The Personal Universe: Metaphysics for the 21st Century
by Jeanne Warren

What is metaphysics? It has been variously defined, but I like the way it is described by a late 19th-century German author of *A History of Philosophy*, a man named Wilhelm Windelband (1). He wrote of "the general questions which concern the actual taken as a whole" and distinguished these from "those which deal with single provinces of the actual". The former, he said, form the problem of metaphysics, called by Aristotle 'first science'.

The Oxford Companion to Philosophy (2) says something similar. "Metaphysics," it says, "is the most abstract and in some views 'high-falutin' part of philosophy, having to do with the features of ultimate reality, what really exists and what it is that distinguishes that and makes it possible."

I like the distinction between the 'general questions' and the 'single provinces' because, to me, metaphysics is concerned with examining our foundational concepts, the ones which underpin our thinking and which we usually accept without question. Today I want to examine one such concept and suggest a replacement. Our concepts do matter; they help to shape our world. If they are inadequate they lead us astray. Human life is always problematic, but the 20th century saw an explosion of human energy which has left us with urgent problems which need attention.

Our conception of ourselves has been faulty. Buried deep within our tradition is the assumption – a metaphysical assumption – that persons are *primarily* thinking individuals and are best understood when considered in that light. I want to propose instead that we conceive of persons *primarily* as doers. This is an approach which some Existentialist thinkers adopted, but though they criticised previous philosophy they too often rejected systematic thinking altogether. This is not a satisfactory option for those of a metaphysical bent. Why should we abandon abstract thought when considering practical human affairs?

One 20th-century British philosopher who refused to accept this retreat was John Macmurray (3). He is not well known now, but he enjoyed some public recognition before the war, due partly to his lectures on philosophy for a wider audience on the BBC Third Program. He had a distinguished academic career, which followed a fairly conventional route from Tutor at Balliol College, Oxford to Professor at University College London and finally at Edinburgh, a return to his native Scotland.

Macmurray was always interested in practical matters, such as politics and education, as well as in the fundamental questions of philosophy. His first published books, in the early 1930's just after he turned 40, were *Freedom in the Modern World* and *Interpreting the Universe* (4). In the Preface to the former he wrote, "Philosophy becomes real, and, therefore, of interest and importance to those who are not specialists in the subject, only when its problems are forced upon it by the immediate life of its time and its environment. (5)" The problem he identified as needing attention was that of our inadequate thinking about persons. He set himself the task of seeking a solution. This he set out in his 1950's Gifford Lectures on 'The Form of the Personal' (6). In talking about that solution today, I hope to illustrate metaphysics in action, so to speak, for though few have yet followed in his footsteps, I believe he has provided a useful and usable new path for philosophy to explore.

Macmurray was well versed in the history of philosophy. His study of the German philosophical tradition (which he could read in the original) gave him a clue to the way forward in the work of Immanuel Kant. Kant, said Macmurray, had reached the conclusion that reason is primarily practical. We think according to the rules of logic and non-contradiction, but reason is broader than just giving us rules for thinking. The whole of a person's way of living is infused with reason, which is the faculty by which we manage our

freedom. This freedom is primarily a freedom of action, which includes within it a freedom of thought. As Macmurray puts it in describing Kant's thought, "The belief in freedom is … a necessity of reason, like the belief in the law of contradiction. To reject it is to reject reason itself, not merely in the practical, but also in the theoretical field…. [T]he belief that our judgments can be true or false, depends upon our belief that our actions can be right or wrong, of which indeed it is a special case. (7)" In other words, if we were not free to accept or reject a line of thought, reason would simply not be operative, any more than it is when a river finds its way to the sea.

Kant said that we cannot *know* that we are free. This is beyond the limits of knowledge, in the realm of faith. To think otherwise is to risk falling prey to illusion, to engage in metaphysics in the bad sense of speculative reasoning. Macmurray realised, however, that Kant had continued to ground his thought in the 'Cogito', which Descartes had established as the starting-point of modern philosophy. This defines a person as a thinking substance. Since Kant's objection was grounded in his acceptance of the 'I think' as his centre of reference, his objection did not necessarily have to be decisive. Macmurray proposed that we try to philosophise starting from the 'I do' rather than the 'I think', from the practical rather than the theoretical. It is important to realise that this does not mean that we abandon the theoretical nature of philosophy. Philosophy is necessarily theoretical, but it is possible to theorise *from the standpoint of action*. Similarly, Copernicus conceived the planetary system from the standpoint of the sun, but he did not have to leave the earth and travel to the sun in order to do it.

