A Metaphysics for the 21st Century: The significance of John Macmurray's thought

This brief summary of the philosophical position of the 20th century British philosopher John Macmurray (1891-1976) is intended to be supplemented by things written elsewhere. Macmurray, a native of Scotland, wrote some dozen books and held professorships at University College London and Edinburgh. He appeared on the BBC Third Program in the 1930s, where he managed to interest many members of the general public in philosophical consideration of social and political issues. Although he relinquished any formal connection with religious institutions after World War I, in which he fought, until his retirement many years later, when he joined the Society of Friends (Quakers), his was a valued voice in the progressive discussions of religion which were widespread at the time.

In his wide-ranging philosophical thinking, Macmurray had a central focus – to develop a philosophical concept of persons that was better than the one he inherited, which was individualist, dualist and idealist. Quite capable of analytic thought, he wanted to put analysis to use in creating the big picture, which for him was about how to enable universal human flourishing. (Had he been working today, he might have taken more trouble to include other species and the earth itself in his theories. As it is, there is nothing in his work which denies them their place, I think.) Late in his career he summarised his philosophy thus: "*All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action for the sake of friendship*." The word 'friendship' was one he pressed into use to mean positive relations between people, where fear was absent and creativity, free expression and enjoyment of each other were possible. A grouping of people where this could happen he often called a 'community'. A 'society', on the other hand, was the functional group which, of necessity, underpinned the community. People were members of both, but a society could function without friendship whereas a community was constituted by it. All communities needed a functioning society but not all societies resulted in communities.

This paper aims to present the world-view which Macmurray developed as he discarded dualism and re-thought the metaphysical basics. I use 'metaphysical' here to mean philosophical ontology, talk about what there is. If that is a perverse usage of 'metaphysics' then please translate as you think fit. When I first read Macmurray's book *Reason and Emotion* (RE 1935), I did not have any grounding in academic philosophy. His organisation of concepts about the world into material, organic and personal categories made immediate sense to me. Only later did I realise the extent of their difference from the categories based on a dualism of the physical and the spiritual (or mind and body, etc.) which have imbued the western philosophical tradition. Therefore I will begin by describing Macmurray's three-fold way of thinking about the world and human life.

Seeing the World Whole

Macmurray was unusual for his day in embracing science without abandoning religion. From his parents he received a grounding in what he would call a religion that was 'real', that is, one which informed the way of life of its adherents in a way which was accepted both intellectually and emotionally as valid. From his education he received the knowledge of science which convinced him of the validity of its experimental method of obtaining

information about the world. If these two clashed, which they sometimes did, he set himself the task of resolving the clash without abandoning either. Fortunately, his religious grounding included an insistence on absolute integrity, so he was led to face awkward questions rather than to duck them. Experience of war and a happy marriage broadened his outlook. He approached philosophy with what I would call an 'existentialist' stance, though he was not typical of that school or any other.

He was driven to philosophise about the 'person' because, he came to believe, the acute problems of the society of 1920s Europe derived from a failure to understand ourselves properly, in particular a failure to consider our emotional life as of equal importance to our intellectual life. He looked to the tradition for clues and failed to find them, concluding that he would have to provide a new structure himself. His first presentation of it, in his book *Interpreting the Universe* (IU 1933), was not widely taken up. He became much better known for his radio talks, re-printed as *Freedom in the Modern World* (FMW 1932), where he for the first time made a serious effort to explain his philosophical thought to the layman. Already the great variety of his thought is becoming apparent, as he applied philosophy to the political and social problems of the day.

Macmurray understood the world we know as being material. Everything has a material aspect, including ourselves. Some of the material objects are alive, and this is the organic aspect, which some but not all of the world possesses. We humans are ourselves living organisms, but we also have a third aspect, the one which philosophy, in his view, was most confused about. He called this aspect 'the personal' (or, in early works, 'personality'). It is important to note that this is a conceptual category and does not mean an individual. Persons are material and organic as well as personal. So, the personal includes the organic, and the organic includes the material. You can look at this triad either way, thinking of the material as the most inclusive because everything has a material aspect, or thinking of the personal as the most inclusive because it includes the other two aspects.

