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THE METAPHYSICAL FOUNDATIONS OF  
HUGH MACCOLL'S RELIGIOUS ETHICS\*

“How can it be otherwise, since the unknown is infinite and the known infinitesimal in comparison?”

Hugh MacColl, *Man's Origin, Destiny, and Duty*, p. 96.

This paper attempts to give a systematic exposition, interpretation and evaluation of Hugh MacColl's view on the ultimate meaning of life as expounded in his last book *Man's Origin, Destiny, and Duty* (1909). MacColl's religious ethics is a version of what Elizabeth Anscombe calls a divine-law conception of ethics. However, the essential doctrines of the Christian religion on which the divine authority of morality is based can be unmiraculously proved by means of a scientific methodology alone. MacColl justifies the theistic doctrines of the separateness of the Soul from the body, the survival (and transmigration) of the Soul, the existence of Superhuman higher intelligences, and the existence of a Supreme Being in terms of a version of Platonic dualism. In his defence of these metaphysical and theological foundations MacColl not only resists but also attacks the pretensions of an overall Darwinian evolutionary explanation, especially the monism of Ernst Heinrich Haeckel.

Hugh MacColl's (1837–1909) view on the ultimate reality and meaning of human life in the universe consists of a set of theological, ethical, metaphysical and anthropological doctrines. In this paper, I try to give a systematic exposition, interpretation and evaluation of this *Weltanschauung* as expounded in MacColl's last book, *Man's Origin, Destiny, and Duty*, published in the year of his death (1909).<sup>1</sup> To begin with, I sketch MacColl's metaphysical project in the light of my identification

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<sup>1</sup>MacColl had already dramatically expressed his world-view in the novel *Ednor Whitlock* (Chatto & Windus, London, 1891). The following abbreviations are used to refer to works of MacColl's. CP: “Chance or Purpose?” (1907a); WWS: “What and Where is the Soul?” (1907b); MODD: *Man's Origin, Destiny, and Duty* (1909). Both papers from *The Hibbert Journal* are reprinted as an Appendix in the latter book.

of MacColl's religious ethics as a version of the divine-law conception of ethics. Subsequently, I interpret this project as a form of Platonic dualism and set out its three major tenets: mind-body dualism, the existence of a psychic hierarchy and the existence of God. Finally, I briefly evaluate these metaphysical foundations of MacColl's divine command ethics in the context of "serious" naturalistic metaphysics, especially Ernst Heinrich Haeckel's evolutionary monism.

## I. THE DIVINE-LAW CONCEPTION OF ETHICS AND MACCOLL'S METAPHYSICAL PROJECT

Ethics and religion are intimately related in MacColl's world-view. Although it is possible to imagine a virtuous non-religious person and, conversely, a religious vicious person, religion and morality are not mutually independent. "It is evident *a priori*, . . ." MacColl claims, that "the belief that an invisible Being or Beings take note of all we do, and can even read our most secret thoughts, must affect our conduct either for good or evil" (MODD, p. 149). This dependency of human conduct on religious belief is not only a psychological fact given in commonsensical and historical experience, but also a necessary truth, according to MacColl. Religious fundamentalism, for example, amply attests to this essential aspect of human nature.

Whether the influence on human conduct is benign or malign depends upon the content of the particular religious belief. In MacColl's opinion, African voodooism, impure Buddhism and ancient Greek and Roman polytheism have bad effects, whereas Hebraic and Christian monotheism have good consequences. The intermediate conclusion of MacColl's comparative philosophy of religion is that "the belief in one supreme, directing, all-powerful, and beneficent Being constitutes the best philosophical basis for a practical code of morality . . ." (MODD, p. 154). From the standpoint of morality, then, Christian monotheism is superior to Hebraic monotheism because the former involves the ideas of punishment and reward in the life hereafter, spiritual inwardness and extreme altruism ("Love your enemies!"), whereas the latter is still too much bound to ritualistic outwardness and "this-worldliness". The final conclusion of MacColl's comparative study is that "if it were a mere question of choosing a religion whose moral precepts recommend themselves instinctively to our conscience, the Christian religion as Jesus taught it, and as epitomised in his Sermon on the Mount, would be an ideal religion" (MODD, p. 161).

Apart from the psychological dependency of moral conduct on monotheistic belief, MacColl also argues for the stronger constitutive

thesis that an ethical system must depend upon a divine Superhuman Power. Non-religious ethics based on human authority alone will never command the respect of the average man. For want of ultimate foundations, an atheistic system of ethics has no stability. The final authority of a stable system of ethics must, therefore, be superhuman and theistic (MODD, pp. 71–72, 129). The respect for and efficacy of a practical code of morality are best served by the belief in an all-seeing God. An unshakeable ethical system depends upon a powerful Deity not only for its authority and efficacy, but also for its content.

In view of MacColl's comparative philosophy of religion, it is not surprising that the specific content of such an ethical system is delivered by the superior moral code of Christendom. The fundamental code of Christian (and Hebraic) monotheism is given with the Mosaic law and the ten commandments. God as the Supreme Ruler is, consequently, the ultimate source of moral obligation because His commands create duties. So, whatever is done in accordance with God's will and His commands is good; and whatever is done in opposition to these is evil: "What *he* approves must, by express definition, be *right*; what *he* disapproves must, by express definition, be *wrong*" (MODD, p. 72).

MacColl's religious ethics is, in my opinion, a clear version of what Elizabeth Anscombe (1958) calls *the divine-law conception of ethics*. Such a conception entered Western civilisation after Greek and Roman antiquity with the rise of Christianity. The notion of "moral obligation" and the strong notion of "morally ought" are, in this conception, made intelligible in terms of being bound by divine law. This Christian conception of ethics is, of course, conditional on the belief in God, as Anscombe observes: "Naturally it is not possible to have such a conception unless you believe in God as a law-giver; like Jews, Stoics and Christians" (ibid., p. 30). Accordingly, the authority and efficacy of the divine-law conception of ethics fully depends upon the conviction that there is one Supreme Ruler of the universe. In short, divine command ethics rests upon the belief in the existence of God. "No restraining power on earth," MacColl claims, "can equal that of the full conviction, *when the full conviction exists*, that an invisible superhuman eye ... is watching every deed ... " (MODD, p. 72). The stability of a system of morality is guaranteed by divine authority, but " ... this superhuman authority cannot be effectively appealed to till the educated and uneducated alike are firmly convinced that it really exists" (MODD, p. 129).