What Macmurray is proposing is a metaphysical shift. He is aware that, as he says, "The very mention of metaphysics is apt to arouse feelings of suspicion, more or less violent and hostile, among an influential section of contemporary philosophers." He goes on, however, to say, "The doctrine that metaphysical statements are meaningless has its roots in the positivistic aspect of the Critical philosophy. The ground of this judgement is that a metaphysical assertion cannot be verified, because it purports to refer beyond the limits of possible experience. (8)" He says that the objection is justified from the standpoint of the primacy of the theoretical, of the 'I think'. "But," he goes on, "this conclusion is valid *only* on the assumption that the theoretical standpoint is the only possible standpoint. If this is not so, then the conclusion may be taken as a *reductio ad absurdum* of that standpoint. (9)" The weakness of the positivist case, he says, is in its understanding of verification, which must be taken to have a wider meaning if one philosophises from the 'I do' rather than the 'I think'. It must include the effects of actions in the world – history can falsify metaphysical assumptions about persons.

We should notice that we cannot ask in advance if an attempt to replace the 'I think' with the 'I do' is possible. To do so is to presuppose the primacy of the theoretical, the very thing which the proposed new approach is rejecting. We can only simply try to do it. It is immensely difficult, because it involves transforming our habits of thought. Even a failure is worthwhile, however, because it may provide a stepping-stone to future success.

What would philosophy from the standpoint of action look like? To start with, we realise that action *includes* thought. Our Cartesian heritage posits a dualism between theory and practice, an unbridgeable gulf between the two. If we substitute the practical standpoint, the dualism between theory and practice disappears. In thinking, the mind alone is active. In acting both the body and the mind are active. Action is not an alternative to thought, it is a more complete concept, including the thinking self within the acting self.

Action and thought are the two poles of our personal experience. Theoretically conceived, they are two opposed concepts. In actuality, one includes the other. Action includes thought, but thought does not include action. Thus action is primary in a way that thought is not. By reflecting from the standpoint of action we do not exclude thought, we include it as a necessary though subordinate component. To be clear about terms, the term 'action' is being used to mean activity which is intended. Thus action without thought is a self-

contradictory concept. We can 'act without thinking', but by this we mean that we acted without *sufficient* thinking. If, while preoccupied, we answer a question put to us in a way we later regret, we do not consider that our answer involved no thinking at all, for without thinking we cannot speak. (The subject of talking in our sleep raises interesting questions about unconscious thinking, which I will not go into here, except to say that an infant who has not yet learned to talk does not talk in its sleep.)

The self in its completeness Macmurray calls the Self-as-agent, which is also the title of the first volume of his Gifford Lectures. The thinking self is a restricted mode of operation of this self. Macmurray calls it the Self-as-subject. The Self-as-subject is separated from the world it thinks about, and it is confronted with problems such as, "How do I know that the world exists?" The Self-as-agent knows the world as that which both supports and resists its action. It is the Self-as-subject which asks the question, "How do we *know* that the self is an agent?" From the point of view of the Self-as-agent this question has no force. It arises from the theoretical standpoint, the one we are rejecting. We might as well go back and ask Descartes, "How do we know that the self is a thinker?" He would have replied that the very question indicates that the self who asks it is a thinker. To doubt is to think. For the Self-as-agent, knowledge that he or she is an agent *follows* from being one. The practical is philosophically primary.

Because the Self-as-agent *includes* the Self-as-subject, Macmurray proposes a philosophical 'form of the personal' which sees the person, not as a synthesis of a dialectic (this Macmurray calls the form of the organic) but as "a positive which necessarily contains its own negative" (10). The negative is not something bad but rather something less complete or something at the opposite pole. Thus, above, I described action and thought as being opposite poles of our experience. They are not two sides of a dialectic; they are dimensions or poles of the complete experience of each of us. Both are necessary but the positive (action) is more complete than the negative (thought). Another example: A complete person includes an organic body. The personal includes the organic as its necessary negative. Or we could say more generally that the personal includes the impersonal as its negative. This pattern recurs throughout Macmurray's analysis.

