

Introduction

John Macmurray (1891–1976) characterizes the ideas in his Gifford lectures in this way: ‘The simplest expression that I can find for the thesis I have tried to maintain is this: All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action for the sake of friendship’ (SA, p. 15). Underlying this quotation are two key principles; the first is that the self is defined by action at least as much as by thought and the second is that the development of the self requires dynamic relation with other selves. Consequently Macmurray’s most significant contribution to philosophy is a definition of the person that shifts the focus from the isolated thought of the individual to action, which, in turn, leads to an analysis of the ethical relations of persons. At the time that Macmurray is promoting emphasis on the whole person and highlighting the vital importance of positive relationships, these are original and striking ideas. As a result Macmurray’s ideas are proving to have contemporary relevance in the fields of philosophy, psychology, mental health, education, sociology, politics, theology and feminist theology. In addition, while this book represents the first full-scale analysis and critical appraisal of his work, the recently increased interest in Macmurray’s thought has meant that a number of his books have been reissued, a reader has been published (Conford, 1996) and some of his articles have been collected in an anthology (McIntosh, 2004).

An extensive account of John Macmurray’s life was first published in 2002, following years of painstaking work by John Costello in deciphering Macmurray’s personal correspondence and interviewing his friends and acquaintances. From Costello’s biography, the unpublished correspondence and the autobiographical material contained in *Search for Reality in Religion*, it is possible to provide a brief sketch of the main life experiences informing Macmurray’s religious philosophy.

Born on 16 February 1891 in Maxwellton, Kirkcudbrightshire, Scotland, Macmurray is part of a strict Calvinist household. Consequently he is instilled with strong religious convictions that remain with him throughout his life, although he seeks to change their content and form. Following an education at the Aberdeen Grammar School and Robert Gordon’s College in Aberdeen, he registers for an MA degree in Classics and Geology at Glasgow University. During his time in Glasgow he intends to become a missionary and joins the Student Volunteer Missionary Movement. He is also an active member of the Student Christian Movement, which introduces him to a less rigorous and more enjoyable form of Christianity than he has previously encountered.

As a university student, Macmurray attempts to apply the methods learned in his science studies to his religion. First, this prevents him from having a theology that is at odds with scientific understanding. Secondly, in preparation for a Student Christian Movement Bible study session, he is led to abandon the dogmatic

doctrinal teaching of the Calvinist tradition, on the grounds that examination of the relevant material fails to justify the doctrines (*SRR*, pp. 13–14). Macmurray does not explain which doctrines he finds to be absent from the Bible, but he is particularly opposed to Christian individualism and otherworldliness. From the point of the aforementioned SCM Bible study onwards, Macmurray's theological convictions remain flexible.

When Macmurray graduates in 1913, he has already acquired a place as Snell Exhibitioner and Newlands Scholar at Balliol College, Oxford. He plans to study Greats for two years, but war breaks out before he has completed the course. Uncertain of his ethical stance regarding armed combat, Macmurray enlists as a Nursing Orderly with the Royal Army Medical Corps. Once in France and in the midst of the fighting, however, he seems to be as involved in the war as a soldier; hence, he joins the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders as a lieutenant. While on leave in 1916, he marries Elizabeth (Betty) Hyde Campbell, an artist, whom he had met through a school friend and fallen in love with some years previously. (There were to be no children.) Macmurray survives the fighting on the Somme, but is wounded in the battle at Arras. Consequently he is invalided home, where he remains until the end of the war, subsequently receiving the Military Cross for bravery.

