FORUM
Volume 55, Number 3, 2013
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM

Still 'Learning to Be Human': the radical educational legacy of John Macmurray

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ABSTRACT This article explores some of the key themes of John Macmurray's recently published lecture, 'Learning to be Human'. It focuses initially on three elements of his argument: relationships in education; education and the economy; and our corrosive obsession with technique. It then utilises Macmurray's views to develop a typology of schooling intended to help us understand why so much of what we do now is counter-productive and how we might go about doing things differently in ways expressive of a more generous view of human flourishing.

Prologue

The text that follows is a very slightly adapted version of a public lecture given at the Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh on Thursday, 2 May 2013. It centres on a hitherto unpublished lecture called 'Learning to be Human' given in the same place 55 years earlier by John Macmurray.

Macmurray is, in my view, one of the greatest twentieth-century philosophers of the English-speaking world and a radical educational thinker from whom we still have much to learn today.[1] His highly original ideas and engaging style provide a welcome counter to our contemporary obsession with narrowly defined, easily measured outcomes that not only miss the point of education, but destroy its very possibility through a disgusting and distorting reductionism.

My own lecture was designed to entice a public audience to enjoy some of his educational ideas and follow up by reading his essay, now published in a special issue of the *Oxford Review of Education* entitled 'Learning to be Human: the educational legacy of John Macmurray' (Macmurray, 2012).

My hope is that *FORUM* readers will also be enticed to do the same.

Introduction

I am delighted and honoured to be here. My thanks to Professors Lani Florian and Morwenna Griffiths for inviting me, to Professor David Fergusson for his introduction and to all of you for coming.

I am, as you might anticipate, a great admirer of the life and work of John Macmurray. I first encountered his writing in the mid-1970s and since that time, with the help of Macmurray scholars across the world, members of his family, and some of his old colleagues and friends, I have continued to reflect on the nature and importance of his work for the society in which I live, for philosophy, and for the field of education in which I have practised for 20 years as a secondary school teacher and for a further 20 years in education departments at the universities of Cambridge, Sussex and London.

The particular context for this lecture is the publication of John Macmurray's 1958 Moray House Annual Lecture entitled 'Learning to be Human'. It has now, finally, been published as part of a special issue of the *Oxford Review of Education* (vol. 38, no. 6, 2012) entitled 'Learning to be Human: the educational legacy of John Macmurray'. I am pleased to say it contains fine contributions from scholars in a range of different fields from a number of countries across the world. These include, from Australia, the moral philosopher Raimond Gaita; from the UK, the historian of education, Peter Cunningham; Keri Facer, particularly well-known for her work on educational futures, digital cultures and social change; myself; the philosopher Richard Pring; and Julian Stern, whose recent work explores spiritual development, religious education and schools as communities; and from the USA, Nel Noddings, educational philosopher and international pioneer of care theory.

Structure of the Lecture

In order to whet your appetite for Macmurray's paper, which I hope you will read as a follow up to this evening's reflections, I open the first section of this lecture by offering a few glimpses of the kinds of stance he takes on the development of his thesis about the importance of Learning to be Human.

I then go on to pick out three key elements of his argument – about relationships in education, about education and the economy, about our obsession with technique.

In the second section of my lecture – which I have called 'Education for Human Flourishing' – I utilise Macmurray's views of what it is to be and become a person to develop a typology of schooling which I hope will help us understand why so much of what we do now is counter-productive and how we might go about doing things differently in ways which are more likely to realise a more generous view of human flourishing.

Part 1. John Macmurray on 'Learning to be Human'

Learning to be Human

What does Macmurray mean by 'Learning to be Human' and why should it be a fundamental aim of education? He begins by alerting us to what he calls the paradox of human nature: 'We are born human, and nothing can rob us of our human birthright. Nevertheless, we have to learn to be human, and we can only learn by being taught' in our early years by others who care for us (Macmurray, 2012, p. 666). Human nature is thus profoundly relational.

