The concept of action in Maurice Blondel's philosophy, with particular reference to the 1893 and 1936 versions of *L'Action*

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Abstract

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This thesis studies the way in which the meaning of '*action*' develops across Maurice Blondel's oeuvre. As for method: we allocate to a 'selection' category passages in which '*action*' means action in general; to a 'construction' category passages that can be easily rewritten so that '*action*' means action in general; and to an 'extension' category passages in which the meaning of '*action*' can be extended to action in general. By this means we conclude that in the 1893 thesis '*action*' means human action, and that in later writings the meaning broadens to action in general. We also conclude that Blondel could have understood '*action*' as action in general throughout if he had wished to, and that he had reasons not to do so. Further conclusions relate to an evolution from philosophy with theological implications to theology understood philosophically; to a connection between that evolution and the evolution of the meaning of the '*action*'; and to the concept of 'pure Act'. Finally, we ask to what extent Blondel understood reality 'actologically', that is, with Action rather than Being as the fundamental concept, and with reality understood as action in changing patterns.

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Author's declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and has not previously been submitted for any other degree at Staffordshire University or another institution.

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All page references to Blondel's works are given as those of the original printed editions which appear in brackets in the internet versions of the works. (The 1993 Quadrige printing of the 1893 *L'Action* follows the original pagination, whereas the Alicia Editions 2020 printing of *L'Être et les Êtres* does not.)

I am grateful to Dr Jane Wellens, Head of the Graduate School at Staffordshire University, for permission, where an English translation of an original French text appears in the main text, not to take the original French text into account in the word count if it is located in the footnotes. Because the French text will always be in the footnotes, it has seemed sensible to employ the Chicago 'notes and bibliography' style for the references so that the French text can follow the reference. [1]

Texts

The Université de Québec is to be congratulated on making available internet versions of Blondel's major works, of a variety of his minor works, and of a number of articles about his philosophy. These have been an enormous help during the research for this thesis. Perhaps a downside of this generous provision is that the only books still in print in French are the 1893 *L'Action* [2] and *L'Être et les Êtres*. [3]

Of equal assistance to the Université de Québec website in relation to Blondel's works has been the St Isidore website collection of English translations of the works of Thomas Aquinas.

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[1] https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html

[2] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1993: first published in 1893).

[3] Maurice Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres* (Paris: Librairie Felix Alcan, 1935).

Translations

The translations from French into English are my own, but in places they have been informed by three sources: In relation to the 1893 *L'Action*[4] I have often referred to Oliva Blanchette's English translation of the thesis, but have frequently not followed it;[5] for English translations of *Lettre sur les exigences de la pensée contemporaine en matière d'apologétique et sur la méthode de la philosophie dans l'étude du problème religieux* and of *Histoire et Dogme*[6] I have referred to *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, an English translation by Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan;[7] for English translations of *L'Illusion Idéaliste* and other essays I have often followed *The Idealist Illusion and Other Essays*, an English translation by Fiachra Long;[8] and for an English translation of *Exigences Philosophiques du Christianisme* I have referred to *Philosophical Exigences of Christian Religion*, an English translation by Oliva Blanchette.[9] These are the only published English translations of Blondel's works that I have been able to find. I suspect that the availability of internet translation facilities means that published translations of Blondel's other works might never appear. I have occasionally resorted to Google or Microsoft translate but have frequently not followed them when I have.

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[4] Blondel, *L'Action*, 1893.

[5] Maurice Blondel, *Action: Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, translated by Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

[6] Maurice Blondel, *Les Premiers Écrits de Maurice Blondel*: *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en matière d'Apologétique (1896) Histoire et Dogme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956).

[7] Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, translated by Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994).

[8] Maurice Blondel, *The Idealist Illusion and Other Essays*, translated by Fiachra Long (Dordrecht: Spring Science and Business Media, 2000).

[9] Maurice Blondel, *Philosophical Exigences of Christian Religion*, translated by Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021); Robert C. Koerpel, "Blondel, Maurice. *Philosophical Exigences of Christian Religion*," *The Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022): 589–90.

Introduction

Why is it that Maurice Blondel, who from 1893 to the early 1940s made a significant contribution to continental philosophy, has disappeared from the study of continental philosophy? Most of his books are no longer in print; only one of his major works, and a handful of minor works, have published English translations; the secondary literature is slim; there is only one significant commentary in English on Blondel's life and work; and books about contemporary continental philosophy that really ought to have referenced Blondel simply do not.[10]

Ten years ago I briefly studied Blondel's 1893 *L'Action* ('Action') and his *L'Être et les Êtres* ('Being and Beings') when I wrote an MPhil dissertation on action, change, and diversity in the Western philosophical tradition—a dissertation later expanded and published as *Actology: Action, Change and Diversity in the Western Philosophical Tradition*[11]—and he gets occasional references in *An Actological Metaphysic*[12] and *An Actological Theology*,[13] particularly in relation to his explicitly apologetic works: but I had never subjected his voluminous output to systematic detailed study. This thesis contributes to our understanding of Blondel's philosophical works by exploring in detail his concept of action with particular reference to the two versions of his *L'Action* published in 1893 and 1936.[14] A particular focus will be Blondel's initial restriction of the concept to human

[10] For instance, Todd S. Mei and David Lewin (eds), *From Ricoeur to Action: The Socio-Political Significance of Ricoeur's Thinking* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012); Caroline Williams, *Contemporary French Philosophy: Modernity and the Persistence of the Subject* (London: Continuum, 2001).

[11] Torry, *Actology*, 102–113.

[12] Torry, *An Actological Metaphysic*, ii, xix, 13–14, 23–24, 26, 67, 209.

[13] Torry, *An Actological Theology*, 10, 18, 20, 26–29, 32, 40, 55, 58, 77, 266–67.

[14] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1993: first published in 1893); Maurice Blondel, *L'Action, Tome I, Le Problème des Causes Secondes et le Pur Agir* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1936); Maurice Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II, L'Action Humaine et les Conditions de son Aboutissement* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1936).

action, and then later on a broadening of the concept to include action more generally. We shall term these two understandings of action 'human action' and 'action in general'.

As well as numerous shorter pieces, Blondel wrote five major works: the 1893 *L'Action*; a trilogy—*La Pensée* ('Thought'), *L'Être et les Êtres* ('Being and Beings'), and the revised *L'Action*; and then two volumes of a proposed three volume *La Philosophie et L'Esprit Chrétien* ('Philosophy and the Christian Spirit') along with a collection of four shorter pieces titled *Exigences Philosophiques du Christianisme* ('Philosophical Requirements of the Christian Religion').[15] Brief discussions of *La Pensée* and *L'Être et les Êtres* appear in chapter 5, and there will be no discussion of the almost entirely theological *La Philosophie et L'Esprit Chrétien* and *Exigences Philosophiques du Christianisme*. This thesis is about the concept of action in Blondel's oeuvre: hence the focus on the two versions of *L'Action*.[16]

This thesis is an exercise in the study of continental philosophy, so it will concentrate on the philosophical aspects of Blondel's work rather than on the theological. However, whilst Blondel recognised that philosophy and theology were distinct disciplines, he was also clear that they had to relate to each other, so we would not be true to his philosophy if we did not recognise that his theological material was also philosophical by virtue of its relationship with philosophy. We shall therefore study the theology insofar as it directly relates to the philosophy, and in particular we shall have to ask how Blondel's theological commitments influenced his philosophy.

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[15] Oliva Blanchette, "Translator's Preface," in Maurice Blondel, *Philosophical Exigences of Christian Religion*, translated by Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021), xi–xix; Maurice Blondel, *Exigences Philosophiques du Christianisme* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1950.

[16] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893); Maurice Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934); Maurice Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934); Maurice Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres* (Paris: Librairie Felix Alcan, 1935); Blondel, *L'Action*, *Tome I* (1936); Blondel, *L'Action*, *Tome II* (1936); Maurice Blondel, *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien, Tome I*, fourth edition (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1950: originally published in 1944); Maurice Blondel, *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien, Tome II* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1946).

Critique

But what kind of critique shall we undertake as we study Blondel's works? 'Immanent critique', which employs criteria internal to the text being studied, or 'transcendent critique', which employs criteria external to the text? In a philosophical context, Hegel's dialectic, in which the antithesis to the thesis is formed from within the same context as the thesis, resulting in a synthesis within the same context, is probably the philosophical method closest to the immanent critique practised by the social sciences.[17] The opposite of immanent critique is 'transcendent critique' which draws its criteria from a context outside the text or society being studied: although the other-world connotations of 'transcendent' suggest that 'extrinsic critique' would be a better term than 'transcendent critique' for critique that draws its criteria from outside the social or textual context, and that 'intrinsic critique' would be a better term than 'immanent critique' for critique that draws its criteria from within the text or society being studied.

If we did want to conduct an intrinsic critique of Blondel's works then that would not be easy to do because he rarely defines his terms, and it is not until the first volume of the 1936 *L'Action* that we find discussion of different words for action. Here he writes that he prefers not to use the word '*acte*' because 'it suggests the idea of a completion obtained rather than an active initiative',[18] although in his later books we do find him using the word while still making it clear that there is no completion in action because even '*passivité*', 'passivity', is a receptivity and so a kind of activity.[19] Blondel defines '*agir*' to mean 'the source on which all of [something's] activities depend';[20] but no clear definition of '*action*' is offered because action is different in every different context, and

[17] Sanford Diehl, "Why Immanent Critique ?" *European Journal of Philosophy* 30 (2022): 676–92; James Gordon Finlayson, "Hegel, Adorno and the Origins of Immanent Criticism," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 22, no. 6 (2014): 1142–66.

[18] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936) 57: il suggère par là même l'idée d'un résultat obtenu plutôt que d'une vive initiative.

[19] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936) 334; École, *La Métaphysique de l'Être dans la Philosophie de Maurice Blondel*, 58.

[20] École, *La Métaphysique de l'Être dans la Philosophie de Maurice Blondel*, 56, 189: la source dont dépendent toutes ces opérateurs.

therefore what '*action*', '*agir*' and '*acte*' mean will be different in each context.[21] 'The intelligible essence of action cannot, without contradiction, be fixed in what is transitive in it'.[22] Ludwig Wittgenstein made a similar point twenty years later: that the meaning of a word is its use within particular language games, so use and therefore meaning change as the word's context changes. Different meanings of a word might bear '*Familienähnlichkeiten*', 'family resemblances', to each other, but it would never be possible to identify a single core meaning of a word.[23] For an additional reason this is particularly true of foundational concepts. If a word represents something that is axiomatic within a conceptual structure of some kind—for instance, Being in relation to an ontology—then other words can be defined in relation to that word, but that word is not definable in relation to other words, because if it was then it would not represent a foundational concept. In relation to Blondel's *L'Action*, whether of 1893 or 1936, '*action*' represents a foundational concept. The only definitions possible will be those that we can find within the particular textual contexts within which '*action*' is used, as Blondel suggests.

This means that if we are to offer a critique of the meanings that Blondel gives to the word '*action*' throughout his oeuvre then we shall have to understand those meanings in relation to some 'extrinsic' 'benchmark' meaning, and so in relation to a working definition, an obvious choice for which would be the contemporary dictionary definition of '*action*', as that expresses the public meaning of the term at the time: a meaning of which Blondel would have been aware. To compare the various ways in which Blondel uses the word '*action*' to the contemporary dictionary definition will enable us to evaluate the extent to which Blondel's use of the term '*action*' conforms to the public meaning of the word in each of the works that we shall be studying.

The seventh edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, published in 1878, defines '*action*' ('action') like this:

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[21] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 321–22.

[22] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 322: l'essence intelligible de l'action ne peut sans contradiction être fixée en ce qu'il y a de transitif en elle.

[23] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen / Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2001, first published in 1953), 27, 31.

> The operation of any agent, physical, chemical, mechanical, or immaterial. *The action of fire on wood, on metals. The action of the sun, of light, on plants. The action of a lever on a mass. A rapid, strong, sharp, sudden, instantaneous, or momentary action. The action and reaction of bodies on each other. The action of the soul on the body, of thought on actions, of God on all of nature.*
>
> It is particularly used of human actions, both physical and intellectual. *The action of walking, of running. The action of thinking, of reflecting, of remembering.*
>
> It is often used in relation to morality, and is generally used of everything that one does. *A good action. A bad action. A vile, cowardly action. A generous action. To perform fine actions.* …[24]

The eighth edition of the dictionary, published in 1935, has the second and third paragraphs about human action reworded, but the first paragraph is exactly the same.[25] In both cases, we shall call the action described by the first paragraph 'action in general', and the action described by the second and third paragraphs 'human action'. The order of the dictionary definition paragraphs clearly suggests that action in general is the primary public meaning of '*action*' and that human action is a particular use of the term.

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[24] Académie Française, *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr:

> L'opération d'un agent quelconque, physique, chimique, mécanique, immatériel. *L'action du feu sur le bois, sur les métaux. L'action du soleil, de la lumière sur les plantes. L'action du levier sur une masse. Une action rapide, forte, vive, soudaine, instantanée, momentanée. L'action et la réaction des corps les uns sur les autres. L'action de l'âme sur le corps, de la pensée sur les actes, de Dieu sur toute la nature.*
>
> Il se dit particulièrement Des actes de l'homme, tant physiques qu'intellectuels. *L'action de marcher, de courir. L'action de penser, de réfléchir, de se souvenir.*
>
> Il s'emploie souvent par rapport à la morale, et se dit généralement de Tout ce qu'on fait. *Bonne action. Mauvaise action. Vilaine action. Action noire, lâche. Action généreuse. Faire de belles actions.* …

[25] Académie Française, *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr.

The question that we shall ask as we explore Blondel's thesis, his extension and revision of it during the 1930s, and, to a lesser extent, the works written between those, is this: To what extent does Blondel's use of '*action*' match the definition current at the time as that is expressed by the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*? This will tell us how the meaning of '*action*' changes across Blondel's oeuvre.

A method

The main question that faces us as we approach Blondel's substantial volumes and his shorter articles relates to how he is using the word '*action*'. Does he mean by '*action*' the primary dictionary definition that relates to any action, or does he mean by it human action: the secondary dictionary definition? This question could have been tackled simply by surveying the use of '*action*' and related words in each of the volumes and discussing in a concluding section what we had discovered: that is, whether the uses of the relevant words cohered with the primary or secondary dictionary definitions. However, on trying a more systematic approach that placed in a category examples of '*action*' and related words that fulfilled the primary dictionary definition, the conclusion to be drawn quickly became obvious: that no passages from the 1893 thesis could be placed in the category, but that as we progressed through Blondel's works increasing numbers of passages could be placed in it, and that by the time we reached the second volume of the 1936 *L'Action* the new material that Blondel had written for it contained multiple passages that could be placed in the category. This enabled a clear conclusion to be drawn: that although Blondel would have understood '*action*' to mean 'action in general' throughout his career, as the primary dictionary definition reflected common usage of which Blondel would have been aware, in his 1893 thesis, and throughout his career, he chose to mean by '*action*' 'human action', but increasingly also meant by it 'action in general': the primary dictionary definition.