The carnage of war has a profound and lasting effect on Macmurray's thoughts; he claims that he returns from the war cured of youthful idealism and, more surprisingly, disabused of the fear of death (*SRR*, p. 18). Hence much of his work is concerned with what he views to be the damaging effects of idealism and fear and his proposals for overcoming them. In addition his encounter with the public response to war (rather than the war itself) represents a pivotal moment in his relationship with Christianity. Towards the end of the Great War, Macmurray is invited to preach at a north London church. Based on his experience of the front line, he is certain that the most important attitudes to be fostered in such times are reconciliation and forgiveness, motifs that recur in his works. However, the congregation are expecting a nationalistic and militant sermon that attests to their God's power and inevitable and imminent victory. As a result, the audience give their guest a chilly reception, leading Macmurray to declare that he will never again be part of an institutionalized church, a vow taken 'on Christian grounds' (*SRR*, p. 21). This is a promise Macmurray keeps until, towards the end of his life, he joins the Society of Friends, an organization which still holds great sympathy towards his writings today. (Macmurray's combination of philosophy and theism has been well received also by Jesuit priests in North America and Canada.)

It is following the Armistice that Macmurray embarks on his professional life as a philosopher, having abandoned his childhood ambition to be a missionary. He returns to Oxford to sit his postponed examinations in Greats and to begin his career as the John Locke Scholar of Mental Philosophy (1919). Subsequently he obtains a Lectureship in Philosophy at the University of Manchester (1919–21), which is followed by a Professorship in Philosophy at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa (1921–22). From there he returns

to Balliol College, Oxford as Fellow and Classical Tutor and Jowett Lecturer (1922–28), until he obtains the post of Grote Professor of Mind and Logic at University College, London (1928–44). While employed at University College, London (UCL), Macmurray is granted leave of absence to conduct lecture tours of Canada and the US. Despite the appreciative reception he receives abroad, he declines the ensuing international job offers.

It is in the 1920s that Macmurray begins to publish his views in articles and contributions to books. Although Macmurray's earliest work contains an emphasis on Christianity that diminishes during the 1930s and 1940s (but returns in a more nuanced form in his later works), he is already thinking through his concept of the person. In a letter to Richard Roberts, Macmurray states that 'if the world is to be comprehended, it must be in terms of personality' (c1914–36, 22 July 1925). In essence, his life's work is devoted to the elucidation of this proposition and its implications. Nevertheless, Macmurray does not produce any full-length monographs until the 1930s. According to Conford, the reason for this is that 'He decided that he would allow himself time to formulate his ideas, and would not publish a book until he was over forty' (Conford, a1977, p. 17). As a result, his later works, while presenting more carefully argued and developed postulations, do not contain any major concepts that are absent from his earlier material.

During his life, Macmurray engages with a variety of fields, giving his writings an eclecticism that renders them accessible to a wide audience. In particular, he insists that philosophy is rooted in 'common human experience' (*FMW*, p. 68) and, hence, is of benefit to everyone. In keeping with this view, Macmurray aims to produce a philosophy that is widely intelligible. Furthermore, comprehension of his work is aided by the fact that he was forced to express his philosophical concepts in the vernacular, in order for them to be broadcast on BBC Radio in the 1930s. At a later stage in his career, he states that 'the effective medium of philosophical language is ordinary speech at its richest, used with precision' (*PR*, p. 18).

His first book, *Freedom in the Modern World* (1932), is a collection of BBC radio broadcasts, which, according to Duncan, brought forth such a staggering response from the general public that Macmurray's broadcasts are 'ranked as one of the B.B.C.'s most successful ventures in the field of radio talks' (Duncan, 1990, p. 13). In the aftermath of the First World War, Macmurray is certain that Britain is facing an undeniable dilemma and, further, that it is the task of philosophy to endeavour to solve it (*IU*, pp. 9–10). He states that the problem, as he envisages it, is 'a split between head and heart ... thoughts and feelings' (*FMW*, p. 25). In fact, it is the attempt to unite these categories that characterizes Macmurray's understanding of the nature of the person.

However, as the 1930s influence of Communism grows and Macmurray's ideas become increasingly socialist, the BBC radio producers become wary of Macmurray's opinions, labelling him a 'dangerous speaker' (Hunt, chForthcoming, p. 10) and preventing him from participating in any future broadcasts. Despite this, the Marxist concepts that Macmurray admires in the 1930s continue to be the focus of the articles and books he publishes during the 1940s. Even so, he

still maintains that he is a Christian, and that Marxism is flawed in its indictment of religion. In particular then, his writings attempt to synthesize Christianity and Communism, an issue which he discusses at length with Karl Polanyi (Costello, 2002, pp. 222–35).

