

# Professor Macmurray and Mr. Blair: The Strange Case of the Communitarian Guru that Never Was

—— Sarah Hale

The name of John Macmurray is creeping back into the public consciousness, after having lain forgotten for forty-odd years. While it may not be on everyone's tongue, it is common currency among those whose business it is to analyse 'New' Labour and its leader Tony Blair and to explain the party's perceived shifts of policy under his influence. Macmurray in turn is asserted to have been a significant influence on Blair's thinking. According to Blair's biographer, John Rentoul, Macmurray is Blair's 'philosophical mentor',<sup>1</sup> and 'Blair's idea of community, which is perhaps his most distinctive theme as a politician, derives directly from Macmurray.'<sup>2</sup> This claim is repeated and reinforced by Driver and Martell, who note that 'Blair read and discussed the communitarian philosophy of John Macmurray'<sup>3</sup> while at Oxford, and who elsewhere refer to Macmurray as 'the Scottish philosopher who influenced Tony Blair'.<sup>4</sup> In another biography of Blair, Jon Sopel notes that he 'became fascinated by [Macmurray's] work [which] introduced him to an idea that would later become central to his political thinking, the notion of "community"'.<sup>5</sup> Sopel also refers to Macmurray as 'the Scottish philosopher ... whom Blair was so influenced by when

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<sup>1</sup> John Rentoul, *Tony Blair* (first published 1995), revised edition. London: Warner Books, 1996, p. 479.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Driver and Luke Martell, *New Labour: Politics after Thatcherism*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Driver and Luke Martell, 'New Labour's communitarianisms', *Critical Social Policy*, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Jon Sopel, *Tony Blair: The Moderniser*. London: Bantam, 1995, p. 34.

he was an undergraduate at Oxford'.<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Frazer, in her generally sceptical work on communitarian politics, states categorically that 'Tony Blair's communitarianism was influenced by the philosophy of John MacMurray', encapsulating in one sentence the double misapprehension that Blair's philosophy is Macmurray's, and that the latter is communitarian.<sup>7</sup> More recently, the *Observer* has described Macmurray as 'an important influence on the Prime Minister'.<sup>8</sup>

These claims have two main bases: Blair's attested interest in and admiration of Macmurray; and the emphasis on community in Blairite rhetoric and, to a lesser extent, in New Labour policy, which is seen to reflect one of the primary themes of Macmurray's work. Political commentators have not been slow to note that Blair was at least aware of Macmurray while a student at Oxford in the early 1970s. Blair's interest in Macmurray is well documented. It came about via Peter Thomson, an Australian theology student some years older than Blair and his contemporaries, around whom an informal Christian discussion group coalesced, to which Blair was an enthusiastic contributor. It is from this period, and this friendship, that Blair's own Christianity dates. Thomson in turn was an enthusiast for Macmurray's particular brand of active Christian Socialism. Specific references by Blair to Macmurray are, however, thin on the ground, and most can be traced to a couple of primary sources: a frequently recycled comment made by Blair in a 1994 interview, and a couple of interviews with Thomson (who was until recently, when Blair recommended that he apply for the post of Vicar of St. Lukes, Holloway,<sup>9</sup> a cattle rancher in Australia<sup>10</sup>). In the former, Blair is quoted as saying: 'If you really want to understand what I'm all about, you have to take a look at a guy

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 144.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Frazer, *Problems of Communitarian Politics: Unity and Conflict*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1999, p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> Kamal Ahmed and Denis Staunton, 'Whose side is God on?', *Observer*, 25.6.2000.

