought, and analyses the difference between mechanistic, organic and personal modes of interpreting experience.

Unity Patterns

Thought itself arises from problems in the world, whether practical, personal, social or political. 'Its function is to overcome the cessation of action which has occasioned it, and so to enable us to resume the concrete activity of life which has been interrupted.'⁷ It is a symbolic, mental activity, with 'no causal efficacy in the real world.'⁸ For it to be effective its symbolic representation of the real world must be adequate, so that the process of imaginative manipulation of ideas will not distort or omit elements of that real world. Although ideas and images can be manipulated in any way the thinker pleases, his thought will not have any relevance to the world unless they relate to each other in a way which is determined by the nature of the world. Such an arrangement Macmurray calls a 'unity pattern'. All thought is tentative and hypothetical, and the results of thought must be tested against the world of experience. Knowledge therefore is not certainty, and is always knowledge-through-action.

A mechanistic unity-pattern is inadequate to cope with all aspects of the world. 'It arises from the


necessity of manipulating physical objects and is, therefore, adapted to the representation of reality so far as reality is stuff to be used, or to put it more technically, so far as reality is material.⁹ Hence its symbolism is the interchangeable unit, because 'any individual thing will be symbolised not for its individuality but merely as a bearer of general properties'. (*Interpreting the Universe*, p87). If different objects are equally useful to our purpose, their various individual qualities, other than causal properties, will be of no significance. All change in this unity pattern will be the result of external, mechanical causes. It assumes everything to be passive and has a merely instrumental value, effective only insofar as the world is to be treated as a means to an end.

An organic unity pattern can deal with different aspects of the world from those dealt with by mechanistic thought, for it is designed to apply to processes of growth. A living thing will be represented as a unity of different but harmonious processes, each having a function to perform for the whole. Explanations will be teleological, interpreting change by reference to a state to be reached at the end of the process. But, says Macmurray, while we can interpret teleologically the growth of plants and animals, because we know what their final state is, we cannot interpret the world as a whole in this way. Neither can organic thought represent objective human consciousness. Another unity pattern is needed in order to explain the nature of personality. In the Gifford Lectures Macmurray defines this new unity pattern, or logical form, as follows: 'The Self is constituted by its capacity for self-negation. It must be represented as a positive which necessarily contains its own negative.'¹⁰ Such a statement naturally sounds abstract, but Macmurray applies the form to all the different aspects of human life, and the reader of *The Form of the Personal* will be able to see for himself its fertility. For example, it is only persons who act. Action, as opposed to mere activity, necessarily involves thought. But to cease to act, and only to think, is to cease to be in dynamic relation with the world, and therefore is to cease to be fully a person. Thought is justified only when its aim is more effective action. On an individual level, action is made possible by the existence of a hierarchy of skills and habits, which in themselves are unconscious and impersonal. Another example is the case of personal knowledge. We know other people through relation with them, by their revelation of themselves to us and ours of ourselves to them. Personal knowledge includes factual knowledge about the person, but no amount of factual knowledge can give us personal knowledge. Or again, human beings are necessarily involved in economic relations, as the impersonal aspect of communal life, but the economic framework can only be justified insofar as it furthers a fully human life for members of that community. (We might give another example - self-negation is shown most clearly by the act of suicide, in which the desire to deny community is so great that the return to personal life cannot be made. Only persons commit suicide - lemmings do not, and we only talk of them doing so by abstracting illegitimately from human life and omitting the intentionality of the suicide act.)

To each unity pattern there corresponds one of what Macmurray calls the 'reflective activities' of man. Science corresponds to the mechanistic pattern. It is impersonal, dealing only with the 'it',

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the world of information which is anybody's, as opposed to knowledge, which is always somebody's. To the organic pattern corresponds art, which is concerned with the unity of different elements in a harmonious whole. There is also a 'close and constant relation between art and the organic aspect of our own experience'¹¹ which is manifested in singing and dancing for example. Contrary to popular prejudice, art is a more complete form of knowledge than science, since it involves the apprehension of the particular. Art is a spontaneous expression of the personality and involves the third person - the 'it' - as science does, but also the first person, the 'I'. It holds no place for the second person, since an artist's vision is his alone. The artist is isolated, at the mercy of society's approval or disapproval, and he gives to those who will take. But he cannot take, or cooperate. As an artist, he cannot give himself to the reciprocal give and take of personal life.¹²

The majority of Macmurray's writing deals with an analysis of the personal life, and since the reflective activity corresponding to the unity pattern of the personal is religion, all his philosophy is in a sense a philosophy of religion. His understanding of religion is a humanistic one, based to a considerable extent on an anthropological analysis. It is one of his criticisms of Marx that the latter did not do research into the social nature of religion, making the assumption that religion is necessarily idealist. However, we shall return later to his ideas on religion. For him, all human life is personal, which means social. He rejects the individualistic starting point of Descartes, which has been so dominant in Western philosophy. Human awareness is not just of an 'I', but of a 'You-and-I'. A child sees the world in anthropomorphic terms at first and only later learns to abstract the impersonal. Here we see Macmurray's logical form of the positive containing its own negative. Personal life is the positive mode, but includes the 'Not-I' or negative. Without the 'Not-I' (the 'You') there would be no personal life.