In addition to writing, broadcasting and lecturing, Macmurray's academic career is punctuated by acts of wider public interest. For example, while employed in Johannesburg, he engages in the struggle for improved housing for the impoverished black South Africans. Then, during the 1930s, he contributes to the efforts to sustain peace through the Christian Left and the Left Book Club, influences which remain at the heart of his political philosophy. In addition, while Macmurray's account of the self bears the hallmarks of analytic philosophy, his account of the relations of persons bears some resemblance to Continental philosophy, perhaps partly attributable to his early interaction with academic refugees, such as Theodor Adorno and Karl Popper (*ibid.*, p. 237). When the outbreak of the Second World War renders the plight of the Christian Left immaterial, Macmurray becomes involved in the founding of the Common Wealth Party, supporting its focus on the future of democracy in Britain and mainland Europe. In addition, when many of the students and staff of UCL adjourn to Aberystwyth and Bangor, Macmurray chooses to remain in London studying the possibilities for Anglo-Soviet relations.

It is also during his time in UCL that Macmurray is involved with the Froebel Society, named after the German educationalist who insisted on the importance of play in a child's formal education and development. In addition to writing a number of articles on the subject of education, Macmurray is instrumental, with Kenneth Barnes, in opening the Wennington School, Lancashire (which, some time later, was moved to Wetherby, Yorkshire). The school operated on the principle that emotional training and play assist in the development of the intellect, and it appears to have been a success for a number of years, although financial constraints eventually led to its closure in 1975 (*ibid.*, p. 374). Macmurray's involvement with alternative forms of education stems from his belief in the importance of education for all people. To this end, he maintains that the role of the university, and especially that of the philosopher, owing to their critical insight, is to serve the wider society (a1959, pp. 159–68; a1952, pp. 86–92). Moreover, Macmurray asserts forward-thinking views on the importance of educating all aspects of the person, including the education of the emotions, a theme underpinning his concept of the person. This Macmurrian image for education is consonant with contemporary developments and proposals taking place in British and American schools today.

Macmurray's final post is at Edinburgh University as Professor of Moral Philosophy (1944–58), where he also serves as the Dean of the Faculty of Arts in the later years. His commitment to education includes membership of the Inter-University Council for Higher Education Overseas, and a successful campaign for the re-opening of Newbattle Abbey, a college for mature students. It is during this time in Edinburgh that Macmurray has the opportunity to meet Gabriel Marcel and

Martin Buber, perhaps cementing his Continental approach to the philosophy of personal relations (Costello, 2002, p. 322).

By the 1950s, and aware of the realities of inequality in the Communist countries of the East, Macmurray's explicitly Marxist emphasis dwindles; yet he remains socialist in his outlook. Consequently, his prestigious Gifford lectures, which represent the most comprehensive form of his entire theory in other respects, barely mention communist principles or their relation to Christianity. Macmurray delivered his series of Gifford lectures at Glasgow University in 1953 and 1954, entitled 'The Form of the Personal' and published in two volumes as *The Self as Agent* and *Persons in Relation*; it is for these works that he is most widely remembered. The first volume concentrates on shifting the definition of the self from its traditional focus on thought to an alternative focus on action, thereby undoing the legacy of Cartesian dualism. One of the implications of defining the self as agent rather than thinker is that solipsism does not arise; rather, objects and persons other than the self are known to exist through the primary experience of interacting with them. The second volume looks in closer detail at the nature of person-to-person interactions, from childhood through to adulthood. Macmurray examines the reality of the interdependence of persons and the roles of politics and religion in enabling ethical and fruitful relationships to develop. Unknown to Macmurray's generation of scholars, his understanding of the person is proving to be useful to contemporary fields of scholarship that are attempting to move away from individualism and the Cartesian emphasis on thought, such as feminist theology and disability studies (Swinton and McIntosh, 2000, pp. 175–84).