> The first principle of human nature is mutuality. ... This principle, that we live by entering into relation with one another, provides the basic structure within which all human experience and activity falls, whether individual or social. For this reason the first priority in education – if by education we mean learning to be human – is learning to live in personal relation to other people. Let us call it learning to live in community. I call this the first priority because failure in this is fundamental failure, which cannot be compensated for by success in other fields; because our ability to enter into fully personal relations with others is the measure of our humanity. For inhumanity is precisely the perversion of human relations. (Macmurray, 2012, pp. 669-670)

Macmurray also offers a still highly relevant contemporary reason why 'Learning to be Human' should exert strong claims on our educational priorities. It is that we are no longer born into a stable world. The world you grew up in is not the world in which your children or your students will make their way. The future is unknown in a much more profound way than it was for earlier generations. Thus, rather than second-guessing an imagined future,

> [t]he fixed points, by which we can steer our course as teachers, have become those human qualities and aptitudes which remain unaffected by social transformations; qualities and aptitudes which belong to all men [sic] everywhere because they are involved in the structure of human nature itself. ... It is the values and understandings which rest upon a common humanity that we have to learn and that education ought to teach. To be educated today means to have learned to be human – not Scottish, not British, not even West-European, but human. (Macmurray, 2012, pp. 667, 668)

The rest of Macmurray's lecture explores a number of consequences that follow from taking such a view seriously. These include the importance of certain kinds of relationships in education and thus of the school as a positive, life-enhancing community; the need to place instrumental aspects of education within the deeper context of human flourishing; and the importance of educating the emotions. Time forbids attention to all these matters. Leaving aside the crucial issue of education of the emotions, which deserves a companion lecture in its

own right, I want to pick up on three key issues that weave their way through the fabric of Macmurray's lecture that link strongly with the concluding section of my lecture in which I develop a framework of educational flourishing based on Macmurray's wider philosophical work.

These issues concern the central importance of human relationships in education, the need to place the requirements of the economy within the deeper context of human flourishing, and the need to subordinate the instrumental imperatives of technique to the values and purposes they are designed to serve.

Why Relationships Matter

Given Macmurray's view about the deeply relational nature of our being and his insistence that the fundamental task of the educator is 'helping other people to learn to be human', it comes as no surprise to find considerable emphasis on the relationships between all those involved in the process. With regard to the relationships between teachers and pupils, he insists that

> this aspect of education is not merely fundamental. It is also inescapable. For any kind of teaching involves establishing personal relations between teacher and pupil, and the success or failure of the teaching depends very largely upon the character and quality of this relation. (Macmurray, 2012, p. 670)

A teacher must

> be able to enter into positive relations with each individual among his pupils. He must not be afraid of them, and he must be able to inspire their trust and admiration. No person who doesn't really care for children should ever teach. (Macmurray, 2012, p. 673)

Equally important are the relationships between the teachers themselves: schools should not merely be efficient and effective organisations, but profoundly human communities.

Key in all this is the need to recognise and combat the corrosive effects of fear. Whilst acknowledging that '[t]he process of human development itself is always bound up with fear, with fear directed towards people with whom one stands in personal relation' (Macmurray, 2012, p. 670), Macmurray's unwavering response was to insist that

> the use of fear as a weapon in teaching is a perversion of education, and in the end is self-defeating. It may succeed in securing an immediate obedience, but education is not concerned with immediate results but rather with persisting effects. (Macmurray, 2012, p. 670)

As he put it in some of his early educational writings in the 1930s, education is fundamentally about helping us to

> live a rich, full, abundant, joyous human life ... If instead it cramps and limits the spirits of our children, makes them narrow-minded, dependent, wanting in courage and grace and joy of living – then it must not merely be unnecessary, it is positively criminal. (Macmurray, 1931a)

We must judge education, not by competitive exams or by yardsticks of academic knowledge, but by the kinds of lives people lead.

> The only way, in the end, to answer questions to do with the success or otherwise of the school system is by watching the effect that education has on the children, and by judging its results, not in terms of cleverness or knowledge, but in terms of character. (Macmurray, 1931a)

Learning, Earning and Living

In raising serious issues about the need to develop a more profound notion of education than one that is dominated by matters of economic or political expediency, Macmurray is not blind to the requirements of earning a living or to the legitimate aspirations of those who wish to develop a society which is more in tune with the demands of justice and democracy.

He does, of course, acknowledge that these practical imperatives are

> what we mean, on the whole, by education. This is what, on the whole, we teach to the great majority of our citizens. (Macmurray, 2012, p. 672)

His underlying point, however, is

> to suggest that this is not the whole of education, that it is not even the more important part of it. It is rather the minimum that an industrial society must demand for efficiency's sake. I do not mean that more than this does not get done in our schools. But it gets done, in the main, in spite of the conception of education which is built into the system; and in the interstices, as it were, of the organisation. (Macmurray, 2012, pp. 672-673)

Underscoring his awareness of contemporary realities, he goes on to acknowledge the following:

> It is, I insist, an important aspect, and it is the minimum of training that cannot be done without. And it should be done well. But I must add this: it can only be done well if it is done as a part of the whole task, in and through the other aspects. What matters most is that those who design it and those who teach it should be under no illusion that it constitutes the whole of education, or that it can be treated as if it were the paramount aspect. (Macmurray, 2012, p. 673)

And this applies as much to universities as it does to schools.

