

A beginner's guide to Macmurray in a philosophical context

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Who is Macmurray?

Macmurray, a Scot, born 1891 and died 1976, was for most of his life as an academic philosopher at the universities of Oxford, London and Edinburgh. He wrote some 15 books and almost 200 other publications (articles, chapters in books etc) . Macmurray was a highly original thinker whose thinking has been little understood. Some have suggested that his ideas were ahead of their time.

Macmurray confronted philosophy's most thorny conceptual difficulties. At the same time he was passionate that philosophy should be 'living' and deal with issues of real importance. He broke new ground in the 1930s by being the first philosopher to give radio broadcasts for the BBC. His broadcast talks dealt with complex topics, yet, to the surprise of programme controllers, achieved peak audiences. Though Macmurray's philosophy remains little known in the academic world, his thinking has had a quiet influence in many fields and has inspired some influential public figures.

What are his main themes?

Although Macmurray is critical of religion in its institutional forms, he sees the religious impulse in human beings as a fundamental part of our make up. For Macmurray, it is in community with others that we discover who we really are. The religious impulse is that in us which seeks genuine friendship with our fellows. According to Macmurray, it is in the building, maintaining and celebration of community, that the real task of religion lies.

Some people regard Macmurray more as a political theorist, partly because of his early interest in Marx and also because of his lucid writings on the nature of freedom. Macmurray argues that economic, political and social freedom are important but always partial. The most complete freedom is that which we find in the spontaneity of friendship.

Still others see Macmurray as a philosopher of psychology and psychotherapy. He was deeply concerned with the emotions and their role in personal experience, and he was influenced by psychotherapeutic thinking. The question 'What stops us from being whole, spontaneous loving human beings?' is an underlying theme. He argues that it is fear – in its many guises – which destroys our spontaneity.

At the heart of Macmurray's philosophy is the effort to grasp personal nature from a new perspective; from the primacy of mutual relationship between persons rather than from the standpoint of the solitary ego. For Macmurray, relationship is rooted in action. Creating community between persons is not just an idea to contemplate, but a central underlying task for humankind.

Perhaps the least understood aspect of Macmurray's thinking, is his attempt to articulate the underlying logical structure which informs the personal universe. This is the focus of his Gifford Lectures – 'The Form of the Personal' – but is also a theme we find running through much of his writing. (see 'Main Influences' below for a more philosophical introduction to his ideas)

What are his formative influences?

Macmurray was brought up in a Presbyterian culture, tempered by evangelical influences. His parents were

keen churchgoers. Although the religion of his youth was rather austere in some respects, Macmurray gained from his parents a deep sense of the meaning of religious faith. As a young man he toyed with the idea of becoming a missionary.

During the Great War, Macmurray served as a soldier in the trenches. At an early age he experienced the utter devastation of modern warfare. The shocking hardship of the trenches and the day-to-day familiarity with death had a profound effect on the young Macmurray. Returning from the war, Macmurray felt deeply disillusioned. He was incensed by the hypocrisy and shallowness of the society in which he found himself, not least of all by the Christian Church. Macmurray, whilst holding to the core of his own religious faith, decisively rejected institutional Christianity. His rejection was resolute: he remained outside the church for all his professional life.

Macmurray's disenchantment with church Christianity did not lead to cynicism, but rather to a kind of radical skepticism. He started by questioning the attitudes and beliefs most fervently presented as true by his elders. This soon led him to question the fundamental assumptions which seemed to inform the entire process of philosophical thinking.

It is possible to argue that the whole of Macmurray's philosophy is an attempt to find the deep grounds for religious faith. Certainly this search seemed to be the impetus for much of his thinking, but it would quite wrong to view Macmurray simply as a theologian or merely a religious thinker. He looks at the full gamut of personal experience. The originality and incisiveness of his insights spill over to every aspect of what it is to be a human being.

Macmurray was through and through the philosopher. He saw his task as an intellectual one: to provide conceptual clarity. He did not stray, like many of his existentialist contemporaries, into using artistic imagery and metaphor as a form of exploration. It was not that he disliked art. On the contrary, he had a profound respect for artistic insight. His wife was an artist, he greatly admired D. H. Lawrence, he loved music. He simply felt that it was too easy to abandon philosophy for art as a way of avoiding knotty conceptual problems.

What kind of person was he?

Macmurray was shortish in stature, bearded, quietly spoken and quite shy in social situations. He often had a sparkle in his eye and a tangible presence about him. He lived in Oxford, London, and Edinburgh and for many years at the Quaker village, Jordans, in Buckinghamshire. He was an active member of the village community life. After retirement from professional life, he joined the Society of Friends (Quakers). He found here a spiritual home where his need for religious freethinking would be accepted.