Note that this structure rules out an immaterial person. Macmurray does not talk much about souls or the after-life, but what he does insist on is the difference between the organic and the personal. In his world-view, biology does not and cannot fully explain personality. 'Nature' is important but it is organic, not personal. Persons are amazing in their creativity and reason. The personal goes beyond the organic, just as the organic goes beyond the material. The personal is not limited by the nature of the organic. (If it were, it would not be a separate aspect, but merely a subset of the organic.)

Philosophies of the past had failed, Macmurray thought, to take proper account of the distinctiveness of the personal. Philosophies prior to Kant ('even the philosophies of Berkeley or Spinoza' (IU p. 99)) had used mathematical, mechanical ways of thinking, which were suitable to the material but not to the organic or the personal. A big change came with the philosophies of the organic, which substituted biological thinking for mechanical thinking. Biological thinking introduced ideas of form and development, and was developed above all by Hegel. Organic thought is essentially dialectical. Again, an attempt was made to universalise the system of thought to include persons as well as other organisms. Again, it ultimately proved unsuitable for the task, in Macmurray's view.

The personal needed its own form, a form which would accommodate both the aspects which persons shared with all organisms and the qualities which were unique to persons. This was ultimately described by Macmurray as 'a positive which includes and is constituted by its own negative', but without more description this may not be very helpful. The two characteristics of persons which provide their essential uniqueness are agency (the capacity to consciously alter the world in accordance with intentions) and relationship (the capacity to relate to other persons in friendship). I will not go into detail here. It is enough to keep in mind that persons are not simply complicated organisms, in Macmurray's view, any more than organisms are simply complicated objects. The gulf between a human person and a lizard is just as wide as the gulf between a lizard and a brick. If some philosophers wish to understand all three of these using the same concepts they will not, in Macmurray's view, help us very much to understand the human situation. And it is the human situation that ultimately concerned Macmurray – What should we do? Or in another formulation, how can we avoid another war? Today we could say, how can we stop ourselves from ruining our planetary home?

Three Generalized Expressions of the Personal – Religion, Art and Science

This three-fold distinction runs through Macmurray's thought. His interest centres on how it is seen in the personal life (the generalized view of ourselves – I emphasise that 'personal' is not used to mean 'pertaining to an individual'.) We have three characteristic modes of reflection: science, art and religion. These are all expressions of our capacity for *reason*. Macmurray sees reason as distinguishing persons from other organisms, but his definition of it is his own, though he relates it to Kant's work in *The Critique of Practical Reason*. Reason is 'the capacity to behave consciously in terms of the nature of what is not ourselves' . . . 'to behave in terms of the nature of the object' . . . 'to behave objectively'. (RE p.19) Macmurray does not here exclude thinking but rather includes both it and feeling, which are essential to acting.

He now turns to facts of common experience. One of these is language. "The immediate necessities of language in its primary function of inter-personal expression determine that the forms of our speech shall recognize a distinction between a first, a second and a third person; between the speaker, the listener, and the person or thing which is the object spoken about." (RE 146) He gives us this example:

"Conversation between two intimate friends is not merely an interchange of information, but also a means of fellowship. Through speech they enter into communion. This is the particular experience which is generalized in religion. When two friends talk together they talk about something or someone. It is impossible to dispense with the third person. There must be a subject of conversation. . . . But in the conversation of friends it is not the most significant element. I do not mean that they talk together for the sake of talking: when people do that they are not in fellowship, and the conversation is meaningless. They are both interested in what they are talking about, and intent upon it. But what gives to the conversation its personal significance is the mutual sharing of experience and knowledge. . .

