

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.³ 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.⁴

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

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