The implications of the new metaphysical presupposition which sees individuals primarily as doers, rather than primarily as thinkers, are worked out in the first volume of the Gifford Lectures, with chapters on such things as perception, causality and modes of reflection. But in this volume is also an acknowledgement that the individual in isolation cannot represent the complete actuality of the personal, which demands the inter-personal for its completeness. An organism becomes a person only in relation with other persons. For the sake of simplicity of analysis, this aspect of the personal is ignored in the first volume, but that does not make it any less important. Our culture tends to be individualistic, seeing personal relations as an add-on. The habit of starting from 'I think' makes this almost inevitable, as thinking is something that we do individually. On the other hand the self who acts is inherently a self in relation with other selves and the world.

Thinking isolates us. Thought does not change the thing thought about. Action, on the other hand, affects the world. My action encounters the world as both support and resistance. It is these encounters which give me my initial knowledge of the world, without which I would have little to think about. A special subset of the world is other persons. How do I know another person? This cannot be achieved without meeting and inter-acting with them. Sometimes we may say when we meet someone we have heard about, "I feel as if I know you already." The 'as if' shows that we don't yet feel we quite know them, even though we may know a lot about them.

If we base our philosophy on the 'I think', we can only think of another person as another 'I'. As Macmurray puts it, "Any philosophy which takes the 'I think' as its first principle, must remain formally a philosophy without a second person; a philosophy which is debarred from thinking the 'You and I'. (11)" Our thinking about the interpersonal in these circumstances is likely to be of an impersonal kind,

concentrating on aggregates and systems rather than on relations of which 'friendship' would be the paradigm. Do you not think, looking around the contemporary world, that this has indeed happened?

Recently I came across a striking example of a failure to realise the importance of personal relationship. In 1995 in Massachusetts, a pair of twins was born premature and very small. The latest technology was used in the intensive care unit, and one of the girls was doing well, but the smaller, weaker one seemed to be losing her fight for life. As a last resort, a nurse decided to put them together in the same cot, a 'technique' she remembered hearing about somewhere. The effect was immediate. From that day both twins thrived, and at two months old they were allowed to go home. Doctors had been worried about the risk of infection, but they had been oblivious to the risk of isolation. Once the tiny baby had re-found her twin, life began to seem worth living. This practice gradually spread to other hospitals – not, it seems, because of a light-bulb moment of insight on the part of clinicians trained in conventional medicine, but because the practice could now be supported by research (12).

All of Macmurray's work emphasised the importance of the interpersonal, but in the second volume of his Gifford Lectures, given the title *Persons in Relation*, he considers the topic as part of his rigorous analysis of the philosophical form of the personal. The tradition of Plato and Aristotle, which rested on their conviction that the theoretical life was the good life, led directly to the 'I think'. It had the effect of making other selves, or we could say other minds problematic. One assumes that Aristotle knew that his students existed and had minds. It would be sensible to have a way of thinking about the world which makes this assumption primary, something to be presupposed rather than something needing to be proved. This, Macmurray suggests, is what can be achieved by thinking from the standpoint of the practical, of the 'I do'. Action means interaction with the world, which includes other people. This is a primary reality constitutive of personal being.

Macmurray points out that personal knowledge of another person includes an impersonal element, an element which includes what science tells us about people in general, or what can be known about a particular individual without being acquainted with them. The personal contains the impersonal as its necessary negative. He also points out that the theory of the personal that he is proposing is philosophical and not scientific. Science examines persons impersonally. The difference has to do with intention. Persons are agents and action is intentional. Intention is what distinguishes action from behaviour, that is, from activity which happens rather than being done. As Macmurray explains, "Action cannot be object for a subject; for a purely objective attitude reduces action to behaviour and represents it as matter of fact, not as matter of intention. (13)" Science, in other words, does not 'do' personal action. It must deal in facts, and, to quote Macmurray again, "What is intended is never matter of fact, though it may be a fact that I intend it. (14)"

In *Persons in Relation* Macmurray begins with the infant and its primary carer, on whom its very survival depends. Almost its only instinctive behaviour is to cry when distressed. Its personhood develops, from the beginning, in relationship, long before it learns to talk. The relationship is its primary reality. Only later does it separate itself out and think of itself as a separate individual. It goes from dependence to independence but then progresses to inter-dependence, to functioning as a member of a personal community. This is the fullest expression of personhood.