This raised the question as to how easily Blondel could have written his 1893 thesis and his other works with '*action*' and related words referring to action in general rather than to purely human action. Placing texts in a 'selection' category had been a useful method for drawing a clear initial conclusion, so a possibility was to develop additional categories to explore the question: How easily could Blondel have meant 'action in general' rather

than ‘human action’ when he wrote the word ‘*action*’. Clear candidates were a ‘construction’ category into which passages could be placed if minor amendment enabled us to read ‘*action*’ as ‘action in general’ rather than as ‘human action’, and an ‘extension’ category into which a passage could be placed without amendment if ‘*action*’ could easily have meant ‘action in general’ if the passage had not been located in a context in which ‘*action*’ clearly meant ‘human action’. The more passages that could be placed in the ‘construction’ category, the more easily we could hypothesise that Blondel could have written about action in general but decided not to do so. If passages could be placed in the ‘extension’ category, then we knew that those passages could have referred to action in general, that it was only by placing the passages in contexts that assumed that ‘*action*’ meant human action that Blondel had given ‘*action*’ that meaning, and that he might have understood that without those contexts ‘*action*’ could have meant ‘action in general’. The more passages we could locate in the ‘construction’ and ‘extension’ categories, the more we could hypothesise that Blondel was making a decision, whether consciously or subconsciously, to choose the secondary dictionary definition rather than the primary definition. By employing this method we discover that throughout Blondel’s oeuvre we can find multiple passages that we can place in the ‘construction’ and ‘extension’ categories, which strongly suggests that throughout Blondel was choosing, whether consciously or not, to mean by ‘*action*’ the secondary dictionary definition rather than the primary definition. This provides a basis for asking the question: Why do we find this evolution in the meaning of ‘*action*’ across Blondel’s works?—possible answers to which will be found as we study Blondel’s academic, philosophical, religious, and ecclesiastical contexts.

The strength of the ‘action reading’ categorising approach to Blondel’s books and articles is that it provides a systematic way of studying what Blondel wrote: but there is clearly a significant weakness in that imposes on Blondel’s complex writings a simple extrinsic method. In mitigation: the categorisation method is not the only way in which this thesis studies Blondel’s vast output. The majority of the thesis offers substantial summaries of the 1893 *L’Action*, of some of the articles, and of the 1936 *L’Action*; and within the categories will be found numerous quotations selected from the works under discussion. All of this material is selected because it represents Blondel’s use of ‘*action*’ and related words. Simply surveying this material leaves us with the impression that throughout Blondel’s works ‘*action*’ means ‘human action’, but that later on it also means ‘action in

general', which raises the same questions as the categorising method: Why did Blondel initially take '*action*' to mean 'human action', and why do we find the word increasingly meaning 'action in general' later on? So as well as employing a categorising method to draw some tentative conclusions, the conclusions drawn at the end of each chapter and at the end of the thesis rely as well on readings of the many quotations to be found in the summaries and on the discussion of those passages to be found there. The conclusions therefore benefit from a broad evidential base.

For the purposes of our 'action reading' method we shall allocate passages containing '*agir*' and '*acte*' to the three categories in the same way as we shall allocate passages containing '*action*'; and, more generally, where we discuss Blondel's employment of '*action*' we shall also have in mind his use of '*agir*' and '*acte*': so unless we are discussing the three words separately, the reader can assume that a discussion of '*action*' is a discussion of '*action*', '*agir*' and '*acte*'.

To pre-empt the conclusions

First of all, in relation to the method: No passages in the 1893 *L'Action* fit into the 'selection' category, so we can conclude that in Blondel's thesis '*action*' means human action and does not refer to action in general. Blondel's writings between 1893 and the 1930s trilogy are generally apologetic in character and so rarely tackle directly such philosophical concepts as action: however, by the time of the trilogy, increasing numbers of passages can be placed in the 'selection' category, so we can conclude that by the 1930s Blondel was happy to employ '*action*' to mean action in general, with human action regarded as one type of action. The first two books of the trilogy, *La Pensée* and *L'Être et les Êtres*, are focused on concepts other than action, so they do not draw attention to the broader treatment of action that they contain, but by the time we reach the first volume of the 1936 *L'Action* we find multiple passages in which '*action*' means action in general; and by the time we reach the second volume, which is a thorough revision of the 1893 thesis, so much of the text could be placed in the 'selection' category that a separate chapter section on that category is no longer required. The fact that all of the material which takes a broader view of action appears in the amendments made to the 1893 thesis strongly suggests that Blondel is here making a conscious

decision to draw attention to the way in which his understanding of '*action*' has changed. We can therefore conclude that a significant evolution has taken place across Blondel's oeuvre, from '*action*' understood as purely human action to an understanding of '*action*' as action in general within which human action is a particular kind of action.

As for the other two 'action reading' categories: throughout Blondel's oeuvre, from the 1893 thesis onwards, multiple passages can be included in the 'construction' and 'extension' categories. This means that from the beginning of his philosophical career Blondel could easily have understood '*action*' to mean action in general if he had chosen to do so, which in turn suggests that he was initially choosing not to do that, in spite of the public definition of *action* of which he would have been aware.[26] We can also assume that Blondel felt more able to broaden his use of '*action*' as his philosophical career progressed.

As we shall discover in chapter 2, Blondel's philosophy was influenced by a wide variety of philosophers, and in particular by philosophies significantly focused on human action. Blondel was therefore working within an existing tradition. He had initially largely rejected Aquinas's philosophical theology, which he had not read, because of *Action Française*'s rather rigid appropriation of it: but later on he read Aquinas for himself, found there a theology that he could value and use, and increasingly referenced it. As we survey the whole of Blondel's output we discover the increasing influence of a Roman Catholic Christian theology significantly influenced by Aquinas's rather Aristotelian philosophy, and so by a conceptual structure focused on 'substance' ideas that led towards an understanding of fundamental reality as Being and beings rather than as Action and action. However, we also find that Blondel was influenced by some very different philosophers, and particularly by Teilhard de Chardin, whose concept of cosmic evolution coheres with the broadening of the meaning of '*action*' that we find in Blondel's later works. For Teilhard de Chardin, there is something dynamic about the whole of the universe, including its matter, and we eventually find Blondel expressing similar ideas.

[26] Académie Française, *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr.

In chapter 3 we study Blondel's Catholic upbringing, his Catholic religious experience and convictions, political and ecclesiastical conflicts of the time, and scientific change. All of these clearly influenced the evolution of Blondel's philosophy.

Early on, by restricting his use of '*action*' to human action, and in particular by not allowing the concept of action anywhere near important theological questions, Blondel was hoping to avoid the kind of ecclesiastical condemnation suffered by numerous other philosophers and theologians during the early years of the twentieth century, many of whom he knew.

In the absence of other persuasive motives for restricting his understanding of action to human action, we have to conclude that the reasons were that 1. he was working within a tradition represented by Ravaisson and Maine de Biran in which '*action*' meant 'human action'; 2. he wanted to achieve coherence between his philosophy and his own theological convictions; and 3. he wished to avoid any suspicion that theological consequences of his philosophy were unorthodox. If Blondel had extended his understanding of action beyond human action, then traditional understandings of God as an *unmoved* mover would have been called into question, as would have been the substance-based traditional understanding of the Eucharist. The three reasons given are clearly interconnected and inseparable. As for the later shift in the meaning of '*action*': scientific developments during the early twentieth century towards an understanding of reality as patterned action, the fact that certain controversies had somewhat subsided, and Blondel's own increasing sense of intellectual security, meant that by the late 1930s it was less of a problem for him to understand action as action in general, with human action understood as a particular kind of action.

The increasing presence of explicitly theological language in the 1936 revision of the 1893 thesis[27] and in *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien*[28]—in which '*action*' refers as

[27] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action, Tome I, Le Problème des Causes Secondes et le Pur Agir* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1936); *L'Action, Tome II, L'Action Humaine et les Conditions de son Aboutissement* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1936).

[28] Maurice Blondel, *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien, Tome I, Autonomie Essentielle et Connexion Indéclinable*, fourth edition (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1950: first published in 1944); *Tome II, Conditions de la Symbiose Seule Normale et Salutaire* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1946).

much to God's action as to ours[29]—was clearly intended both to express his own religious convictions and to answer critics of his earlier work and thus again to retain the confidence of ecclesiastical authorities. The 1893 thesis is a philosophical work that occasionally draws theological but nondoctrinal conclusions; the explicitly apologetic works that follow are often about the relationship between philosophy and theology but are also quite theological in their content; *La Pensée*,[30] *L'Être et les Êtres*,[31] and the first volume of the 1936 *L'Action*,[32] are increasingly theological, both across the trilogy as a whole and within each of the books; and the second volume of the 1936 *L'Action*[33] is a revision of the 1893 *L'Action* that takes it in a much more theological direction. The conservative theological character of Blondel's later output meant that a broader understanding of '*action*' would not have been understood as challenging the Church's theology as long as Christian theology and a broader concept of action were kept apart, which they were.

We find that two evolutions happen in tandem across Blondel's oeuvre: a progressive extension of the meaning of '*action*' from human action to action in general, and an evolution from philosophy with theological implications to theology understood philosophically. Reasons that we adduce for the evolution of the meaning of '*action*' from human action to a broader understanding of it are contemporary scientific developments; philosophical influences, and particularly Teilhard de Chardin; and the explicitly theological works and revisions reducing the need to avoid unwanted theological conclusions being drawn from a broader understanding of '*action*'. Reasons that we adduce for the increasingly theological character of Blondel's publications are that the security of a university post far from Paris, and then of retirement, meant that no longer did Blondel's work have to recommend itself to a secular academy and that he was therefore free to write the explicitly theological philosophy that had always been his

[29] Maurice Blondel, *Exigences Philosophiques du Christianisme* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1950).

[30] Maurice Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I, La Genèse de la Pensée et les Paliers de son Ascension Spontanée* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934); *Tome II, Les Responsabilités de la Pensée et la Possibilité de son Achèvement* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934).

[31] Maurice Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres* (Paris: Librairie Felix Alcan, 1935).

[32] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome I*.

[33] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II*.

intention. There is therefore a connection between the two evolutions: The increasingly theological character of Blondel's published work made possible the extension of the meaning of '*action*' from human action to action in general, with human action as a special case: but apart from this the reasons for the two evolutions were different from each other.

A further conclusion that we can draw is that at the beginning of Blondel's career 'pure Act' was understood in Aristotelian fashion as an unchanging change-maker, whereas later on 'pure Act' was sometimes understood as itself dynamic. Reasons for this evolution were probably similar to those for the evolution of the concept of '*action*'.

Clearly no infallible proof can be offered for any of these conclusions. As Karl Popper has shown, no theory can ever be proved: what matters is that they should be falsifiable, and that it should be possible to corroborate them.[34] The evidence that I gather in the early chapters of this thesis, alongside the detailed discussion of Blondel's works, provides at least a cumulative case for the conclusions that I have drawn, and the 'action reading' method provides further corroboration of the conclusion that the early restriction of the concept of action to human action was a choice: a choice that could be quietly revised later on.

The structure of the thesis

The thesis is structured as follows: In the first chapter I study the introduction to Blondel's 1893 *L'Action*[35] in order to provide an introduction to his philosophy and to construct a typology of readings that I shall then test out on Blondel's texts. Chapter 2 studies a number of philosophers who would have influenced Blondel, including Thomas Aquinas, Félix Ravaisson, Pierre Maine de Biran, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin; chapter 3 outlines Blondel's context, life, Christian faith, and controversies; chapter 4 explores

[34] Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 36–37, 117, 241–42; *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959), 40–41.

[35] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1993: first published in 1893).

the 1893 *L'Action*[36] and employs the 'action reading' method on it; chapter 5 discusses Blondel's writings between the 1893 *L'Action* and the 1936 revision of it, and employs the 'action reading' method to study his understanding of '*action*' in the first two books of the 1930s trilogy; and chapters 6 and 7 study the two volumes of the 1936 *L'Action*: in chapter 6, the 'action reading' method is employed, but in chapter 7 so much of the material could be placed into the 'selection' category that no separate section is given to it. In each case, the summaries of Blondel's works are not intended to be comprehensive: the density of Blondel's thought, combined with space limitations, would not permit that; and space constraints have prevented detailed summaries of *La Pensée* and *L'Être et les Êtres*.[37] What each of the summaries of the 1893 and 1936 *L'Action*s[38] does attempt is an overview that concentrates on the role of action.

After writing the trilogy, Blondel embarked on a three-volume work, *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien*, of which only two volumes were completed and published. The first volume[39] becomes increasingly theological, and the second[40] is almost entirely theology. We shall not study *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien* in this thesis, and neither shall we study in detail four earlier essays published as *Exigences Philosophiques du Christianisme* just before Blondel died.[41]

The final chapter draws the conclusions pre-empted above, and also asks whether Blondel is to any extent working with an 'actological' conceptual framework: that is, one in which reality is understood as action in changing patterns rather than as beings that change.

Originality

The following might constitute an original combination of conclusions:

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[36] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893).

[37] Blondel, *La Pensée*, *Tome I*; *La Pensée*, *Tome II*; *L'Être et les Êtres*.

[38] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893); *L'Action*, *Tome I* (1936); *L'Action*, *Tome II* (1936).

[39] Blondel, *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien, Tome I*.

[40] Blondel, *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien, Tome II*.

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That Blondel initially restricted his treatment of action to human action but later, in relation to a changing context and additional influences, extended it to action in general; that the treatment of action could easily have been about action in general throughout, so we have to conclude that the initial restriction to human action was a choice; that Blondel chose an initial restricted treatment of action because that was the tradition within which he was working, for reasons of his own conservative Christian faith, and for the purpose of maintaining ecclesiastical acceptability; and that he was later able to broaden that treatment in the context of a more secure ecclesiastical acceptability nurtured by works that more clearly expressed the conservative nature of his Christian beliefs.

Equally innovative is the method employed, which locates texts into 'selection', 'construction', and 'extension' categories. By finding that no passages in the 1893 *L'Action* can be located in the 'selection' category, but that multiple passages can be located in the 'construction' and 'extension' categories, I have been able to conclude that in the 1893 *L'Action* Blondel restricted his understanding of '*action*' to human action, and that this was likely to have been a deliberate choice; and by finding that in the 1936 *L'Action*, and also in texts written between the 1893 and 1936 *L'Action*s, multiple texts can be located in the 'selection' category, I have been able to conclude that Blondel increasingly understood action as action in general, with human action understood as one kind of such action.

Conclusions relating to the evolution of the concept of 'pure Act', and reasons for that, and a conclusion related to a correlation between the evolution from philosophy with theological implications to theology understood philosophically and the evolution of the meaning of '*action*' might also be innovative.

Whether Blondel was increasingly working with an actology rather than with an ontology remains an open question, but the significant evolution in the use made of '*action*' suggests that he might have been moving in that direction.

Chapter 1

The introduction to Maurice Blondel's 1893 *L'Action*

Introduction

Our first substantive chapter has two purposes:

First of all, to study the introduction of the published version of Blondel's 1893 thesis as an introduction to his philosophy of human action. At the heart of that philosophy is Blondel's recognition that he cannot refrain from acting, and that every action is based on insufficient knowledge, is different from the action that he wishes to do, closes off other possible actions, and is to some extent the result of influences from outside himself, so to that extent the action is not his.[42]

> In the use of what I call my freedom, and after its exercise, underneath my acts I seem to feel all of the weight of necessity. Nothing in me escapes it. If I try to evade decisive initiatives, I am enslaved for not having acted, and if I go ahead then I am subject to what I have done.[43]

Secondly, we shall use this first chapter to illustrate the methodology explained in our introduction.

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[42] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1993: First published in 1893), x.

[43] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) x: Au principe de mes actes, dans l'emploi et après l'exercice de ce que je nomme ma liberté, il me semble sentir tout le poids de la nécessité. Rien n'y échappe en moi: si je tente de me dérober aux initiatives décisives, je suis asservi pour n'avoir pas agi; si je vais de l'avant, je suis assujetti à ce que j'ai fait.

*'*action*', '*agir*', and '*acte*', in the introduction to the 1893* L'Action

Whilst the introduction to *L'Action* is all about action, acting, and acts, that is not all that it is about: for instance, there are discussions of oppression and emancipation, freedom and sacrifice, Christian education, and morality. We shall leave such excursions to one side and concentrate on those passages that directly relate to action: and we shall do that by focusing on those passages in the introduction that contain the words '*action*', 'action'; '*agir*', 'to act'; and '*acte*', 'act'. We shall stray from that policy only where discussion of other concepts relates directly to Blondel's discussion of human action.