There are, according to MacColl, three obstacles to establishing—or re-establishing—the belief in the existence of God in the hearts of all men (MODD, pp. 130–31, 161). First, against theism stands Darwin's

theory of evolution as an alternative explanation of every phenomenon in the universe, and even of the universe itself. I will deal with atheistic evolutionism in the final section. Second, God is not given in sense-experience, since he has a non-empirical existence. And God seldom, if ever, interferes directly with the normal course of nature. Hence, theistic belief cannot be empirical belief. Third, the main obstacle is the *miraculous* character of the Christian religion. Faith in the fundamental Christian doctrines is essentially bound up with faith in Jesus' miracles, and especially with his miraculous resurrection. For modern men, however, it is hard, perhaps even impossible, to believe in biblical miracles; but "without the miracles, they consider that the whole body of Christian doctrines, with the morality founded thereon, must lack divine authority" (MODD, pp. 161–62). So, if modern men lose faith in miracles, they lose faith in the Christian doctrines, and without these doctrines—especially the existence of God—morality loses its foundation and life its meaning. According to MacColl's line of thinking, if God does not exist, everything goes and nothing has any meaning whatsoever. This position is reminiscent of Ivan's thesis in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: "without God everything is permitted".

I am now in a position to state and clarify *MacColl's metaphysical project* in *Man's Origin, Destiny, and Duty*. In order to safeguard the meaning of life and secure the basis for morality, MacColl wants to establish "the fundamental and essential doctrines of the Christian religion . . . on which alone a durable, logical, and satisfactory code of morality can be founded . . . independently of and without any appeal to these miracles" (MODD, p. 162). To dissipate the modern scepticism he will try to prove unmiraculously three doctrines common to all Christian denominations, namely the existence of One Supreme Being, the existence of Superhuman Beings and the survival of the Soul after death. That is to say, MacColl will try to prove these doctrines by means of a *scientific* methodology, i.e. on the basis of ". . . the modern evidence afforded by undeniable experiments and observations in psychology, physiology, and other branches of science . . ." (MODD, p. 163). MacColl wants to relieve many anxious hearts by scientifically establishing the kernel of Christianity on which morality and the meaning of life are founded.

MacColl's project is very classical in Western philosophy, especially after the Enlightenment. The classical project of the rationalization of religious doctrines essentially includes the construction of positive proofs on the basis of pure reason and scientific evidence independent from the testimony of and historical evidence for miraculous divine

revelation (MODD, pp. 69, 163). This philosophical rationalization of religion converts theological doctrines into *metaphysical* ones. MacColl thinks that such an "enlightened" religion based on metaphysical principles is perfectly possible, and that it is "... a religion that will satisfy both the logical demands of the intellect and the yearning aspirations of the human heart" (CP, p. 386). Once the metaphysical principles are established by means of the scientific methodology, these reasonable assumptions can be employed as the *foundations* of a stable and authoritative system of ethics. Clearly, in MacColl's project of grounding morality and guaranteeing the meaning of life, religion harmonizes with science and metaphysics:

Between honest, truth-seeking religion and honest, truth-seeking science there need never be any conflict. ... True religion, founded on pure Theism, must, like science, be progressive, and adapt its tenets to changing conditions and new discoveries. Science, accepting the same pure Theism, must, like true religion, tread softly and reverently, and regard nature as a divine book which it is man's privilege and bounden duty to study. (CP, p. 396)

Before looking at the realization of MacColl's metaphysical project in somewhat more detail, I will make three comments on his divine-law conception of ethics. First, MacColl's apologia for religious ethics, and in particular for Christian morality, is reactionary. At the beginning of this century and even much earlier, Kantian morality on the continent and utilitarian ethics on the Anglo-Saxon islands had both attempted to emancipate modern moral philosophy from theological domination. MacColl says nothing about these laudable attempts to ground morality on the rational autonomy of man. He does not, however, go back to an Aristotelian-Thomistic virtue-ethics, but only reaffirms a rationalized version of (Protestant) moral theology in which "duty" and "responsibility" are the focal moral concerns. Second, MacColl's divine-law conception of ethics is a version of moral externalism. The reasons for being moral do not come from within the moral practice, but from without. Moral life is motivated by the fear of an all-seeing and punishing God "in heaven". Conversely, if God were dead, everything would be permitted. Christianity is, moreover, deemed superior because a person can never escape his future punishment even for secret crimes in the life hereafter. Divine command ethics is, consequently, a legalistic ethics of deterrence. However, by making morality extrinsically dependent on the belief in the existence of a Supreme Ruler, morality is perhaps more unstable than when it is intrinsically motivated by autonomous rational obligation or the good life. When a person loses his faith in God, he does not necessarily lose his faith in moral values and the meaning of life. Third, the rationalization of the Christian

divine-law conception of ethics discards the very basis of the Christian religion, namely the miraculous mystery of Jesus' resurrection. As a consequence, faith in a living personal God who reveals himself in history through His Son is replaced by belief in a postulated God—the “God of the philosophers”. Yet the essence of Christianity seems thereby to be lost, and the notion of the meaning of life as a religiously informed journey to God made unintelligible.

## II. MACCOLL'S PLATONIC DUALISM

In the light of his project, MacColl advances three fundamental metaphysical hypotheses:

- (1) the distinctness of mind (soul) and body (*mind-body dualism*);
- (2) the existence of non-human intelligences (*psychic hierarchy*); and
- (3) the existence of One Supreme Being (*God*).