> Universities are educational institutions, as are schools. Their business is not primarily to produce scientists, or historians, or philosophers, but through the sciences and the humanities, through discussion in their societies or through games in their athletic clubs, to educate men and women. And education, from the standpoint of its victims, is learning to be human. (Macmurray, 2012, p. 666)

Beyond the Tyranny of Technique

Lastly, I want to bring out what is an important companion point that has particular resonance with the realities all of us in this room encounter on a daily basis. Insisting that

> [w]ithout some measure of these human qualities and capacities, without an understanding of what he is undertaking in proposing to teach another person to be human, he cannot succeed (Macmurray, 2012, p. 673),

Macmurray goes on to make the important companion point that

> [n]o technical training in educational methods can ever be substitute for this, however unexceptionable the methods may be in themselves. Education is not and cannot ever be a technical activity. The attempt to turn would-be teachers into technicians by teaching them classroom tricks is as stupid as it is ineffective. (Macmurray, 2012, p. 673)

Widening and deepening the point, Macmurray brings his lecture to a close, affirming:

> Here, I believe, is the greatest threat to education in our own society. We are becoming more and more technically minded: gradually we are falling victims to the illusion that all problems can be solved by proper organisation: that when we fail it is because we are doing the job in the wrong way, and that all that is needed is the 'know-how'. To think thus in education is to pervert education. It is not an engineering job. It is personal and human. (Macmurray, 2012, p. 674)

This profound dislocation of purposes and processes, allowing either the reversal of their proper priority, or, worse still, the cannibalisation of valued ends by predatory means, describes with disturbing clarity the ruination of education currently being foisted on unsuspecting populations by neo-liberal governments across the world.

Part 2. Education for Human Flourishing

For those of you not familiar with Macmurray's educational writing I hope I have whetted your appetite; for those of you unfamiliar with his wider philosophical work I hope now to entice you to further encounter through one interpretation of how his fundamental views of human being and becoming might provide the basis of a typology that enables us to analyse and respond to some of the contemporary developments in education and other caring professions that currently confront us.

Arguably, Macmurray's greatest philosophical achievement was his 1950s Gifford Lectures, subsequently published as *The Self as Agent* (Macmurray, 1957) and *Persons in Relation* (Macmurray, 1961), in which he developed a sophisticated and elegant philosophical account of what it is to be and become a person.

In essence, he suggested that human beings tend to have two very different, but interrelated, kinds of relationship that enable them to develop their humanity. These are functional relations and personal relations.

Functional relations are typical of society. They are instrumental and practical. They enable us to get things done. They are defined by their purposes and thus, usually through roles of one sort or another, involve only aspects of our humanity.

In contrast, personal relations typical of community are not defined by their purposes. They are expressive of who we are and who we wish to become. We enter into these kinds of relationship – as, for example, in friendship – with the whole of ourselves, not for any particular purpose, but rather because it is our nature to do so. Defined by the principles of freedom and equality in the context of care, it is in these kinds of relationships that we can become most fully ourselves, most fully human. In relations of friendship, we do, of course, do things together. However, the joint activities or encounters do not define the relationship; they are expressive of it. Going by train to the seaside is not the purpose of our friendship; the day out is an expression of our care for and delight in each other.

Two further points are crucial here. Firstly, not only does Macmurray insist on the necessary interdependence of the functional and the personal, he also helps us to understand the proper relationship between the two. Whilst both are necessary and interdependent, they are not of equal importance. 'The functional life is *for* the personal life ... the personal life is *through* the functional life' (Macmurray, 1941, p. 822). Not only do personal relations precede our emergence as social beings in a temporal sense, they provide the point and purpose of functional relations.

Over the years I have come to see Macmurray's insights into the human condition as increasingly important and practically enabling. Not only do they provide an orientation that is socially just and humanly fulfilling, they also help us to understand why certain developments turn out to be destructive of the very things they set out to achieve.

Performance, Persons and Purposes

If we take the two quite different kinds of relations between persons – the functional and the personal – and explore some of their combinations and interrelations in the contexts of schooling, we begin to see underlying patterns and processes that encourage or discourage certain views of what education is for and how it is best achieved.