Macmurray examines the problematic nature of personal relations in the areas of ethics, politics and religion. Our responses to each other range from those based on fear to those based on love. The fearful responses can be either defensive or aggressive. We need systems of justice to manage the inevitable problems which arise from relations based on fear. Our political and economic systems are the functional underpinnings which enable a community of friendship to flourish. Friendship is for its own sake, not for the sake of something else. By friendship, Macmurray means an open, positive attitude to one another in which we feel

we can be ourselves. Perhaps there is no good word for this, but I heard descriptions of some such atmosphere from people who went to London during the Olympic games. Religion, says Macmurray, is about just this, the loving community. It cannot be understood by a philosophy without a 'You', because it is about the 'You and I'. "Religion, we may say, is the knowledge of the Other as community. (15)"

The classical way of thinking about ourselves as a combination of material body and immaterial mind or spirit does not work. It leaves us with such conundrums as the 'mind-body problem'. In Macmurray's words, "[I]t denies the 'I do' and substitutes on the one hand an 'I think', and on the other, an 'it happens'. . . . [It] must either assert that the relation of mind and matter is an insoluble mystery which, if it is accepted, must rest upon a dogmatic *Credo quia impossibile,* or it must deny either the reality of matter or the reality of mind, and have resort either to a pure materialism or a pure spiritualism. In either case, what is denied is action. (16)"

Macmurray ends by asking the question, 'Is what exists personal? (17)' He seeks to show that any impersonal conception of the world is inadequate. When Wittgenstein says, 'The world is everything that is the case', he is, says Macmurray asserting that the world is mere matter of fact, whereas the world also contains, "everything that appears to be the case, but is not. Error, stupidity and evil; the illusions of the wishful thinker and the 'nonsense' of the metaphysician, are in the world; and any conception of the world which excludes them is an inadequate conception. . . . [T]he world must be such that it can produce such creatures as we are, and must contain in itself the possibility of a problematical activity like our own. (18)"

Last year I read a recent book relating brain structure to Western culture, *The Master and his Emissary* by Iain McGilchrist. It puts forward the thesis that each hemisphere of the brain presents us with a different world. The right hemisphere keeps us in touch with the outside world, with its varied and sometimes confusing or conflicting messages to us. It provides us with broad, global, flexible attention. The left hemisphere produces for us a coherent world, one where the contradictions are resolved. It provides us with local, narrowly focussed attention (19). It struck me that Macmurray's thought could be seen as a striving for a right-hemisphere concept of the world from the left-hemisphere discipline of philosophy. Macmurray even says at one point, "[A] philosophy which starts from the 'I think' … is committed, by its starting-point, to an ineradicable dualism. The knower is then a pure subject, a mere observer, an isolated self, imprisoned in the fortress of his own ideas, and incapable of breaking out. Starting from the ideas he finds in himself he can reach out to other ideas, but he can never reach anything that exists. (20)" Macmurray's whole philosophical project can be seen as an attempt to forge a more adequate metaphysics.

McGilchrist, a former Consultant Psychiatrist and also researcher in neuroimaging, makes use of the sort of brain research which wasn't around in Macmurray's day. Research with brain damaged patients or, more recently, with experimental temporary inhibition of one hemisphere, shows many examples of the differences between the two hemispheres (21). Both hemispheres contribute to almost everything that we do, but in different ways. The best working relationship, he says, is for the right hemisphere, the one with the wider and more outward focus of attention, to pass things to the left hemisphere for processing, and then to receive back the results. This means that the left hemisphere has a somewhat subordinate position. However, each hemisphere has a capacity to inhibit the other to some degree. McGilchrist thinks that the left hemisphere may have become too dominant in modern Western people, leading to a culture with a world view increasingly out of touch with reality.

Heidegger, McGilchrist thinks, was very important in the history of modern philosophy, because he was able to go beyond the tradition he inherited and re-connect philosophy with the parts of reality which it had lost sight of. The fact that he valued poetic language helped. In an interesting paragraph, McGilchrist says, "Philosophy and philosophical discourse is only one way of understanding the world. Most people who instinctively see the world in Heideggerian terms don't become philosophers – philosophers are self-selected

as those who feel they can account for, or at any rate sensibly question, reality in the very terms that would need to be transcended if we are to do justice to the right hemisphere's reality. There are notable exceptions, however. (22)" As well as Heidegger, McGilchrist cites Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein. (I have ascertained that he has not read Macmurray!)