Notwithstanding his eclecticism there is, I think, a strong Platonic tendency present in his metaphysical system. In my interpretation, then, MacColl's metaphysics is a version of Platonic dualism. Theism is, of course, a component of every Platonic scheme, and mind-body dualism is a prerequisite for the Platonic thesis of the soul's survival after bodily death. In contradistinction to Cartesian dualism, however, MacColl's metaphysical hierarchical scheme includes infrahuman as well as superhuman souls in addition to human souls. And in comparison with the Aristotelian hierarchy, MacColl's metaphysical system is more dynamic and directed towards perfection. Overall mind-body dualism in combination with the ascending psychic universe justifies, to my mind, the label “Platonic”, or perhaps more accurately “*neo-Platonic*”.<sup>2</sup> Although mind-body dualism and theism are not exclusively (neo-)Platonic, the transmigration of the soul through a psychic hierarchy—the second hypothesis—is specifically Platonic. In addition, MacColl's general rationalistic methodology, as well as his ethics of duty and responsibility also indicate a tendency towards Platonism. It is, on the whole, not uncommon for mathematicians and logicians to have strong Platonist sympathies. Whether or not MacColl was in any way influenced by the “Cambridge Platonists” of the 17th century (Benjamin Whichcote, Ralph Cudworth, Henry More) or later British Platonists such as

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<sup>2</sup>It would be interesting to compare and contrast MacColl's metaphysics with the Platonic scheme of Plotinus or Proclus.

J. McT. E. McTaggart, I do not know. In any case, "Platonic dualism" is a convenient label to systematize MacColl's eclectic metaphysics.

In the pursuit of truth, MacColl puts his speculative hypotheses forward on the basis of "*scientific instinct*" (CP, p. 389). Before going into detail concerning his defence of these metaphysical theses and what exactly they mean, I will say something more about the scientific methodology he uses to defend them. MacColl's Platonic metaphysics relies on three methodological strategies: the use of (i) data, solid facts and scientific evidence "... afforded by undeniable experiments and observations in psychology, physiology, and other branches of science ..." (MODD, p. 163); (ii) induction and analogy (MODD, p. 69); and (iii) the mathematical theory of probability on which the modern system of logic is founded (MODD, pp. 133–34).<sup>3</sup> MacColl's rational methodology is thus partly *empirical*, partly *formal*. For example, the emphasis on the existence of God as an explanatory cosmological hypothesis—the third hypothesis—elucidates MacColl's preoccupation with having sufficient evidence and proofs for this hypothesis. Apart from the three formal strategies, MacColl also employs a fourth, more substantial methodological principle, which is in a way the converse of Occam's Razor, and which I call (iv) the principle of *pluriformity and complexity*. MacColl's ontology includes "unknown immaterial substances" besides known material ones such as measurable matter, as well as "unknown spiritual forces" besides known physical forces such as attraction, electricity and magnetism. According to MacColl, the probabilities are entirely against those scientists who conclude that "... the substances existing, and the forces operating, in our universe are few in number and expressible in simple formulae" (MODD, p. 85). Because uniformity and simplicity hinder good science, "the sooner scientists get rid of the superstitious dogma called the 'uniformity of nature' the better it will be for science" (MODD, p. 86).

Hypothesis (1) states that "... the Soul and body are two separate entities" (MODD, p. 9). In MacColl's mind-body dualism "... the *Soul* or *Ego* (in man or in the sentient lower animal)" is defined "as simply *that which feels*, or is *conscious* ..." (MODD, p. 4). This definition, in order to include non-human souls, does not limit the soul, in a Cartesian fashion, to "that which thinks". MacColl casts his net wider: "By express definition, the *Soul* or *Ego* is the entity that feels, and, in its higher development, thinks and reasons" (MODD, p. 11). In the case of

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<sup>3</sup>As to the latter, MacColl observes in a footnote that "in my *Symbolic Logic and its Applications* I have shown ... the fallacy of the subjective theory of probability which values a chance at *one-half* when ... there are no data for a calculation" (MODD, pp. 134–35).

humans the soul (or ego) is equated with “*the real person*” (MODD, p. 10). Remarkably, MacColl reduces the mental to the conscious. Everything that is mental comes under the category of sensations. One can agree that the notion of “unconscious sensation” is self-contradictory (MODD, p. 3; WWS, p. 159), but there is nothing self-contradictory about the notions of “unconscious judgement” and “unconscious reasoning” (WWS, p. 168), for mental states and processes can function perfectly well without being conscious, as contemporary cognitive science abundantly attests. The categories of propositional attitudes and mental dispositions seem to be null and void in MacColl’s philosophy of mind.

MacColl’s argument for mind-body dualism is based upon “physiological facts” about the insensibility of the body (MODD, pp. 5–7; WWS, p. 161). When we ask what the *real seat* of consciousness is, we cannot answer that it is the body or a part of the body. The toes, the limbs, the eyes, the ears, and even the nerves are not seats of consciousness, but only insensible instruments or channels of transmission. Although we project, for example, sensations of pain to parts of the body, it is not these parts themselves which feel pain and are conscious. So-called “phantom limb pain”—i.e. still feeling pain in an amputated limb immediately after the operation—is sufficient evidence for this physiological fact. Some physiologists conclude from this corporeal insensibility that it is the brain, and the brain alone, that feels, sees, hears, and is conscious. The brain is, according to these scientists, an exception to the general rule of corporeal insensibility. Furthermore, “physiologists assert, and probably with truth, that every thought, every sensation, is accompanied by some change in the substance of the brain . . . ” (WWS, p. 165). These two elements, the brain as the real seat of consciousness and the systematic correlation between mental and brain activity, are “ . . . supposed in some way to support the atheist’s contention that the brain and the soul (or ego) are identical, or, at any rate, inseparable, so that the ultimate dissolution of the former necessarily leads to the extinction of the latter also” (WWS, p. 165).

