Philosophy, Past and Present: John Macmurray and Our Future

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ABSTRACT

John Macmurray’s controversial thesis: “All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action and all meaningful action for the sake of friendship” is unpacked by explaining and illustrating what he means by the “personal.” He sees philosophy as a cultural phenomenon which expresses and responds to its historical context, and in turn affects how people think and behave. The Subject as Thinker, which has dominated modern philosophy, has led us to value knowledge for its own sake and trust theory over practice, needs to be replaced by the self as agent. The logic of the personal, in which the positive (e.g. action, love) is constituted and sustained by its negative (e.g. thinking, fear) arises out of personal relationship (“I-and-you”). Facing the problematic personhood may enable us to find meaning in relations with others, and face the future with hope.

KEYWORDS

Action, Knowledge, Logic, Meaning, Negative, Positive, Reflection, The Personal, Thinking

Reflecting on the career of modern philosophy it seems we are at a crossroads in history and we need a new take on its role in society. Thinking is involved in all that we do, but at least since Descartes, knowledge has been a matter of thinking while thought has had priority over action. This has been useful for science which has made good use of theory, but we now have world problems which call for a new approach. In the following we meet a philosopher who starts from the perspective that actually knowledge comes before thought, and action is real, while thinking, which can inform action, is not. It is persons that think in order to act, and John Macmurray shows how important it is to understand what it is to be a person, so we may come to terms with the problems we human beings have created for ourselves. He offers a new philosophy which may enable us to survive and live together more rationally in the world.

John Macmurray (1891 – 1976) was a British philosopher – actually Scottish – who was quite well known in his time, being something of a public intellectual.1 As philosophy in England became more “professionalized” he lost status in academic circles and his work was not taken seriously by the next generation, which was caught up in logical positivism.2 He was raised to be a classicist and took his first degree in Greek and Latin at Glasgow University but he had always been interested in science, first chemistry and then at university he took a course in geology and won the gold medal that year. When he graduated from Glasgow, he went to Oxford to take up philosophy, and there he was disconcerted to hear it argued in all seriousness that scientific knowledge was not really knowledge.

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(This was during the relatively brief flowering of British Idealism, a variant of Hegelianism, taken especially seriously at Macmurray’s college, Balliol.) As the role of science and all sorts of questions about knowledge became more and more significant in his later thinking this comment seems particularly striking.

His studies at Oxford were interrupted by the First World War, and like many of his peers, he enlisted. And as with others who survived the trenches, his world was changed by the experience. It came to him even as he participated (he was honored with the Military Cross for Valor) that what people were doing was totally irrational. Something had gone badly wrong for these actions to seem to make sense. I give this biographical background to try to give context to the unique philosophical insights which Macmurray developed and which I believe address issues that our culture needs to face today. He gave the Gifford Lectures in 1953 and 54, and the published versions, 1957 and 61 respectively, which offer perhaps the most fully developed versions of his thought, are titled The Self as Agent and Persons in Relation. These titles indicate the two themes that are central to his project, which combines epistemology, ontology, and ethics in wholly new ways. The first, surprising if not controversial, he puts clearly enough:

All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action for the sake of friendship… (1995a, p. 15).

The second is more obscure, but I hope to elucidate it though this essay. It is indicated by the title he gave to the complete series of the Gifford Lectures: “The Form of the Personal”. He was concerned that we recognize the need for, and learn to reflect according to, what he calls the “logical form of the personal” in which the positive is constituted and sustained by the negative (1995a, p. 98). The first is related to the second in that action is the positive whereas thinking is negative, and he argues that we must replace the philosophical subject (the thinker) with the recognition of the self who acts in the real world. To act is to make a choice, do this, not that. He gives the example of a wood-carver who is consciously moving his knife this way, not that, as he proceeds with his work. His thinking is integrated into his actions: he is constantly aware of what he is doing (and what he is avoiding doing) as he proceeds (1995a, p. 88). But if he hits a serious snag and is not sure what to do next, he will put down his tools, and stop work altogether. As Macmurray puts it, he withdraws and reflects on what is going on. Only after he has come to some insight which helps him to solve his problem will he be ready to move into action again.