<sup>9</sup> Ian Hargreaves, 'Tony's best mate is back', *New Statesman and Society*, 31.5.1996, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Sopel, *Tony Blair*, p. 34.

called John Macmurray’,<sup>11</sup> going on to say that ‘he was influential — very influential. Not in the details, but in the general concept.’<sup>12</sup> One Labour chronicler, Andy McSmith, may have hit upon a more realistic assessment of Macmurray’s influence on the student Blair, attributing the latter’s inspiration to Thomson’s ‘own mix of liberation theology based *partly* upon ... Macmurray’.<sup>13</sup>

With regard to community, to many eyes the Blair trademark, the unique selling point with which he has provided his party, is the rediscovery (or possibly reinvention) of this idea. Even, and perhaps especially, within Blairite rhetoric, the concept of community covers a range of interpretations, some of which are evident in this single paragraph from a recent speech:

At the heart of my beliefs is the idea of community. I don’t just mean the villages, towns and cities in which we live. I mean that our fulfilment as individuals lies in a decent society of others. My argument to you today is that the renewal of community is the answer to the challenges of a changing world.<sup>14</sup>

Community is also one of Macmurray’s key concerns. *Ergo*, the assumption has it, Blair’s emphasis on community must reflect Macmurray’s influence. Such assumptions are not confined to journalists. Academic commentators too have repeated and lent credibility to these claims.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Paul Anderson and Nyta Mann in *Safety First: The Making of New Labour*. London: Granta Books, 1997, p. 10, who give the source as Robert Crampton, ‘Labour Exchange’ in the *Times*, 30.9.1995; and by Rentoul, *Tony Blair*, p. 42, who sources it to *Scotland on Sunday*, 24.7.1994.

<sup>12</sup> Rentoul, *Tony Blair*, p. 44, again sourced to *Scotland on Sunday*, as above.

<sup>13</sup> Andy McSmith, *Faces of Labour: The Inside Story*. London: Verso, 1996 (2nd edn 1997), p. 26. My italics.

<sup>14</sup> Tony Blair, speech to the Women’s Institutes’ Triennial General Meeting, 7.6.2000. In one paragraph here Blair identifies community first with local area and then with society as a whole, and then characterises it as a means to individual fulfilment, as renewable, and, most breathtakingly, as universal panacea.

<sup>15</sup> For example Driver and Martell, *New Labour: Politics after Thatcherism*, above.

I am going to suggest, however, that Blair's 'philosophy', as reflected in both his words and his deeds (i.e. New Labour policy) is markedly different from Macmurray's and frequently in stark opposition to it, with very little common ground; and that only an extremely superficial reading of Macmurray could have led commentators — and Blair himself — to believe otherwise. The problem lies in that 'the general concept' cited by Blair, which most commentators understand as referring to the concept of community, is notorious for the broad range of interpretations which it invites, yet throughout discussions of Macmurray's perceived influence on Blair it is treated as if it is an uncontested, unambiguous term, which necessarily means the same for Blair as for Macmurray, which, as we shall see, is far from the truth. This in turn leads to the superficial posthumous characterisation of Macmurray as a communitarian in the mould of Amitai Etzioni.<sup>16</sup> The most blatant example of this is provided by Soper, who says that Macmurray's ideas 'find voice nowadays through the American Communitarian Movement, Amitai Etzioni [*sic*]',<sup>17</sup> and that Etzioni's work has a message 'not so very different from that of ... Macmurray'.<sup>18</sup> This travesty<sup>19</sup> of Macmurray's views is fairly common currency, with only a couple of writers questioning it.<sup>20</sup> Although gaping chasms can be identified between the positions of Macmurray and Blair on almost every issue on which the former

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<sup>16</sup> Etzioni, who founded the American 'Communitarian Movement', stresses the role of community in regulating behaviour and did much to popularise the 'rights and responsibilities' discourse currently used by New Labour.

<sup>17</sup> Soper, *Tony Blair*, p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>19</sup> It is not my aim here to 'rehabilitate' Macmurray, nor to defend him in particular against traduction. It may well be that his current obscurity is deserved; some of his ideas are decidedly eccentric, and others — for example, his belief in the inevitability of socialism — outdated. But he writes eloquently and, throughout his career and across his popular and academic work, consistently; and what he says on his main theme, the nature of human relations, bears re-reading in an age which barely acknowledges the possibility of non-instrumental relationships.