In *Freedom in the Modern World* Macmurray examines ethics in the light of the three unity patterns. A 'mechanical' morality is of Roman type, involving obedience to laws; a 'social' morality is one of subordination to a higher purpose, as though humans were only parts of an organism. Personal

freedom can only be obtained through relations with other people in which there is no deception, domination or diffidence; each sees the other as he really is. True morality is that which fosters self-realization, but the self can only be realised in its relation with other selves. 'Everything that prevents that - fear or pride or the passion for wealth or power or position in men, the subordination of human beings to organizations and institutions, an unjust distribution of wealth or opportunity in the community ... is the enemy of morality.'¹³

Reason and Emotion

In Reason and Emotion he deals with the education of the emotional life, arguing that liberty will not, as some fear, lead to chaos, if only the hitherto neglected emotions can be properly developed. There is no ground, he says, for assuming that the emotions are necessarily irrational. 'Reason' is our capacity for objectivity, and objectivity is achieved by the emotions just as much as by our intellect. If the emotional life is nourished, our emotional evaluations will be more trustworthy. Here Macmurray has, I believe, solved the problem of the nature of reason, and avoided both the dangers of arid intellectualism and its counterpart, the excesses of irrationalism. We can see once more his idea that thought is of no value unless tested objectively - internal intellectual coherence is not the equivalent of truth.

Personal life, then, to summarise Macmurray's conclusions, is the life of objectivity, of relation to the world of other people; of capacity to behave in terms of that which is other than ourself. Because personal life is not based in our biological nature, it cuts across all racial and sexual barriers. Any restrictions on human relationships such as class division, sexual discrimination or apartheid, are obstacles to the personal life, and irrational, since they conflict with the social nature of human beings.

Thus the Self is constituted by its relation to persons; indeed the Self is a person, not a substance or organism. The Self is an agent, existing in dynamic relation to the world. It is not a 'pure subject', and is only a subject by negating its agency in thought, whose purpose should be to help the Self act more effectively in its determination of the world. But the Self can only be agent by being subject, for if it could not think, it could not act; it could only react to stimulus. Thought must be a component of action. The Self acts upon the world, determining the future, and since action involves choice, thought must work in terms of the distinction between right and wrong, to which the distinction between true and false is secondary. 'In other words, a theory of knowledge presupposes and must be derived from, and included within a theory of action.' (The Self as Agent, p89) If the Self is conceived as thinker, action is inexplicable, but thought can be accounted for if the Self is conceived as Agent. But the Self is only the Self by virtue of its - or rather his or her - relations to other people. In the early chapters of Persons in Relation Macmurray shows how human life cannot ever possibly be individualist, tracing the growth of the human child to maturity and demonstrating its dependence on other humans at every stage. Personal life is not a matter of fact - it is a matter of intention and co-operation, and the Self only has freedom through co-operation which is free from fear. Hence moral action is action intended to maintain and extend full, free human relations.

Macmurray's analysis of religion, we have said,

is anthropological; that is, he looks at its function in human society. While accepting that religions in practice can act as palliatives for social evils, and frequently as conservative and nationalistic forces; and accepting too the Marxist critique of idealism, he still does not believe that religion is idealistic in its essence. Indeed, when it is so, it is betraying its true nature. Western civilization derives from three cultures: Greek, Roman and Hebrew. The first was chiefly an artistic civilization; the second a technical, legalistic one; and the third a religious one. Hebrew society was penetrated by religion in every aspect of life, and Jewish identity was maintained after the dispersion by their religion. Macmurray draws the inference that religion cannot be idealist because the Hebrews were not idealist. His book The Clue to History gives the evidence for this point of view and then proceeds to analyse European history in terms of a struggle between realism and idealism. Idealism seeks to remove the possibility of a just society from this world. The Judaeo-Christian tradition, when it fails to seek justice on earth, betrays itself, and of course it has done so continually. Macmurray sees Marxism as the reassertion of the social aspect of this tradition.

