CHAPTER 1

THE PERSONS IN RELATION PERSPECTIVE

Towards a Philosophy for Counselling and Psychotherapy in Society

Key words and themes: personalism, persons in relation, the self as agent, knowledge of, knowledge about, the good other, friendship in community.

This paper is the first in a planned series which aims to articulate and synthesise the persons in relation perspective in counselling and psychotherapy, drawing together the contributions of the philosopher John Macmurray (1891–1976), the psychotherapist Ian Suttie (1889–1935), and the psychoanalyst Ronald Fairbairn (1889–1965). The present paper introduces the persons in relation perspective, derived from Macmurray’s work. It outlines the historical and cultural context leading to the emergence of modernism, and the response of personalism. It summarises John Macmurray’s life and philosophy, focussing on his account of knowledge, its relation to the senses and the emotions, and his view of persons, society and religion. The paper goes on to develop a hypothesis about the rise of counselling and psychotherapy in Britain, linking it to the decline of religion, the conflict between individualism and collectivism, and the re-emergence of the persons in relation perspective. It concludes by posing challenges for the person-centred and psychodynamic orientations, and for counselling and psychotherapy as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

This paper has a personal significance for several reasons. First of all, I come from a northern Irish Presbyterian family, although I was born and grew up in Scotland. My father was a minister of the Church of Scotland who died in January 2003. He is very important to me, but the relationship is complicated because, as a child, I was in awe of him, and because from my early teens I knew that I did not believe in God. It was not until I came across the work of John Macmurray in 1989 that I began to entertain the idea that belief in God might not be the core of religion. This discovery has been slowly exploding in my soul, like a benign bomb, ever since. You can perhaps imagine my emotions when, sifting through his possessions with my brothers and sister, I came across two of Macmurray’s books from the 1930s, with red underlines and the occasional marginal note in my father’s handwriting. It was clear he had been deeply touched by Macmurray, as I have been 60 years later. In one of our last conversations – we were talking about the institutional church
and its doctrines – he said to me, ‘Of course, I don’t believe in a lot of that stuff now. But I believe in Jesus’.

The second reason for its personal significance is that, ever since I took up the post of Head of the Centre for Counselling Studies at Moray House Institute (now the School of Education of the University of Edinburgh), I have been committed to the idea and practice of dialogue between the person-centred approach and psychodynamic perspectives in counselling and psychotherapy. We were the first postgraduate centre to adopt this orientation to counselling training. I have been challenged by the question of how best to express the common ground between them, coming as they do from such apparently different sources. In the present paper, and those to follow, I see myself as helping to excavate that common ground.

The third reason is frankly political, as well as religious. The global failure of communism in the 20th century lies not in the poverty of its original vision, but in its failure to put the personal at its heart. Instead, it put its faith in technology, in large-scale social structure and in an impersonal, coercive and frequently murderous collectivism, treating human beings and their relationships as disposable objects to be bulldozed aside. Personalists like John Macmurray entered into sustained dialogue with communism in the 1930s, but they were not heeded. We can still hear the voice of John Macmurray today, and we can learn and apply his lessons in the 21st century.

This paper was first presented at the joint International Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy/European Association for Counselling conference at Geneva in April 2003, on the theme of the counsellor and social responsibility. It begins with a question, an old-fashioned theological play on words: what is the ground of all our being as counsellors? I suggest that many of us do have such an orientation, which is indeed the ground of our being counsellors, but we are either unaware of it in the sense that we have never said it to ourselves out loud, or else we are diffident in talking about it, especially when speaking to those with political, economic or institutional power. We tend to talk their language, and tack towards their objectives, so that we can persuade them to make use of our services.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

In what follows, I identify some of the key features of the persons-in-relation perspective. This entails outlining the thinking of John Macmurray, whose work provides the basis for it.

To do this I need to start with a very short history of the 19th and 20th centuries, mainly in Europe. The 19th century was characterised by rapid urbanisation, industrialisation and the flourishing of capitalism; the emergence of modern nation states in Germany and Italy; the weakening of the Austro-Hungarian empire; and the growth of British, French, and later German imperialisms. The cultural backcloth was romanticism, which began in radical iconoclasm and ended in regressive sentimentality. Grudging but significant advances were made in the direction of the representative version of democracy. The Christian religion got