<sup>20</sup> These include Ruth Levitas, *The Inclusive Society? Social Exclusion and New Labour*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998, pp. 105-110, and Samuel Brittan, 'Blair's real guru', *New Statesman* 7.2.1997.

pronounced, including the themes of tradition, Christianity and the role of the church, socialism, capitalism, equality and democracy, for reasons of space I shall concentrate here on the key theme of community and the related issue of the relationship of rights and responsibilities.<sup>21</sup>

John Macmurray is unremarked and unremembered today; already unfashionable by the time of Tony Blair's interest in him. The vast 1998 *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* does not have an entry for him. Yet from the 1930s to the 1950s he was widely known; a populariser of moral philosophy through radio appearances and lecture series, collections of which were being published into the 1960s,<sup>22</sup> and pamphlets and short volumes on a number of topics.<sup>23</sup> As well as this relatively popular work, he wrote more academic volumes<sup>24</sup> and held chairs at London and Edinburgh, and in South Africa and Canada. The publishers of the 1968 edition of *Freedom in the Modern World* (first published in 1932) claim that the work 'has probably had a deeper and more lasting effect than any other

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<sup>21</sup> The one area in which Blair's views might be compatible with his supposed mentor's relates to their shared view that Christianity is best expressed through action — Macmurray's view being that that is religion's only worthwhile manifestation. It is through this understanding, Blair has claimed (see Michael Cockerell, 'The secret world of Tony Blair', *New Statesman* 14.2.2000, p. 13), that his Oxford Christianity led him into politics and specifically into the Labour Party. It is certainly well documented that Blair did not show much interest in politics while an undergraduate, preferring to divide his spare time between religion and rock music. On the other hand, the claim that his involvement in politics is no more than an expression of his Christianity and a desire to put Christian principles into action sits a little uneasily with the clear ambition and calculation with which he secured both his Sedgefield seat and the leadership of his party (see in particular McSmith, *Faces of Labour*, chapter 1).

<sup>22</sup> Collections of lectures by Macmurray include *Freedom in the Modern World*. London: Faber, 1932; and *Reason and Emotion*. London: Faber, 1935 (revised edition 1962).

<sup>23</sup> Including *A Challenge to the Churches: Religion and Democracy*, London: Kegan Paul, 1941, and *Conditions of Freedom*. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1949.

<sup>24</sup> Including *The Self as Agent* (1957) and *Persons in Relation* (1961). These are also lecture series, but, being the Glasgow Gifford Lectures, are of a more academic nature.

book of a philosophical character published this century'.<sup>25</sup> Even allowing for publishers' established tendency to hyperbole, this demonstrates that Macmurray was considered a very important figure in mid twentieth century Britain.

The main thrust of Macmurray's work is his assertion that people's humanity and human potential is only realised through their relations with others — but only through certain kinds of relationship. Relations, according to Macmurray, may be either social or communal. Where people come together to co-operate for common ends, a social relationship is formed. In this, we

associate with others in order to achieve some purpose that we all share. Out of this there springs a life of social co-operation through which we can provide for our common needs, and achieve common ends. We may define this social life in terms of purposes. That is its great characteristic.<sup>26</sup>

Social relationships are, in other words, instrumental to some shared purpose. The definition of society is that it is founded upon, and composed of, instrumental relationships. This is highly necessary to human survival, but it is not the form of relationship which expresses and realises humanity itself.

The satisfactory working of social life depends upon entering into relationships with other people, not with the whole of ourselves, but only with part of ourselves. It depends upon suppressing ... the fullness and wholeness of our natures.<sup>27</sup>

By contrast communal relationships are what Macmurray calls 'personal'. For him the 'personal life':

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<sup>25</sup> Macmurray, *Freedom in the Modern World*. London: Faber, 1968 edition, inside front cover.