Subsequent to his privileged appointment as Gifford lecturer, Macmurray is awarded an honorary LLD at Glasgow University. Shortly afterwards, in 1958, Macmurray retires to the village of Jordans in Buckinghamshire. It is in this village that Macmurray decides to become an official member of the Society of Friends, although he has shared many of their views for some time. His application to the Society of Friends is prompted by his dissatisfaction with living a 'religious' life alone; in fact, the inherent communality of the religious life is a fundamental aspect of Macmurray's understanding of religion. Despite the pivotal role that religion occupies in his thought, however, Macmurray does not produce a philosophy of religion. Rather as Duncan explains, Macmurray's theory is a 'religious philosophy' (Duncan, 1990, pp. 118–19); that is, his philosophical enterprise includes religion as an integral part of it. Hence Macmurray views himself as an inherently religious person, whereas the logical analysis of a philosophy of religion can be carried out without necessitating any personal religious experience or belief.

Following his retirement, Macmurray does not publish much beyond two brief monographs. While the explanation for this might simply be old age, it is possible that he sees the Gifford lectures as the culmination of his life's work, and he realizes that it will be several years before the importance of his ideas would be widely acknowledged. The publications from his later life focus mainly on his concern to remain distanced from institutionalized Christianity, while also asserting the significance of the reported life and teachings of Jesus Christ for understanding

human nature and relationships. It is this issue that forms the basis of his last public speech, 'The Philosophy of Jesus', which he delivers to a gathering of the Society of Friends in 1972.

Two years previously, in 1970, Macmurray returns to Edinburgh to look after his very elderly mother. Her death proves traumatic for him and not long afterwards, on 21 June 1976, he dies also. His wife, who outlives him by a few years, ensures that his ashes are returned to Jordans village and a memorial service is held at the nearby Society of Friends Meeting House. Two days after his death, *The Times* publishes an obituary in which Macmurray is referred to as a talented and remarkable individual, but one who 'did not measure easily during his lifetime' (*The Times*, 01976, 23 June, p. 17). A year before his death in a letter to Kenneth Barnes, T.F. Torrance writes 'he is something like fifty years ahead of the rest of us' (Torrance, c1975, 6 March). Thus while not fully appreciated in his lifetime, Macmurray's moral and political philosophy is gaining credence thirty years after his death. On the one hand, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair claims (albeit contentiously) that Macmurray's writings have had an impact on his political outlook (Blair, 1996, pp. 59–60). Hence it is from a social and political perspective, as well as a philosophical one, that Macmurray's 'thinking is now seen to be relevant to our present problems' (*The Scotsman*, a1994, 17 September). On the other hand, Beveridge and Turnbull suggest that Macmurray's philosophical contributions are noteworthy in relation to their consistency with peculiarly Scottish thought (Beveridge and Turnbull, 1989). Although Macmurray is not a nationalist, and in later works he explicitly condemns nationalism as a spurious and dangerous principle to foster, from his rhetorical writings on the tradition of the Scottish universities it is clear that he is instilled with nationalistic pride, especially in the aftermath of the First World War (a1941a, pp. 471–2; u1922b).

It is by placing the tenets of Macmurray's work alongside those of John Baillie, Ronald Gregor Smith and John Macquarrie that Beveridge and Turnbull argue that Macmurray is a distinctively Scottish thinker (Beveridge and Turnbull, 1989, pp. 96–9). This judgement is based on the claim that all these scholars have a type of 'personalist' theory. While this is the case, the argument is weakened by the fact that there are many scholars who have promoted personalism from other nationalities, of which Emmanuel Mounier is merely one example. Furthermore, since David Hume and Thomas Reid are probably the most famous Scottish philosophers, it seems that Macmurray's work, if distinctively Scottish, must have some connection with their thought. While Macmurray is not a sceptic in the Humean extreme, his philosophy can be regarded as a 'common-sense' philosophy, at least in so far as the issues under consideration are made lucid to those whom they concern. That is, it can be argued that Macmurray succeeds in making his philosophy of personhood intelligible to persons.