“Now let us consider how science and art can be derived from this full speech-situation. Suppose that the same conversation takes place between two strangers who have no personal interest in one another. There is then no self-communication involved. . . . The object, the third person, becomes the essence of the situation and the conversation becomes a matter of giving and receiving information about it. . . . The experience is no longer emotional, but merely intellectual; no longer religious but scientific, for it is of this type of experience that science is the generalized form.” (RE 146-150)

Macmurray observes that science is thus impersonal. Of course, scientists are persons, and elsewhere he emphasises the fact that science ‘grew up’ when it began to use the experimental method, basing its knowledge on action and observation rather than speculation. Here he is saying that we do not get *personal* knowledge from science.

“This concentration on the object, this indifference to the persons concerned, which is characteristic of the ‘information’ attitude, is often called objectivity. It is really only impersonality. . . . Information is always information about something, not knowledge of it. Science cannot teach you to know your dog; it can only tell you about dogs in general. You can only get to know your dog by nursing him through distemper, teaching him how to behave about the house, and playing ball with him. Of course you can *use* the information that science gives you about dogs in general to get to know your dog better, but that is another matter.” (RE 151-2)

Macmurray was particularly concerned to distinguish art from religion. Continuing his example:

“Art, too, can be simply derived from the full personal experience which we are considering. If science wipes out the first and second persons and the personal relation between them by reducing them to the status of bearers of information, art too makes its own abstraction. It abstracts from, and so universalizes the second person. . . . We start again with our two friends in real conversation. We shall suppose that they have just met after the Christmas vacation and are sharing with one another the pleasure of their holiday. One has been for the first time to Switzerland for winter sports. He begins to tell his friend of the glory of sunset in winter in the Bernese Oberland, with the creamy pink light flooding the immense quiet snow-spaces and the crumpled glaciers; picking out the dark rugged line of long mountain ridge against the fathomless tenderness of the sky. . . . Now imagine that in the telling he becomes so wrapped and thrilled in his experience that he becomes indifferent to the personality of his listener; then he has become the artist and his talk is the essence of art.” (RE 152-3)

Art, then, is not concerned with the mutuality of personal relations. The artist is emotionally in touch with his experience, and he communicates it, but the artist is not concerned with the nature of the second person, the hearer or viewer. Again, it is the case that artists are persons, and as persons they relate to other persons. But the artist *as artist* wants to give, not to receive. Macmurray writes elsewhere about the dangers of confusing the artistic attitude, which is unconcerned with the second person, with the attitude he calls religious, which is constituted by a mutuality of concern. He felt that the ‘organic’ philosophies, which did not recognise the individuality of the second person, made this mistake. These would include the philosophies of Hegel and Marx. When it came to ethics, organic thinking failed to see the risk of a loss of freedom inherent in a collective approach.

The Whole Person

What Macmurray provided was a concept of a whole person, not one divided into two halves from the beginning. He built this up by, first, pointing to the relationship between matter and life (the material and the organic). Although, historically, there had been concepts of a 'life force' existing separately from matter, these were mostly abandoned in favour of the concept of an organism, a living whole. Interestingly, Macmurray brackets this stage with an aesthetic way of thinking. This was difficult for me to understand, but one thing that was clear was that 'life' introduced something beyond the mechanical, which needed a new sensibility in order to be fully appreciated. Concepts of form and balance are applicable both to living things and to art. Feeling is introduced, essential to both.

Macmurray then goes on to consider the relationship between life and personality (the organic and the personal). The mistake of traditional thinking, he said, was to subtract the material aspect from the whole person and name what was left 'the spiritual' or 'the mental'. This destroyed the integrity of the person and was no more a good foundation for thought about persons than the idea of a 'life force' had been for thought about the organic world. The task of developing adequate concepts about persons is more difficult because we are persons ourselves. His conclusion that we are agents who exist in mutual relations with other agents was facilitated by his rejection of the dualist way of thinking.