However, MacColl claims that “*no physiologist has as yet brought forward any trustworthy data which would warrant the conclusion that the brain is an exception*” (MODD, p. 5) to the general rule of corporeal insensibility. Moreover, the brain and the soul (or ego) cannot be identical, for “ . . . the same conscious-thinking ego may be said to work with absolutely different brains at different periods of its existence”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>MacColl’s reason for saying this is based upon the empirical assumption that “this substance [the brain] is passing away continually” (WWS, p. 165). He observes

(WWS, p. 165). There is, according to MacColl, no valid reason to accept the atheistic physiologist's claim that the brain is the final and ultimate terminus of all channels of sensory transmission. On the contrary, the principle of corporeal insensibility should, by analogy, be applied to the case of the brain as well:

But why not carry the principle further? Is it quite certain that all sensation *is* in the brain—or in the material body at all? If, in spite of the *direct* evidence of our sensations, we draw a wrong inference when we locate a certain feeling in our toes, may we not also be wrong when, trusting to the *indirect* evidence of our sensations and to our fallible reason, we locate that feeling or any other in the brain, or, for the matter of that, in any *fixed* position anywhere, whether in the body or out of it? (CP, p. 395)

If the brain is not an exception to the principle of corporeal insensibility, then the inevitable conclusion follows that “the whole body, brain and nervous system included, has in itself no more feeling, consciousness, will, thought, or initiative than a plant, phonograph, or calculating machine, or the inanimate apparatus in wireless telegraphy. Like the last, the brain neither feels nor understands the sensations and intelligence which it transmits” (MODD, p. 12). The material chunks of matter, called *body and brain*, are only unconscious automata. In light of the fact that the brain, like all other parts of the body, is a mere insensible link in a chain of sensory transmission, MacColl concludes further: “Yet, since feeling or consciousness is admittedly an ultimate fact of nature incapable of analysis, something—an intangible something, which here I call *soul*—does unquestionably feel” (WWS, p. 167). The real seat of consciousness is, accordingly, the soul (or the ego) which is separated from the body.

As to the nature of the soul, MacColl affirms the doctrine of the soul's immaterial substantiality: “. . . the Soul, though invisible and imponderable, and therefore immaterial, is nevertheless composed of some substance different both from ordinary matter and from the hypothetical ether, and may thus have a spatial form, on some part of

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that “The material brain with which our ego did its thinking a year ago has already passed clean away, and has been replaced by fresh material particles, forming a new brain with which it does its thinking now” (CP, p. 393). The ego is not reducible to the brain because the ego remains the same thinking thing, whereas the brain does not remain the same substance. Clearly, MacColl has in mind the numerical identity of the brain (token) and not its qualitative identity (type). In order to sustain or realize the same thinking, the brain does not need to stay numerically identical—does not need to have exactly the same ‘material particles’—but it needs to have the same qualities or functional organisation. MacColl's idea that new ‘fresh material particles’ can realize the same old thoughts is comparable with the ideas about the non-reducibility of the mind to the brain in contemporary *functionalism*. For these latter ideas, see Cuypers 1995.

which is permanently registered (as on the human brain) a record of its whole past” (MODD, pp. 66–67). Accordingly, an immaterial substance “... is not a mere abstraction, like a thought or idea, which has no form and occupies no position in space or in the material universe” (MODD, pp. 85–86). This immaterial substance, the soul, causally interacts with the material substance, the brain. The idea of mental causation is kept very vague and implicit: “the impressions communicated by the Soul’s thoughts to the material human brain” (MODD, pp. 72–73) constitute molecular changes in the brain which give rise to bodily movements. MacColl’s mind-body dualism is, quite naturally, connected to his ego-theory of personal identity: “While the material brain [and body] changes, *it*—the seeing, hearing, feeling, thinking *soul*—remains” (WWS, p. 166). He rejects not only the body and brain theory but also the bundle theory of personal identity.<sup>5</sup> The thoughts themselves are not the thinkers. The stream of consciousness is not the person: “The *Soul*, by express definition, is ‘*that which feels*’; it is not the *feeling*. In its higher developments, it is ‘*that which thinks*’, or the ‘*thinker*’; it is not the *thought* or the *succession of thoughts*” (MODD, p. 74).

Because the immaterial substance has “a spatial form” according to MacColl, it makes sense to ask the question *Where is the Soul or Ego?* “Is it in the body, or near the body, or far away from the body?” (MODD, p. 26). Even if the soul and the body were two separate entities, it would still be possible that they are necessarily connected in a way that excludes the soul’s survival of bodily death. MacColl answers the question whether the soul can exist without the body by offering “the hypothesis of the Soul being external to and possibly far away from its own bodily mechanism” (MODD, p. 28). This hypothesis of the soul’s *externality* is a hypothesis about the position of the soul: “... its position may be fixed or variable. It may, at one instant, be in the body, or near the body, and, the instant after, it may be millions of miles away from the body” (MODD, p. 12). The soul is, therefore, not necessarily connected to the body. It is external to the body and does not reside inside the body, or does not form a unity with the body: “... the Soul or Ego may be conscious while far away from its ever unconscious body, and may from a distance, while believing itself in close contact, control the ordinary movements of that body, and even influence others ... ” (MODD, p. 14). MacColl’s model for this somewhat startling hypothesis is wireless telegraphy: “Do not the phenomena of wireless telegraphy make it plain that certain mechanisms, wonderfully

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<sup>5</sup>For these theories, see Cuypers 1998.

suggestive of the nervous system, can be operated upon by conscious Beings from afar, and by these made to transmit thoughts and sensations which the mechanisms themselves neither feel nor understand?"<sup>6</sup> (WWS, pp. 162–162).