Philosophy for Macmurray is a species of reflection which has a particular role to play in the culture in which it arises. The implication is that while a society is functioning reasonably well, those who are drawn to philosophy do not tend to make waves, but function more as custodians, perhaps embellishers, of an accepted tradition. Such seems to have been the case in Europe throughout the Medieval era. Then the emergence of science and the concomitant crumbling of the authority of the Church posed serious problems. Descartes, caught up in the turmoil of the intellectual world, stopped to think, and the “subject as thinker” was born. It is generally accepted that Descartes was not able entirely to disentangle his reflections from the assumptions and thought-patterns of his education, but his efforts set in motion the rest of what has come to be called “modern philosophy.” Macmurray was convinced that Twentieth Century Europe was facing an analogous crisis, one more serious than that of the Seventeenth. Like the wood carver we need to stop what we are doing, take time to reflect, so as to be able to think afresh about our situation, do something different and avoid the catastrophes which we keep seeming to bring about. A new kind of philosophy is called for.

While no-one today would argue for Cartesianism as such, there are a number of elements of seventeenth century metaphysics still around, albeit sometimes, as Macmurray puts it “unexpressed and half-conscious, implicit in [our] ways of behavior” (1936, p. 9). They have become taken-for-granted habits of thought. Indeed, Macmurray was convinced that any major intellectual breakthrough (or shift in thinking) will gradually make its way into the society at large, and in due course affect
the way most people think. Thus, for him, metaphysics is not restricted to the consideration of an abstruse set of hypotheses – such as fell out of favor with analytic philosophers. Rather, we all function according to taken-for-granted assumptions about how the world makes sense, so there is an implicit metaphysics underlying everything we do, whether we think about it or not. In Descartes’ case, his implicit metaphysics was at odds with his explicitly formulated epistemology, and it is that epistemology which was taken up by succeeding thinkers.

The Cartesian dictum “I think therefore I am” is a riddle Descartes thought he had solved, but for Macmurray it is a non-starter. To think in a way not integrated with action is to stop interacting with reality, to withdraw into imagination. His rejoinder to Descartes: “cogito ergo non-sum” (1995a, p. 81). A mental note is a note I do not in fact make.⁵ If a philosophical system ends in solipsism, it has refuted itself, and by definition, the subject of the cogito is cut off from the real world. And really has anyone been convinced by Descartes’ reasoning? Doesn’t he leave us with more questions than answers? He believed he could establish certain knowledge through thought alone. There will be more to say about imagination later. Macmurray contends that

“All thought presupposes knowledge. It is not possible to think about something you do not already know” (1996, p. 6)⁶ (author’s italics). This is primary knowledge which “is first and foremost that immediate experience of things which is prior to all expression and understanding” (1996, p. 7).

Macmurray’s metaphysics therefore involves a different ontology: the landscape of thought looks different if we start somewhere else.

We only need to stop and think when something interrupts the smooth pattern of life, when something untoward breaks the flow. That’s when we experience the negative. Thus, for Macmurray we begin to think only when we have to, and we learn to do so in the course of our experience – beginning with that “primary knowledge”. So how, where, do we start? Interestingly enough, recent work by child psychologists supports and amplifies what Macmurray describes (Stern, 1985; Winnicott, 1988).

The baby experiences frustration, pain, hunger, etc. She learns that her desires have to be met by some other being – she is not alone, but dependent on an Other. This awareness of not-self Macmurray calls “the germ of rationality.” She learns she is an “I” at the same time as her will conflicts with another’s will. “I” and “you” come into being together. Reality has begun to enter her life. What, one might ask, is the relation between rationality and reality? Or more succinctly, “what is reason?” Macmurray’s definition is that “reason is the capacity for objectivity” (1996, pp. 127-8); that is to say: “the capacity to stand in conscious relation to that which is not ourselves” (1996, pp. 127-8). This definition was given to underscore the difference between dreaming and waking consciousness, but it also applies to the beginning of personal existence in the life of the infant.

This is our first primary knowledge, knowing another person who also knows me: not, it should be noticed, knowledge about, third-person knowledge, Buber’s “I-it”, but personal – “I-thou” (Buber, 1970 & 1965). What is crucial about the infant’s initiation into primary knowledge is that it occurs in a situation of total dependence. The baby will not survive unless someone responds to her need. What I just referred to as a conflict of wills holds in a nutshell – is actually the seed – of the problematic logic of the personal. The positive is to be constituted and sustained by the negative. The baby’s fear that the mother or care-giver will not be there, that the demand made on the Other is refused, is the negative. But assuming the needed response does come in due course, the fear, as it is allayed, becomes an element in a growing relationship of trust: and, with this, comes the capacity to appreciate the positive as fear is subordinated to love. Love, then, according to Macmurray is constituted and sustained by fear.⁷

One reason this matters as an introduction to the “personal” is the question of motive: all response to the world is motivated, as one’s underlying attitude may be predominantly positive or negative. If the baby does not forgive the caregiver for what was experienced as betrayal, then the negative, the fear, will not be subordinated to the positive, and this first original relationship will not become mutual, each being a source of joy to the other. The baby’s concern for self-protection will lead to trying to deal with the caregiver’s behavior either by trying to placate the Other with excessive “goodness”
or by finding a way to assert her will aggressively and win that way. These attitudes may underlie general approaches to life, and influence philosophical positions, in particular, moral theories, which are usually ways to try to solve the problems we have when wills conflict. Macmurray’s account emphasizes the personal, and concludes that it is personal relationships which make life worth living, in his terms, give it meaning.