In The Clue to History religion and politics become inseparable. It was written in 1938, and views Fascism as the latest and worst threat to the possibility of a just human society, and to the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The attitude of Nazism to the Jews, argues Macmurray, was an attempt once and for all to destroy the idea of a communistic society and to replace it by a society based on race and blood. Fascism was the logical end of European civilization, rather than a strange aberration, for Europe had always tried to avoid putting into practice the justice required by its religious tradition. '... the form of our Western life has rested upon the acceptance in the "spiritual" field of the root principles of rationality - equality, freedom and universal community - and their refusal in the practical field of material life.'¹⁴

Negative Democracy

Much of Macmurray's writing on political matters was done in the thirties as a response to the rise of Fascism, and as a result of his early study of Marxism. During the war he published a short book called Constructive Democracy, which deals with a distinction of continuing importance for British politics, the difference between 'negative' and 'constructive' democracy. Our present democracy is negative, he says, because it excludes large parts of the country's economic life from political authority. It is not an essential function of democracy to protect private property; rather, the essence of democracy is freedom of speech and worship. Therefore it is quite possible to have a socialist democracy, with a planned economy. Indeed, it is essential to control economic life, since the means of life are also the means to the good life. 'Whoever controls wealth controls the means of cultural development and personal freedom. ... - the control of culture which democracy denies to political authority is exercised in fact by economic powers which are themselves exempt from political control.'¹⁵ This little book of forty pages draws a distinction that still needs to be made.

A theme to be found running through Macmurray's work is his rejection of dualism, which expresses itself in various ways: as the split between reason and emotion, or thought and action, or theory and

practice, or realism and idealism. Different forms of it are attacked in different books. In The Clue to History Macmurray looks at the split between the theory and practice of religion; in Reason and Emotion he argues that the real distinction should be intellect and emotion, and that both are capable of rationality or irrationality. And his whole philosophical position, in The Form of the Personal, attempts to bring thought and action into a reciprocal relationship, through 'the rhythm of withdrawal and return'.

Christians, Marxists, existentialists, psychologists and anthropologists - Macmurray's thought owes something to all these groups, but the system he has produced is his own, argued in close detail. It is his ability simultaneously to see human life as a whole, and to analyse its different aspects in depth, that makes him remarkable. And it is not essential to accept the general outline of his philosophy to be able to appreciate the particular points he makes: his analysis of the relation between mother and child, or of the nature of democracy, or of scientific and artistic method. He is one of a tiny number of British philosophers in this century to

have taken note of continental philosophy. The price he has paid for believing that his subject is about the world, not words, is neglect. I hope this article may help to rectify matters.

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- 1 Search for Reality in Religion, p21
- 2 op. cit., p18
- 3 op. cit., p22
- 4 The Self as Agent, p13
- 5 Freedom in the Modern World, p68
- 6 op. cit., p101
- 7 Interpreting the Universe, p38
- 8 op. cit., p40
- 9 op. cit., p85
- 10 The Self as Agent, p98
- 11 Religion, Art and Science, p31
- 12 See Reason and Emotion, pp164-5
- 13 Freedom in the Modern World, p205
- 14 The Clue to History, p235
- 15 Constructive Democracy, p22

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Media and images

Brian Miller

'Consciousness' is not something other than 'sensuous human activity' or praxis. It is to be understood as an aspect or moment of praxis itself. Furthermore the forms that 'consciousness' takes in society are to be understood within the context of the forms of social praxis.

- Richard J. Bernstein, Praxis and Action (London, 1972)

My general consciousness is only the theoretical shape of that which the living shape is the real community, the social fabric, although at the present day general consciousness is an abstraction from real life and as such confronts it with hostility.

- Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscript of 1844

The key to the understanding of media lies in this concept of consciousness as a moment in praxis.

Man is the social being. His 'self' is relationship, which is him in relation to others. Even when his life does not appear in the direct form of communal life in association with others, it is still, Marx says, 'an expression and confirmation of social life'. Our individual consciousness is a moment in our interrelated activity, and our relationships reconcile our own consciousness to ourselves.

However, when the objective basis of material society is founded upon other than human relationships, upon the relations of things in the form of capital-movement, the resultant reified social relations lead to the subjective condition of social opacity. In the condition of social opacity, human relations are pale reflections of the relations of things, and cannot assume primary place because this would be at odds with society's material basis in things.

As this process of opacity develops, a

development in relation to the growth of productive forces and extensions of capital into every facet of human existence, images loom more and more as the means by which a sense of human relationship in praxis is restored. These images enhance the individual personality by confirming perception, since perception is decreasingly confirmed through close, living relationship and identity with others. The function of these images determines their content: they are offered up as unambiguous, familiar, loving, altruistic, enlightening and dependable. Above all, they confirm self-identity by yielding to the viewer's preferences, even when this yielding incorporates any necessary apparent abrasiveness. The function of the image is to confirm individual self-identity.

Image specificity

One cannot identify with a wooden totem. Once upon a time an image of that kind would have served to be the focal-point for common activity, primitive social praxis. But the nature of images alters with societies, which demand different functions from them. In the modern case, the image must of necessity be lifelike, realistic, recognisably and empathically human. This requires it to appear to us in movement and in sound, in colour, in highly-defined tone and picture, and in a personable manner. It must be very much like ourselves, to all appearances, and must at the same time be either very much what we would like to be, what we desire in others, or what we believe to be true about others, confirming both fondest hopes and deepest suspicions.

Consciousness, previously identified as a moment in social praxis, becomes an activity, but since it is one played out without the direct participation of others, it must therefore seek