MacColl's main evidence for the hypothesis of the soul's externality and independence comes from psychopathology and even parapsychology. A certain class of nervous maladies proves that the conception of a disembodied soul is not incoherent (MODD, pp. 16–22). The telepathic theory which says that "... a human being, voluntarily or involuntarily, may, without any electrical apparatus (as in wireless telegraphy), or other visible means of communication, instantly convey a sensation to another person many miles distant ..." (MODD, pp. 13–14) makes the hypothesis of the Soul's externality easily credible. MacColl accepted the possibility of telepathy on empirical grounds and believed that "no one who has seriously studied the theory of probability will regard this [materially unsupported communication] as a mere coincidence" (MODD, p. 29). The contemporary reader may be surprised by MacColl's belief in parapsychology, yet at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one it was not uncommon among intellectuals to take parapsychology, mesmerism, spiritism and the like very seriously.<sup>7</sup> MacColl widens the scope of his parapsychological soul-metaphysics even further: "If a human soul, as many eminent scientists now believe, can instantly (by 'brain waves' or otherwise) act upon another human soul, when their bodies are thousands of miles apart, where lies the difficulty of believing that a human soul can be similarly but more profoundly influenced by a superhuman soul, and from a still greater distance?" (MODD, p. 32). The possibility of such a communicative universe presupposes MacColl's second grand hypothesis.

Let me turn to the somewhat extraordinary hypothesis (2): the existence of non-human intelligences. Although the belief in the existence of non-human animal forms of consciousness and intelligence is quite common, the belief in the existence of non-human higher intelligences is rather extravagant by contemporary standards. According to MacColl, there exists a hierarchical psychic universe, starting from infrahuman consciousness and intelligence just above the level of the senseless plant, and ascending above the human level through superhuman higher forms of psychic life in infinite gradations, until reaching

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<sup>6</sup>Although Daniel Dennett is a contemporary materialist philosopher of mind, he also answers the question *Where am I?* by giving a *functionalist* hypothesis of the externality and independence of the mind. See Dennett 1978.

<sup>7</sup>I owe this point to Ivor Grattan-Guinness. See, for example, Grattan-Guinness 1983.

the upper level of consciousness and intelligence in the One Supreme Being. The classical religious icon or metaphor for the superhuman higher forms of consciousness and intelligence is “the community of angels”. MacColl’s argument for the existence of a superhuman psychic universe is inductive and analogical: “Is it not more reasonable to infer, by induction and analogy, that man is but a link in the ascending evolutionary chain of intelligence?” (MODD, p. 31). Just as there is a descending series of infrahuman sentient and intelligent beings, there is an ascending series of superhuman sentient and intelligent beings. And just as numberless infrahuman beings lack the requisite faculties to perceive man’s existence directly, man himself lacks the suitable organs in the present stage of his development to obtain direct empirical evidence of superhuman existence. “But that which man cannot perceive *directly* through his outward senses,” MacColl says, “he is capable of learning *indirectly* by the exercise of his slowly developing reason—a faculty which was given him expressly that he might so apply it” (CP, p. 387).

Although “man is but a link in the ascending evolutionary chain of intelligence”, the difference in psychic faculties between humans and infrahuman animals is not merely one of degree, but of kind: “Man, however low his type, possesses one faculty of which no other animal, not even the highest ape, shows the most elementary rudiment. For want of a better name, let us call it the faculty of *symbolisation*” (MODD, p. 107). Man not only possesses the faculty of articulation, as, for example, a parrot does, but also the faculty of “... conscious speech-development—the faculty of representing ideas (in order to remind himself or give information to others) by arbitrary sounds or symbols” (MODD, p. 115). Although higher animals understand commands, they are incapable of understanding the meaning of propositions (classifications and abstractions). And though non-human animals can draw elementary inductive inferences, they are incapable of abstract deductive reasoning or drawing a necessary conclusion from given premises (MODD, p. 123).

The superhuman psychic universe is filled with higher forms of consciousness and intelligence in infinite gradations. Probably all degrees of consciousness and intelligence are represented, from just above the hypersensitive and genial human level until the omniscience, omnipotence and omnibenevolence of the One Supreme Being. The superhuman psychic universe is at the same time a *moral* universe. And just as consciousness and intelligence are distributed in different degrees, good and evil (pleasure and pain) are likewise distributed. However, good and evil coexist on all levels (except on the divine upper level)

but in different proportions: in ascending the hierarchy “... the evil *in proportion* to the good will eventually diminish, and the good in proportion to the evil will increase” (CP, p. 388; MODD, pp. 33–34). In this hierarchical psychic and moral universe the higher beings have power and mastery over the lower ones, but at the same time the former will be held responsible for their influence on the latter (MODD, pp. 70–71).

The existence of a hierarchical psychic and moral universe is connected with MacColl's baffling doctrine of the transmigration of the soul. Although souls have a permanent existence, they do not always have the same life. MacColl claims that “All forms of life, or at least of *conscious* life, life capable of feeling pain and pleasure, are in a state of transition, and are destined at death to pass into a higher life, with higher pleasures, higher pains. That higher life, too, will end and will be succeeded by a still higher, and so on for ever” (CP, p. 387). In that sense souls are not static entities; they have an evolution and develop progressively. Souls move dynamically through the psychic and moral hierarchy upwards, *ad infinitum*: “... we may suppose these successive metamorphoses to go on forever into higher and higher spheres of existence, experience, and ever-increasing knowledge. The material body and other successive instruments of education, material or immaterial, would thus successively rise and pass, be born and die, while the Soul, the only permanent substance, would remain” (MODD, p. 67). MacColl admits that “... this is a mere hypothesis built upon rather insufficient data” (MODD, p. 67). But as regards the lack of sufficient evidence the mere hypothesis of metempsychosis is on a par with other scientific hypotheses, such as that of the hypothetical “ether”, acceptance of which was widespread in MacColl's day. Moreover, the idea of reincarnation is neither logically incoherent in itself nor logically inconsistent with the known scientific facts (MODD, p. 68). Furthermore, it cannot be excluded that science will have to leave “... untouched the ground for which its methods and instruments are as yet, and may be for ever, unsuited” (CP, p. 396).