Perhaps because of his more introvert nature, Macmurray never became an outspoken social activist like say Bertrand Russell, or political campaigner like Sartre in later life. His influence was a quiet one, often through the quality of his friendships. For instance, he was good friends with George McLeod, the founder of the Iona Community and was a supportive influence during the foundation of the community. Macmurray was part of the inspiration for the Woodcraft Folk, a youth organization which offers a more left-wing alternative to the rather reactionary culture of Scouts. Through his friendship with Kenneth Barnes, he helped to influence and form the curriculum of a forward-thinking independent school.

There are many examples of this kind of indirect influence. He is remembered warmly by those that knew him for the quality of his friendship. He remained married and devoted to his wife, Betty. They did not have children: his wife had gynecological problems which made this impossible. His mother was an important enduring influence on Macmurray; she died only a few years before Macmurray at the ripe age of 105.

Which thinkers are most similar to Macmurray?

Macmurray's thought defies easy classification. It would be tempting to pigeonhole Macmurray with the religious existentialists. Certainly, many of his concerns are existential in nature. He has much in common not only with Buber, but also Marcel, Ebner etc. But Macmurray is far too interested in conceptual clarity to be truly in tune with the mood of existentialist thought.

Like Buber, Macmurray has central to his thinking, the distinction of 'I-You' and 'I-It' (representing the two fundamental modes of relating) . However, whereas Buber uses a whole range of poetic imagery to put over his ideas, Macmurray insists on seeking conceptual coherence. Macmurray's analysis is thus, to my mind, more penetrating than Buber's (and perhaps less immediately accessible).

Some have tried to link Macmurray with the personalists – Mounier and Blondel. There clearly are similarities – the insistence of discovering personal nature as distinct from organic, Blondel's recognition of the importance of action as a defining characteristic of personal nature etc. It is curious that the personalist movement, which is gaining some popularity in recent years, has only made marginal reference to Macmurray's ideas.

Most often Macmurray is seen a maverick – someone who strode off in his own direction. In a sense I think this is true, but only in the sense that any truly original thinker is likely to be considered a maverick by his contemporaries. I do not use the term in a derogatory sense. It is partly because of the originality of his thought, that it is so hard to evaluate his work. There is not a clearly established academic context by which to measure and compare it.

I should add that from time to time, Macmurray is labeled as an idealist. This is a curious grouping, to my mind. His whole life was devoted to rooting out idealism. He was passionate in his dislike of it: in this respect he saw eye to eye with Marx.

Who are his main philosophical influences?

Macmurray was seeking to establish a radically new philosophical perspective, and was therefore often working from first principles. He saw himself as a pioneer exploring new territory rather than a sifter and codifier of other people's thoughts. It is perhaps partly because of this that it is hard to put his thinking in an academic context. The marked absence of references to other writers in his work further compounds the difficulty. It is possible, however, to identify three important strands of influence: Kant, Marx and Christianity

Kant

Macmurray's respect for Kant is unequivocal. He particularly respects Kant's concern for conceptual clarity, his intellectual thoroughness and his systematic effort to grasp all aspects of personal experience. These are all qualities we find in Macmurray's work (with the added benefit that Macmurray's work is somewhat more readable than Kant's!). It could be said that Macmurray's philosophy is a radical critique of Kant.

Macmurray takes the view that Kant's philosophy, though more complete than many of his successors, fails because his perspective was limited by the philosophical tradition in which he found himself. Kant starts from the primacy of the isolated thinking ego. According to Macmurray, this is a misconceived perspective and leads to the kinds of anomalies which Kant (and subsequent philosophers) could not adequately resolve.

Macmurray argues that our existence as persons is rooted in action (not mere thinking), and in the mutuality

of I and You (not merely in the isolated 'I'). If we want to grasp the fullness of what it means to be a person, we must start from twin notions of action and mutual relationship.

Macmurray follows Kant's preoccupation with exploring the limits of reason, rationality and freedom. He tries to show us that when we look from the new perspective – of thinking from the standpoint of action in the context of relationship – we can arrive at a richer, clearer and more coherent understanding of personal nature.

Marx

Macmurray made a detailed study of Marx's works in the 1930s and we find frequent references to Marx in Macmurray's early writings. Macmurray was one of the first philosophers in Britain to read and comment on Marx's previously unavailable 'Early Manuscripts' (see Macmurray and Marx). Though Macmurray considered Marx's thinking to be flawed in important respects, his influence on Macmurray is evident.

Macmurray's central assertion of the primacy of action has Marx's fingerprints on it. It was Marx who insisted so resolutely on the importance of praxis. The idea that what ultimately matters is what we do, not merely what we think, is a theme we find throughout Macmurray's work. It is only by acting according to what we say we believe, that we are able to discover if our beliefs are real. The separation of theory and practice — the failure to walk our talk — leads to pretence and destroys reality.