'I act, but without even knowing what action is …' [44] Blondel is perturbed that nothing is certain. 'This appearance of being which agitates within me, these light and fleeting shadowy actions, carry with them, I am told, an eternally weighty responsibility …' [45] What he does know, though, is that he *acts*. He does things. He knows that he experiences his own human action: a parallel starting-point to Descartes' 'I think therefore I am'; [46] and he hopes to achieve a similar certainty: 'I shall no doubt discover what is hidden in my acts, at this ultimate depth where, without me and in spite of myself, I endure being and become attached to it.' [47]

That is the first of three dilemmas that Blondel wants to solve, and he summarises his method for solving it:

> The problem is inevitable; we inevitably resolve it; and this solution, true or false, but voluntary at the same time as necessary, each one bears in their actions. That is why we must study action: the very meaning of the word and the richness of its content will unfold little by little. It is good to explain to someone all of life's

[44] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) vii: J'agis, mais sans même savoir ce qu'est l'action …

[45] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) vii: Cette apparence d'être qui s'agite en moi, ces actions légères et fugitives d'une ombre, j'entends dire qu'elles portent en elles une responsabilité éternellement lourde …

[46] René Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), 61.

[47] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) vii: Je découvrirai sans doute ce qui se cache dans mes actes, en ce dernier fond où, sans moi, malgré moi, je subis l'être et je m'y attache.

> demands and all of the hidden magnitude of their works, and to strengthen within them the courage to act, along with the ability to affirm and to believe.[48]

What Blondel is seeking is not some theoretical ontological grasp of the meaning of himself as a human being, but 'the courage to act'.[49] Already he understands that a human being is not simply a being who acts, but is defined as much by human action as by the being of the human being: so he needs to know how to act rather than how to understand his being. It is this recognition that drives the following discussion of conscience and the will.

Just as Descartes' argument for the existence of God and the world sets out from his own thought,[50] Blondel here sets out from the evidence of his own action:[51] evidence that he can only regard as universalizable: that is, he is sure of his own human action, and so can extrapolate to knowing his own human action to be an example of human action in general. 'To take stock of the immediate evidence, action, in my life, is a fact, the most general and the most constant of all, the expression within me of a universal determinism …'[52]

The second of Blondel's three dilemmas is that whilst he intends a scientific approach to human action, as the subtitle of *L'Action—Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science*

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[48] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) viii: Le problème est inévitable; l'homme le résout inévitablement; et cette solution, juste ou fausse, mais volontaire en même temps que nécessaire, chacun la porte dans ses actions. Voilà pourquoi il faut étudier l'action: la signification même du mot et la richesse de son contenu se déploieront peu à peu. Il est bon de proposer à l'homme toutes les exigences de la vie, toute la plénitude cachée de ses oeuvres, pour raffermir en lui, avec la force d'affirmer et de croire, le courage d'agir.

[49] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) viii: le courage d'agir.

[50] Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 61.

[51] René Virgoulay, *L'Action de Maurice Blondel, 1893: Relecture pour un Centenaire* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1992), 10–12.

[52] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) viii: A consulter l'évidence immédiate, l'action, dans ma vie, est un fait, le plus général et le plus constant de tous, l'expression en moi du déterminisme universel …

de la Pratique—suggests,[53] he cannot avoid a superficially incongruous moral aspect. 'More than a fact, it is a necessity … More than a necessity, action often appears to me as an obligation …'[54] But there is no contradiction here between a moral sense and scientific method. As the sense of obligation cannot be separated from the experience of human action, that too must become the scientist's evidence.

The third of the three dilemmas is that human action closes off opportunities rather than opening them up. Whenever we act, our action is just one of many possibilities in that time and place, so all of the other possibilities that were available remain forever closed to us: 'Each determination eliminates an infinity of possible acts. No one escapes this natural mortification.'[55] There is no escape from this dilemma, because if we choose to do nothing then human action does not somehow cease: it continues, but it is no longer human action of our own choice. 'If I do not act out of my own movement, there is something in me or outside of me that acts without me; and what acts without me ordinarily acts against me.'[56]

What we have to regard as yet another dilemma is that no human action is ever fully informed.

> I cannot put off acting until all of the evidence has appeared, and all evidence that enlightens the mind is partial. Pure knowledge is never enough to move us

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[53] Michael A. Conway, *The Science of Life: Maurice Blondel's Philosophy of Action and the Scientific Method* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000), 189–373; Fiachra Long, Review of Michael A. Conway, *The Science of Life*, *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 67, no. 4 (2002): 402–4.

[54] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) viii: Plus qu'un fait, c'est une nécessité … Plus qu'une nécessité, l'action m'apparaît souvent comme une obligation …

[55] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) viii: Chaque détermination retranche une infinité d'actes possibles. A cette mortification naturelle personne n'échappe.

[56] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) ix: Si je n'agis pas de mon propre mouvement, il y a quelque chose en moi ou hors de moi qui agit sans moi; et ce qui agit sans moi agit d'ordinaire contre moi.

> because it does not take hold of us in our entirety. In every act, there is an act of faith.[57]

Anton van Hooff suggests that the act of faith here is an act of commitment to concrete multiple contingent reality[58] in relation to which there will always be a disconnect between our knowledge and our intentions, and a further disconnect between our intentions and our actions. Our knowledge is partial; our intentions do not necessarily cohere with our partial knowledge; and our actions are determined by multiple factors and so do not always relate well to our intentions.

> My decisions often go beyond my thoughts, and my acts beyond my intentions. Sometimes I do not do all that I will; sometimes I do what I do not will, almost without knowing. And these actions that I have not completely foreseen, and that I have not entirely ordered, once they are accomplished, weigh on the whole of my life and act upon me, seemingly more than I have acted upon them.[59]

This echoes Paul's Letter to the Romans, which Blondel would have known:

> I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. … I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.[60]

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[57] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) ix: je ne puis différer d'agir jusqu'à ce que l'évidence ait paru, et toute évidence qui brille à l'esprit est partielle. Une pure connaissance ne suffit jamais à nous mouvoir parce qu'elle ne nous saisit pas tout entiers: en tout acte, il y a un acte de foi.

[58] Anton van Hooff, "L'Acte de Foi ou la Dialectique du Concret," in *Blondel entre* L'Action *et la Trilogie*, edited by Marc Leclerc, 259–70 (Bruxelles: Éditions Lessius, 2003).

[59] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) ix–x: Mes décisions vont souvent au delà de mes pensées, et mes actes, au delà de mes intentions. Tantôt je ne fais pas tout ce que je veux ; tantôt je fais, presque à mon insu, ce que je ne veux pas. Et ces actions que je n'ai pas complètement prévues, que je n'ai pas entièrement ordonnées, dès qu'elles sont accomplies, pèsent sur toute ma vie et agissent sur moi, semble-t-il, plus que je n'ai agi sur elles.

[60] Romans 7:15–19, NRSV.

Blondel decides to begin his scientific exploration of human action by studying action that is 'inevitable and forced … in order to find out … where this necessity of action leads in the end …'.[61] The first requirement is that human action should take place in order for that action to become the scientific evidence that Blondel requires: 'Action is a necessity: I will act. Action often appears as an obligation: I will obey.'[62] And he recognizes that it is not simply an aspect of human life that he is discussing here—it is what we are as human beings: 'What matters is me and my all …'.[63]

It is not that some theory comes first and human action follows. It is the human action that is foundational. 'All the deductions of moralists based on the most plain facts, on mores, and on social life, are ordinarily artificial, narrow, and meagre. Let us act, and leave aside their alchemy.'[64] As Blondel recognizes, no action comes unencumbered by ideas: but it is still the action itself that is the evidence that the scientist requires:[65]

> The scientist, too, is often forced to be daring and to risk the possibly precious material that he has in hand … This precious material I have to expose is myself … Life abounds with ready-made experiments, hypotheses, traditions, precepts, and

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[61] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) x–xi: inévitable et forcé … pour voir … où cette nécessité de l'action nous conduit enfin … .

[62] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xii: L'action est une nécessité; j'agirai. L'action m'apparaît souvent comme une obligation; j'obéirai.

[63] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xii: c'est de moi et de mon tout qu'il s'agit … 'What matters' translates '*de … il s'agit*'. The reflexive verb '*s'agir de*', usually translated as 'it is a matter of', 'it is about', 'the issue is about', means literally 'it acts on itself about', with the 'it' an indeterminate placeholder. In English there is a subject relating to an object: one being to another. In French there is some indeterminate reality 'acting on itself about' whatever it is: '*il s'agit de*' … . An active process of engagement is envisaged rather than the static configuration represented by the English translations.

[64] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xii: Artificielles d'ordinaire, étroites, maigres, toutes les déductions des moralistes sur les faits les plus pleins, sur les moeurs et la vie sociale. Agissons, et laissons là leur alchimie.

[65] Fiachra Long, "Introduction," in Maurice Blondel, *The Idealist Illusion and Other Essays*, translated by Fiachra Long, 1–74 (Dordrecht: Spring Science and Business Media, 2000), 13.

> duties that we have only to verify. Action is that method of precision, that laboratory test, where, without ever understanding the details of the operations, I receive the certain answer that no artificial dialectic can supply.[66]

Whilst to act is to open the possibility of future actions, Blondel had recognized that to act closes multiple roads to other actions, so human action that might have become evidence is no longer available because it never happened. In this context Blondel recommends 'moral experimentation'.[67] This sounds risky within his ecclesiastical context, but there are clear constraints on any experiments:

> The mind's curiosity does not suppress practical necessities under the pretext of studying them; and, in order to think, I am not dispensed from living. I need at least the shelter of a provisional morality, because the obligation to act is of another order than the need to know.[68]

A 'provisional morality'[69] is required in order to solve the dilemma that we are constantly faced with multiple possibilities for action, and at any point in time must choose one of them. We therefore need an 'empiricism of duty':[70] and it is here that conscience becomes a factor in the argument. We can never 'make a perfect connection between action and thought',[71] so one way of choosing how to act is to follow

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[66] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xiii: Le savant est contraint, lui aussi, de payer souvent d'audace et de risquer la matière peut-être précieuse qu'il a en mains … Cette matière précieuse qu'il me faut exposer, c'est moi … Il y a sans cesse, dans la vie, des expérimentations toutes préparées, des hypothèses, des traditions, des préceptes, des devoirs que nous n'avons plus qu'à vérifier: l'action est cette méthode de précision, cette épreuve de laboratoire, où, sans jamais comprendre le détail des opérations, je reçois la réponse certaine à laquelle aucun artifice de dialectique ne supplée.

[67] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xiv: expérimentation morale.

[68] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xiv: La curiosité de l'esprit ne supprime pas les nécessités pratiques sous prétexte de les étudier; et, pour penser, je ne suis pas dispensé de vivre; il me faut au moins l'abri d'une morale provisoire, parce que l'obligation d'agir est d'un autre ordre que le besoin de connaître.

[69] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xiv: morale provisoire.

[70] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xv: empirisme de devoir.

[71] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xiv: relier parfaitement l'action à la pensée.

'conscience': which, as Blondel points out, can enable the necessity of action and the freedom of the will to be coherent with each other: though this is surely only the case if no distinction can be made between conscience and will.

> Thus, in the absence of all theoretical discussion, as also during the course of all speculative investigation into action, a direct and quite practical method is offered to me. This unique means of judging the constraints of life and of appreciating the demands of conscience [72] is to lend myself simply to everything that conscience and life require of me. Only in this way will I maintain an accord between the necessity that forces me to act and the movement of my own will. [73]

Blondel realizes that to introduce conscience into a discussion that until then had understood human action as the only evidence that the scientist needed is to introduce 'another method': [74] but the usual caveat has to be offered: '… is it possible to act always with the happy and courageous simplicity that no uncertainty can stop …?' [75] Because the aim is not simply partial knowledge, but rather 'the courage to act', [76] speculative science is not required: but a scientific method, 'reflection', [77] is nevertheless indicated.

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[72] The French word '*conscience*' can be translated as 'awareness', 'conscience', or 'consciousness', so as we read Blondel's works we have to study the context in order to discover which of these might be the most appropriate. In this case the context is discussion of a sense of obligation, so translation of '*conscience*' as 'conscience' is appropriate.

[73] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xiv–xv: Ainsi, en l'absence de toute discussion théorique, comme aussi au cours de toute investigation spéculative sur l'action, une méthode directe et toute pratique de vérification s'offre à moi: ce moyen unique de juger des contraintes de la vie, et d'apprécier les exigences de la conscience, c'est de me prêter simplement à tout ce que la conscience et la vie exigent de moi. De cette façon seulement, je maintiendrai l'accord entre la nécessité qui me force à agir et le mouvement de ma volonté propre.

[74] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xv: une autre méthode.

[75] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xvi: … est-il possible d'agir toujours avec l'heureuse et courageuse simplicité que n'arrête aucune incertitude …?

[76] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) viii: le courage d'agir.

[77] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xvi: réflexion.

> Besides, even when we have no hesitation as to what is to be done, do we always do what we know and what we will? And if repeated failings spoil our experience of life, if the first sincerity is lost, and if there emerges across our path the irreparable past of an act, will we not have to have recourse to an indirect way? And is not reflection, roused by the obstacle itself, necessary, like a light, to find once again the lost way? [78]

A somewhat perilous argument is then offered as to the kind of science required. Blondel recognises, as Karl Popper did, [79] that sciences such as psychology can prove nothing: all they can do is disprove hypotheses and leave in play hypotheses not yet disproved. Uncertain knowledge is all that we can hope for. Blondel suggests that this is not good enough if a scientific method is to be applied to human action, simply because if some conclusion is to be reached as to how we should act then uncertainty cannot be permitted. When we act we have to choose one path rather than many others, because the chosen act will close off every other possibility in that time and place.

> This complement or this supplement of moral spontaneity must, therefore, be sought in ideas as scientific as possible. But let us be careful. Nothing is more perilous and less scientific than to govern ourselves, in practice, according to incomplete ideas. Action cannot be partial or provisional, as knowledge can be. Hence, when one has begun to discuss the principles of human conduct, one must not take the examination into account as long as the examination has not

[78] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xvi: Est-ce que d'ailleurs, même quand on n'hésite pas sur ce qu'il y a à faire, on fait toujours ce qu'on sait et ce qu'on veut? Et si de continuelles défaillances gâtent l'expérience de la vie, si la première sincérité est perdue, s'il se dresse devant la route l'irréparable passé d'un acte, ne faudra-t-il pas recourir à une voie indirecte? et la réflexion, provoquée par l'obstacle même, n'est-elle pas nécessaire, comme une lumière, pour retrouver la route égarée?

[79] Herbert Keuth, *The Philosophy of Karl Popper*, translated by Herbert Keuth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 31; Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959), 41.

> been brought to completion, because we have to have something principled, central, and total, to illuminate and regulate acts.[80]

The method might be 'indirect',[81] but the conclusion must offer certainty:

> It is therefore a science of action that must be constituted, a science that will be such only insofar as it will be total, because every way of thinking and living deliberately implies a complete solution of the problem of existence: a science that will be a science of action only insofar as it will determine for all [action] a single solution to the exclusion of all others.[82]

The agenda here remains human action, so it is a science of human action that Blondel has in mind, but, as we shall see, the formulation can suggest a more wide-ranging metaphysic of action and so much that Blondel says here about human action could equally well apply to action in general.

Because the conclusion must offer certainty, only certain aspects of the 'indirect method'[83] will be appropriate:

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[80] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xvi–xvii: Ce complément ou ce supplément de la spontanéité morale, il faut donc le chercher dans des idées aussi scientifiques que possible. Mais qu'on prenne garde; rien de plus périlleux et de moins scientifique que de se gouverner, dans la pratique, par des idées incomplètes. L'action ne saurait être partielle ou provisoire comme peut l'être la connaissance. Donc, quand on a commencé à discuter les principes de la conduite humaine, on ne doit pas tenir compte de l'examen tant que l'examen n'est pas achevé, parce qu'il faut quelque chose de principal, de central, de total pour éclairer et régler les actes.