<sup>26</sup> Macmurray, *Reason and Emotion*, p. 97.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96-7.

demands a relationship with one another in which we can be our whole selves and have complete freedom to express everything that makes us what we are. It demands a relationship with one another in which suppression and inhibition are unnecessary.<sup>28</sup>

The personal life is in contrast to both the social life and the individual life (life in pursuit of purely egoistic aims).<sup>29</sup> Whatever we call this kind of relationship (and Macmurray points out that all the possible terms, such as '[f]riendship, fellowship, communion, love' have all taken on a partial meaning too specific for this purpose), at the heart of it

is the idea of a relationship between us which has no purpose beyond itself; in which we associate because it is natural to human beings to share their experience, to understand one another, to find joy and satisfaction in living together; in expressing and revealing themselves to one another.<sup>30</sup>

It is this type of relationship which characterises Macmurray's conception of community. It is, I think it is fair to argue, a highly specific and very *pure* view of community, providing for a very narrow definition of the term.<sup>31</sup> Certainly, in Macmurray's view, society and community are two very different things, defined in opposition to each other. Society arises through external pressures and needs and is described as 'external and compulsive',<sup>32</sup> while community arises from internal human impulses and is 'spontaneous and intrinsic'.<sup>33</sup> The entire point of Macmurray's

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>31</sup> Macmurray's characterisation of 'society' and 'community' should not be confused with the distinction made by Tönnies between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*.

<sup>32</sup> Macmurray, *A Challenge to the Churches*, p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

advocacy of community is as a contrast and necessary complement to social relations. Therefore, to conflate the idea of 'community' with that of 'society', as New Labour so frequently do, is to reject the distinction at the very heart of Macmurray's work, and to negate everything he has to say about the desirability of community.<sup>34</sup>

Macmurray has been claimed as a communitarian because of his stress upon the importance of community for humankind. Although he is much else besides, there can be little objection to this provided that it is borne in mind that his conception of community is of a very narrowly defined form of relationship, of a particularly rare and precious nature. But Macmurray's work cannot be used to confer the value that he ascribes to this conception of community upon what he calls 'mere society'.<sup>35</sup>

Notwithstanding this, it is Blair's claims about the relationship of the individual to society which have done most to draw comparisons with Macmurray. A typical example is his claim, quoted earlier, that 'our fulfilment as individuals lies in a decent society of others'.<sup>36</sup> However, assertions to the effect that these sentiments are a reflection of Macmurray's views would appear to be based upon a very superficial reading of Macmurray. A closer reading suggests that Blair's position is almost diametrically opposed to Macmurray's. This confusion arises because Macmurray's vital distinction between society and community, discussed above, is ignored. Blair's (and the government's) constant conflation<sup>37</sup> of the terms is sufficient in itself to demonstrate that this aspect at least of their thinking owes nothing to Macmurray.

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<sup>34</sup> The same distinction is made by Macmurray in his *Creative Society* (1935), p. 97. A feature of Macmurray's work is its consistency on key themes.

<sup>35</sup> Although in fairness it should be pointed out that Macmurray appears to accept that a functioning society is a prerequisite of community.

<sup>36</sup> Tony Blair, speech to the Women's Institutes' Triennial General Meeting, 7.6.2000.

<sup>37</sup> See for example, Tony Blair *The Third Way: New Politics for the New Century*. London: Fabian Society, 1998, p. 4; Gordon Brown, speech to the Annual Conference of the NCVO, 9.2.2000. Blair's speech to the Women's Institute provides particularly good examples.

Communitarian politics is often presented as an antidote to the individualism perceived to have been engendered under Thatcherism. For Macmurray, however, individualism — which he perceived in his own time — was not the cause of social ills, but a symptom of them, in particular of insecurity, in a world dominated by fear rather than love. To sum up in a brief typology, for Macmurray individualism is an expression of fear, society is an expression of mutual need, and community is an expression of love.<sup>38</sup>

Blair is frequently labelled communitarian because of his constant emphasis on rights and duties, or rights and responsibilities. Recent examples include Blair's assertion that 'If we invest so as to give the unemployed person the chance of a job, they have a responsibility to take it or lose benefit'<sup>39</sup> and 'For every new opportunity we offer, we demand responsibility in return'.<sup>40</sup> These reflect Blair's view that 'a decent society is not based on rights. It is based on duty.'<sup>41</sup>

However, this finds few echoes in Macmurray, who shows a commitment to welfare rights which is at odds with both Blairite rhetoric and the antipathy of communitarians like Etzioni to such rights, saying:

... getting rid of unemployment, providing hospitals and recreation grounds and better schools for the poor and so on ... is very necessary but it is no substitute for personal morality. It is a matter of bare justice, and it has got to be done. But to erect it as a moral ideal is another matter .... What the unemployed need is not pity from a distance, but *their bare rights as members of an astonishingly wealthy*

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<sup>38</sup> See Macmurray, *Freedom in the Modern World*, p. 59.