Macmurray shares Marx's stinging attack on idealism. He takes the view that the philosophy of idealism implicitly (and insidiously) legitimates the separation of theory and practice. Furthermore, social institutions infected by the attitude of idealism become contaminated with hypocrisy and sentimentality. Macmurray accepts Marx's rejection of the institutional religion of his day, that is, a religion informed by idealism. Macmurray's argument is that the Christianity which Marx rejects is a perversion of true Christianity.

Christianity

Macmurray's radical understanding of Christianity forms the backcloth for all of his thinking. Whilst bluntly rejecting the trappings of the Christian Church, Macmurray is inspired by what he sees as the essential core of Jesus' teaching. He finds here a clear expression of what it is to be a whole human being. According to Macmurray, Jesus' call to live life with faith rather than fear is at the heart of real Christianity. He sees Jesus' use of the term 'faith' to be deeply practical. Faith is not primarily to do with belief but rather concerned with a fundamental attitude to the world. To live with faith is to live life with an attitude of trust. What often passes as Christianity, Macmurray dubs 'pseudo religion'. Pseudo-Christianity idealises faith by taking away its practical reference.

Other influences

The psychoanalytic tradition also influenced Macmurray. He felt that Freud had far too narrow a perspective, but greatly admired the writings of the British psychoanalyst, Suttie. Suttie is one of the few thinkers outside Kant and Marx that Macmurray explicitly acknowledges. Suttie's writing in the 20s and 30s was astonishingly forward thinking. He fought against the coldly mechanistic approach of Freud's followers. He was strongly critical of what he saw as Freud's taboo on tenderness. He spoke out for love as a fundamental motive. These are themes we find in Macmurray's work. (Interestingly Suttie is little remembered. He died at a tragically young age and his work was soon eclipsed by rising stars such as Melanie Klein)

In his published work, Macmurray has little to say about other philosophers. This is not because he is

ignorant of them. He was very widely read. He seems to have synthesized what he wanted from their work and made them his own. For instance, the notion of 'I and You' is central to Macmurray's philosophy. It seems unthinkable that he would not have read Buber, who was so widely known for his 'I and Thou' philosophy. Yet he makes no mention of him in any of his published works. Was he influenced by Buber? What did Macmurray think of Buber's work?

Of course, the notion of 'I and You' originates not from Buber, but Feuerbach, a contemporary of Marx. Buber acknowledges his debt to Feuerbach – even going so far as to refer to Feuerbach's insight as a 'Copernican revolution' in thought. As Macmurray was using the term 'I and You' in the 1930's, before Buber's work was widely available in this country, it seems likely that Feuerbach was also Macmurray's source of inspiration, though this is not at all clear. It is possible that Macmurray and Buber took parallel paths without significantly influencing one another. This, at least, is the view taken by Friedman, Buber's interpreter, and it would seem to concur with the evidence.

Macmurray criticizes language philosophers for exploring relatively trivial problems. He rather dismisses them as 'all form with no content'. He is clearly more in tune with existentialists: at least they are exploring real issues. But he is at odds with them for abandoning the search for conceptual clarity. He is at one with Kierkegaard's uncompromising critique of the Hegelian dialectic. It is not that Macmurray is against dialectic logic per se, it is just that it is inadequate for the task of understanding personal nature.

What are the obstacles to understanding Macmurray's writing?

Most of Macmurray's books are transcripts of lectures. There is a directness and easy conversational feel to much of his work. He refuses the temptation to invent technical terms, but rather uses the richness of the English language to make his understanding known. All this, along with the clarity and conciseness of his style, make his writing easily accessible. His university lectures were apparently very popular – people queued to hear him. His radio broadcast lectures in the 1930s brought peak audiences. So what are the obstacles?

Macmurray challenges our preconceptions. This can be disquieting. Academics in particular have seemed to be unsettled by Macmurray's thought. It requires a certain degree of open-mindedness to come to an appreciation of Macmurray's ideas. We also have to be willing not to jump to premature conclusions. Sometimes his argument hangs on a radical reframing of a concept which is in common usage and which we think we understand. Because he is looking at intellectual landscape from a totally different vantage point, everyday ideas suddenly become unfamiliar. This can be downright disturbing (or exhilarating depending on your attitude to the unfamiliar).

There are aspects of Macmurray's style which can be off-putting. In some of his lectures, he has a tendency to be declarative and can come over as dogmatic. There are times when he almost sounds 'preachery'. He enjoys putting in challenging, even outrageous, statements, sometimes not fully explaining them at the time. I suspect that he would have had a twinkle in his eye in the lecture theatre at these moments. He is often interested in the big picture and will make broad-brush generalizations.