MacColl does not make it exactly clear what the scope and mechanism of the soul's transmigration are supposed to be. Do the infrahuman animal souls of “the lion and the lamb” (MODD, p. 84), for example, reincarnate in *homo sapiens* bodies and become human souls? What the transmigration mechanisms are and how they work is not specified. However, two necessary conditions for the upward progression are that on each level of the hierarchy, evil and good (pain and pleasure) coexist, and that the struggle for existence continues: “For the struggle is necessary for the development, and the struggle

would be impossible without the incentives of pain and pleasure—pain at the failure, pleasure at the success. The idea of a perpetual, never-ending happiness in a future life, without struggle and without pain, is an unwholesome dream, beautiful but paralysing, like that of the opium-eater” (CP, pp. 387–88). Furthermore, “moral conduct” is the mechanism for speeding up the soul’s upward progression: “Every duty rightly performed or attempted advances automatically, and every duty neglected automatically retards, the upward progress of the Soul. In this way virtue ultimately brings its own reward, and vice its own punishment” (MODD, p. 81). I doubt that even this rough sketch of the soul’s transmigration can be made coherent, let alone a more detailed one. One cannot doubt, however, MacColl’s moral motives behind the doctrine of the soul’s transmigration, for it provides the possibility of a long process of self-perfection. This perfectionism is one of the most hopeful elements in theism: “He [God] allows men to commit errors, and he allows them to commit crimes . . . in order that the discomforts and sufferings which those errors and crimes sooner or later entail, here or hereafter, may in the long-run purify their souls and accelerate their progress upwards” (MODD, p. 157).

Let me now examine hypothesis (3): the existence of One Supreme Being. The crowning piece of MacColl’s Platonic metaphysics is the Deity: “And we cannot restrict our consideration to the class of sentient beings called the human. Below these are the infrahuman; above them are the superhuman; and over all we are almost compelled by instinct as well as logic consistency to infer the existence of a Supreme Being, who maintains and directs . . . the evolution of the whole material and psychic universe . . . ” (MODD, p. 36). As to the nature of God, the qualities of omniscience and omnibenevolence can logically be ascribed to Him, but omnipotence only within limits, for “the laws of logical consistency cannot be altered even by omnipotence, and, for aught we know to the contrary, the highest happiness may be logically impossible without the preliminary pain and struggle” (CP, p. 388).

On the basis of this second logical impossibility—happiness without pain—MacColl rebuts the argument to atheism from the reality of evil. In light of the psychic hierarchy and the never-ending quest for moral perfection, this idea of pain and evil as necessary for upward progression is the kernel of his theodicy (MODD, pp. 37–42, 83–84). The seeming inconsistency between an omniscient, all-powerful and perfectly good God and the reality of physical as well as moral evil disappears as soon as one realizes that “evil and suffering exist because, for each sentient unit above or below the human, experience of evil and suffering, within limits, in the present stage of his development, is

necessary for his progress upwards and for his future capacity to perform his allotted part in carrying out God's mysterious purpose in the infinite succession of lives to follow" (MODD, p. 83). If there were still drawbacks based upon the unacceptability of evil, then MacColl would close the discussion by rhetorically asking: "What is the suffering of this fleeting terrestrial life, however terrible it may feel to the sufferer at the time, in comparison with the sum total of the joys and sorrows of the Soul after an infinity of years in its evolutionary progress from life to life, from higher to higher?" (MODD, p. 78).

Two other closely related qualities must also be attributed to God. In the light of MacColl's divine-law conception of ethics, God is the source of moral laws: "By express definition we call what the Supreme Ruler approves *right*, and what he disapproves *wrong* . . ." (MODD, p. 76). Moreover, He is also the source of natural laws which "*must be in conformity with the will of the Supreme Ruler of the psychic and physical universe*" (MODD, p. 105). Besides physical laws of nature, such as the law of gravitation, there are also psychic laws of nature; for example, ". . . the act of prayer has set in motion a psychic law designed for the benefit of the soul, as the instinctive taking of wholesome food sets in motion a physiological law designed for the health of the body" (MODD, p. 97). How then do human beings know the moral laws and the laws of nature? In accordance with MacColl's scientific methodology, the epistemology of these laws cannot be based upon miraculous divine revelation, as laid down in the Holy Bible or other religious authorities. Man's knowledge of the laws must, therefore, be founded on the scientific study of *the book of nature* ". . . by observation, experiment, and slow, inductive reasoning" (MODD, p. 77). The divine cosmic language of all natural phenomena—physical and psychic, external and internal—reveals God's will and purpose as regards the human race.

MacColl's theism is, as he himself admits, ". . . built upon assumptions, some of which cannot easily be harmonised with the tenets of any existing theistic religion" (CP, p. 386). The most important reason, in my opinion, to call his metaphysical system *deistic* instead of theistic lies in his adherence to ". . . the doctrine that God leaves his laws to carry out his purpose automatically without any direct interference with their working . . ." (MODD, p. 96). That is to say, "God's will generally works itself out through what we call natural laws, and, to all appearance, automatically. Immediate, direct, or miraculous interference with these laws, though there is no logical reason against it, nor any proof that it ever occurs, must be so exceedingly rare that we have no right ever to expect it" (MODD, p. 79). But although there is

no direct or exceptional intervention of God's will in the law-governed course of nature, God's will still remains, of course, the primary cause of the natural laws themselves and, furthermore, of all the natural events to which these laws give rise (MODD, p. 91). In discussing his non-standard theism, MacColl leaves untouched "the question so often discussed whether the Supreme Being is a 'personal', an 'impersonal', or an 'immanent' God . . . because it is scarcely possible to enter upon such a discussion without losing oneself hopelessly in a maze of verbal and metaphysical ambiguities" (MODD, p. vi).

