

“Persons in Relation” – What does John Macmurray’s approach add to ethical philosophy?

Paul Cockburn

Over the last year or so a group of about seven of us have been studying the Gifford lectures that were delivered by John Macmurray. We have all enjoyed it; he is certainly stimulating even if you do not agree with him.

I will say just a few words about John Macmurray. He was born in Scotland in 1891 and died in 1976. He studied at Balliol. His studies were interrupted by the First World War, in which he was wounded, and won the Military Cross. After the war, he became Professor of Mind and Logic at University College London from 1928 to 1944. He is sometimes defined as a **Personalist**; believing that the concept of persons and all that it implies is important. Interestingly he has been air-brushed out of philosophical history – his successor at UCL was AJ Ayer. He gave the Gifford lectures in 1953 and 1954 and most of what I am going to talk about which is I hope related to ethics is in the second part of his talk which is in a book entitled ‘**Persons in Relation**’. Macmurray argues for persons being free agents having free will, and who exist primarily in relation to other persons. I don’t want to get bogged down in the free will argument (see Jeanne Warren’s excellent article in the 2013 issue of the Philsoc Journal). You could say that he has converted Descartes’ Cogito; the ‘I think’, into ‘I do’ or more to the point ‘we do’.

What does this mean in terms of ethics? Well, his **Personalism** highlights the importance of morality, and he links this to his philosophy of the state, and I will talk about how he uses psychology and psychoanalytic theory in his philosophy.

Macmurray believes that what he calls the **Form of the Personal** is established in our early life. He gives a detailed analysis of child development. He describes the experience of the child in the child/mother relationship. A baby (he in the following) gets hungry, cries, is fed by his mother, and then the hunger repeats. This basic personal experience is the pattern of our lives in terms of our desires. The baby must learn to wait for a response from the mother to his cries. Then by repetition the memory of the process of wanting to be fed, crying, the mother’s response and the desire being met leads to feelings of anticipatory pleasure, through waiting and then actual satisfaction. These feelings all coalesce so that the period of waiting merges with the later satisfaction. The child can imagine future satisfaction.

The first behaviour of a child is unconscious and presupposes knowledge of an other, in this case his mother, and mother and baby are communicating and the baby is having its needs met. This communication between mother and child is two-way even in the early stages of life before language is learnt.

When a child cries, if the period of waiting for the mother is too long, then positive expectation is replaced by a negative distress, perhaps expressed in a tantrum. As the child grows up, to help him acquire new skills the mother will do less and less for the infant. This refusal is in fact an expression of the mother’s love (she wants the child to do more for itself and become fully a person), but to the child it may appear to be like a betrayal, he feels isolated. He expects the future to be like the past, when his mother cared for him much more. The child becomes anxious that the mother does not love him any more, and only the mother can reassure him at this point.

The mother’s refusal to do what the child expects leads to a clash of wills, self-assertion against the other. He hates his mother, hoping she will change her mind. In this conflict moral struggles are pre-figured, as the child is conflicted between his own will and the

love of the other who is part of him, whose love the child needs. If the child learns to do what is required of him through negative emotion, fear of what will become of him, worry that his mother will withdraw her care for him, his character becomes negative. It is necessary the positive relation to the mother is re-established, that somehow the child has to recognize the illusion of the negative phase, that his mother still loves him and that her refusal to give in to his demands is somehow good for him.

But when the child accedes to his mother's demand because he must, against his will, he remains egocentric, dissatisfied. There will be a split in his mind between the ideal and the actual. He either conforms obediently and feigns 'goodness' or rebels and becomes a 'bad boy'. If he becomes a 'good' boy he will placate his mother whose enmity he fears. He may inhabit an imaginary world, a phantasy world, where his wishes are granted, which to him is real. On the other hand he may become a 'bad' boy, rebellious and aggressive; seeking to gain by force or cunning what is not freely given to him. His real life is practical; he seeks to use power over the other for his own ends. Over time individuals thus become submissive or aggressive in character. He becomes either less practical and more contemplative or pragmatic and more practical. Both 'reactions' are egocentric, for the self rather than the other and in both cases excluding mutuality.

The child has to learn to trust his mother despite appearances. The mother's task is to convince the child that despite her refusing to satisfy the child's desires, his fear that she is against him is an illusion. In future instead of doing something for himself out of fear, he needs to do it in co-operation with the mother.

Macmurray also mentions other family members besides the mother. He says the father is important but does not elaborate. There can be splits in the family where negative emotions play out: negative emotions against the mother are projected on the father, or on another sibling. The whole family may be united in projecting their mutual hostility against an outsider; the unity of a nation is intensified by the need to combine against an enemy nation.

According to Macmurray, there are three moral 'ways of life'. He calls these 'dispositions', they are categories of apperception in a Kantian sense (i.e. they present the world in a certain way to us). They determine the general form of our experience of others. They are derived from our childhood experience, the pair-bonding with our mothers and experience of family. So groups in society also exhibit the three typical modes of morality we have mentioned – contemplative (passive), pragmatic (aggressive) and community.

In the positive communal mode, we act not for the sake of ourselves but for others. We have to overcome fear and the hostility arising from fear: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. Unity in the community is achieved.

But there are two negative modes: the contemplative, which is rooted in submission and the pragmatic (which is rooted in aggression).