In the typology presented in Figure 1, I explore five different kinds of interrelation [2], concentrating particularly on the third and fourth types as most clearly illustrative of the difference a Macmurrayan perspective makes, both to how we conceive and name our aspirations and to how they are most appropriately realised in practice.

Schools as **impersonal** organisations	Schools as **affective** communities	Schools as **high-performance** learning organisations	Schools as **person-centred** learning communities	Schools as agents of **democratic fellowship**
The Functional marginalises the Personal	*The Personal marginalizes the Functional*	*The Personal is used for the sake of the Functional*	*The Functional is used for the sake of the Personal*	*The Political expresses/supports the Personal*
Mechanistic Organisation	Affective Community	Learning Organisation	Learning Community	Democratic Fellowship
Efficient	Restorative	Effective	Humanly fulfilling/instrumentally successful	Democratic living and learning

Figure 1. Education and schooling for human flourishing.

In the first, *Schools as Impersonal Organisations*, the functional marginalises the personal. The model is mechanistic and efficient in both orientation and operation. In the second, *Schools as Affective Communities*, that combination is reversed. Here the personal marginalises the functional. Their orientation is predominantly restorative.

In the third, *Schools as High-Performance Learning Organisations*, the personal is recognised as important, but its significance depends upon the degree to which it serves functional or institutional goals. The personal is used for the sake of the functional.

The significance of people and relationships, of students and teachers, is derivative and rests primarily on their contribution, usually via high-stakes testing, to the public performance of the organisation. They are important primarily insofar as they are the servant of extrinsic ends. Relationships are important, the voices of young people are elicited and acknowledged, community is valued, but all primarily for instrumental purposes within the

context of the market place. Social and indeed personal relationships are reduced to social capital; having relationships moves subtly towards 'doing relationships', towards relationships management.

It is these kinds of orientations that sit most comfortably within the dominant paradigms of contemporary capitalism in which the self as competitive consumer reaches its most triumphant realisation. Masked by unguent smiles of self-interest and the language of passion and commitment, a pretence of care becomes the agent of increasingly narrow forms of schooling setting in train astonishing levels of dishonesty, greed and fear. Witness, this extract from Nel Noddings' contribution to the Macmurray special issue of the *Oxford Review of Education*. What she says of the USA has discomforting echoes on this side of the Atlantic:

> At the present time, we are plagued by cheating at every level in our schools. ... [S]tudents cheat in classroom tests and the tests on which college admission is decided, plagiarise essays – sometimes buying them on the internet – and sometimes hire other people to take their tests. Teachers and administrators, fearing the loss of jobs and financial support for their schools, falsify test results and misrepresent final scores. (Noddings, 2012, p. 779)

The 'high-performance' model, to which we in England are currently in thrall, understands the power, but denies the point of the personal. In acceding to the depth and speed of such a disastrous betrayal, we accelerate our rush to a future whose spurious productivity deepens our demise and jeopardises the future of our species and our planet.

Fourthly, *Schools as Person-centred Learning Communities* exemplify a Macmurrayan set of priorities. Here the functional is for the sake of the personal/communal – i.e. how we lead good lives together. All functional relationships and arrangements are directed at human ends and intentions. It is those deeper and broader human aspirations that are the arbiters of legitimacy and the goals towards which we should strive. Not only is the functional for the sake of the personal, and the personal through the functional, the influence of the personal on the functional is transformative of it; the functional is *expressive of* the personal; means are transformed by the ends by which they are inspired and towards which they are aiming. In other words, the functional ways in which we work together in schools to achieve personal, communal and educational ends are transformed by the moral and interpersonal character and quality of what we are trying to do. Not only will these affect relations between teachers and students and between teachers themselves, but every aspect of the school's interpersonal and physical architecture. It is also likely to include rejection of too easily devolved forms of accountability, preferring in their stead the more demanding, more inclusive notion of shared responsibility.

Before briefly touching on the fifth component of my typology, let me illustrate some of the differences between the high-performance and person-

centred approaches by looking at how they might typically approach the practice of target setting.