[81] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xviii: indirecte.

[82] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xvii: C'est donc une science de l'action qu'il faut constituer; une science, qui ne sera telle qu'autant qu'elle sera totale, parce que toute manière de penser et de vivre délibérément implique une solution complète du problème de l'existence; une science, qui ne sera telle qu'autant qu'elle déterminera pour tous une solution unique à l'exclusion de toute autre.

[83] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xviii: méthode indirecte.

> Only this indirect way alone is that of science, because, starting from doubt and systematically eliminating every chance of error and every cause of illusion, it closes every way out but one. Hence, truth imposes itself, it is demonstrated. [84]

What seems to be essential, as we could have predicted on the basis of our previous discussion of conscience, is that only action coherent with conscience should be counted as evidence: 'It would be to take the first and decisive step to accept, be it only by way of an experiment or a simple postulate, moral obligation or even the natural necessity to act.' [85] This is not to say that Blondel will not be exploring many examples of human action and multiple ways of thinking about it: *L'Action* is full of such discussions, the majority of which Blondel regards as cul de sacs to be backed out of.

> In the face of necessity itself which, to speak the language of appearances, forces me to be and to act, I refuse to ratify, in the order of thought, whatever I have resolved to practice in the order of action. And since we must first eliminate all false ways of being and acting, instead of seeing only the straight way, I shall explore all of those ways that are furthest from it. [86]

Here, as well as the requirement to discuss certain understandings of human action in order to dismiss them, we find again the ubiquitous requirement 'to practice'. [87] It is 'the

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[84] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xviii: c'est cette voie indirecte qui seule est celle de la science, parce que, partant du doute et éliminant systématiquement toute chance d'erreur et toute cause d'illusion, elle ferme toutes les issues sauf une: dès lors la vérité s'impose, elle est démontrée.

[85] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xix: Ce serait faire le premier pas et le pas décisif que d'accepter, fût-ce à titre d'essai ou de simple postulat, l'obligation morale ou même la nécessité naturelle d'agir.

[86] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xix: En face de la nécessité même qui, à parler le langage des apparences, me force à être et à agir, je me refuse à ratifier, dans l'ordre de la pensée, ce que, dans l'ordre de l'action, je me suis résolu à pratiquer. Et, puisqu'il faut d'abord éliminer toutes les fausses manières d'être et d'agir, au lieu de ne voir que la voie droite, j'explorerai toutes celles qui s'en écartent le plus.

[87] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xix: pratiquer.

order of action'[88] that is always primary, and 'the order of thought'[89] that is secondary. But we still haven't answered the question as to what the 'total'[90] that will characterize the scientific method might be. No clear response emerges in the text, and we are left with a disjunct between action inspired by conscience and the scientific study of empirical human action, and therefore with what looks like permanent disconnections between knowledge and practice and between being and action: precisely the disconnections that Blondel did not wish to be left with. 'My situation, then, is quite clear. On one side, in action, complete and absolute submission to the dictates of conscience, and immediate docility. … On the other side, in the scientific realm, complete and absolute independence.'[91] The contradiction becomes clear once both science and the will are understood. For the scientist,

> nothing can be taken for granted, no facts, no principles, and no duties. I must strip myself of every precarious support that I have been relying on. … Thus, for the problem of action to be raised scientifically, we should not have to accept any moral postulate or intellectual given.[92]

As for the will as driver of human action:

> For the most intimate orientation of hearts to be revealed it must be enough to let the will and action unfold in each individual down to the final agreement or contradiction between the primitive movement and the end in which it

[88] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xix: l'ordre de l'action.

[89] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xix: l'ordre de la pensée.

[90] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xvii: totale.

[91] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xix: Ma situation est donc bien nette. D'une part, en action, complète et absolue soumission aux dictées de la conscience, et docilité immédiate … D'autre part, dans le domaine scientifique, complète et absolue indépendance.

[92] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xxi: rien que je puisse tenir pour accordé, rien ni des faits, ni des principes, ni des devoirs; c'est à me retirer tout appui précaire que je viens de travailler. … Ainsi, pour que le problème de l'action soit posé scientifiquement, il faut qu'on n'ait ni postulat moral, ni donnée intellectuelle à accepter.

> terminates. The difficulty is to introduce nothing external or artificial into this profound drama of life … [93]

However much they might be studied by the science that Blondel has in mind, the dictates of conscience, the determinations of the will, and the action of the human being, are not subject to any science. They are the fundamental constituents of human life. The disjunction between science and the action of the will aligns with that between knowledge and action: 'whatever apparent disproportion there might be between what I know, what I will, and what I do, and however fearful the consequences of my acts might be … I am.' [94] And again, however much science might study the human will and its relationship to human action, both the will and the action will be determinative, and not any conclusions that a science might come to. As René Virgoulay puts it: 'Action is not only a book to read: it is a journey to practise'; [95] and, as Blondel himself puts it:

> This is the will, the most intimate and the most free, that it is important to find in all of my endeavours and to bring finally to its perfect fulfilment. What is most important is to bring reflected movement into agreement with the spontaneous movement of my will. But it is in action that this relation of either equality or discord is determined. Hence the importance of studying action, for it manifests at once our double will; it constructs all of our destiny within us, like a world that is our original work and has to contain the complete explanation of our history. [96]

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[93] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xxii: Il doit suffire de laisser la volonté et l'action se déployer en chacun, afin que se révèle la plus intime orientation des coeurs, jusqu'à l'accord ou à la contradiction finale du mouvement primitif avec le terme où il aboutit. La difficulté, c'est de n'introduire rien d'extérieur ni d'artificiel dans ce drame profond de la vie …

[94] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xxiii: quelque apparente disproportion qu'il y ait entre ce que je sais, ce que je veux et ce que je fais; quelque redoutables que puissent être les conséquences de mes actes … je suis.

[95] René Virgoulay, *L'Action de Maurice Blondel, 1893: Relecture pour un Centenaire* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1992), 51.

[96] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xxiv: C'est cette volonté, la plus intime et la plus libre, qu'il importe de retrouver en toutes mes démarches, et de porter enfin jusqu'à son parfait achèvement: le tout est d'égaler le mouvement réfléchi au mouvement spontané de mon vouloir. Or c'est dans l'action que se détermine ce rapport ou d'égalité ou de

And it doesn't matter if a scientific approach finds human action to be in some way 'false': [97] it is the action that remains primary.

> There is in the illusory, in the imaginary, and even in the false, a reality, something living and substantial that is embodied in human acts, a creation that no philosophy has sufficiently taken into account. [98]

This ringing assertion of the primacy of human action comes near to the end of Blondel's introduction: and the mention of 'the illusory … the imaginary and the false' [99] is entirely appropriate in this position, because it is precisely these kinds of understanding of human action that Blondel will discuss in the subsequent chapters.

We can summarise the philosophy offered by the introduction to the 1893 *L'Action* as 'human action is primary and thought is secondary. I act, therefore I am.' Or perhaps, better, 'I act'. But some of the elements of Blondel's introduction blunt that conclusion, particularly in relation to the will and conscience. Blondel suggests that he lends himself

> to everything that conscience and life require of me. Only in this way will I maintain an accord between the necessity that forces me to act and the movement of my own will. [100]

This implies that whilst conscience is experienced as inner obligation, it is an external force, and that the will is a separate internal one. We are therefore left wondering how

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discordance. Aussi importe-t-il souverainement d'étudier l'action; car elle manifeste à la fois la double volonté de l'homme; elle construit en lui, comme un monde qui est son oeuvre originale et qui doit contenir l'explication complète de son histoire, toute sa destinée.

[97] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xxv: faux.

[98] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xxv: Il y a dans l'illusoire, dans l'imaginaire et le faux même, une réalité, quelque chose de vivant et de substantiel qui prend corps dans les actes humains, une création dont nulle philosophie n'a tenu un compte suffisant.

[99] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xxv: l'illusoire, … l'imaginaire et le faux.

[100] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xv: c'est de me prêter simplement à tout ce que la conscience et la vie exigent de moi. De cette façon seulement, je maintiendrai l'accord entre la nécessité qui me force à agir et le mouvement de ma volonté propre.

conscience and the will relate to each other; whether the will, conscience, or action, is the primary category; and whether a human being is a being who possesses a conscience and a will and who acts, rather than being defined purely by human action, with conscience and the will understood as themselves human action. If the will and conscience are driving the human being's action, then the human action is not the primary category that earlier parts of Blondel's introduction had thought it to be: 'I shall no doubt discover what is hidden in my acts, at this ultimate depth where, without me and in spite of myself, I endure being and become attached to it.' [101] Is Blondel working with a concept of the human being as a being for whom action is necessary, or is he working with a concept of the human being constituted by action rather than by being? His treatment of conscience and of the will leaves us in some doubt. A study of some of the texts from his introduction will help us to answer the question.

The 'action readings' methodology

In the introduction to this thesis we proposed a threefold categorisation: 'selection' selects those texts that already understand '*action*' to mean action in general; 'construction' rewrites passages so that '*action*' means action in general; and 'extension' extends to reality as a whole the meanings of passages that in their initial contexts assume restricted meanings of action.

Selection

By focusing on the words '*action*', 'action'; '*agir*', 'to act'; and '*acte*', 'act', we can find no passages to put into the 'selection' category, and so must conclude that in the introduction to the 1893 thesis '*action*' means human action and not action in general.

[101] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) vii: Je découvrirai sans doute ce qui se cache dans mes actes, en ce dernier fond où, sans moi, malgré moi, je subis l'être et je m'y attache.

What would Blondel's introduction have looked like if before he started to write *L'Action* he had understood '*action*' to mean action in general: 'the operation of any agent, physical, chemical, mechanical, or immaterial'? [102] One way to approach this question is to ask how passages would have had to be written differently in order for '*action*' to mean action in general. We can illustrate this by considering this passage

> The scientist, too, is often forced to be daring and to risk the possibly precious material that he has in hand … This precious material I have to expose is myself … Life abounds with ready-made experiments, hypotheses, traditions, precepts, and duties that we have only to verify. Action is that method of precision, that laboratory test, where, without ever understanding the details of the operations, I receive the certain answer that no artificial dialectic can supply. [103]

However, we are not isolated human beings: we are intimately entangled with other people and with our social and physical environments, so Blondel could have written 'This precious material is myself and the social and cosmic environment in which I am enmeshed'. The action within all of that is the scientist's material, and not just a mythical isolated human being. It is the world, and not just life, that 'abounds with ready-made experiments, hypotheses, traditions, precepts, and duties that we have only to verify.' If Blondel had recognised each human being's entanglement with an active environment as the location of human action, and therefore the impossibility of abstracting human action from action in general, then '*action*' might have been understood as action in

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[102] Académie Française, *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr: 'L'opération d'un agent quelconque, physique, chimique, mécanique, immatériel'.

[103] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xiii: Le savant est contraint, lui aussi, de payer souvent d'audace et de risquer la matière peut-être précieuse qu'il a en mains … Cette matière précieuse qu'il me faut exposer, c'est moi … Il y a sans cesse, dans la vie, des expérimentations toutes préparées, des hypothèses, des traditions, des préceptes, des devoirs que nous n'avons plus qu'à vérifier: L'action est cette méthode de précision, cette épreuve de laboratoire, où, sans jamais comprendre le détail des opérations, je reçois la réponse certaine à laquelle aucun artifice de dialectique ne supplée.

general rather than as purely human action. The 'precious material I have to expose is myself' along with the other people with whom I am entangled and the environment within which I live.

Extension

'Extension' extends to reality as a whole the meanings of passages that in their initial contexts assume restricted meanings of action. Take this passage as an example:

> It is therefore a science of action that must be constituted, a science that will be such only insofar as it will be total, because every way of thinking and living deliberately implies a complete solution of the problem of existence: a science that will be a science of action only insofar as it will determine for all action a single solution to the exclusion of all others. [104]

Even though in the context of Blondel's introduction the action discussed here is human action, there is no reason why the meaning of such a passage *should* be restricted to human action: and if it had appeared in a volume of the later trilogy then we would have been able to interpret '*action*' as referring to the cosmos as a whole: that is, with '*action*' understood in relation to the first paragraph of the dictionary definition—'The operation of any agent, physical, chemical, mechanical, or immaterial'—rather than in relation to the subsidiary definition—'It is particularly used of human actions, both physical and intellectual'. [105] If we were to understand '*action*' as action in general, then, as Blondel

[104] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xvii: C'est donc une science de l'action qu'il faut constituer; une science, qui ne sera telle qu'autant qu'elle sera totale, parce que toute manière de penser et de vivre délibérément implique une solution complète du problème de l'existence; une science, qui ne sera telle qu'autant qu'elle déterminera pour tous une solution unique à l'exclusion de toute autre.

[105] Académie Française, *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr: L'opération d'un agent quelconque, physique, chimique, mécanique, immatériel .... actes de l'homme.

himself puts it, what is required is 'a science of action' that is 'total', [106] and not just about human beings.

Conclusions

By studying the introduction to the 1893 *L'Action* we have gained some understanding of the centrality of human action to Blondel's philosophy, and have also grasped that that centrality has to some extent been compromised by discussion of the will and of conscience.

We have illustrated an 'action reading' methodology that allocates texts into three categories. We have found that no passages properly belong in the 'selection' category; that it is possible to 'construct' passages so that they understand '*action*' to mean action in general; and that it is possible to 'extend' the meanings of passages about human action so that they understand '*action*' to mean action in general. We can conclude from this exercise that the introduction to Blondel's 1893 thesis is totally focused on human action, and that he understands the human being as a being who acts and whose actions are driven by the actions of the will and of the conscience, both of which are understood in terms of their being. We have also been able to conclude that the introduction could in principle have been written on the basis that '*action*' means action in general. It is already beginning to look as if a choice has been made.

[106] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xvii: une science de l'action … totale.

Chapter 2

Philosophical influences

Introduction

Philosophy and theology cannot be separated, either in Blondel's life or in his publications,[107] but on the basis that he himself argued for a clear distinction between them[108] we are justified in separating them into different chapters. So in this chapter we shall study some of the philosophies that appear to have influenced Blondel, which will provide useful evidence when we come to evaluate his philosophy; and in chapter 3 we shall study religious and ecclesiastical factors.

To locate a philosopher philosophically requires several different questions to be addressed: Who were the philosophers they read and by whom were they influenced? Where might they have located themselves philosophically? Where might others have located them? And to what extent was the philosophy constructed in conversation with

[107] Oliva Blanchette, "Translator's Preface," in Maurice Blondel, *Philosophical Exigences of Christian Religion*, translated by Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021), xi–xix.

[108] Maurice Blondel, *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en Matière d'Apologétique*, in Maurice Blondel, *Les Premiers Écrits de Maurice Blondel*: *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en matière d'Apologétique (1896) Histoire et Dogme*, 5–95 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956), 43; Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics*, in *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma* by Maurice Blondel, 125–208 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 161; Maurice Blondel, "Y-a-t-il une Philosophie Chrétienne?" *La Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 38, no. 4 (1931): 599–606.

other philosophers?[109] Unfortunately because Blondel rarely references his sources[110] we can often only speculate. To take just one example: might Blondel have been influenced by Léon Brunschvicg, who was teaching philosophy at the Sorbonne while he was teaching at Aix-en-Provence, or might the influence have been in the opposite direction? In 1949, but no doubt expressing ideas from earlier in his career, Brunschvicg was writing about 'spiritual dynamism':[111]

> from the standpoint of phenomenal determinism, by applying the technical processes of modern science, an appeal to the creative power of life emerges from the solutions reached by physicists.[112]

Both 'thought' and the human 'spirit' offer 'unsuspected resources'[113] for a spirituality: and connectedly

> we cannot base spirituality on transcendence, in whatever form it presents itself to us. It will therefore remain for us to investigate how the philosophy of spirit can be definitively conceived as a philosophy of immanence.[114]

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[109] Pierre de Cointet, "Introduction: Maurice Blondel, Philosophe," in *Maurice Blondel et la Philosophie Française*, edited by Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet, 11–19 (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007), 11–12.