<sup>39</sup> Tony Blair, 'Values and the power of Community' (capitalisation as original), speech to the Global Ethics Foundation, Tübingen University, 30.6.2000.

<sup>40</sup> Tony Blair, speech to the Women's Institutes, 7.6.2000. Both these examples in fact demonstrate a shift in which responsibilities are no longer exchanged for rights, but for mere 'opportunities'.

<sup>41</sup> Tony Blair, speech to the Labour Party annual conference, 30.9.1997.

*community*. We have to see that they get their rights, and not pat ourselves on the back for our benevolence when we are merely being honest and decent.<sup>42</sup>

In other words, people should be able to depend, for subsistence and more, on rights, not charity. Macmurray talks about rights far more than he talks about duties, and when he refers to responsibilities, this is with a very different understanding from Blair's. Peter Thomson is quoted by Rentoul as saying that Macmurray

was onto a concept of community. He used to say that the noblest form of human existence is friendship and that instead of being on a debit and credit ledger idea of 'If you do this for me, then I'll do that for you', we ought to develop a sense of community where people were committed to the welfare of one another.<sup>43</sup>

This seems a far more accurate reflection of Macmurray's thought. But it is a long way away from current government policy, in which the language of rights in exchange for duties, opportunity in exchange for responsibility, and 'contracts', 'compacts' and 'covenants'<sup>44</sup> strongly reflects the 'debit and credit ledger idea' rejected by Macmurray in his advocacy of the spontaneous generosity of truly human relations.

Responsibility for oneself plays a part in Macmurray's thought, but not in the way it is used in government rhetoric. For Macmurray, the ability to take responsibility for oneself is a privilege, even perhaps, in an ideal world, a right, but certainly not a burden. For example, in a discussion of democracy, Macmurray says that '[democracy] opposes privilege and social

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<sup>42</sup> Macmurray, *Freedom in the Modern World*, pp. 215-16. Emphasis added.

<sup>43</sup> Rentoul, *Tony Blair*, p. 42. Such reciprocal arrangements would be typical of Macmurray's social, rather than communal, relations.

<sup>44</sup> For example, in his Tübingen speech, Blair says that a 'covenant of opportunities and responsibilities' is a necessary condition of 'spending taxpayers' money on public services or social exclusion'.

distinction, because these mean that some people or some classes of people are cornering freedom and responsibility for themselves at the expense of others'.<sup>45</sup> Responsibility is a precondition of freedom<sup>46</sup> which people will grasp if only given the opportunity, not something which has to be imposed upon them by New Deal type conditions. It can be argued that this reflects an overly optimistic view of human nature. But it cannot be argued that New Labour's conception of responsibility reflects Macmurray's.

One aspect of the government's brand of communitarianism is to attempt to foster community by encouraging people to serve others. This ethos underlies the concept of 'active community', which encompasses voluntary work and charitable giving and is a key plank of proposals for the teaching of citizenship in schools. It is also widely promoted and practised in traditional Christianity. For Blair and his government, 'Volunteering and community activities are central to the concept of citizenship and are the key to restoring our communities'.<sup>47</sup> Such sentiments reflect, almost word for word, pre-election Labour Party policy documents.<sup>48</sup> The idea that 'Clearer expectations need to be set about the importance of people participating in their communities ... Children should grow up with these expectations', and the proposal that 'by 2010 all first degree courses should provide for a small element of credit towards the degree for approved community activity; and all universities and colleges should use community involvement as part of the criteria for entrance',<sup>49</sup> both appear to bring us a little nearer to the compulsory community service advocated by contemporary communitarians like Etzioni<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Macmurray, *Challenge to the Churches*, p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> This point is made in *Freedom in the Modern World*, p. 48.