One important consequence of MacColl's deism—the belief in an absent and noninterfering God—is the non-existence of real miracles as orthodoxy construes them. MacColl accepts the existence of "miracles" only in a very attenuated sense, as events that strike us with wonder, and of which science can give instances in plenty, for example, telephone or wireless telegraphy. In this sense, miracles are not violations of the laws of nature, but seemingly unintelligible and perplexing phenomena at a certain time, of which a fully natural explanation in accord with the laws of nature is possible at a later time. According to MacColl, there is no essential or logical difference between the "miracles of science" and the "miracles of religion" as recorded in the Bible. It is true that the former are explicable, whereas the latter are inexplicable in the present state of human knowledge. But this explanatory difference is purely epistemological. If the relevant knowledge of the laws of nature were available, then the miracles of religion would be equally explicable: ". . . the miracles recorded in the special writings which they hold sacred might be explained also if we knew all the laws of nature . . ." (MODD, p. 94). However, if under such ideal epistemic conditions an alleged religious miracle or dogma were still to remain inexplicable, then MacColl would advise extreme caution and even *agnosticism* about the credibility of such miracles and dogmas.

Although MacColl starts from "assumptions, some of which cannot easily be harmonised with the tenets of any existing theistic religion" (CP, p. 386), and although he never says to which denomination he belongs, his attempt to rationalize religious doctrine and his motivation to safeguard ethical integrity make plausible, I think, the speculation that he was a *unitarian dissenter* and an *ecumenist*. MacColl's deism and his attendant rejection of miracles (as well as dogmas) do not harmonize with the doctrines of the established Christian church. And given his general tendency to purge religion of superstition, he also would reject the doctrine of the Trinity. Moreover, the ideal of moral self-perfection, which forms a central part of MacColl's hypothesis of a dynamic psychic hierarchy, is essential to free churches, especially to

methodism. Furthermore, MacColl explicitly mentions Jesus' Sermon on the Mount—Matthew, chapters 5 to 7—(MODD, p. 161), which is the main guiding passage for radical, free churches and ecumenical movements. MacColl's rationalistic religion, which "will satisfy both the logical demands of the intellect and the yearning aspirations of the human heart" (CP, p. 386), transcends the bounds of any particular denomination. MacColl's advice to be agnostic bespeaks an attitude of religious moderation and tolerance: "the fact that anything approaching irrefutable evidence is unattainable should make theists of all denominations, Catholics and Protestants, Jews and Mahomedans, humble, cautious, and mutually forbearing" (MODD, p. 95). Now, whether MacColl also officially belonged to one or other dissenting denomination in the Scotland of his days (e.g. Free Church, United Presbyterian), or whether he kept his dissenting convictions private and outwardly stayed within the national established church, is of course another matter and subject for further investigation. And whether MacColl also practised in one or other Protestant church in Catholic France, where he lived for the most part of his life, I do not know.

MacColl was a metaphysical realist, and were he still alive today his realistic belief in God would be uncluttered by anti-realistic Wittgensteinianism, voluntaristic fideism or obscure Whiteheadian process theology, let alone postmodern deconstructionism. His rational justification of his conviction that there objectively is a God is by a teleological proof of God's existence. MacColl's argument from "the machines constructed by nature—the living animals which reproduce their kind . . ." (MODD, p. 128) for divine Design is modeled after that of William Paley. In his classical treatise *Natural Theology* (1802), Paley argued from the purposeful natural, living organisms—or parts of them, such as the eye—to the existence of a designing God by analogy to the necessary inference from a watch or a telescope to the existence of a designing instrument maker. In the same vein, MacColl's teleological argument sets up an analogy between an appeal to human designing intelligence to explain "calico weaving in a cotton factory" and an appeal to superhuman designing intelligence to explain reproductive living organisms. MacColl's defence of theism by a design argument is to be situated in the context of post-Darwinian, Victorian Great Britain. According to the atheistic or agnostic evolutionist, a theistic explanation of the data is not required, because purely random mutations and the process of natural selection do the explaining just as well. Apparent purpose in nature is not contrived by divine Design, but is simply the outcome of pure chance. According to MacColl, however, "*Blind chance* (as in natural evolution) is the apparent automatic

cause; but the real though invisible cause (also as in natural evolution) is *intelligent and foreseeing design*" (CP, p. 385). I will now go into his reasons for opposing Darwinian evolutionary explanation.

### III. SERIOUS METAPHYSICS AND DARWIN'S DANGEROUS IDEA

While sketching the three main tenets of MacColl's Platonic dualism, I did not critically engage with the many different hypotheses and doctrines that compose this grand metaphysical scheme. An important preliminary question to ask before starting to question the validity of MacColl's *Weltanschauung* in the context of late 20th century philosophy seems to me to be this: *Can it be taken seriously any longer?* Perhaps MacColl was an innovative logician, but he surely was an old-fashioned "Victorian" metaphysician. If MacColl's Platonic dualism cannot be taken seriously any more, then it is perhaps not worthwhile to engage with it critically. Now "serious" metaphysics is, at least in the context of contemporary analytical philosophy, materialistic and atheistic. A radical application of the scientific methodology in philosophy has led to the naturalization of metaphysics, especially in the philosophy of mind and action. Contrary to MacColl's view that science, transcendental metaphysics and religion harmonize, orthodox contemporary philosophy adopts a harsh conflict-view which proclaims the elimination of all transcendental and theistic explanatory hypotheses.

Some unorthodox contemporary philosophers, however, still take the realization of a metaphysical project such as that of MacColl's dead seriously. The best example in contemporary philosophy is, I think, Richard Swinburne. Apart from the doctrine of a psychic hierarchy, Swinburne vigorously defends mind-body dualism and the existence of (the Christian) God on the basis of pure reason and scientific methodology.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, although substance dualism only occupies a marginal position in naturalized philosophy of mind<sup>9</sup>, the debate on the coherence of theism and the existence of God within the context of metaphysical realism is still prominent in contemporary philosophy of religion.<sup>10</sup> So, whether MacColl's metaphysical foundations of divine command ethics rest upon good or bad arguments, there certainly is still some support for something like MacColl's dualism and theism in contemporary philosophy. A thoroughgoing evaluation of MacColl's metaphysical project and its execution would have to take account of

<sup>8</sup>For his defence of substance dualism, see Swinburne 1997, pp. 145–99, 298–312. For a good summary of his defence of God's existence, see Swinburne 1996.