[110] Jean Ferrari, "Blondel et la Philosophie Française, de Descartes à Bergson," in *Maurice Blondel et la Philosophie Française*, edited by Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet, 23–47 (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007), 27; Fiachra Long, "The Blondel–Gilson Correspondence through Foucault's Mirror." *Philosophy Today* 35, no. 4 (1991), 351–61, 352–53. Among more recent French philosophers Michel Serres comes to mind.

[111] Léon Brunschvicg, *La Philososphie de l'Esprit* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1949), 47–48: dynamisme spiritualiste.

[112] Brunschvicg, *La Philososphie de l'Esprit*, 56–57: En se plaçant sur le plan du déterminisme phénoménal, en appliquant le procédés techniques de la science moderne, que l'on voit surgir, des solutions atteintes par les physiciens, un appel à la puissance créatrice de la vie.

[113] Brunschvicg, *La Philososphie de l'Esprit*, 114: pensée … esprit … ressources insoupçonnées

[114] Brunschvicg, *La Philososphie de l'Esprit*, 171: Nous ne pouvons pas appuyer la spiritualité sur la transcendance, sous quelque forme qu'elle se présente à nous. Il nous

All themes, and even terminology, that we shall find in Blondel's oeuvre. Who influenced whom?

Only four thinkers are explicitly referenced in the 1893 *L'Action*: Pascal, Leibniz, Maine de Biran, and St Bernard. (In the case of both Leibniz and St Bernard, several quotations in Latin appear but in each case only two are attributed).[115] Among these, Maine de Biran appears to have been particularly influential.[116] But references in *L'Action* are not all that we have to go on. In relation to Blondel's works as a whole we are assisted by his own *L'Itinéraire Philosophique* ('Philosophical Itinerary'), which purports to be a record of an interview but was in fact written by Blondel in 1927.[117] Among those who deeply influenced Blondel's philosophy were his teachers, and particularly Émile Boutroux, whose significant influence we shall study below, and Léon Ollé-Laprune,[118] whom both Peter Reifenberg and Jean Ferrari credit with having a significant influence on Blondel's understanding of the relationship between action and thought. We shall find that

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restera donc à rechercher comment la philosophie de l'esprit peut être définitivement conçue, en tant que philosophie de l'immanence.

[115] Paul Archambault, *L'Oeuvre Philosophique de Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Librairie Bloud & Gay, 1928), 49; Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), 367, 370, 393, 402–4, 441–42, 460; René Virgoulay, *Philosophie et Théologie chez Maurice* Blondel (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 18, 32, 73, 76, 83, 86, 116, 132.

[116] Alessandra Aloisi, "Coenesthesia or the Immediate Feeling of Existence: Maine de Biran and the Problem of the Unconscious between Physiology and Philosophy," *Perspectives on Science* 32, no.1 (2024): 47–69; de Cointet, "Introduction," 13–14.

[117] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 324–43.

[118] Peter Reifenberg, "Ollé-Laprune dans l'Interprétation de Maurice Blondel," in *Maurice Blondel et la Quête du Sens*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 87–100 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1998); Jean Ferrari, "Blondel et la Philosophie Française, de Descartes à Bergson," in *Maurice Blondel et la Philosophie Française*, edited by Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet, 23–47 (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007), 27–28, 39–40.

Blondel's early reading of Félix Ravaisson, and also of Plato,[119] Aristotle,[120] Blaise Pascal,[121] Pierre Maine de Biran,[122] René Descartes,[123] Nicolas Malebranche,[124] and a wide variety of contemporary thinkers, influenced the 1893 *L'Action*; and René Virgoulay finds significant early influence by Francis de Sales and Ignatius of Loyola.[125] As a committed Roman Catholic, the Bible was a constant influence on Blondel's theology and therefore on his philosophy;[126] and among better known theologians, Blondel references St Paul[127] and Augustine.[128] To four of these philosophers and theologians Blondel dedicated articles: Descartes, Malebranche, Augustine, and Pascal. In relation to Blondel's scientific method, Jules Lachelier's 'spiritual realism'[129] was an important influence, as was Leibniz.

In this chapter we shall study a number of the philosophers whom Blondel read, and at the end we shall decide which of them influenced his philosophy and how.

Félix Ravaisson

During the 1880s Blondel read Félix Ravaisson's short book *De l'Habitude* ('About Habit'), which was published in 1838, and his major work, *La Philosophie en France au XIXe*

[119] Blondel, *L'Itinéraire Philosophique*, 12, 15, 74, 108, 125.

[120] Blondel, *L'Itinéraire Philosophique ,* 76, 77, 204, 251.

[121] Blondel, *L'Itinéraire Philosophique*, 45, 57.

[122] Blondel, *L'Itinéraire Philosophique*, 56, 136–37, 152, 198.

[123] Blondel, *L'Itinéraire Philosophique*, 35, 42

[124] Blondel, *L'Itinéraire Philosophique*, 27, 39, 183

[125] Virgoulay, *Philosophie et Théologie chez Maurice Blondel*, 17–18.

[126] René Virgoulay, *Philosophie et Théologie chez Maurice* Blondel (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 16–17, 20–23.

[127] Maurice Blondel, *L'Itinéraire Philosophique de Maurice Blondel. Propos Recueillis par Frédéric Lefèvre* (Éditions Spes, 1928), 42

[128] Blondel, *L'Itinéraire Philosophique*, 45, 258, 269, 114, 201

[129] Michael A. Conway, *The Science of Life: Maurice Blondel: Philosophy of Action and the Scientific Method* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000), 82–112.

Siècle, published in 1868,[130] and Ravaisson's philosophy continued to be a significant influence throughout his career.[131]

In *De l'Habitude* Ravaisson defined 'habit'[132] as 'the general and permanent way of being, the state of an existence considered in all of its elements or in the succession of its epochs.'[133] Habit is the result of change, but then persists as 'a state … a disposition, a virtue'.[134] 'From the first stage of existence we find permanence and change united: and in the change itself the tendency to permanence.'[135]

We exist in space and time, with time as 'the universal condition of change', and space 'the condition and the most apparent and elementary form of stability'.[136] In this context both habit and bodies are '*l'étendue mobile*', 'an extended mobile' or 'a mobile extension'.[137] For Ravaisson, only life can generate habit: the inorganic world cannot.

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[130] Blondel, Maurice, *L'Itinéraire Philosophique de Maurice Blondel. Propos Recueillis par Frédéric Lefèvre* (Éditions Spes, 1928), 42 ; Simone D'Agostino, "Une Philosophie de l'Action. L''Autre' Métaphysique de Félix Ravaisson," in *Maurice Blondel et la Philosophie Française*, edited by Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet, 61–77 (Paris: Éditions Parole & Silence, 2007), 71–73.

[131] Michael A. Conway, *The Science of Life: Maurice Blondel: Philosophy of Action and the Scientific Method*, European University Studies, Vol 616 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000), 65–66; Peter Henrici, "Les Structures de *L'Action* et la Pensée Française," in *Maurice Blondel: Une Dramatique de la Modernité*, 32–43 (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1990), 34.

[132] l'habitude.

[133] Ravaisson, *De l'Habitude*, 7: la manière d'être générale et permanente, l'état d'une existence considérée, soit dans l'ensemble de ses éléments, soit dans la succession de ses époques.

[134] Ravaisson, *De l'Habitude*, 7: un état … une disposition, une vertu.

[135] Ravaisson, *De l'Habitude*, 10: Dès le premier degré de l'existence se trouvent donc réunis: la permanence, le changement; et, dans le changement même, la tendance à la permanence.

[136] Ravaisson, *De l'Habitude*, 9: la condition universelle du changement … la condition et la forme la plus apparente et la plus élémentaire de la stabilité.

[137] Ravaisson, *De l'Habitude*, 9, 10: l'étendue mobile.

Inorganic life has 'destiny',[138] whereas nature, on a scale from vegetation to human beings, can develop habit. Vegetation exhibits 'little access'[139] to habit; for animals, the 'permanence and change'[140] of each different individual provide the context for habit; in human beings' consciousness 'bursts forth intelligence and will';[141] and 'it is … in consciousness alone that we can find habit's pattern'.[142] We now have less reason to draw such clear boundaries, so today we are more able to extend into an understanding of the entire universe Ravaisson's conception of habit as 'a disposition related to a change, established in a being by the continuity or repetition of the very same change'.[143] Habit requires change that exhibits continuity, or patterning through time: and we can now find reasons for applying the concept of habit to the patterned action that we call inorganic matter.

It is instructive to apply to Ravaisson's *De L'Habitude* the 'extension' element of the methodology that we have developed in order to study Blondel's concept of action. Ravaisson restricted 'nature' to the organic, but if we reinterpret it as denoting both the organic and the inorganic then we can extend the sense of Ravaisson's *De l'Habitude* to a broader discussion of habit as the way in which the universe and every part of it gives birth to changing patterns within ubiquitous action: for instance, for Ravaisson, 'the history of Habit represents the return of liberty to nature, or perhaps the invasion of liberty's domain by a natural spontaneity.'[144] No rewriting is required to apply this passage to the cosmos as a whole: a possibility understood by Boutroux when he

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[138] destin.

[139] Ravaisson, *De l'Habitude*, 16: peu d'accès.

[140] Ravaisson, *De l'Habitude*, 17: la permanence et le changement.

[141] Ravaisson, *De l'Habitude*, 24: dans la conscience éclatent l'intelligence et la volonté.

[142] Ravaisson, *De l'Habitude*, 25: c'est … dans la conscience seule que nous pouvons trouver le type de l'habitude.

[143] Ravaisson, *De l'Habitude*, 8: une disposition, à l'égard d'un changement, engendrée dans un être par la continuité ou la répétition de ce même changement.

[144] Ravaisson, *De l'Habitude*, 75: L'histoire de l'Habitude représente le retour de la Liberté à la Nature, ou plutôt l'invasion du domaine de la liberté par la spontanéité naturelle.

extended the concept of habit to laws of nature.[145] It is not only we who are constituted by habit, but the universe is as well. All of it is change informed by stability, and stability generated by change: action in patterns, and constantly changing patterns of action.

A more appropriate title of Ravaisson's book would have been the appropriately ambiguous *De l'Habitude dans l'Action* ('Habit in Action'). Given the strong echoes of Ravaisson's *De l'Habitude* in Blondel's 1893 *L'Action*, both in the general direction of its thought and in its detail, it is difficult to understand why Blondel makes no mention of Ravaisson. It is not until we get to the 1936 *L'Action* and the later *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétienne* that we find Ravaisson explicitly referenced.[146]

In his 1868 *La Philosophie en France au XIXe Siècle* ('Philosophy in France during the Nineteenth Century') Ravaisson responds to Immanuel Kant's breaking apart of the world into noumena and phenomena, to the subsequent phenomenology that located itself entirely on the side of the human exploration of phenomena, to utilitarianism, and to a variety of other philosophies of the nineteenth century. Ravaisson proposes 'another philosophy'[147] focused on an 'obscure force'[148] that was not subject to the sciences but within which they could operate.[149]

Throughout his survey of nineteenth century French philosophy, Ravaisson pays particular attention to philosophers' discussions of action. For instance, he interprets Aristotle's discussion of Being in terms of potential and actuality but also in terms of 'effective, actual existence ... which constitutes the action or act, source and foundation

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[145] Émile Boutroux, *De la Contingence des Lois de la Nature* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1898), 3; Adam C. English, "'Science cannot Stop with Science': Maurice Blondel and the Sciences," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 2 (2008): 269–92, 271.

[146] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action, Tome I* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1936), 375; Maurice Blondel, *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien, Tome I*, fourth edition (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1950: originally published in 1944), 235, 248.

[147] Ravaisson, *La Philosophie en France au XIXe Siècle*, 278, 275: une autre philosophie.

[148] Ravaisson, *La Philosophie en France au XIXe Siècle*, 278, 275: force obscure.

[149] Simone D'Agostino, "Une Philosophie de l'Action. L''Autre' Métaphysique de Félix Ravaisson," in *Maurice Blondel et la Philosophie Française*, edited by Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet, 61–77 (Paris: Éditions Parole & Silence, 2007), 65–66.

of movement, and cause, through movement, of being and unity';[150] he suggests that Aristotle defined 'perfection by action';[151] he discusses the idea that we experience 'an action that is not only a reality like sensations, but which is what is real in them par excellence';[152] and he also discusses a first cause:

> From action to action, from power to power, reason obliges us to go back to a power that is finally sufficient in itself, that is to say to a first cause, which of course can only be a perfect spontaneity.[153]

This first cause Ravaisson is happy to name 'God',[154] and he is equally happy to recognise that God is

> on the one hand, above things, perfection, which is the final cause; on the other, underneath things, absolute existence, which is the efficient cause, and which the final cause attracts to itself.[155]

D'Agostino suggests that Ravaisson's philosophy destroys a metaphysics of substance.[156] It does, but it does not destroy metaphysics. Instead, it creates a new metaphysics of action, for as Ravaisson brings to a close his survey of nineteenth-century French philosophy, he reiterates a philosophy in which action is everywhere, so that even

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[150] Ravaisson, *La Philosophie en France au XIXe Siècle*, 2: l'existence effective, actuelle … c'est celle que constitue l'action ou acte, source et fond du movement, et cause, par le movement, de l'être et de l'unité.

[151] Ravaisson, *La Philosophie en France au XIXe Siècle*, 122: la perfection par l'action.

[152] Ravaisson, *La Philosophie en France au XIXe Siècle*, 122: une action qui n'est pas seulement une réalité comme les sensations, mais qui est ce qu'elles ont par excellence de réel.

[153] Ravaisson, *La Philosophie en France au XIXe Siècle*, 78: D'action en action, de puissance en puissance, la raison nous oblige-t-elle à remonter jusqu'à une puissance qui se suffise enfin à elle seule, c'est-a-dire à une cause première, qui ne peut être évidemment qu'une parfaite spontanéité.

[154] Dieu.

[155] Ravaisson, *La Philosophie en France au XIXe Siècle*, 124: d'un côté, au-dessus des choses, la perfection, qui est la cause finale; de l'autre, au fond des choses, l'existence absolue, qui est la cause efficiente, et qu'appelle à soi la cause finale.

[156] D'Agostino, "Une Philosophie de l'action," 66.

'tending to action is already to act; tendency is action': [157] and existence is action as well. Ravaisson posits 'a spiritual realism or positivism' [158] in which 'the mind takes into itself an existence and understands that all other existence derives from it and depends on it: an existence that is none other than its action'. [159]

Both the general direction and some of the detail of Ravaisson's philosophy as we find it in both *De l'Habitude* and in *La Philosophie en France au XIXe Siècle* are reflected in Blondel's first recorded mention of an intention to study action in 1882 in which he discusses texts from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and suggests that knowledge cannot be prior to action because it relies on it: [160]

> to do is anterior as well as superior … knowledge is a consequence … the doctrine of action founds the logic of the proposed three stages [of sensible substance, immutable substance, and matter]. [161]

The same ideas can be found in the 1893 *L'Action* and in the trilogy. Paul Archambault recognises Ravaisson's works as a considerable influence on Blondel's philosophy, [162] and D'Agostino goes as far as to suggest that *L'Action* would not have been possible if Blondel had not read Ravaisson. [163] Clearly we cannot prove that, but it is perfectly possible that

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[157] Ravaisson, *La Philosophie en France au XIXe Siècle*, 278: tendre à l'action est déjà agir; tendance est action.

[158] Ravaisson, *La Philosophie en France au XIXe Siècle*, 278, 275: un réalisme ou positivisme spiritualiste.