Connecting Theory to Practice

How does all this help us in the 21st century? For one thing, it overcomes several errors, including individualism, idealism and sentimentality. Individualism does not take notice of the inter-personal foundations of personality. We do not begin our lives as isolated individuals. Though our state of utter dependence on others is soon overcome, this independence matures into inter-dependence. Without any connection with others our lives become meaningless. Our current social arrangements have tended to isolate us from one another more than is good for our mental health and contentment.

Idealism arises from dualist thought. The theoretical and the practical are in competition instead of working in harmony. Thinking comes to be valued more than doing, and a 'practical person' comes to be thought of as lacking in theoretical capacity! If we are considered to be essentially thinkers, then we believe that it is important to have an idea of the best way of living, but not as important that we actually live that way. We also neglect our desires, which may get in the way, instead of getting to know them and harmonising what we think with what we feel.

Sentimentality is insincere or unreal emotion, which misleads us by substituting itself for real emotion. Idealism can make us feel we have to pretend to have feelings which we may not really have. At the same time, it downgrades feeling in favour of thinking, so that the question of integrity of feeling does not even arise in the way that it does with thinking. Unreal feeling is like counterfeit money, it exists but it is false. It values what is not valuable, or it fails to value something which is actually of value.

In the 1930s the place of feeling was a contentious issue. Listeners to the BBC's Third Program ninety years ago heard this from Macmurray, in one talk in his series on 'The Modern Dilemma':

"A merely intellectual force is powerless against an emotional resistance. If an economist, for instance, were to devise the perfect plan for the settlement of our industrial troubles, and prove beyond controversy that it was the only way to solve our problem, it would still be of no avail if our emotions were ranged against it. We could not put it into operation. Unless the emotions and the intellect are in harmony, rational action will be paralysed.

"Now that, I think, is our actual situation. . . . In the modern period, that is to say since the break-up of the medieval world, there has been an immense development of knowledge. There has, however, been no corresponding emotional development. As a result we are intellectually civilized and emotionally primitive; and we have reached the point at which the development of knowledge threatens to destroy us. Knowledge is power, but emotion is the master of our values and of the uses, therefore, to which we put our power. Emotionally we are primitive, childish, undeveloped." (FMW p. 47)

I would amend that view now to say that we are emotional adolescents. We have freed our emotions but not developed them in the disciplined way which would allow them to mature. Compared to our thinking, our feeling remains uneducated. Emotional maturity would enable us to confront situations such as widespread destitution in our own society, or dangerous degradation of our natural environment, with agreed and effective action, would it not? It is not more knowledge that we need but rather the emotional wholeness to overcome our fears and freely do our best in dealing with a dreadful situation. Instead, we remain divided, quick to blame but unable to put our knowledge to use for our mutual benefit. Macmurray was one of the few philosophers to make the role of feeling central. Incidentally, he said that participation in the arts was one way of educating the emotions. This has implications for the school curriculum.

Markets

Macmurray distinguished between the fully personal life of a human community (large or small) and the political, economic and social arrangements that society devises to enable communities to flourish. These functional arrangements are a means to an end, necessary but subordinate. One of Macmurray's formulations is *"The functional is FOR the personal; the personal is THROUGH the functional."*

The post-war welfare state aimed at universal well-being. The means were understood to include varying degrees of state control of the economy. In the 1970s the means came to be questioned. A reliance on free markets was seen as the way forward, and this faith in 'the market' has continued for over forty years. But there has been a confusion. Because the distinction between means and ends was not usually made explicit, it has been possible to present the market as an end in itself, an increase of 'freedom' in the economic sphere. At the same time, there is an implication that it will lead to universal well-being. We now see that the market system that we have concentrates wealth at the top and impoverishes increasing numbers at the bottom. It is time to recognise that the market, and indeed the whole of the economy, is a means and not an end.

Markets are impersonal mechanisms that behave in ways that are somewhat predictable. To assume that they will always work to our benefit is to attribute ends to them which they do not have. We need to regulate the market so that it serves the ends we desire. This of course leads to another of our functional arrangements, politics.