To some people, Macmurray comes over as simplistic. This is partly because he insists on using everyday words, rather than inventing a new vocabulary. Friendship, personal relationship, love, faith, religion, freedom, rationality, community, emotion, intention, motive are all fundamental concepts in his philosophy. But he uses these words in a way, which is utterly distinctive: he reframes them, finding a richer, deeper meaning in them. It should not be thought that Macmurray's thinking is lightweight simply because he uses ordinary words.

Another obstacle to appreciating Macmurray is that he makes very few footnotes or references to other writers. It is therefore hard to put his writing in an academic context. He makes frequent references to Kant and Marx – his two main influences; in ‘Self As Agent’ he gives a detailed critique of the nineteenth-century romantics; existentialist and language philosophers are given some oblique references. Beyond this there is very little in the way of commentary on other thinkers.

One of his most widely read books, ‘Reason and Emotion’, is a collection of lectures which loosely follow the theme of emotional rationality. Though many people find the book stimulating, there can be the tendency for the reader to be left with the sense of a series of tasters, without the substance of a full meal. It would be easy to pass the book off as being rather insubstantial.

At the other extreme, the Gifford lectures (published as ‘Self as Agent’ and ‘Persons in Relation’) are so clearly and concisely argued, with challenging and sometimes abstract ideas, the reader can be overwhelmed. No one could call this lightweight: the complex argument is tersely reasoned for two volumes. This is a classic. But the reader needs to be intellectually resilient and open-minded to appreciate this.

What influence has he had?

Macmurray has had little direct influence in the field of academic philosophy. Until very recently, his work has been almost entirely overlooked. This is perhaps not surprising. The academic world has often been slow to respond to theorists who offer a radically different way of thinking. Kierkegaard, for instance, was given little attention in his lifetime. It took some 60 years before the originality of his thinking was recognized. There are signs that the significance of Macmurray’s thinking is now beginning to be acknowledged in some philosophical circles.

Theologians have perhaps been the most consistent in recognising Macmurray as a figure worthy of exploration (though not always one to approve of!). In North America, there is a slow but growing interest in his work in university schools of theology. John Costello, a Canadian Jesuit priest and academic, has been the driving force behind the recent reprint of many of Macmurray’s books. He has also written a scholarly biography of Macmurray (published in 2002).

Given Macmurray’s lack of acceptance in the academic world, the extent of his ‘quiet’ influence is curious. For instance, some of the key figures in UK public office claim to have been inspired by him in different ways. Though Prime Minister Blair’s policies bare little direct resemblance to Macmurray’s thinking, Blair quotes Macmurray as one of the most important inspirational influences of his youth. Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and Archbishop Carey each claim to have admired Macmurray.

Many ordinary people have also been touched by Macmurray’s thought. He was the first philosopher in Britain (perhaps in the world) to broadcast radio lectures on philosophy. In the 1930’s, he was a household name, broadcasting to peak audiences. He was able to look at some of the most complex subjects with a simplicity of style and with an easy manner which inspired people. Some of his books, ‘Reason and Emotion’ for example, have stayed in print for some 60 years, being sold largely to a non-academic audience.

Macmurray was not a ‘cosy’ or popularist thinker, nor did he talk down to his audience. His ideas were radical. For this he was not wholly popular with the establishment. Lord Reith, the controller of the BBC at the time of his early broadcasts, blocked further lectures because they were considered to be subversive. For instance, the idea that we can discover values by learning to trust our true feelings rather than by blindly following a strict moral code was met with outrage from more conservative quarters.

Macmurray has not been without some influence in the social sciences. In the field of psychotherapy, Harry

Guntrip was a great admirer of Macmurray's writings. Guntrip, a disciple of Fairburn, helped to establish the shift away from classical Freudian theory, with its emphasis on instincts (or drives), to the more humanistic Object Relations Theory (ORT). In ORT, it is not merely drives, but our relationship to the environment (and to people), which forms the primary motivating force in human nature. This crucial shift has had a major influence on the development of the modern approaches to psychodynamic psychotherapy and counselling.

Also in the field of psychotherapy, R.D. Laing, John Heron and John Bell, the founder of family therapy, each recognise Macmurray in their different ways. In sociology, Gellner was a great admirer of Macmurray – perhaps more as an inspirational figure rather than as a direct influence. In psychology Colwyn Trevarthen, who has made ground-breaking research in the field of infant communication, acknowledges Macmurray as an important influence. Macmurray is sometimes quoted by educationalists particularly in the field of the education of emotions.

Almost nothing has been written about what Macmurray considered to be his most significant contribution: his exploration of the logical structure of underlying personal experience, what he called the 'Form of the Personal'.

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