We will come back to these issues later. For now, let us spend more time with the child. As her range of experience expands and she explores the world, she learns to discriminate between different Others. At first it seems she thinks they are all other “I”s, but in due course, some are clearly “I”s (i.e. “you”s) because they respond to her as opposed to some where this is not quite clear. Some are animate, but not so personal, such as pets, and some seem to be objects she can manipulate. Vygotsky documented how a child early on starts to use things to achieve her ends (1986). Already she has been making choices, saying yes to this and no to that and adjusting what she does if thwarted, if reality has said “no”. To solve a problem, you have to figure it out, trying different ways to handle it. As I have suggested, this is by way of imagining different solutions. And it is a lot easier if you have control of inert stuff than if you have to deal with other people and their goals and actions (or with recalcitrant animals or plants that need watering, etc.).

In Interpreting the Universe, published some twenty years before he gave the Gifford Lectures, Macmurray describes what he calls “unity patterns”, which he later will refer to as distinct “logical forms,” as in the title of those lectures. These are the ways we make use of imagination when we withdraw from action because we have to stop and think. To keep our reflection relevant and consistent we must make use of symbols to represent what we need to think about, and combine these symbols in a systematic and consistent fashion so that our conclusions will help us resolve the real-world issues that made withdrawal from action necessary in the first place. It is clear that the value of this thinking lies in the fact that it is unreal, and we can choose how to apply what we learn from reflection when we return to action.

Descartes’ focus on mathematics and his recognition of its importance for science effectively articulated the logical form of substance – inert stuff. This made sense as philosophy’s response to the development of physics and also provided continuity with the traditional privilege accorded to mathematics. And as Macmurray put it, it “proved adequate for the scientific determination of the material world” (1996, p. 33). In terms of the child’s exploration of her world, this is the sophisticated version of her manipulation of objects to get what she wants. Macmurray describes it as the logical form according which everything we encounter is regarded as means to an end, and thus it is primarily concerned with cause and effect – if I do this, that will happen – on the assumption that there is relative regularity in the world on which we act. (He calls this “the continuant” (1995a, pp. 146-164). For the purposes of this approach, whatever will achieve our end will do, and thus we can regard the units as interchangeable, which is why mathematics works. Reassuringly perhaps, this logical form can be symbolized as ~(A●~A) – and the relation between math and logic was of course beautifully demonstrated in Princípios Mathematíca. (The way the negative works here will be of interest in a moment.) Indeed, this mode of reflection about the world has had amazing success as evidenced in the growth and application of the sciences, with the result that it seems to have become the gold standard for knowledge, so to speak. And what cannot be symbolized in this way, what is not mathematically determinable, becomes unknowable. What is still more problematic is that the human being, the one who reflects on the material world, will have to be regarded as “immaterial” (Descartes’ “thinking substance”) while as Davidson’s discussion of “anomalous monism” indicates, the activity of thinking itself cannot be understood in material terms (Davidson, 1980).

Descartes has left us with at least three problematic bequests. First, reflection – thinking separate from action – is more to be trusted than experience, which requires a body – the upshot of his dualism. Second, if we could establish the right foundation or identify the right building blocks we could achieve certain reliable knowledge – a substance-based picture, for sure. Third, everything can be made sense of according to scientific principles as in mathematical physics. After Descartes, Spinoza and
Leibniz continued his project, producing versions which were perhaps more consistent, but in some ways further and further from what was happening in real people’s lives. (Surely these were grand feats of imagination!) When “rationalism” was superseded by “empiricism”, it was not so much that Descartes’ dualism was overcome as that interest in the “mental substance” waned, and we were left with the material – or the “object” without a clear account of any subject. And if we do try to make sense of the self, according to a physical (mechanistic) conception, we must end in skepticism as became clear to Hume. Even now, as I have already suggested, “thinking” is a problem for science, which is sometimes presented – or perceived – as not the product of human persons at all. And the relation between brains and minds continues to puzzle many.¹⁰