[159] Ravaisson, *La Philosophie en France au XIXe Siècle*, 275: l'esprit prend en lui-même d'une existence dont il reconnaît que toute autre existence dérive et dépend, et qui n'est autre que son action.

[160] D'Agostino, "Une Philosophie de l'Action," 67–68, 71–73.

[161] Maurice Blondel, "La Première Notule," in Simone D'Agostino, *Dall'atto all'Azione: Blondel e Aristotele nel Progetto de 'L'Action'*, 440–41 (Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1999): ποιειν est antérieur aussi bien que supérieur … γινωσκην es tune consequence … La doctrine de l'action fonde la logique du tiers admis cf Mét. A.II.1069.b.6_.

[162] Paul Archambault, *L'Oeuvre Philosophique de Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Librairie Bloud & Gay, 1928), 37.

[163] D'Agostino, "Une Philosophie de l'Action," 77.

Blondel's total concentration on action in his 1893 *L'Action* was at least encouraged by a reading of Ravaisson. What is beyond doubt is that, in Peter Henrici's words, Blondel went further than either Maine de Biran or Ravaisson in constructing 'a realism or spiritual positivism of which neither Ravaisson nor Maine de Biran would have dared to dream'.[164]

Leibniz and Spinoza

Leibniz was always a significant inspiration for Blondel, particularly in relation to the concept of infinity integral to the differential calculus—which he might or not have been the first to discover—to his scientific method,[165] and to his proposal of a '*vinculum substantiale*', a 'substantial bond' that connected the individual monads out of which the universe was created.[166] When Blondel submitted his thesis *L'Action* in 1893, he also had to submit a thesis in Latin, and chose as his subject the *vinculum substantiale*. As Jean Brun points out, as far as Blondel was concerned, there was nothing static about the *vinculum*:

> There was in this dynamism something that seduced the philosopher of *L'Action* for whom thought gradually takes form and organization, interiority and initiative, to become conscious, to ascend to reason and intelligence, and on up

[164] Peter Henrici, "Les Structures de *L'Action* et la Pensée Française," in *Maurice Blondel: Une Dramatique de la Modernité*, 32–43 (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1990), 43.

[165] Conway, *The Science of Life*, 189–373; Fiachra Long, Review of Michael A. Conway, *The Science of Life*, *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 67, no. 4 (2002): 402–4.

[166] Maurice Blondel, "La Première Notule," in Simone D'Agostino, *Dall'atto all'Azione: Blondel e Aristotele nel Progetto de 'L'Action'*, 440–41 (Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1999); Donald Rutherford, "Metaphysics: The Late Period," in *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*, edited by Nicholas Jolley, 124–75 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 160–62. Rutherford calls the *vinculum substantiale* a 'theory of baroque complexity'.

> to the threshold of the mystery of being and of divine thought, animated as it is by the thrust of a force making us feel and experience that we are eternal.[167]

Leibniz is referenced throughout Blondel's oeuvre, and increasingly so as the trilogy progressed. As Paul Gilbert suggests, phenomena function as a *vinculum* that connects theory and practice, the universal and the particular;[168] and as David Grumett has discovered, the *vinculum substantiale* gave to Blondel a means of understanding the substance of the Eucharistic elements in terms of action: [169]

> The question raised by Leibniz and des Bosses concerning transubstantiation during the Eucharist leads us to conceive of Christ, without detriment to the constituent monads, as the bond which makes substantiation possible, the vivifying agent for all creation: *vinculum perfectionis*.[170]

The bonding characteristic of the *vinculum substantiale*, and the dynamic character that Blondel was able to impose on it, were what attracted Blondel to Leibniz's proposal; and we can understand a dynamic ubiquitous *vinculum* as one of the factors underlying the evolution of action from human action to action in general across Blondel's oeuvre.

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[167] Jean Brun, "Leibniz et Blondel," in *Hommage à Maurice Blondel*, 25–37 (Paris: Société les Belles Lettres, 1962), 28.

[168] Paul Gilbert, "Le Phénomène, la Médiation et la Métaphysique: Le Dernier Chapitre de 'L'Action' (1893) de Maurice Blondel: Seconde Partie," *Gregorianum* 70, no. 2 (1989): 291–319, 302: L'être du phénomène est un *vinculum* qui rassemble l'entendement actif et la sensibilité passive et qui noue en lui l'universalité de l'entendement conceptualisant et la singularité de la sensibilité concrète.

[169] David Grumett, "Blondel, Modern Catholic Theology and the Leibnizian Eucharistic Bond," *Modern Theology* 23, no.4 (2007): 561–77, 568.

[170] Blondel, Maurice. Paper of 5 December 1919. In *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin—Maurice Blondel:*
Correspondence (New York: Herder and Herder, 1976), 23, quoted in David Grumett, "Blondel, Modern Catholic Theology and the Leibnizian Eucharistic Bond," *Modern Theology* 23, no.4 (2007): 561–77, 568.

In 1893 Blondel's colleague Victor Delbos published a book about Spinoza's philosophy to which Blondel wrote two responses in 1894 that reveal Spinoza's thought to have been an early influence on Blondel's method of immanence, by which he meant that all philosophy must set out from phenomena and that those phenomena give access to a transcendence.[171] The articles show that Blondel found in Spinoza's works a human reason that provided a 'spiritual dwelling ... an ethic' that 'has finally completely encompassed the entire metaphysical problem and become a doctrine of being and life ...'[172] and that 'aims analytically to condense the very idea of duty and morality ... into the free march and synthetic progress of action'.[173] Apart from the two 1894 articles, Spinoza is not particularly in evidence early on,[174] but is increasingly referenced in the trilogy. Spinoza believed there to be a single substance[175] with a divine character to which we, everyone else, and everything else, belong as modes of being:[176] an idea

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[171] Maurice Blondel, *Oeuvres Complètes*, *Tome II*, edited by Claude Troisfontaines (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 61–88: Il y avait dans ce dynamisme de quoi séduire le philosophe de *L'Action* pour qui la pensée prend peu à peu forme et organisation, intériorité et initiative, pour devenir consciente, monter à la raison et à l'intelligence jusqu'au seuil du mystère de l'être et de la pensée divine, animée qu'elle est par la poussée d'une force nous faisant sentir et éprouver que nous sommes éternels.

[172] Blondel, *Oeuvres Complètes*, *Tome II*, 62, an article in *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne*, ns 30 (128) (1894), 260–75, 261: Une demeure spirituelle … une éthique … a fini par envelopper le problème métaphysique tout entier et par devenir une doctrine de l'être et de la vie …

[173] Blondel, *Oeuvres Complètes*, *Tome II*, 73, an article in *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne*, ns 30 (128) (1894), 260–75, 274: Se propose de réduire analytiquement l'idée même du devoir et de la moralité … c'est la marche libre et le progrès synthétique de l'action.

[174] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 110.

[175] Benedict de Spinoza, *On the Improvement of the Understanding; The Ethics; Correspondence*, translated by R.H.M. Elwes (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 48, 54.

[176] Jonathan Bennett, "Spinoza's Metaphysics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, edited by Don Garrett, 61–88 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 61–71.

with connections to Leibniz's *vinculum substantiale*. 'It is therefore by projecting the human into God that he succeeds in putting the divine into man. … ' [177]

> The central idea of Spinozism, the very one that seems to survive all of the outdated forms of the system, is the notion of immanence: things carry within them their explanations and justification, simply because there is a reintegration of them into the whole that includes them. We carry within ourselves the law of our destiny. [178]

Blondel often treated both Leibniz and Spinoza as philosophers to argue with rather than as conversation partners, [179] but if he had consistently understood Spinoza's single substance as the ubiquitous action that he sometimes understood Leibniz's *vinculum substantiale* to be, then he might have found himself understanding '*action*' to mean action in general rather sooner than he did.

Maine de Biran

Pierre Maine de Biran was a prolific author who treated the mind scientifically as an aspect of the human body. From his early writings:

> I would like psychology combined with physiology to give us a theory about the different illnesses of the mind and their remedies, because more physics affects our moral state than we might think. [180]

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[177] Blondel, *Oeuvres Complètes*, *Tome II*, 67–68: C'est donc en projetant l'humain en Dieu qu'il réussit à mettre le divin en l'homme.

[178] Blondel, *Oeuvres Complètes*, *Tome II*, 79: L'idée maîtresse du spinozisme, celle même qui semble survivre à toutes les formes caduques du système, c'est la notion d'immanence: les choses portent en elles leur explications et leur justification, par cela seul qu'il y en a réintégration dans le tout qui les comprend; l'homme porte en soi la loi de sa destinée.

[179] James Le Grys, "The Christianization of Modern Philosophy according to Maurice Blondel," *Theological Studies* 54, no.3 (1993): 455–84, 467–68.

[180] Pierre Maine de Biran, *Écrits de Jeunesse, 1792–1798*, Maine de Biran, Oeuvres, tome I, edited by Bernard Baertschi (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin), 1998, 162: Je

Why not treat psychology in the same way as we treat experimental physics? [181]

And so, for instance, 'my body and my self are one and the same', [182] and 'the state of our bodies, or a certain mechanism of our being, which we do not direct, determines the sum of our happy or unhappy moments'. [183] This understanding had clear philosophical consequences: for instance, in relation to René Descartes' 'I think, therefore I am' (*cogito*):

> Without the *self* or consciousness, there is no thought; without the internal apperception which is indeed my thought, there is no me: *to exist* (for oneself), *to perceive* or know that one exists, *to think*, these are all synonyms which can be substituted one for the other without changing anything at the heart of the ideas. [184]

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voudrais que la psychologie jointe à la physiologie nous donnât une théorie sur les différentes maladies de l'esprit et sur leurs remèdes, car il entre dans notre état moral plus de physique qu'on ne pense.

[181] Pierre Maine de Biran, "Journal," volume III (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1957), 19 (1794 or 1795): Pourquoi ne traite-t-on pas la psychologie comme la physique expérimentale.

[182] From an 1815 manuscript, quoted in Henri Gouhier, *Maine de Biran par Lui-même* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970), 121: mon corps et moi ne faisons qu'un.

[183] Pierre Maine de Biran, *Oeuvres Philosophiques de Maine de Biran*, volume I, edited by V. Cousin (Paris: Librairie de Ladrange, 1841), 73: L'état de nos corps ou un certain mécanisme de notre être, que nous ne dirigeons pas, détermine la somme de nos moments heureux ou malheureux.

[184] Pierre Maine de Biran, *Rapports des Sciences Naturelles avec la Psychologie*, Maine de Biran, Oeuvres, tome VIII, edited by Bernard Baertschi (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1986), 89: Sans le *moi* ou la conscience, il n'y a point de pensée; sans l'aperception interne qui est bien ma pensée, il n'y a point de moi: *exister* (pour soi-même), *s'apercevoir* ou connaître qu'on existe, *penser*, voilà autant de synonymes qui peuvent être substitués l'un et l'autre sans rien changer au fond des idées.

Descartes had not distinguished between 'our foundational consciousness' and 'our beliefs',[185] and so had not noticed that his argument was circular.[186] Maine de Biran's conclusion is that 'I exist' must be a principle from which arguments set off,[187] rather than the conclusion of an argument: but Henri Gouhier suggests that he also attempts his own '*cogito*':

> The *I* feels like *I* the moment it exerts its action on an organ. The evidence of my will affirms the correlative existence of the self and the body.[188]

For Maine de Biran, the will constituted the essence of human life:[189]

> The will, individual power free from effort and movement, differs from appetite, from need... the action which, beginning in a single centre, effects free movements, which it depends on the individual to do or not to do, is the proper symbol of a forging will.[190]

Instead of writing of 'the will', Maine de Biran sometimes employed 'soul' terminology: 'The soul only exists by exerting effort, which is its fundamental mode of existence'.[191]

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[185] Maine de Biran, *Rapports des Sciences Naturelles avec la Psychologie*, 104.

[186] Maine de Biran, *Rapports des Sciences Naturelles avec la Psychologie*, 91.

[187] Maine de Biran, *Rapports des Sciences Naturelles avec la Psychologie*, 94.

[188] Henri Gouhier, *Maine de Biran par Lui-même* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970), 118: Le *je* se sent comme *je* à l'instant où il exerce son action sur un organe. L'évidence de 'je veux' affirme l'existence corrélative du moi et du corps. (As 'je veux' can be 'I want' in the sense of desiring something, and 'I will', in the sense of willing to do something, and the latter is probably in mind here, 'je veux' has been translated 'my will'.)

[189] Ernest Naville, *Maine de Biran: Sa Vie et ses Pensées*, second edition (Paris: Didie et Compagnie, 1874), 78.

[190] Pierre Maine de Biran, *Oeuvres de Maine de Biran*, volume VIII, edited by Pierre Tisserand (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1932), 195: La volonté, puissance individuelle et libre de l'effort et du movement, diffère de l'appétit, du besoin … l'action qui, commençant dans un centre unique, effective les mouvements libres, qu'il dépend de l'individu de faire ou de ne pas faire, est le symbole propre d'une *volonté* motrice.

[191] Pierre Maine de Biran, *Oeuvres Philosophiques de Maine de Biran*, volume III, edited by V. Cousin (Paris: Librairie de Ladrange, 1841), 306: L'âme ne se sent exister que par l'effort, qui est son mode fundamental.

This led him to question whether 'our species' particular activity of the soul' [192] might not be entirely physiological, and to a recognition that the same question might be asked of the physics of the cosmos:

> Is there a single force animating all of nature, acting on enormous masses, as on the molecules or elements of bodies, cause of the general movement in raw matter, and principle of organization in organized beings? [193]

This was a century before Teilhard de Chardin was writing similar text.

Of particular interest is correspondence between Maine de Biran and André-Marie Ampère, a scientist famous for his work on electromagnetism, and after whom the amp is named. In 1807 Maine de Biran wrote to Ampère,

> Action is primitive and prior to knowledge which depends on it as its essential condition … to be constituted as *myself*, an individual subject ... must begin to move the parts of his body, to act, to make an effort. [194]

The idea that the individual is constituted by their action then appears frequently during the correspondence:

> Such a being would act first as a result of the simple spontaneity of the driving principle which is in him or which is him, without determinate intention, without foreseeing the outcome of his action; and he could thus acquire ideas of

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[192] Pierre Maine de Biran, *Oeuvres de Maine de Biran*, volume I, edited by Pierre Tisserand (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1920), 27: une activité d'âme particulière à notre espèce.

[193] Maine de Biran, *Oeuvres de Maine de Biran*, volume I, 31: Existe-t-il une force unique animant toute la nature, agissant sur les masses énormes, comme sur les molécules ou éléments des corps, cause du movement général dans la matière brute, principe de l'organisation dans les êtres organisés?

[194] Pierre Maine de Biran and André-Marie Ampère, *Correspondence Philosophique Maine de Biran—Ampère*, edited by André Robinet and Nelly Bruyère (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1993), 61, 62: L'action est primitive et antérieure à la connaissance qui en dépend comme de la cause ou de sa condition essentielle. … pour être constitué *moi*, un sujet individuel … doit commencer à mouvoir les parties de son corps, à agir, à faire effort …

> knowledge; to the exercise of his activity would be linked certain feelings or emotions, which would determine the moving being to repeat the same acts. [195]

Maine de Biran's influence on Blondel's philosophy is particularly clear in the chapter of *L'Action* on 'the body's action and the organism's psychology'. [196]

Henri Gouhier remarks that following the publication of *L'Action* in 1893 'blondélisme' was much discussed in France and beyond, and that during the early two decades of the twentieth century Blondel's was the best known contemporary philosophy in France apart from Bergson's: but as he also says, at the time of the publication of *L'Action* the best known contemporary philosophy in France was Maine de Biran's. [197]

Initially, as Henri Gouhier puts it, Maine de Biran 'demanded from the sciences what Pascal awaited from grace', [198] but always pondered religious questions, knew that God 'always takes us beyond ourselves', and wondered 'how to reconcile that with a psychological doctrine of the self'. [199] Nine years before his death he had a 'most

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[195] Maine de Biran and Ampère, *Correspondence Philosophique Maine de Biran—Ampère*, 120: Un tel être agirait d'abord par suite de la simple spontanéité du principe *moteur* qui est en lui ou qui est lui, sans intention déterminée, sans prévoir la suite de son action; et il pourrait ainsi acquérir des idées de connaissances; à l'exercice de son activité se trouverait liés quelques *sentiments* ou émotions, qui déterminerait l'être moteur à répéter les mêmes *actes*.