<sup>9</sup>Besides Swinburne's defence, see Foster 1991.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, Smart and Haldane 1996.

these contemporary supporting arguments as well. Such a detailed examination is, however, beyond the scope of the present paper.

Contemporary mainstream English-language philosophy is, to a large extent, naturalized. In addition to physical “Big Bang” cosmology and the scientific understanding of the mind, there is one other central instrument in this process of naturalization, namely evolutionary biology. In conclusion, I highlight the reasons why MacColl resists as well as attacks the alternative Darwinian evolutionary explanation of the central mysteries of life—an explanation which enormously excited the intellectual community in his day.<sup>11</sup> MacColl's most important opponent in the debate on Darwinism is a famous predecessor of contemporary serious metaphysics based on evolutionary biology, namely Ernst Heinrich Haeckel (1834–1919). Haeckel believed that his evolutionary monism—his so-called “law of substance”—could resolve all seven riddles of the universe which Emil Du Bois-Reymond had enumerated in his 1880 address to the Berlin Academy of Sciences: the nature of matter and force, the origin of motion, the origin of life, the order in nature, the origin of simple sensation and consciousness, rational thought and speech, and freedom of the will. MacColl often ridicules Haeckel's view in the sharpest words possible:

So this is the creed of the great apostle of ‘Monism’ as modern atheists have chosen to call their new religion! The Ultimate Cause, the real creator and sustainer of all phenomena, mental and physical, the phenomenon of human intelligence included, is no intelligent Deity or Deities. It is nothing at all analogous to, much less surpassing, the intelligence of man. It is simply an immense attenuated, yet all-powerful, eternally vibrating jelly! And this strange jelly-god is endowed with sensation and will, “though necessarily of the lowest grade”! Alas! Alas! what wild nonsense some eminent specialists can write when they venture beyond the narrow limits of their own familiar domain! (CP, pp. 390–91)

MacColl does not object to Darwin's ideas of variational evolution, natural selection and adaptation, but only to the “dangerous” idea of an all-embracing and all-explaining principle of evolution. That is to say, he does not attack evolutionary theory as such and even admits its truth within limits, but he protests against “the outrageous pretensions of those who would explain every phenomenon in the universe, and even the universe itself, on evolutionary principles . . . ” (MODD, pp. 124–25). For example, Haeckel and also Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) belong to the latter category of exaggerations. So, “as one important factor in the gradual changes which animals undergo

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<sup>11</sup>For a good introduction to Darwin and contemporary evolutionary biology, see Mayr 1991.

in successive generations, this Darwinian evolution seems reasonable enough; but to speak of it as the sole cause of, or even as the most important factor in, the development of animals, or of such marvellous organs as the human eye or the human brain, from some primary inorganic non-sentient matter, betrays an extraordinary ignorance of the first principles of probability” (MODD, pp. 100–101). In a generalized Darwinian theory today, not only the natural, but also the social and moral worlds of human beings are explained on evolutionary and sociobiological principles.<sup>12</sup> MacColl would have been horrified and deeply shocked by these contemporary applications of Darwinism to social and moral life.

MacColl’s reaction to the theory of evolution is not as radical as, for example, that of the creationists who dogmatically hold that evolution explains nothing whatever. His reaction is more moderate in that he acknowledges that “... within due limits, and taken in conjunction with other and far more important factors, it helps to obtain clearer notions of the progressive *steps* in plant and animal development—so far as their *material* structure is concerned” (MODD, p. 125). It is true that evolution alone does not explain anything; variational evolution, natural selection and adaptation cannot be the whole story. Although evolution certainly does not explain everything, it explains something. According to MacColl, evolution explains bodily development and material structure, yet it affords no explanation whatsoever of the directing and designing forces “... which constrain the original cells and seeds to take those steps—which constrain some to develop into oaks, others into cabbages, some into fishes or reptiles, others into dogs, horses, cows, or human beings ...” (MODD, p. 125). Furthermore, evolution offers no explanation whatsoever of “... the origin and development of *mind*—of feeling, consciousness, thought, etc. ...” (MODD, p. 133). In addition, MacColl evidently rejects an evolutionary explanation of the emergence of life “from some primary inorganic non-sentient matter ...” (MODD, p. 101).

I take it that MacColl is claiming that there are three important “missing links” or “gaps” in the evolutionary story: the transition from the non-living to the living (*the emergence of life*), the transition from basic forms of life to reproductive species (*the origin of reproduction or the problem of speciation*), and the transition from the mindless to the minded (*the origin of the mind*). The second not so well-known gap comes to the following. Cumulative selection over successive generations—the evolutionary mechanism of development and

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<sup>12</sup>For such a sociobiological account, see Wilson 1978.

speciation—*presupposes* some mechanism of reproduction in the ancestry. But it is hard to see how these reproductive mechanisms as adaptive features can themselves then be the product of cumulative selection *without a further cause*. Now MacColl's metaphysical scheme fills in these lacunas with the "God of the gaps". Although he does not give any detailed explanation of the three pivotal transitions, he suggests that God is the best explanatory hypothesis to resolve these big riddles of the universe. In comparison with Haeckel's "embryology of the soul" (MODD, pp. 134–37) and his general explanatory hypothesis of the "vibrating ether" MacColl's theistic hypothesis is, I think, the better one in terms of simplicity and even credibility. Haeckel's extreme Darwinism is, however, too speculative and shot through with anthropomorphic projection. Sober contemporary evolutionary theory and its sophisticated applications in serious metaphysics and the naturalized philosophy of mind is, of course, a much more challenging alternative to theistic explanation.<sup>13</sup> Yet it remains to be seen whether such a universal Darwinism will eventually be able to fill in the remaining gaps and to dissipate the central mysteries of nature.

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<sup>13</sup>For a fascinating book on sophisticated Darwinian thinking in biology and philosophy, see Dennett 1995.

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