Obviously, the application of mathematical symbolism has worked well in many areas of human endeavor, but when this logical form is universalized, it doesn’t solve all our problems. If applied to living things it runs into trouble, and even more so if it is to help us with relationships with other human beings. The recognition that other logical forms are possible gradually changes the way people think. For example, look at the difference between Hobbes’ picture of society where the great machine is built up of units all effectively interchangeable and moved by the same energy, (the differences being due to their relative positions) and that of Rousseau. Rousseau envisioned a society where all members found their fulfilment (freedom) in their contribution to the whole. This reflection on interrelatedness and process is echoed in Kant’s Third Critique. (The Critique of Pure Reason is still working out the substance model. Macmurray notes the effort in the Critique of Practical Reason to make room for action, even if it is incomprehensible according to the first Critique¹¹). In the logic of substance which is mathematical, the units are stable and interchangeable, and so positive and negative cancel each other: ∼(A•−A). But the logical form figured out by Hegel, the dialectic, will have to symbolize the organic. This “logic” is quite different: here positive and negative interact and are absorbed into something new (the Aufhebung). This makes it possible to reflect on life and growth as it accounts for a relationship between disparate elements in which both are changed as they contribute to a whole greater than themselves. (A•−A)→B. Reflecting on human life according to this symbolism, Rousseau’s vision had more going for it than Hobbes’ but it is not going to be adequate in the long run. The life experienced in such a totalitarian-type society will not prove satisfactory. As in the full-fledged Hegelian state, all must find their “truth” in the function which they perform for the greater good. Just as the cause/effect metaphysics still colors our thinking about the value of science, the organic model is also part of our taken-for-granted metaphysics. We think of ourselves as members (i.e. limbs) of larger (corporate) organizations (organ, again); our function in society is part of who we are, but there is more to life than this. Macmurray was very interested in the Russian experience: it was the first time a philosophical theory was actually tested in the real world (1995a). And the result of the test was: it does not work; i.e. society run that way did not meet the needs of the people involved. Whether the capitalist version of democracy works is perhaps still being decided. The organic model is very influential: it underlies the current obsession with growth, whereas with real organisms, the cycle of life includes death.

But about human beings: physically, certainly we are matter, and biologically alive, but neither account tells the whole story. We may have it right about physics, and are making progress in understanding living systems of plants and animals, but ourselves? Our lack of self-knowledge may – perhaps already does – spell disaster. The logical forms then can be symbolized ∼(A•−A), (A•−A)→B and now try this: (A•−A)•∼(A•−A)→(A’•A’′)→? (these are my symbols, not Macmurray’s). In the case of the personal, somehow the negative is essential, is in fact constitutive of the positive. I am me because I am not you, and vice versa. The unit of the personal is “I and you”.

The substance logic of science, as our culture has applied it, has allowed us to accumulate more and more knowledge. The reference to “means” suggests money in the bank¹². Mary Midgley’s book Wisdom, Information and Wonder has the subtitle: “What is knowledge for?” She is scathing about the accumulation of scientific information for its own sake (1991, Ch. 8). If everything is seen as means, then nothing is of value in itself. If knowledge is simply hoarded, it is available to be used
for good or ill, and the more power it gives us, the more damage it can do in the wrong hands. Not necessarily with evil intent, but because, as seems to be most often the case, people do not know what to do with it. Remember, this knowledge is reflective, the product of withdrawal from reality. Hence, the thrust of Macmurray’s claim: “All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action.” What is the point of all this data?

The second mode of reflection which makes sense of the organic, allows one to appreciate how the whole can be much more than the sum of the parts. Here, judgment, as Kant described it in the Third Critique, is aesthetic, a matter of feeling, a sense of how entities that differ, even oppose each other, can interact in such a way that they disappear into a final, satisfactory form. Macmurray says it has us seeing the world as end. Again, this insight is reflective, detached from the real world and so, impersonal. This has been regarded with some complacency (Aristotle being only one example) as an (intellectual?) virtue, but it is clearly an occupational hazard for a human being who exists in the real world. Such thinking is not doing anything so it takes no risks and does not involve other people. Action, on the other hand, takes place in real time, that is to say, as it changes the situation, it initiates a future which is different from the past. (The traditional “problem of free will” can only seem like one from the perspective of reflection: i.e., in imagination.) And we are always already in relationships with others, even if we have sometimes been in a position to ignore this, or even forget it. But today we have no choice.