<sup>47</sup> *Giving Time, Getting Involved: A Strategy Report by the Working Group on the Active Community*, Active Community Unit, Cabinet Office, 1999, p. 9.

<sup>48</sup> See for example *Building the future together: Labour's Policies for Partnership between Government and the Voluntary Sector*. London: Labour Party, March 1997, pp. 1,4 and 6.

<sup>49</sup> *Giving Time, Getting Involved*, p. 13.

<sup>50</sup> Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community* (first published 1993). London: Fontana, 1995, pp. 113-15.

and Daniel Bell.<sup>51</sup> Macmurray scathingly condemns such an ethos of service to others, and in doing so unambiguously rejects the accepted communitarian conception of the individual's relationship to the rest of society.

To see why, it is necessary to look in a little more detail at Macmurray's moral philosophy. He describes three kinds of morality: mechanical, social (or organic) and human.<sup>52</sup> It is the last of these which relates to his conception of community. The second, social morality, is very close to the communitarian morality endorsed by Etzioni and promoted by New Labour. Macmurray sets out what social morality says. For example,

it will talk a great deal about purpose. Each of us ought to have a purpose in life and to work for its achievement, it will say. Then whatever draws us aside from our purpose will be bad and whatever advances it will be good .... If human life is to be good, it must not forget that the purpose which it serves is not its own purpose but the purpose of life as a whole.<sup>53</sup>

Macmurray outlines the justifications offered for this morality, which again, look like those of modern communitarianism:

Each of us is born into a society and our lives are bound up with the community to which we belong .... We owe all we have and all we are to the community to which we belong. The community is our real environment and we live only in it and through it. Therefore the purpose which ought to control our lives is not our own selfish purpose, but the social purpose. We are part of a community of social life, and the goodness of our individual lives depends upon our devoting them to the common good

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<sup>51</sup> Daniel Bell, *Communitarianism and its Critics*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1993, pp. 141-2.

<sup>52</sup> Macmurray, *Freedom in the Modern World*, ch. 9.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 195-6.

... The good man is the man who serves his country, serves his generation, identifies himself with the good of the community and devotes his life to the accomplishment of the social purpose.<sup>54</sup>

Thus 'social morality' is a morality based on 'society', that form of human association premised on some shared purpose. I quote this passage at length because it is so exactly the sort of thing which Blair says. He could express such sentiments and truthfully claim to be quoting Macmurray. One can almost imagine Blair skimming through *Freedom in the Modern World*, alighting on this section, and forming an admiration for Macmurray on the basis of it. However, this morality is being set out in detail only to be condemned. Such a 'morality of service ... is a false morality. It is false because it thinks of human life in biological terms, as if we were animals, not persons.'<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, it is 'a denial of human reality. It treats everybody as a means to an end.'<sup>56</sup> Finally, such a view of morality 'subordinates human beings to organization'.<sup>57</sup> In sum, according to Macmurray,

The first thing we have to stop is the false idea that it is a good thing to serve society and its institutions. It isn't. *It is an evil thing.*<sup>58</sup>

Modern communitarian thinking is clearly not that new. Macmurray was already taking issue with it in 1932, on two fronts: firstly the view that the individual owes his existence, and therefore a duty, to the 'community', and secondly the idea that serving one's 'community' is morally good. This makes very clear the danger in claiming Macmurray as a modern communitarian or even a progenitor of modern communitarianism. It also must cast serious doubts on any claim that Blair's substantive views owe anything to the philosopher. Macmurray sets out in detail the kind of morality currently espoused by Blair, only to condemn it as false

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 198.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 200-201. Emphasis added.

and evil. Far from providing the philosophical basis for new Labour's 'communitarianism', Macmurray's writings constitute a very plausible philosophical ground from which to condemn it.

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