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John Macmurray on the “Personal” as Involving a “Practical Contradiction” and Why It Matters

Abstract:

Macmurray replaces the traditional philosophical standpoint of subject-as-thinker with self-as-agent, and only persons are agents. The unit of the personal is “I-and-you”; I become “I” when I distinguish myself from “not-I”, namely, “you”. Awareness of the negative begins in babyhood, as I learns I am dependent on a relationship with an Other who can fail to fulfil my needs. The logic of the personal then differs from mathematical logic or Hegelian “logic”, since for it, “the positive is constituted and sustained by its own negative”. Persons are capable of intentional action, doing this (the positive), instead of that, while thinking is the negative (what I don’t do.) Action being primary, right and wrong come before true and false, and sustained thinking (a new philosophy) is needed for reflecting constructively on how to meet today’s challenges. Motivation for action can be either negative (fear) or positive, envisaging possible friendship.

Keywords:

Macmurray, person, positive/negative, self-as-agent, friendship

Conventional (mathematical) logic, Macmurray tells us, applies to inert homogeneous substance: all units are regarded as identical, or at least interchangeable, and contradiction indicates a dead end: $\sim (A. \sim A.)$ The argument, one might say, is over; the negative eliminates the positive. There is also a “logic” we owe to Hegel, that Macmurray calls “organic,” in which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, which therefore differ from one another as they function together and are absorbed into the service of a life which transcends them. Thus this “contradiction,” which might seem more productive than the first, is overcome by the negative being swal-

lowed up by the new positive. Both these logics apply to a world from which the thinker is detached – he stands outside what he contemplates. Especially in the first case, this objectivity has been valued as “rational,”¹ but even the second suffers from the flaw of being “impersonal,” according to Macmurray, and reliance on these ways of thinking is posing a serious danger to humanity. He proposes a “Copernican revolution,” according to which, the “subject as thinker” is to be replaced with the “self as agent,”² and only persons are agents. He is responding to what he regards as the crucial insight of Kierkegaard’s criticism of Hegel.³ For Kierkegaard, this “existential thinking” was not philosophy, but for Macmurray it is the key to identify and address the irrationality evident in the failure of our civilization to address its dire situation. What Kierkegaard maintained, Macmurray tells us, is that “the dialectic of the personal life ... is a dialectic without a synthesis.”⁴ While Kierkegaard was perhaps an isolated and idiosyncratic genius, Macmurray’s work as a philosopher is to challenge the way we currently think (in much the same way that Descartes did in his time), in the hope that we will realize what we are doing and avoid the catastrophe that our culture is heading toward. This paper is an effort to articulate Macmurray’s new logic – that of the personal, and share what I believe matters most in what he has to offer us today.

As opposed to the units I mentioned above (isolated “ones” or entities that belong in an organic system) the unit of the personal is “I and you,” and not an individual self; that is to say, to be a person requires a relationship between selves, which have their own kind of unity.⁵ In Macmurray’s words: “[T]he unity of the self contains and indeed is constituted by a practical contradiction between its elements.”⁶

Huh? So let us try to sort out how such a self and its paradoxical unity come to be, and explore its relation to the logic of the personal, that in which “the positive includes and is sustained by its own negative.”⁷ The contradiction is inherent: it is integral to all things personal, and as persons we need to come to terms with it and accept its implications. In practice, in fact, it is not unfamiliar, as you will see.

How do I come into being as “I?” Child psychologists since Macmurray continue to explore the implications of what he pointed out.⁸ The basic insight is that “I” come into being as “I” in a relationship with “you,” and the original/originating bond is touch. The mother, or whoever is the care giver, touches the baby and the baby touches mother. Mother, of course, knows what she is doing, but what does the baby know? The baby certainly has feelings: at a minimum, he experiences and expresses comfort or discomfort, but how does he come to a sense of self? Certainly, he is responsive: there is something like communication from the beginning, even in the womb, as experiments described by Stern can show, but at first it is not personal. It is as if there is no distinction between inside and outside, no sense of “here” versus “there.” Merleau-Ponty called it *la vie à plusieurs* – “life lived by several,”⁹ in which there is a “we” not distinguishable into “I” and “you.” A newborn,

1) See *The Master and his Emissary: the Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* by Iain Gilchrist. In this far-ranging book, this humanist/psychiatrist/neuroscientist documents the way the analytical, problem solving left brain has come to dominate and frustrate the synthesizing, imaginative, value-oriented right brain, to the detriment of our culture, and possibly the demise of humanity.

2) *The Self as Agent* and *Persons in Relation* were originally presented as the Gifford Lectures 1953 and 54.

3) John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1991), 36–37.

4) *Ibid.*, 97.

5) John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1991), 61.

6) Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, 98.

7) Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, 16. He says this in different ways, in many other places.

8) Donald Woods Winnicott, and more recently Daniel Stern, in particular. Macmurray cites Ian Suttie (*The Origins of Love and Hate*).

9) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Les Relations avec Autrui chez L'Enfant*, 33. English translation in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 119.

within minutes of birth, will imitate the facial expression of an adult paying attention to him; babies will cry when they hear other babies cry, and so on. Apparently, this is a kind of “infectious” reaction, a generalized participation without distinction, not yet allowing for difference.

Fairly soon, there will be evident pleasure in touch, shared joy in mother’s singing, satisfaction in recognizing patterns (music played before birth and again after), interest in new sensations, and all this seems to be without specifying this is “my” experience whether or not shared with “you.” The baby is clearly aware of rhythm, and of things changing: from the beginning, he has a sense of lived time, a capacity to expect something, and to be surprised. He can feel distress, and he reacts to discomfort and its alleviation. But if there is no inside and no outside, there is not yet any external reality as such. The touch, therefore, is not me touching you, or you touching me: the touching comes and goes. It is sensation not yet sense, and so not yet mine, that is personal.

The point is that for there to be any such distinction, there somehow has to be a new kind of interruption leading to an awareness of what Macmurray identifies as “other.” He calls this the germ of rationality.¹⁰ The first “other” which will give meaning to “self” will be “not-self,” in fact, another person. The baby must become aware that his needs are being met, his discomfort assuaged by this other. How does he become aware? By noticing that his needs are not met: he experiences the pain of hunger (perhaps just generalized discomfort), he has to wait, and then eventually his needs are met by the other, but according to the other’s whim. The baby is frustrated – and now he has experienced the negative. He can also begin to identify the other as both the source of the frustration, and then of the fulfilment of his needs. Thus emerges the “I,” at the same time as the “you” comes into focus as “not I,” the other whose will conflicts with mine. There is a felt distinction, an awareness of resistance, a pushing and a pushing back, a shared but separate, distinguishable presence experienced as opposition – “you!” It is this conflict with the other that reveals the “I” as the negative of the other.

Personal individuality is not an original given fact. It is achieved through the progressive differentiation of the original unity of the “You and I.”¹¹

This is the pattern of the logic whereby the positive is constituted and sustained by its own negative. For in this “*Ur*-conflict” lies the “contradiction” that, as Macmurray explains, renders all personal consciousness problematic.¹² That is to say, the mother-baby conflict may or may not be resolved satisfactorily. If the baby learns that mother has not really betrayed him, but does return after the withdrawal, reaffirming her love and care, and the relationship is restored, then there will be renewed trust and the promise of a future together. But if things do not go well, the baby may not forgive the mother, and the underlying motive of fear will predominate. Resentment, even hatred, will arise, precluding love. The negative, in this case, is not subordinated to the positive, does not allow the renewed love to overcome the fear. The positive needs the negative to come into being as positive: I need you if I am to be me. The solution to the conflict, then, is for the baby to see beyond the immediate frustration, acknowledge that the mother is really on his side and, after withdrawing, return to connect with her and allow the relationship to unfold. Re-evaluation, not yet a conscious choice as such, but as it can go either way, he may or may not opt for the “yes” that takes account of (has meaning because of) the “no.”

I cite at length a relevant passage from Macmurray because I would rather present you with the prophetic warning in his words:

It is necessary that the mother should refuse him what he has every reason to expect; it is necessary that within the relationship with her he should be forced into negativity, believe that she has ceased

10) Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, 51.

11) *Ibid.*, 91.

12) *Ibid.*, 161.

to care for him and be afraid. For only so can he experience the distinction between positive and negative in its fundamental manifestations; as the distinction between real and unreal, between good and evil, beautiful and ugly, true and false. For all of us, at any stage, development depends upon the rhythm of withdrawal and return; and this is true for societies as for individuals. If the rhythm ceases, development ceases with it, and we are ripe for death or for destruction.¹³

I fear Macmurray's references to "development" and being "ripe" might suggest he is reverting to what he has otherwise decried as the organic model – that our destiny is on a par with a biological fate – but I believe this would be a misunderstanding of how he reads our situation. Nevertheless, how we act or react has irreversible consequences. He goes on to describe the child's experience as:

the origin of the moral struggle, in a situation which is universal and necessary in human experience... He needs the other in order to be himself; and his awareness is an awareness of the other... His relation to the other becomes ambivalent... From this conflict of agents are derived all the characteristic dichotomies in terms of which human life must be lived, and in it they are contained. With their emergence in consciousness, as distinctions between real and unreal, right and wrong, good and evil, true or false, action becomes necessary and human life becomes problematic. We are compelled to distinguish and choose.¹⁴

It must already be clear that to be a person is not exactly a matter of fact. It might better be described as the human condition, our existential predicament.¹⁵ I have already mentioned Macmurray's reference to Kierkegaard, and that pronouncement, that "we are compelled to distinguish and choose" might recall the latter's "either ... or ..." or even Sartre's dictum that we are "condemned to be free." When contemporaries told Macmurray that he was an existentialist, he resisted at first: apparently, he identified the movement with Sartre – but eventually he began to see some connections.¹⁶ One example of the contradictions involved in being a person that Macmurray notes is our capacity for self-deception. Although he relates it to unconscious motivation, it could also be read as equivalent to Sartre's "bad faith." Here we see a difference with Sartre, for whom to be authentic is to experience isolation and anguish. Sartre remains in the negative, in distrust and fear, and co-operates with others as a last resort. He has to face a future for which he alone is responsible, without a meaning beyond his own projection. ("Man is a useless passion.")¹⁷ Macmurray is closer to de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, who were as clear as he that our existence necessarily involves others. As "the positive is constituted and sustained by its own negative," bad faith is the failure of good faith. I can tell the truth because I can lie, and vice versa.