Artificial Intelligence

Is Artificial Intelligence personal or impersonal? I would say the latter. Its designers are persons but they are not designing something like themselves, only something like certain aspects of themselves. But perhaps they see themselves as essentially verbal beings! Our philosophical tradition would encourage them in that direction.

If we are thinking of delegating decisions to AI devices, then we are into the realm of values. There is talk of AI determining values, but I don't think this has been thought through. Values are apprehended by our feelings; they may be assessed by our intellects but a purely intellectual determination of value is impossible. AI does not think, as far as I understand, let alone feel. How can it make its own decisions?

That we devote so many resources to the development of AI and so few to the care of the needs of our fellow-citizens indicates that we value something which AI has to offer. I am not sure what it is or that it is something that will really satisfy us in the end.

Loss

Macmurray has put back two important considerations which modern philosophy does not usually emphasize. He said that feeling was as important as thinking, since feeling determines our goals, whereas thinking can only determine the means to reach them, but not the goals themselves. It is our feeling which discerns what is of value to us, what we really want – what is to be sought rather than shunned. But a 'stiff upper lip' attitude has robbed us of acquaintance with and reflection on our feelings. We acquiesce in the pursuit of economic goals which can conflict with things which would contribute to our well-being. I am thinking of the natural world, sacrificed to 'development', or beauty, sacrificed to 'efficiency' or 'austerity'. But there are of course many other examples.

Secondly, the importance of relationships is ignored by a philosophy centred on the individual. Loneliness is a big problem in our population. The contribution of digitisation to this problem is usually ignored. The more that automatic systems of various sorts replace people in providing services, the less opportunity there is for personal interaction. Even the relatively 'impersonal' services of a check-out clerk may be preferable to a self-service machine, but the difference between consulting a GP who knows you and one who does not, or even no GP at all but just a computer, is much greater. Why, I wonder, is the expense of a computer justified but the salary of a GP not? Again, there are loads more examples of the down-grading of the value of personal interaction.

Losses are often not recognised when they are happening but only later when it is too late. If we were more 'emotionally intelligent', we could foresee and forestall more of them.

Summary

Macmurray's distinction between the material, the organic and the personal accords with our daily experience. It overcomes the split in the concept of the person consequent on the dualistic thinking of the past and provides us with **a concept of the whole person**, who acts and who relates to other persons. (It can be noted that this conceptual scheme excludes traditional dualism, determinism and individualism.)

The personal **includes** the impersonal (material, organic).

Inter-personal relations can be both personal (friendship) and impersonal (functional). The impersonal is essential but subordinate:

> "The functional is *for* the personal; the personal is *through* the functional."

Coda

Some triads:

material	organic	personal
use	appreciate	relate
control	contemplation	communion
individual	collective society	community
truth	beauty	goodness
pragmatic	aesthetic	ethical
Science	Art	Religion
Matter	Life	Personality/The Personal

The last term is the only one which is a new Macmurray term, for which the only equivalent I can discover is 'God'. Our highest and deepest symbol for what we know of reality is personal, but also infinite, and our difficulty in holding these two together in our minds has led to the abandonment of it altogether, as being illusory. We can manage 'Matter', even 'Life', but we balk at considering a modern meaning for 'God'. One Macmurray quote:
"God is beyond the personal, of course, but it is the personal in our experience which points in the direction of God." (*Search for Reality in Religion* (1965) p. 45 note)

Some other quotations:
"To assert that the world is spiritual is not to deny that it is material. In a properly personal conception of the world there is no denial of materialism. On the other hand, to assert materialism as the last word about reality is to deny its personal character and, indeed, its organic character." (RE 223)
"Philosophers have continually talked about the self as if it could exist and function in relation to a non-personal world. (This, indeed, is the inner meaning of the dualism between matter and mind.)" (RE 222)
"There is no 'I' without a 'you'." (RE 222)

Jeanne Warren 17 May, 2023