

# John Macmurray 6–9 April 1998, Aberdeen

This, the first conference to be held on John Macmurray's philosophy in his native Scotland, reflects a revival of interest in his work on both sides of the Atlantic – an interest which predates the publicity given to him as Tony Blair's favourite philosopher. Indeed the political readings of Macmurray at the conference varied from (in the red corner) my own paper pointing out that Macmurray's critique of idealism and dualism was inspired by Marx, his theory of history close to Marx's if rather more historicist, and his communist goal identical with Marx's except for his rejection of secularism; to (in the blue corner) Brenda Almond's attempt to co-opt him for neo-liberalism; via Frank Kirkpatrick's judicious use of his ideas to defend an interventionist politics of welfare in the American context. There were also friendly critiques of Macmurray's personalism from the perspectives of feminism (Susan Parsons) and analytical philosophy (Robin Downie), and fascinating confirmations and corrections of some of his theories by psychological experiments and surveys, most notably from Colwyn Trevarthan.

Macmurray was a singularly accessible philosopher, many of his works having started life as public lectures

or BBC broadcasts, and he put forward many of the ideas which we have later learnt with much tribulation from Heidegger, in lucid English, in the 1930s, without any direct Heideggerian influence that can be traced. He was also the first philosopher to contribute to the Christian–Marxist dialogue. So the ignoring of his work for so long is puzzling, and was puzzled over at the conference.

The event was interdisciplinary – mostly philosophers, psychologists and theologians – with quite a few non-academics present, some of whom had known Macmurray personally. From them, as well as from Jack Costello's biographical paper, one learnt such nuggets of information as that Macmurray privately accepted the label 'existentialist', that he would refuse to lecture if any student had pen and paper out for taking notes, that he was instrumental in getting several thinkers out of Nazi Germany, including Adorno, and that he and his wife were once chased by the monster while rowing on Loch Ness. The conference atmosphere was extremely friendly, as befits a conference commemorating a philosopher who held that friendship was the ultimate end of life and thought.

**Andrew Collier**

## LETTER Blindspot on race

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In Bob Carter's article 'Out of Africa: Philosophy, "Race" and Agency' in *Radical Philosophy* 89, an interesting aporia opens up which, in light of the imminent *RP* conference on that subject, ought to be mentioned. I refer to the way in which Carter brings up the issue of race only to confine his discussion to what black or African people think about its relation to philosophy. Carter's blindspot is that he repeats a questionable construction of the neutrality of philosophy. He confines the issue of 'race and philosophy' to those he considers as 'raced' subjects. Carter's error is that he repeats without question the assumption that non-black philosophers are not also raced subjects. Carter takes white to mean neutral and unraced. He then goes on to point to the difficulties of sustaining the concept of 'race' philosophically across a series of current books by African and African-American scholars.

It is disturbing that *Radical Philosophy* chose to publish this piece. It appears to have the effect of

raising what I take to be contemporary philosophy's great unthought troubling anxiety only to reduce it to philosophical illegitimacy. If philosophy's radical edge is occupied by thinkers who look to African and African-American scholars alone concerning the question of philosophy and race, it will find itself situated within the core of leading liberalistic ideologies.

This attitude needs to be met with the strongest challenge from what I take to be a more radical position within philosophy. As in other fields of intellectual activity, the issue of philosophy and race should be taken to involve *white* and *black*. Just as the study of gender does not equate with the study of women, so too should the study of race be inclusive of all subject positions. In this way, the question of philosophy and race opens up questions of *whiteness* as much as it does *blackness*. Only in this way can we leave the futile and sterile debates about the tenability of an 'African' philosophy behind.

**Jeremy Weate**