To act is intentionally to bring about change, and we recognize the point at which "action becomes necessary" because that is when something about the situation we are in is, at least in some respect, unsatisfactory. There is something for us to do. We could follow the child (and Macmurray does) in his exploration of his world,

13) Ibid., 94.

14) Ibid., 97–98.

15) Cf. Heidegger's description of *Dasein* as "the being for whom Being is an issue". There are a number of parallels in Heidegger's *Being and Time* with insights in Macmurray (as well as striking differences). I am sure Macmurray did not know his work.

16) See *John Macmurray, a Biography* by John E. Costello, which also gives an account of Macmurray's interactions with Martin Buber.

17) Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 784.

as he enters into new relationships and his range of action grows, but the fundamental logic is the same. To act is to commit to one of at least two alternatives, “yes” to this and “no” to that or those, and what we have done becomes history, a matter of fact. The act itself is the exercise of will in the real world, in which real things take place. What makes it an action (and not an event or accident) is that it was intended, and Macmurray insists on the difference between matters of fact and matters of intention: and it is persons who have intentions, who initiate a future by what they choose to do.

An action can succeed or fail: we can get it right because we could have got it wrong. If this were not so we would not have the sense of having done anything: we have to know what we are doing, and the right is achieved by rejecting the wrong. This knowledge is not a matter of knowing a fact (that such and such is the case); that Macmurray gives priority to action over thinking means that “right and wrong” come before “true and false.” So, in action, as the logic of the personal makes clear, thinking is the negative which constitutes and sustains action, the positive. To act, we have to be thinking: the wood worker decides what not to do as he carves the wood, correcting mistakes as he proceeds, and this know-how need not – perhaps even cannot – be conceptualized, but it is there. When (if) things go seriously wrong, our carver will put down his tools and step back and reflect.¹⁸ This withdrawal from action has an important role in assessing what to do next. When society as a whole meets an impasse in some sense, some people who become aware of this start reflecting on what has gone wrong, and this is the inspiration for Macmurray’s philosophical ambition to turn philosophy around.

Descartes was a pivotal figure – he did turn philosophy around, in response to the crises in his time, and if you like, rescued thinking, and helped birth the new rationality. But part of our inheritance from Descartes is to value theory over reality, in effect to stay withdrawn in reflection, to define the self as thinker, not as agent.¹⁹

The ascendancy of theory has served us well in some respects, expanding our knowledge in many areas, without paying attention to its value in action. Without, that is, reference to persons. What is true of substances or organisms (that which can rightly be said of them), being not directly concerned with human relationships, can be articulated quite impersonally. And while such information can be useful, it can be used for good or ill. What, after all, is the point of it? Macmurray says, “All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, all meaningful action for the sake of friendship.”²⁰ Impersonal (“scientific”) accounts of human beings and their interactions will miss the point and distort our reality when they are treated as if they are “facts” on the basis of which we can make predictions. We should be using the wrong logic. To try to understand human behavior as explicable according to the laws of cause and effect, or as members (limbs) of the body politic or other organization (note “organ” in this word), offers no access to useful reflection on what we or our fellows are actually doing, or what to do next. On some level, everything we do involves other people – to be a person is to be in relationship with other persons, but again we can refuse to acknowledge this – we can say “yes” or “no” to the claim this makes on us. A person is always able to behave impersonally. I can only ignore what (or who) I know is there. It is only human behavior that can be “inhumane.” Only a free being can be enslaved. We know the good (the positive) to the extent of our awareness of evil, and our relationships with others can be positively or negatively motivated, that is, by love or fear.

As we make our way from babyhood to adulthood, our culture has tended to push us to value independence, as if to be an isolated individual is the crowning achievement of a person. But it is fear which tends to make us withdraw, and it is the positive relationship with others that makes life worth living; that gives

18) Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, 88.

19) To Descartes’ “*cogito ergo sum*”, Macmurray quips “*cogito ergo non-sum*” (1991a, 81) – what is only thought does not exist; to the extent that I am (only) thinking, I am not doing anything, I am “out of it”.

20) Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, 14.

meaning to what we do. “If the *terminus a quo* of the personal life is a total helpless dependence on the Other, the *terminus ad quem* is not independence, but a mutual interdependence of equals.”²¹

What I hope will happen is that Macmurray’s philosophical perspective will replace the blinkered thinking, which is really fear-based, that is dominant in the world today. We must return from the dominant position of the negative (withdrawal) to the positive lest “development ceases ... and we are ripe for death or for destruction.”

21) Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, 66.

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