Love, Fear and Freedom

According to John Macmurray’s account of the logic of the personal, “the positive includes and is sustained by its own negative”.¹ As the unit of the personal is “You and I”, – I am not you, and you are not me – our existence starts in a personal relationship which manifests this positive/negative dynamic: our form of life is determined from the beginning by communication. Thus, even before we become conscious agents, as babies we know love (positive) and fear (negative), the basic motivations which will underlie action. As the personal is a two-way relationship with the other, it will begin in infancy with the bond we have with the other who takes care of us; a baby is totally dependent on someone else. We respond to love and react in fear if it seems the love is withdrawn. We feel and respond more directly to the “yes” after we have felt the “no” (if there were no “no”, we would not appreciate the “yes”) – and we know the other as the one with the power to give us what we want. Even after we have grown up enough not to need the other for survival, we are still always in relationship. “If the terminus a quo is a helpless total dependence on the other, the terminus ad quem is not independence, but a mutual interdependence of equals”.² The baby responds to the mother (or whoever cares for him) not just with satisfaction at being fed and kept physically comfortable, but to her, paying attention to him, responding to him. The communication is always, already mutual, obvious within moments from birth. But what of the mother’s love for the baby? Her delight in him, her pleasure in holding him, her irresistible desire to sing to him, her joy at his first smile? How is this love

¹ Persons in Relation, pg. 16 and many other places

² Persons in Relation, pg. 66
related to fear? She fears for him, he is so defenseless, so easily hurt. She will want to protect him, she may worry lest she fail him in some way. To love at all is to be vulnerable, to lay oneself open to pain - thus the stoics’ recommendation was never to be attached to anyone or anything. But if the mother’s fear is not subordinated to the love, her anxiety will affect the baby and the negative will to that extent outweigh the positive.

If her love does not include the negative, the awareness of what is to be feared, which calls for action, it is, as Macmurray says, unreal, merely “sentimental,” effectively ego-centric, not responsive to the other, in this case, the infant. Her care, then, involves action. Action is intentional: it means recognizing that there is something that needs to be done to change the situation, and then inter-acting with what resists her effort (the “no”) so as to renew the mutual bond, which in the long term is what Macmurray calls friendship. “All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action for the sake of friendship” – namely that “mutual interdependence of equals” where persons become most fully themselves.

Of course no mother is only a mother, she has other interests and concerns; even when focusing as a mother, she is not perfect. She has her own fears, her own “hang-ups” which will be part of what the child will have to negotiate as he grows up. As he develops, we hope in an environment where love is stronger than fear, his trust in himself will increase as he learns to handle frustration (mother saying “no”, dropping the toy from the crib, falling, getting up, etc., etc.). He will become more conscious of his contribution to the primary relationship; then there will be new experiences, different relationships with other people, other beings and objects. He realizes he has power of his own – and his “default” attitude to life will be positive or negative – in the end, love or fear.
As he moves from dependence to independence the mother – child relationship will change: she will have to handle her fear differently, and recognize and respect his growing agency. I remember my son at 2 ½, starting to climb the ladder on the swing set which my daughter, pushing 5, had just scrambled up. He was so focused, so determined, his little leg hardly long enough to reach the second rung. But then he was up. I held my breath. I was afraid. But I also felt that he was testing himself in an important way. I badly wanted to run over, pull him down and pick him up. I was definitely poised to catch him if he fell. But I repeated to myself, over and over, “a broken leg is healed more quickly than a broken spirit”.

Action, as I have already indicated, affects the world: it always involves interaction between self and other; the first interactions, we have seen, are with other persons (the “I – thou” of Martin Buber.) Relationships with the non-personal come later, as the child becomes more active. The responses of the other vary: the cat objects to its tail being pulled, but does not talk or feed him. The teddy bear does not react to being dropped, whereas when he falls down, it hurts. When things do not respond as he expects, he will in due course come to terms with these different kinds of other. One can see an infant processing the effects of what he is interacting with: the emergence of thinking. All action involves thinking: it means we are making choices, no to this, and yes to that, as our intentions unfold. Macmurray offers the example of a craftsman carving wood, focused on refining movements of his hand, his tool as he proceeds, his thinking integrated into his action. Action is real, as touching is real: whatever we touch also touches us, and it is intentional – we recognize the right move as compared with the alternative, which allows us to correct errors. As Macmurray puts it, right and wrong come before true and false.

So the “no”, the negative, is integral to action (again: “the positive includes and is sustained by its own negative”). If our action is interrupted in some way, if our project hits a snag, we stop
and withdraw from action, to look harder at what we have been doing and consider our options. This kind of thinking Macmurray calls reflection to distinguish it from that which is part of action: its purpose is to improve action. So the self for Macmurray is primarily agent, and only secondarily thinker; a philosophical or theoretical perspective which values thinking for its own sake, forgetting the nitty-gritty of action, is a dead end. The thinker, *qua* thinker, is not in touch with reality or with other persons. He is, one hopes, only temporarily “detached”, as if outside time. For time is the dimension of action, which is accomplished in relation to the future. What is done, the past, becomes a matter of fact, whereas action as future-oriented, is always open-ended. It is characterized by intention. If discussions about freedom, equality and human dignity treat these issues as matters of fact, there will always be an air of unreality, because they are human values which need to be understood as matters of intention. Thus they cannot be fulfilled once and for all, but they are a call to commitment (cf. marriage, or community.) They refer to the personal, even as they need to be realized in a material and a social world, which by necessity are less personal. But such structures as we put in place must in the end be evaluated by how well they function in contributing to the space opened for the life of the personal – our relationships with others. Whatever we do only has meaning in terms of those relationships, and as discussed above, underlying intention is motivation – at the deepest level, love or fear.

For example, freedom is a matter of our desires, aspirations and needs - doing what we want, getting what we want, etc. These are not fixed: they can be adjusted in relation to others, or corrected in the light of experience (is this what I really wanted?) And what I want to do may be incompatible with what you want to do, we may both need the same things, and there aren’t enough to go around (thus effects of love or fear.) So freedom depends on other people (as does its absence – only a free being can be enslaved) and it is both at risk and open-ended. He also says that we only experience real freedom in a relationship which allows us to be fully ourselves,
where we set up no defenses - need hide nothing from our friend or from ourselves. So we come again to his sense of the point of it all – “the mutual interdependence of equals”.

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