When Macmurray reflects upon Reid's reaction against Hume, he asserts that the Scottish tradition is one of 'learning and serving', which recognizes that 'the commonsense of yesterday is the nonsense of tomorrow' (u1945a). In this respect, Macmurray seeks to retain a humble attitude with regard to his ideas, but

he does not refer to his thought as profoundly Scottish; in fact he declares that his work is most similar to the thought of Martin Buber (*SRR*, p. 24). Thus, even though Macmurray was born in Scotland, his influences seem to be drawn from a worldwide source of scholars; likewise, he spent a relatively short period of his life residing in Scottish territory.

Nevertheless, Macmurray's political and moral philosophy retains the themes of the British idealists who went before him, such as, T.H. Green, Edward Caird, F.H. Bradley and Bernard Bosanquet (Nicholson, 1990). Like these thinkers, much of Macmurray's work contains the dual influences of Greek and German philosophy, notably Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Hegel. Macmurray's theory differs from Hegelian idealism, since Macmurray is a scientific realist with a religious faith. Macmurray's reference to faith is accompanied by a strong critique of institutionalized Christianity and his account of the Absolute Agent bears some resemblance to Hegel's notion of *Geist* (Absolute Spirit). In common with the British idealists, Macmurray's work focuses on the social existence of persons and role of the state in promoting moral interactions therein. Yet while British idealists have been criticized for their inability to establish the grounds from which social standards are to be critiqued, the inclusion of religious values in Macmurray's description of community aims to provide such grounds. Thus it is possible to argue that Macmurray's philosophy is rooted in British idealism, while going beyond it. Moreover the issues he raises relate directly to his life experiences, which, in turn, are deeply affected both by his austere childhood in Scotland and by the awfulness of the Great War.

With Macmurray's ideas beginning to achieve much greater academic recognition, this book aims to draw together the diverse strands of his thought, under the overarching theme of the nature of the person. Macmurray's concept of the person encompasses child development, politics and religion. For example, Macmurray examines the early development of person-to-person relations and draws on the importance of an emotional education, an idea that has been growing rapidly in significance since the mid-1990s (Goleman, 1995). For adults, Macmurray contends, the harmonious relation of persons requires 'communities'; a term which he explains by comparing functional relations with relations of equals. Macmurray insists that social organization by the state is a prerequisite for equality, and, further, that the meeting of equals, as friends, is an essentially religious enterprise. Macmurray's work on the state and on religion, while ahead of its time in essence, contains some of his most contentious notions. On the one hand, Macmurray's examination of the function of the state and his critique of the Marxist exclusion of religion is incisive; on the other hand, the extent to which he is influenced by Marxist economics needs some revision following the widespread collapse of Marxist states. Similarly, Macmurray's emphasis on the superiority of Christianity seems dated, whereas his description of religion as activity which promotes community is consistent with a broad spectrum of religious traditions. In expounding Macmurray's concept of the person then, this book aims to draw out and expand on those aspects which are of contemporary relevance, while critiquing

and rejuvenating areas of his theory that might otherwise appear to be mistakenly divisive. On the whole therefore, this book is sympathetic to Macmurray's concerns, maintaining that his concept of the person is philosophically astute, and that, where revision is needed, this is not due to the fundamentals of the theory itself.