[196] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), 164–80: L'action du corps et la psychologie de l'organisme; Peter Henrici, "Les Structures de *L'Action* et la Pensée Française," in *Maurice Blonde: Une Dramatique de la Modernité*, 32–43 (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1990), 34.

[197] Henri Gouhier, "La Signification Historique de l'Oeuvre de Maurice Blondel," in *Hommage à Maurice Blondel*, Publications de l'Université de Dijon XXVII, 13–23 (Paris: Société les Belles Lettres, 1962), 16.

[198] Gouhier, *Maine de Biran par Lui-même*, 32.

[199] A journal note from 28 December 1818 quoted in Gouhier, *Maine de Biran par Lui-même*, 135: opère toujours la sortie de nous-mêmes … comment concilier cela avec une doctrine psychologique du moi?

intimate' religious experience [200] that led him to embrace the Christian Faith, [201] and although his journal entries took on the character of prayer, [202] he did not change his understanding that religious experience was 'a veritable *psychological fact* and not only a matter of faith', [203] and that 'the physiologists' error is to take the conditions for the cause: that of the mystics is to take no notice of the conditions.' [204] For Maine de Biran, philosophy appears to have led him to Christian faith; and for Blondel, Christian faith motivated the philosophy: a philosophy influenced by Maine de Biran's understanding of the individual constituted by their action but not until later by the 'single force animating all of nature, acting on enormous masses, as on the molecules or elements of bodies, cause of the general movement in raw matter, and principle of organization in organized beings'. [205]

Émile Boutroux

Another of Blondel's teachers who had a significant early and continuing influence on his thought was Émile Boutroux, whom we shall encounter again in chapter 4. In 1898, Boutroux wrote *De la Contingence des Lois de la Nature*, [206] about necessity, being,

[200] Naville, *Maine de Biran*, 66, quoting a journal entry from 16 April 1815.

[201] Naville, *Maine de Biran*, 80.

[202] Naville, *Maine de Biran*, 386.

[203] Maine de Biran, "Journal," volume III, 20 December 1823: Un véritable *fait psychologique* et non pas de foi seulement.

[204] Maine de Biran, "Journal," volume III, 22 November 1821: L'erreur des physiologistes consiste à prendre la condition pour la *cause*, celle de mystiques est de n'avoir aucun égard à la *condition*.

[205] Maine de Biran, *Oeuvres de Maine de Biran*, volume I, 31: Existe-t-il une force unique animant toute la nature, agissant sur les masses énormes, comme sur les molécules ou éléments des corps, cause du movement général dans la matière brute, principe de l'organisation dans les êtres organisés?

[206] Émile Boutroux, *De la Contingence des Lois de la Nature* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1898); Michael A. Conway, *The Science of Life: Maurice Blondel: Philosophy of Action and the*

matter, living beings, and human beings, in which he argued that it is through human action that we access phenomena,[207] and in which he wrote:

> Faced with the impossibility of constituting science on its own, the understanding agrees to give a role to the senses.[208]

Laws of nature are therefore contingent on experience, and so might best be described as 'habit', thus extending Ravaisson's concept of habit from human action to the action of the cosmos as a whole.[209] That same year Blondel wrote his article *L'Illusion Idéaliste* in which he similarly insisted that ideas had to take account of contingent reality.[210] It was Boutroux who first enabled Blondel to understand the importance of the sciences and of interdisciplinary scholarship.[211]

In his 1903–1905 Gifford lectures Boutroux said that

> If the spirit is ... presupposed by science itself and by the laws of nature such as this science reveals them to us, it cannot be said that spiritual life is, from the scientific point of view, a purely subjective mode of existence, baseless and worthless. If we set out from science, then from the point of view of science itself

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Scientific Method (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000), 115–87; Fiachra Long, Review of Michael A. Conway, *The Science of Life*, *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 67, no. 4 (2002): 402–4, 403.

[207] Michael A. Conway, *The Science of Life: Maurice Blondel: Philosophy of Action and the Scientific Method* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000), 157; Émile Boutroux, *De la Contingence des Lois de la Nature* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1898), 150–51.

[208] Émile Boutroux, *De la Contingence des Lois de la Nature* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1898), 3: Devant impossibilité de constituer la science à lui seul, l'entendement consent à faire une part aux sens.

[209] Nancy Cartwright, *The Dappled World: A Study of the Boundaries of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Adam C. English, "'Science cannot Stop with Science': Maurice Blondel and the Sciences," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 2 (2008): 269–92, 271.

[210] Maurice Blondel, "L'Illusion Idéaliste," *La Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 6 (6) (1898), 726–45, 45.

[211] Adam C. English, "'Science cannot Stop with Science': Maurice Blondel and the Sciences," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 2 (2008) : 269–92, 270–71.

> spiritual life is a reality, so it is consistent with reason to ask whether science itself apprehends it in its fullness.[212]

Science itself takes us beyond nature, because until they are falsified and rejected, and even when they are corroborated by evidence, theories are the product of imagination and so are metaphysical[213] and belong to the spiritual.[214]

The lectures give the strong impression that Boutroux had been exploring the relationship between 'nature and spirit'—the title of the lectures—for a number of years. However, a subsidiary interest of the lectures was specifically human action, so we have to ask whether Blondel's *L'Action* had benefited from Boutroux's early ideas about human action, Boutroux's lectures had benefited from an (unacknowledged) reading of Blondel's 1893 *L'Action*, or both.

> The first characteristic of human action is to always pursue something new ... I am faced with an infinite field of possibilities ... action is born from the feeling of a deficiency ... action, like science, involves postulates: and these postulates are fundamentally the same. What constitutes the very real and profound difference between science and action is that while science aims to eliminate intuition so as to preserve only law, action tends to absorb law so as to achieve the richest, most flexible and freest existence possible.[215]

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[212] Émile Boutroux, *La Nature et l'Esprit*, the Gifford Lectures 1903–1905 (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1926), 27: Si l'esprit est … présupposé par notre science même et par les lois de la nature telles que cette science nous les montre, or ne peut dire que la vie spirituelle soit, au point de vue scientifique, un mode d'existence purement subjectif, sans fondement et sans valeur. La vie spirituelle en tant que commençant dans la science, est, au point de vue de la science elle-même, une réalité, et il est, dès lors, conforme à la raison de se demander si la science, à elle seule, la réalise dans sa plénitude.

[213] Boutroux, *La Nature et l'Esprit*, 36; Stefano Gattei, *Karl Popper's Philososphy of Science: Rationality Without Foundations* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 33–34, 52–53.

[214] Boutroux, *La Nature et l'Esprit*, 37.

[215] Boutroux, *La Nature et l'Esprit*, 163–65: Le premier caractère de l'action humaine, c'est de toujours poursuivre quelque chose de nouveau … me face un champ infini de

We have already found these ideas in the introduction to *L'Action* that we discussed in the previous chapter, and we shall find all of them again as we study Blondel's thesis in chapter 4.

René Descartes and Nicolas Malebranche

We can interpret Blondel's studies of both Descartes and Malebranche as the construction of a spectrum, with Descartes' separation of philosophy and theology, and of the physical and the spiritual, at one end, and Malebranche's fusion of them at the other, so that we can locate Blondel's own understanding of the relationship between philosophy and theology mid-spectrum: with philosophy and the sciences separate from theology, but with particular relationships between them, and particularly philosophy's role in enabling us to think about theology—so mid-spectrum, but probably closer to Malebranche's end of it. [216] As Blondel says of Malebranche: 'it is perhaps by the points where he has profoundly distorted the Cartesian doctrine that he has contributed to further fertilizing it'. [217]

possibilités … L'action naît du sentiment d'un manque … L'action, comme la science, implique de postulats: et ces postulats sont, au fond, les mêmes. Ce qui constitut la différence très réelle et profonde de la science et de l'action, c'est que tandis que la science vise à éliminer l'intuition, pour ne conserver que le loi, l'action tend à absorber la loi, de manière à réaliser l'être le plus riche, le plus souple et le plus libre possible.

[216] Blondel, "L'Anti-Cartésianisme de Malebranche," 21; Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 272–74; Claude Troisfontaines, "Blondel et Malebranche," in *Blondel entre* L'Action *et la Trilogie*, edited by Marc Leclerc, 271–84 (Bruxelles: Éditions Lessius, 2003).

[217] Blondel, "L'Anti-Cartésianisme de Malebranche," 26: Ainsi, c'est peut-être par les points où il a dénaturé profondément la doctrine cartésienne qu'il a contribué à la féconder avantage.

Blondel's article on Descartes,[218] written in 1896, is theological in the sense that it is a defence of Descartes' Christian orthodoxy: but an important aspect of Blondel's argument to that effect is his finding that Descartes discriminates between what can be known only by faith, what can be known only by human reason, and those things that belong to faith but can also be known by reason:[219] 'Christianity is not outside the philosophy and the philosophy is not outside Christianity … He does not oppose, he does not separate, he does not combine, he distinguishes.'[220]

Blondel's distinction between philosophy and theology is similar, and, like Descartes, he gives to philosophy a role in reasoning about Christian doctrine.[221] Blondel also agrees with Descartes 'breaking all solidarity between faith and scholastic theology',[222] by which he means the Thomism that had abandoned any clear distinction between philosophy and Christianity. Blondel's verdict is that

> the centre of gravity of Cartesianism is in fact found neither on one side nor the other: it is on the axis of symmetry that allows Descartes' Christianity to compensate for, and even to provoke, as if to counterbalance it, the unlimited development of his scientific positivism:[223]

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[218] Maurice Blondel, "Le Christianisme de Descartes," *La Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 4, no. 4 (1896), 551–67.

[219] Blondel, "Le Christianisme de Descartes," 554–55.

[220] Blondel, "Le Christianisme de Descartes," 555, 557, 563: le christianisme ne soit pas en dehors d'elle et qu'elle ne soit pas en dehors du christianisme. … Le centre de gravité du cartésianisme ne se rencontre en effet ni d'un côté ni de l'autre, il se trouve sur l'axe de symétrie qui permet au christianisme de Descartes de compenser et même de provoquer, comme pour en être le contrepoids, le développement illimité de son positivisme scientifique. … Il n'oppose, il ne sépare, il ne combine pas, il distingue.

[221] Blondel, Maurice, *L'Action*, volume I (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1936), 463.

[222] Blondel, "Le Christianisme de Descartes," 555: rompre toute solidarité entre la foi et la théologie scolastique.

[223] Blondel, "Le Christianisme de Descartes," 557, 563: Le centre de gravité du cartésianisme ne se rencontre en effet ni d'un côté ni de l'autre, il se trouve sur l'axe de symétrie qui permet au christianisme de Descartes de compenser et même de

a positivism that Blondel did not entirely share,[224] as he questioned Descartes' radical distinction between philosophy and theology. For Blondel, the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation is where 'the supernatural of faith takes positive shape in nature and directly concerns the problem of extent, colour … and sensible accidents';[225] and in general Blondel is concerned that to keep philosophy and religion as far apart as Descartes did is to prevent us from reasoning about Christian doctrine and is to deny an essential relationship between ethics and Christian faith.[226] Blondel wants to keep open the boundary between the natural and the supernatural, and between philosophy and theology.

In 1916 Blondel wrote an article titled 'L'anti-cartésianisme de Malebranche'[227] in which he employs the apparent similarities between Descartes' and Malebranche's philosophies to reveal Malebranche's anticartesianism.

> While Descartes … seeks in the knowledge of God, of ourselves, and of the world, a means of obtaining, justifying, assuring, and extending our hold on nature, a means therefore of improving or even prolonging our earthly existence and of conquering the future, Malebranche, on the other hand, considers the present life, human science, and philosophy, only as the steps towards our reintegration

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provoquer, comme pour en être le contrepoids, le développement illimité de son positivisme scientifique. … Il n'oppose, il ne sépare, il ne combine pas, il distingue.

[224] Blondel, "Le Christianisme de Descartes," 556–57, 560; Jean Ferrari, "Blondel et la Philosophie Française, de Descartes à Bergson," in *Maurice Blondel et la Philosophie Française*, edited by Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet, 23–47 (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007), 31.

[225] Blondel, "Le Christianisme de Descartes," 565: le surnaturel de la foi prend positivement corps dans la nature et intéresse directement le problème de l'étendue, de la couleur … des accidents sensibles.

[226] Blondel, "Le Christianisme de Descartes," 566; Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 162–63.

[227] Maurice Blondel, "L'Anti-Cartésianisme de Malebranche," *La Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 23, no. 1 (1916): 1–26.

> into God, as the preparation and the sketched anticipation of another life, and as the means of … welcoming eternity. [228]

Blondel's point is that for Descartes, philosophy, including the positive sciences, is independent of theology, and particularly of Thomist theology, [229] but Malebranche, even though he employs Descartes' methods in relation to knowledge of the natural world,

> not only does not separate philosophy or science from religious preoccupations, but … from the outset he seeks their reunion, to the very fusion of metaphysics and speculative theology. [230]

To take a particular example: for both philosophers 'movement' [231] is an essential category, but for Descartes it is purely science that studies it, so he excludes from the study of movement 'all finalism, all mysticism', [232] whereas for Malebranche movement is an archetype in God and so is a law that God follows. [233] 'Malebranche … tends … to merge what Descartes absolutely separates'. [234]

From the beginning to the end of his philosophical career Blondel explored the relationship between philosophy and theology, and the way in which he focuses on this

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[228] Blondel, "L'Anti-Cartésianisme de Malebranche," 3: Tandis que Descartes … cherche dans la connaissance de Dieu, de nous-mêmes et du monde un moyen d'obtenir, de justifier, d'assurer, d'étendre l'emprise de l'homme sur la nature, un moyen donc d'améliorer ou même de prolonger notre existence terrestre et de conquérir l'avenir, Malebranche, lui, ne considère la vie présente, la science humaine, la philosophie que comme les échelons de notre réintégration en Dieu, comme la préparation et l'anticipation ébauchée de l'autre vie, comme le moyen … d'accueillir l'éternité.

[229] Blondel, "L'Anti-Cartésianisme de Malebranche," 2, 4.

[230] Blondel, "L'Anti-Cartésianisme de Malebranche," 4: non seulement ne sépare pas la philosophie ou la science de la préoccupation religieuse, mais ... il va d'emblée à la réunion, à la fusion même de la métaphysique et de la théologie spéculative.

[231] Blondel, "L'Anti-Cartésianisme de Malebranche," 14: mouvement.

[232] Blondel, "L'Anti-Cartésianisme de Malebranche," 14: tout finalisme, tout mysticisme.

[233] Blondel, "L'Anti-Cartésianisme de Malebranche," 15, 19.

[234] Blondel, "L'Anti-Cartésianisme de Malebranche," 21: Malebranche … tend … à fondre ce que Descartes sépare absolument.

relationship in his articles about Descartes' and Malebranche's philosophies offers evidence of the two philosophers' influence on his work on that relationship.