One of Macmurray's early books is called *Reason and Emotion* (23). Throughout his career he continued to champion, from the point of view of a philosopher, the importance of feeling as well as intellect. Only by using both faculties, he thought, could an adequate concept of the world be formed in the mind. McGilchrist says, in the same paragraph just quoted, "I believe that, despite appearances, philosophy begins and ends in the right hemisphere, though it has to journey through the left hemisphere on its way. (24)" In a philosophical tradition often stuck in the left hemisphere, so to speak, concerned with logic and analysis to the exclusion of inconvenient experience, Macmurray's concern for the person as a living reality rather than an abstract or generalised body or mind places him firmly in the actual world. His determination to formulate a philosophically adequate form of the personal is his way of re-connecting philosophy with that world. It is the sort of reality check from which philosophy can only benefit.

References

For some general background about John Macmurray and information about the John Macmurray Fellowship, go to the website: www.johnmacmurray.org

1. Wilhelm Windelband, *Geshichte der Philosophie*, 1892, translated by James H. Tufts as *A History of Philosophy* in 2 volumes, 1893, 2nd edition 1901, Harper Torchbooks edition 1958. The quotation is from Vol. I, p. 19.
2. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich , OUP, 1995. The entry referred to is '**metaphysics, history of**' by Prof. D.W. Hamlyn of Birkbeck College, London, pp. 556-558.
3. A good biography is *John Macmurray: A Biography* by John E. Costello (Floris Books, Edinburgh, 2002).
4. *Freedom in the Modern World* (Faber & Faber, London, 1932 and 1968) and *Interpreting the Universe* (Faber & Faber, London, 1933), both by John Macmurray.
5. Preface to *Freedom in the Modern World* , p. 15.
6. Gifford Lectures, delivered University of Glasgow 1953 and 1954, published in two volumes: *The Self as Agent* (Faber & Faber, London, 1957 and 1969) and *Persons in Relation* (Faber & Faber, London, 1961 and 1970).
7. *The Self as Agent* p. 57.
8. Ibid. p. 214
9. Ibid. p. 215
10. Ibid. p. 98
11. Ibid. p. 72
12. http://www.nrlc.org/news/2001/NRL04/hugs.html National Right to Life News, April, 2001.
13. *Persons in Relation* p. 28.
14. Ibid. p. 39
15. Ibid. p. 185
16. Ibid. p. 213
17. Ibid. p. 215
18. Ibid. p. 219
19. *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* by Iain McGilchrist (Yale University Press, 2009, paperback 2010), pp. 39-40 and throughout the book.
20. *Persons in Relation* p. 208
21. McGilchrist. One striking example, p. 192-3:

“Take the following example of a syllogism with a false premise:

1. Major premise: all monkeys climb trees;
2. Minor premise: the porcupine is a monkey;
3. Implied conclusion: the porcupine climbs trees.

… At the outset of the experiment, when the intact individual is asked ‘Does the porcupine climb trees?’, she replies (using, of course, both hemispheres): ‘It does not climb, the porcupine runs on the ground; it’s prickly, it’s not a monkey.’ . . . During experimental temporary hemisphere inactivations, the left hemisphere *of the very same individual* (with the right hemisphere inactivated) replies that the conclusion is true: ‘the porcupine climbs trees since it is a monkey.’ When the experimenter asks, ‘But is the porcupine a monkey?’, she replies that she knows it is not. When the syllogism is presented again, however, she is a little nonplussed, but replies in the affirmative, since ‘That’s what is written on the card.’ When the right hemisphere *of the same individual* (with the left hemisphere inactivated) is asked if the syllogism is true, she replies: ‘How can it climb trees – it’s not a monkey, it’s wrong here!’ If the experimenter points out that the conclusion must follow from the premises stated, she replies indignantly: ‘But the porcupine is not a monkey!’ “

22. Ibid. p. 156.

23. *Reason and Emotion* by John Macmurray (Faber & Faber, London, 1935 & 1962).

24. McGilchrist, loc. cit.