Macmurray's most significant contribution begins with his assertion that, thus far, the field of the personal has been inadequately expressed (c1914–36, 25 October 1929). He contends that impersonal analogies lead to theorizing about the person from a dualistic and individualistic standpoint. On the contrary, Macmurray insists that this results in 'the need to transfer the centre of gravity in philosophy from thought to action' (*PR*, p. 11). It is in this respect that Macmurray's concept of the person is holistic; that is, it opposes the view that the mind and the body are most adequately understood as separate entities and argues for the realignment of thoughts and emotions. Likewise, Macmurray asserts that relationships are essential for personal fulfilment, and it is on this basis that Macmurray's work is referred to as a relational account of the person, in contrast with the individualism promoted by capitalism. Initially, it was the horrific experience of world war that caused Macmurray to argue for peace and, therefore, to examine the relations of persons. In his mature work, having developed his focus on action rather than thought, and thus the definition of the person as an agent, he maintains that the agent-self exists 'only as a community of personal agents' (*SA*, p. 12). In spite of his use of the term 'community' and his dissatisfaction with individualism, however, Macmurray is not, as Brittan explains, a communitarian in the contemporary sense of the word, since Macmurray's emphasis on the care of others is interpreted universally, as opposed to being confined within smaller-scale communities (Brittan, a1997, pp. 18–20). Moreover, the notion of universal applicability remains grounded through Macmurray's insistence on the face-to-face relations of equals. It is in relation to equality that Macmurray finds Marxist economics useful, while also safeguarding the self by refusing to reduce the meaning of community to self-sacrifice for the benefit of society (c1914–36, 18 October 1930). Communities then consist of voluntarily related persons who are enjoying the mutual benefits of fellowship.

However, since Macmurray refers to communities as religious, he is faced with the task of reconciling his religious convictions with his certainty concerning the reasonableness of the majority of Marxist principles. Primarily he is able to do this by retaining a decidedly opaque definition of 'God'; he states that 'at most God is for thought a necessary hypothesis' (c1914–36, 22 July 1925). Furthermore, while he holds that religion, especially Christianity, is the root of all community life, he acknowledges the difficulty of defining Christianity (*SRR*, pp. 24–5; a1937a). When, therefore, Macmurray makes the statement, 'I stand outside the Churches because I am a Christian' (u1934b), this implies that his definition of Christianity differs from the prevalent forms of Christianity with which he is familiar. Consequently, amongst the few scholarly writings on Macmurray, the overall aim has been to apply Macmurray's open-mindedness to a traditionally stubborn framework of theology (Fergusson, chForthcoming). The latter is a legitimate and beneficial approach, but this book, while recognizing the importance of religion

for Macmurray, contains the distinctive proposals, first, that his use of the term 'Christian' is vague and theoretically unnecessary, and secondly, that his theory is, in fact, rendered more consistent by replacing such religiously exclusive terminology with something more inclusive of other religions. In short, this book argues that Macmurray's stress on Christianity is reflective of certain ingrained assumptions that he was unable to overcome, as opposed to ensuing from his philosophical propositions. Furthermore, this approach allows the most significant aspects of Macmurray's description of the person to be comprehended and adopted by a religiously pluralist society.

As the nature of Macmurray's work dictates, this book, while engaging primarily with philosophy, also has grounds for mentioning certain psychological, political and religious ideas. In this respect, the book does not intend to present an exhaustive account of the issues therein; it merely seeks to contextualize Macmurray's thought, offering both support for and criticism of his ideas from within the fields that he addresses. Moreover, such comparisons serve to bolster the wide-ranging impact and contemporary relevance of Macmurray's philosophy for improving the understanding of the person and of the importance of personal relationships in a wide range of fields. Later scholars are reiterating and expanding on the themes found in Macmurray's writings decades earlier, often without having come across his work; thus this book provides wider access to his ideas. The way in which Macmurray expresses his ideas is striking, since even a cursory inquiry into his works leaves the reader with the impression that Macmurray has made sense of the world.

Nevertheless, at times the significance of Macmurray's definition of personal identity and the implications this holds for persons in relation are obscured by his attempt to employ a triadic or tripartite methodology, at times straining the Hegelian dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Consequently, this book seeks to assist in the extraction of the underlying concepts from the form given to them, through a full-scale examination of both Macmurray's published and unpublished writings. Such an analysis is justifiable owing to the increased interest in his ideas and the lack of any comprehensive study of his complete works. In addition, this book seeks to address some of the objections that might be raised to its holistic and relational account of the person, by combining the assertion of the credibility of Macmurray's perception with contemporary scholarship that supports and enhances its salient features.