Now we have to stop and reflect on what is happening in our world and figure out what to do next, so we do need to be able to keep the relevant issues in mind. Macmurray’s articulation of the problem may seem abstract and oddly expressed, and he is in some ways struggling in the dark, but certainly there needs to be some rethinking, or we will not make it as a species. What to do about conflicts between human beings and their intractable conflicting desires? The logic of the personal, in which the positive is constituted and sustained by the negative, involves as Macmurray puts it a “practical contradiction” (1995a, p. 98). We have already discussed how love is constituted and sustained by fear. The personal is inherently problematic. And any case will involve this weird logic, as we all know in (personal) experience. We can only tell the truth if we can also lie; we can only get it right if we could have got it wrong – whether in an individual project like the carver’s, or with other people; we can only ignore something or someone we know is there; we can only enslave a being that is free… And the clinchers: only a person can behave impersonally, only a human being can be inhumane. Macmurray quotes an insight from Kierkegaard (his fundamental criticism of Hegel):

*The dialectic of the personal life is a dialectic without a synthesis…*(1995a, p. 98).

Our relationships with one another are always still open-ended, hence my symbolization: (A’•A”)→? Thus the baby is born into a personal relationship; she would not survive unless someone takes care of her. The carer might think of her as a machine to be kept functioning mechanically or as an organism needing to be fed and supported in a nurturing environment – we can always treat human beings in these ways – and perhaps often do – but these impersonal approaches do not welcome her into the human community. For that she needs to be loved, and to know she is loved, by the Other. She must overcome the fear of the loss of that love and respond positively to the Other. She will need to develop that trust and in due course know herself as a member of that community: become a person in an I–you bond. Thus, she will move from dependency into being a full participant, capable of taking her place there. The current cultural valuation of individuality and independence (and related ideas about rights cf.

Hopper and Richards (2012)) are, I would suggest, an expression of a fundamental habit of fear originating in baby-hood. The tendency of intellectuals who value knowledge for its own sake may also have the same motivation: they can feel empowered by ownership of “means” which they need not risk spending or losing. (Remember Descartes’ paranoia about believing something not certain.)
But our actions always directly or indirectly affect others, and are likewise affected by them. In fact any action is only possible because of other people – either in the past, or now: we can only achieve our ends with their help, or, minimally because they do not hinder us. You may recall the title of Macmurray’s second set of Gifford Lectures is *Persons in Relation*, and the second part of his thesis, which I’ve cited already: “all meaningful action [is] for the sake of friendship.” This is Macmurray’s idea of a meaningful life, namely that we can be fully ourselves only in relationship with another where the negative is subordinated to the positive. Other philosophers have written on friendship, but not many in quite this way. John Stuart Mill wrote of the value of a relationship in which “Each can enjoy the luxury of looking up to the other.” (1988, p. 102). Simone de Beauvoir in *Ethics of Ambiguity* (1996) alludes to the possibility of authentic relationships as she documents a range of inauthentic ones. Being a friend, it is important to note, is not a matter of fact. Because it is persons who are capable of friendship, it is a matter of intention which may or may not be fulfilled: what we do, our actions indicate whether we are friends – and actions inaugurate a future. We are always poised to choose, and can always miss the mark. Remember Kierkegaard’s “either/or” (1987). Action, being personal, is problematic.

Macmurray believed that material well-being and a relatively effective social organization are necessary conditions for a satisfactory life (see endnote 4) – but their value in the end is that they support the personal lives of those involved. I have referred to “society” and “community”, and for Macmurray these are different. “Society” can be regarded as a matter of fact, – I just implied it can be understood according to the logic of the organic. But “Community” is a matter of intention, it depends on the commitment of persons, who are positively motivated towards one another, who feel more themselves when together with others who matter to them, and to whom they matter. (Psychology and sociology, especially in qualitative studies, have noted this aspect of human “nature”, but of course individual lives are lived by persons, and they make their own choices, have their own motivation). To the extent that our motivation is fear, we are reacting not acting – and it seems that most of the choices made by politicians and national governments are reactions. To the extent that we use theories – social, economic, psychological – to justify what we do, we are out of touch with what is really happening as well as ignoring how what we are doing impacts our fellows and our planet. Perhaps the logic used by those responsible for our future is simply not able to take account of the muddle we have got ourselves into, or how to get out of it in time.

Is it possible that a new way of thinking can enable us to change the course of history? History, for Macmurray, is an account of human actions, and what we need to come to, he argued, beyond the world-as-means and the world-as-end is a vision of the world-as-one-action. Our world is now so interconnected that what we do involves people all over the planet. Can we somehow begin to recognize this, and take account of others in a positive, not negative way? We cannot be a fully personal community, intending friendship with everyone, even those with whom we have no relationship, but we can try at least to envision others as also persons, “you”, in a positive not a negative frame of reference, and hope to act together rather than react against. Aim at least for a world society that makes room for human community. Community being a matter of intention, not a matter of fact.
REFERENCES


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