High-performance approaches to target-setting are typically characterised by an insistent concern for results driven by league tables or their equivalents. Questions are entirely instrumental. Individual attainment of students (and indeed staff) are important only insofar as they add to the school's public exam profile. The overriding emphasis on outcomes privileges a narrow notion of attainment, questions are often externally generated, generic and tangential to the real concerns and aspirations of the student and they are often asked in a way that is inattentive to or ignorant of personal detail. The freedom available to students is heavily managed by the teacher. Difficult issues are seen as the student's responsibility, the teacher's perception of what needs to be done defines the outcome and the encounter is dominated by the teacher's agenda. Finally, the process is characterised by the presumption of one-way learning. Target setting is primarily instructional, the student is presumed to learn from the teacher and monologue is much more apparent than dialogue.

In contrast to the controlling, cajoling preferences typical of high-performance approaches, which are as oppressive for the teacher as they are for the student, person-centred target-setting takes a quite different form. Here a concern for results is replaced by a concern for persons. Conversations are driven by aspirations for individuals, questions have a wider reference point than standards, and individual attainment is ipsative rather than comparative. The overriding emphasis on outcomes is replaced by an insistence on the integrity of means and ends. Achievement is widely conceived, questions are expressive of an integral concern for and detailed knowledge of the uniqueness of the individual student, and those questions are asked in a manner that is genuinely attentive, rather than a disguised form of teacherly assertion. Managed freedom is replaced by expressive freedom. Conversation is a genuinely joint endeavour, both teachers and students have the confidence to raise difficult issues, understanding emerges from dialogue as often as it precedes it, and exchanges are informed by the felt concerns of both parties. One-way learning is replaced by reciprocal learning. Here target setting is not only supportive of the student's learning, it is reciprocal in nature. The teacher learns about the student, learns from the student, learns with the student, and learns about the process of learning and the teacher's role in it. The teacher's capacity to listen, to be receptive is as important as the student's capacity to do these things.

The fifth and final component of my typology of schools extends the values and orientations of person-centred education to the domain of democratic praxis and argues for the too-long-forgotten notion of 'democratic fellowship'. Here the school as a person-centred learning community develops its commitment to education in its broadest sense in an explicitly democratic form. Not only is the functional expressive of the personal, the political is also utilised in the same way.

Conclusion

The title of my lecture – *Still 'Learning to be Human'* (for which I thank my friend and colleague, Professor Morwenna Griffiths) – can be interpreted in many different ways: as an exasperated cry regretting we have made such little progress since John Macmurray first gave his lecture 55 years ago, almost to the day, in this very institution; as a positive acknowledgement that we, and those who come after us, will inevitably and properly continue an endeavour that must always be renewed by each generation; as celebration and affirmation of the wisdom and humanity of one of Scotland's great philosophers who still has so much to teach us in times that in many respects mirror those in which he first came to public attention in the early 1930s. For me, it is all of these things.

Macmurray's insistence that we return to the deep purposes of education is needed now more than for many years. Our contemporary discourse, disfigured by the disgusting and demeaning language of delivery; our propensity to dislocate ways of working from the ends they are intended to realise and thereby narrow the moral and existential vision that give them their point and their purpose; these and many other examples of an educational culture besotted with the spurious and often dishonest simulacra of performance suggest we need to renew the questions Macmurray so eloquently posed more than 80 years ago. 'Who,' he asked, 'is now concerned to make [the child] a good human being and teach him to live? ... The golden aim of education – to teach the child how to live – has vanished over the horizon, crowded out by a multiplicity of little aims' (Macmurray, 1931b, p. 912).

Macmurray's concerns have resonated down the years across different cultures and contexts, including those in which humanity has been most at risk. The fact that for nearly 20 years I taught English in secondary comprehensive schools in England will explain my decision to end this lecture with one of the most poignant pleas I know of. It is a poem written by the principal of a US high school reflecting on the time when she was 11 years old and had just been parted from her mother and sister in a concentration camp.[3]

Dear teacher,

I am a survivor of a concentration camp.
My eyes saw what no man should witness:
Gas chambers built by learned engineers.
Children poisoned by educated physicians.
Infants killed by trained nurses.
Women and babies shot and burned
by high school and college graduates.

So I am suspicious of education.

My request is:
Help your students become human.

Your efforts must never produce learned monsters,
skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns.

Reading, writing and arithmetic
are important only if they serve
to make our children more human.

Notes

[1] See Fielding (2012) for a preliminary evaluation and celebration of Macmurray's educational work.

[2] For a more fully developed version, see Fielding and Moss (2011).

[3] There are various sources cited for this moving poem/letter. The most accessible is Richard Pring (Pring, 2004, p. 24). Other citations refer to Haim Ginott's book *Teacher and Child* (Ginott, 1972).

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