In the contemplative mode, the adult develops from the child who copes with the apparent hostility of the mother by withdrawing into a life of phantasy. His real life to him is one of reflection; he consciously ceases to intend the practical life. As this mode is reflected in society social norms are created, which unite society. They are basically a matter of style, beauty or grace in social relations, and manners. The danger here is that our fear of others makes us withdraw. We become spectators, following the world which we see as a show, and we try to use thinking and reason in a detached way, as though thought had no motive. It is passive: it is the desire to know the truth without having to live by the truth, to escape from moral commitment, from responsibility. Others, the powerful, effectively command my actions, so it is their responsibility to do right not

mine. Emotionally in this mode the child and then the adult feels resentful. There are echoes of Nietzsche's 'ressentiment' here.

In the aggressive mode, the adult follows the child who rebels against his mother. The child does not withdraw; on the contrary he throws tantrums, fights his mother. He grows up to be a rebel. Aggression is used in an effort to overpower the resistance of other agents and compel them to submit. So how in this scenario is any unity in society maintained? We need laws which limit the freedom of the aggressive individual to harm others.

Here Macmurray looks at the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes says the persons who compose society are by nature isolated, afraid of one another, and in competition with one another. Each individual uses all his powers to secure his own preservation and satisfaction; in this state of nature there is war of every man against everybody else. Human life is poor, nasty, brutish and short. But these aggressive individuals are rational. They realize they have to unite in a society to survive. So in pragmatic mode they seek to achieve long-term ends, subjugating short-term interests, establishing laws which a power external to us can force all of us to keep. This is the power of the sovereign state which maintains the necessary unity of society by force. Hobbes assumes there is a Stoic dualism between Reason and Passion. He thinks our motives, our passions, are ego-centric and base.

So in society or community, we may have incompatible goals or intentions of a number of agents. Macmurray takes the relation of one person with another as the basic structure of community. A community is the network of active relations between all possible pairs of its members. He says that to have a positive personal relation with another is to be heterocentric: the centre of interest and attention is the other. This is a unity of differences: each person retains their individuality. Each person realizes himself in and through the other. I must trust the other. If we quarrel we each withdraw, and fear replaces the trust. We can be reconciled as friends or we may agree to co-operate on conditions which impose restraints on each of us. But we will then be isolated from one another, not so satisfied in the relationship.

In the simple case of two agents who disagree, one might yield to the other, or one might force the other to submit. The criticism of Hobbes is that he assumes there is nothing in man to act as a bond of unity between people. But we could argue that benevolence is as natural to man as self-love.

Rousseau inverts the Hobbesian case: to him human nature is inherently good, the existing social structures are based on reason but they prevent us going back to a more original state where our natural impulses will enable us to form a better society. Reason can reveal to us the goal that society is moving towards in its full organic maturity, and we assume this future harmony is already here, or at least that we are moving towards it, fooling ourselves. We seek a mystical identity with the whole of which I form a part. We want a consensual harmony of wills with self-interest suppressed in favour of the general good.

This is the contemplative mode, where the child submits to the mother's will, and gives up his own self-will to a world of phantasy and imagination.

What about politics? The state has two main functions - to run the economy and maintain justice. The economic sphere is primarily about indirect relations, where we co-operate as workers and have functional roles. It is pragmatic, concerned with efficiency. The state can be totalitarian, treating people as just a means to an end, a cog in the economic machine.

Macmurray contrasts justice with mercy, generosity, benevolence, those moral qualities which involve a readiness to sacrifice self-interest for the sake of others. While justice is just the minimum you get in the courts.

The state is only necessary because there is a breakdown in the customary community of direct personal relations. Macmurray thinks the transition to indirect relations is shown in the history of Greece, in the growth of the city state. Here the growth of indirect personal relations, with other city states, superimposed on the direct relations which existed within the cities, necessitated politics. The cities became interdependent instead of self-sufficient, and power struggles for control of the cities emerged. Just like today, there are a number of independent societies, (read countries) with each one seeking to control in its own interests an economic nexus of interests of which it constitutes only a fragment. (US spying on Germany, Russia and Ukraine).

The Romans solved the problem of heterogeneous states: to keep the peace the super-state (the Romans) imposed laws. But the law imposes only a minimum standard and there are instances where if I obey the law I might act immorally, so it should not take moral precedence. Are there two kinds of obligation, one moral the other political? No - the political is derived from the moral. Morals generally apply to people we know, our direct relations: the law generally applies when our actions affect people we do not know. Each one of us intends to maintain the system of co-operation in general in an indirect way (i.e. mediated by the state). The State system of justice is pragmatic, and the State is a device created to develop and maintain law. However the State can grow into a monster – Hobbe's Leviathan. Because law is universal, it has great power, and megalomaniacs who wish to exercise more and more power can use the State for the wrong purposes. What is the state Macmurray asks – if we track the state to its lair, we find a collection of overworked bureaucrats who are pretty much like us. Those who are wise enough to realize their limitations, and immune to the gross adulation of their fellows, realize they cannot solve everything and resign – and then the power-mad enter who think they can solve everything. He cites Hitler as an example Hitler of this.

If we assume that the State can solve all our problems, then we make power the supreme good. Power becomes the end instead of the means. The State cannot create a community, united in a common life, with the members in communion, in fellowship. If fear dominates, then proper community is not possible. For Macmurray religion unites people in this proper community where fear has been overcome, and to create community is to make friendship the form of all personal relations.

So to summarise - we develop moral dispositions in our relations to others based on the mother-child relation. These are either aggressive, or contemplative, based on fear, or in community, based on love. Societies and nations exhibit these same dispositions as all human social identity is defined in terms of these dispositions.