Saint Augustine

In 1930, so when he was already working on his trilogy, Blondel published an article titled 'Saint Augustine, The original unity and permanent life of his philosophical doctrine',[235] in which he celebrates Augustine as of 'the highest line of metaphysics, psychologists, and humanists … even where he speaks as a theologian and historian, he always remains a philosopher'.[236] Augustine had been able 'to make his reason marry his faith and his faith his reason',[237] and, taking Augustine as his model, Blondel suggests that

> there is no doctrine deserving of the name of philosophy which does not associate two apparently heterogeneous elements: a systematization of ideas that seeks the coherence of organized truths, and that in this very connection seeks a formal proof of their scientific value; and achieved intention and life response … to … the problem of universal becoming.[238]

Blondel sees that in Augustine

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[235] Maurice Blondel, "Saint Augustin, l'Unité Originale et la Vie Permanente de sa Doctrine Philosophique," *La Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 37, no. 4 (1930): 423–69: Saint Augustin, l'unité originale et la vie permanente de sa doctrine philosophique.

[236] Blondel, "Saint Augustin," 423–24: la plus haute lignée des métaphysiciens, des psychologues et des humanistes … là même où il parle en théologien et en historien, il reste toujours philosophe.

[237] Blondel, "Saint Augustin," 424: faire épouser sa raison à sa foi et sa foi à sa raison.

[238] Blondel, "Saint Augustin," 428–29: il n'y a aucune doctrine méritant le nom de philosophie, qui n'associe deux éléments en apparence hétérogènes:—systématisation d'idées visant à une cohérence de vérités organisées, et cherchant dans cette liaison même une preuve formelle de leur valeur scientifique;—intention finaliste et réponse de vie … au problème du devenir universel.

> rational research, the singularities of psychological and moral experience, and Christian experience, come together, without the philosophy thus deployed being confused with positive religion.[239]

Blondel would have written this article for the fifteenth centenary celebrations of Augustine's death in 1930 because Augustine was one of his role models[240] in relation to method, structure, and the relationships between science, philosophy, and theology,[241] and because Augustine's thought was 'both that of philosophy and of salvation ... only the Augustinian perspective allows not only Catholic philosophy, but also fully human philosophy'.[242] In relation to method, both Augustine and Blondel began with themselves: with Augustine's thoughts about himself, and Blondel's human action.[243] And for both, 'more certain and more inadequate than that which we have of ourselves, the knowledge of God is the very condition of our personal thought'.[244] Augustine was Blondel's kind of philosopher, and Blondel was Augustine's.[245]

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[239] Blondel, "Saint Augustin," 431: la recherche rationnelle, les singularités de l'expérience psychologique et morale, les données chrétiennes se rejoignent, sans que la philosophie ainsi déployée se confonde avec la Religion positive.

[240] Michel Faye, "Maurice Blondel, Disciple de Saint Augustin: Une Métaphysique de l'Incarnation," in *Maurice Blondel: La Sainteté de la Raison*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 153–64 (Paris: Hermann, 2022); René Virgoulay, *Philosophie et Théologie chez Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 167–70.

[241] Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 359–79.

[242] Maurice Blondel, *Dialogues avec les Philosophes, Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, Pascal, Saint Augustin ...* (Paris: Aubier, Éditions Montaigne, 1966), 222: à la fois celle de la philosophie et du salut … seule la perspective augustinienne permet non seulement la philosophie catholique, mais aussi la philosophie pleinement humaine.

[243] Aimé Forest, "L'Augustinisme de Blondel," in *Le Centenaire de Maurice Blondel 1861–1961 en sa Faculté des Lettres d'Aix-Marseille*, *Publications des Annales de la Faculté des Lettres Aix-en-Provence* ns 35 (1963), 35–60, 59.

[244] Blondel, "Saint Augustin," 444: plus certaine et plus inadéquate que celle que nous avons de nous, la connaissance de Dieu est la condition même de notre pensée personnelle.

[245] Blondel, *Dialogues avec les Philosophes*, 196.

Blaise Pascal

From the age of nineteen Blondel was inspired by Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* and his other works,[246] and in 1923 he wrote an article titled 'Pascal's Jansenism and anti-Jansenism'.[247] Jansenism was a spiritual movement of the seventeenth century inspired by the writings of Cornelius Jansen, Bishop of Ypres from 1636 until his death in 1638. Jansen had studied Augustine's theology, and his book, published after his death, proposed that God's grace is irresistible, and that without it we cannot follow his commandments, so we are all victims of determinism, whether natural or supernatural. Such a theology was already current at the Port Royal convent in France, and Jansen's book assisted the spread of what became a widespread rigorist movement. The movement was condemned by Pope Innocent III and persecuted across much of Europe, and by the nineteenth century it had become a theological influence and a personal piety rather than a movement centred on religious orders.[248] Blondel described Jansenism as

> evanescent with regard to Catholicism, while it has something almost harsh and provocative, the imprint of which is so strong that, to tell the truth, it seems unique in history because it is both blunt and elusive at the same time.[249]

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[246] Jean-Noël Dumont, "Blondel et Pascal," in *Maurice Blondel et la Philosophie Française*, edited by Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet, 49–59 (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007), 49.

[247] Maurice Blondel, "Le Jansénisme et l'Anti-Jansénisme de Pascal," *La Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 30, no. 2 (1923): 129–63.

[248] F.L. Cross, editor, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, second edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 727.

[249] Blondel, "Le Jansénisme et l'Anti-Jansénisme de Pascal," 131: évanescent à l'égard du catholicisme, alors cependant qu'il a quelque chose presque de dur et de provocant dont l'empreinte est si forte qu'à vrai dire il paraît unique dans l'histoire, parce double caractère contondant et insaisissable à la fois.

Blondel shows some sympathy for the movement as an expression of God's freedom, a passionate recognition of God's grace as free gift, a resultant doctrinal system inspired by Augustine, and a rejection of moral and spiritual compromise, particularly in relation to the institutional church:[250] but Jansenism had

> underestimated God and, at the same time, depreciated our vocation and the mystery and means of the transforming union,[251]

and it had found no 'stable equilibrium'[252] between grace and nature, between the supernatural and the natural.

Pascal had stayed at Port Royal, and whilst he had clearly experienced an initial conversion towards Jansenist ideas, that is not where his spirituality rested.[253] What mattered to him was the interior life as it was experienced, and not ideas about it.

> Pascal does not start from a theoretical and extrinsic hypothesis; he brings into play the hidden but always stretched spring, although so often compressed and annihilated, and what matters is to liberate it from constraints and to allow and cause it to act in all its vigour.[254]

Blondel's verdict is that Pascal was much closer to the mysticism of St John of the Cross than to the system of Port Royal:[255] 'the sense of concrete and psychological realities,

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[250] Blondel, "Le Jansénisme et l'Anti-Jansénisme de Pascal," 133–34.

[251] Blondel, "Le Jansénisme et l'Anti-Jansénisme de Pascal," 141: sous-estimé Dieu et, du même coup, déprécié la vocation de l'homme, le mystère et les voies de l'union transformante.

[252] Blondel, "Le Jansénisme et l'Anti-Jansénisme de Pascal," 142–43.

[253] Blondel, "Le Jansénisme et l'Anti-Jansénisme de Pascal," 148–49.

[254] Blondel, "Le Jansénisme et l'Anti-Jansénisme de Pascal," 151: Pascal ne part pas d'une hypothèse théorique et extrinsèque; il met en jeu le ressort caché, mais toujours tendu, quoique si souvent comprimé et annihilé, qu'il s'agit de libérer des contraintes et de laisser, de faire agir en toute sa vigueur.

[255] Blondel, "Le Jansénisme et l'Anti-Jansénisme de Pascal," 152.

not the genius of abstraction and the superstition of ideology'.[256] We can summarise Blondel's conclusion like this: Jansenism was ultimately a static set of ideas, whereas Pascal's Christian faith was centred on a dynamic relationship between the human soul and God—precisely the ethos that we find in his *Pensées*: a kind of knowing intimately related to human action and emotion as well as to the knowing of the mind.[257] As Pascal had put it:

> The heart has its reasons that reason does not know. We know that in a thousand ways. I say that the heart loves universal being naturally, and itself naturally to the extent that it devotes itself to itself.[258]

Both Pascal and Blondel experienced Christian faith in terms of human action, but where they parted company was over the role of philosophy: for Pascal, philosophy had nothing to offer to the life of the soul, whereas for Blondel the 'method of immanence' (on which see chapter 4) required cooperation between philosophy and practical religion.[259]

What we have discovered as we have discussed the articles written between 1896 and 1930 about Descartes, Malebranche, Pascal, and Augustine—authors whom Blondel clearly regarded as sources for his own philosophy and theology—is a sustained debate about the relationship between philosophy and theology, and commentary that understands human action as the lens through which those authors must be interpreted.

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[256] Blondel, "Le Jansénisme et l'Anti-Jansénisme de Pascal." (1923). La Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale 30 (2) (1923) 129–63, 160: le sens des réalités concrètes et psychologiques, non le génie de l'abstraction et la superstition de l'idéologie.

[257] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 302–5.

[258] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1976), IV, §277, 127: Le coeur a ses raisons, que la raison ne connaît point; on le sait en mille choses. Je dis que le coeur aime l'être universel naturellement, et soi-meme naturellement selon qu'il s'y adonne.

[259] Jean Ferrari, "Blondel et la Philosophie Française, de Descartes à Bergson," in *Maurice Blondel et la Philosophie Française*, edited by Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet, 23–47 (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007), 53, 56–58.

In an article written in 1907, but not published in its original form until 2022, Charles Peirce described his 'pragmatism' as 'no doctrine of metaphysics, no attempt to determine any truth of things. It is merely a method of ascertaining the meanings of hard words and of abstract concepts': [260] and that method is 'scientific' in the sense that it seeks the meaning of concepts empirically. [261]

> The affirmation and denial of … a predicate do differ in their intrinsic significations. The one implies that the object of which it could be truly affirmed would, under some definitely conceivable circumstances, behave differently from any object of which the same predicate could be truly denied. This, to my mind, is the kernel of pragmatism. It is downright nonsense to assert that a general predicate is *real*, if no existential consequence of it is conceivably possible; and real I certainly hold a multitude of such actual predicates to be, and more than any multitude of possible predicates. It would, however, be sufficient, for the purposes of the argument to hold that they are conceivably real. Now every existential fact is an object of possible experience, and every such object might conceivably affect anybody's rational conduct. [262]

Thoughts and other 'signs', such as spoken words, 'may bring about physical effects that are not signs': [263] and Peirce offers the example of a spoken instruction resulting in a cavalry charge. Here again meaning consists

> in some deed or fact, or single series of historic events, where my adjective merely means that I use the noun 'event' in the sense in which an event can happen but once, because the past is gone. [264]

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[260] Charles Peirce, "Pragmatism," *Cognito: Revista de Filosofia* 23 (1) (2022) 1–9, 4.

[261] Carol Nicholson, "Education and the Pragmatic Temperament," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pragmatism*, edited by Alan Malachowski, 249–71 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 253.

[262] Peirce, "Pragmatism," 4.

[263] Peirce, "Pragmatism," 6.

[264] Peirce, "Pragmatism," 6.

William James recognised Peirce as the originator of pragmatism,[265] and expressed his own understanding in similar terms:[266]

> cognition … is incomplete until discharged in act … we have acquainted with a thing as soon as we have learned how to behave towards it, or how to meet the behaviour which we expect from it.[267]

John Dewey suggested that James preserved 'loyalty to fact, respect for the humble particular, so long as it was concretely verifiable',[268] and for Dewey himself, whereas ancient philosophy denigrated 'practical action' and preferred 'self-revolving rational self-activity',[269] now 'experience' generates ideas 'within its own procedures and tests them by its own operations'.[270] What matters is 'concrete thought, the ever giving, ever rich experience';[271] and a recognition that experience is part of nature,[272] and that it is the event of conversation, and action more generally, that give meaning to events.[273] This is

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[265] Christopher Hookway, "'The Principle of Peirce' and the Origins of Pragmatism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pragmatism*, edited by Alan Malachowski, 17–35 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 17.

[266] L. Susan Stebbing, *Pragmatism and French Voluntarism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), 4, 5.

[267] William James, *Essays in Pragmatism*, edited by Alburey Castell (New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1948), 18–19.

[268] John Dewey, *Characters and Events: Popular Essays in Social and Political Philosophy*, volume I (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1929), 115.

[269] John Dewey, *Intelligence in the Modern World*, edited by Joseph Ratner (New York: The Modern Library, 1939), 290.

[270] Dewey, *Intelligence in the Modern World*, 342.

[271] John Dewey, *Philosophy, Psychology and Social Practice*, edited by Joseph Ratner (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1963), 48.

[272] J.E. Tiles, "The Primacy of Practice in Dewey's Experimental Empiricism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dewey*, edited by Molly Cochran, 101–22 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[273] Dewey, *Characters and Events*, volume I, 125–27; David Hildebrand, "Dewey's Pragmatism: Instrumentalism and Meliorism," in *The Cambridge Companion to*

an 'instrumentalism' that delivers 'warrantable assertion rather than belief or knowledge'.[274] Consequently, science is 'operations' that 'disclose relationships';[275] it is our action that creates social relationships; and 'theoretical certitude is assimilated to practical certainty: to *security*, trustworthiness of instrumental operations':[276] and whilst modern psychology does not 'hypostatize abstractions into self-subsistent individuals', it does make possible 'for the first time an adequate psychology of man's religious nature and experience … it finds no insuperable problems in the relations of faith and reason'.[277]

> Ideas are worthless except as they pass into actions which rearrange and reconstruct in some way … the world in which we live.[278]

Here action is action in general as well as human action, and reality is understood in terms of action rather than in terms of being.[279]

As Alexander Klein has pointed out, the pragmatism practised by William James, Charles Peirce, and others,[280] belong within a more general scientific approach to a variety of

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Pragmatism, edited by Alan Malachowski, 55–80 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 77

[274] James Campbell, *Understanding John Dewey: Nature and Cooperative Intelligence* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 22.

[275] Dewey, *Intelligence in the Modern World*, 331.

[276] Dewey, *Intelligence in the Modern World*, 335.

[277] Dewey, *Philosophy, Psychology and Social Practice*, 62,

[278] John Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953*, volume 4, 'The Quest for Certainty', 1929, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 111.

[279] David Hildebrand, "Dewey's Pragmatism: Instrumentalism and Meliorism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pragmatism*, edited by Alan Malachowski, 55–80 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 77.

[280] Ymko Braaksma, "Taking Pragmatism Seriously Enough: Toward a Deeper Understanding of the British Debate over Pragmatism, ca. 1900–1910," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 85 (1) (2024) 65–86, 78; Louis Quéré, "Hermeneutics, Pragmatism and

disciplines, including philosophy;[281] and they, like Blondel, problematise both Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*[282] and also Descartes' radical doubt, on the basis that in practice we are critical realists: we doubt within a general anti-scepticism, and evidence frequently enables us to replace relative doubt with settled belief.[283] We can also propose a more general relationship between pragmatism and Maurice Blondel's early philosophy, which in the 1893 thesis took an empirical approach to human action. There are clear parallels between Dewey's 'practical action' and 'concrete thought'[284] and Blondel's prioritising of 'the singular and the concrete … such is always the object of the science of action';[285] and as Carol Nicholson suggests, Blondel and other French philosophers of the same period 'were responsive to James's views, but most of them

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Sociology: Pragmatism's Advantage," *The American Sociologist* 52 (2021) 798–820, 799; James Williams, "Fantastic Pragmatism," *Noema* 13 (2022) 62–75.

[281] Alexander Klein, "How American is Pragmatism," *Philosophy of Science* 88 (2021) 849–59.

[282] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique*, Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1993, first published in 1893, 452; Joseph Margolis, "Pragmatism Regained: An Answer to my Commentators," *Metaphilosophy* 52 (1) (2021) 75–91, 89.

[283] Christopher Hookway, "'The Principle of Peirce' and the Origins of Pragmatism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pragmatism*, edited by Alan Malachowski, 17–35 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 21–25; Edward C. Moore, *American Pragmatism*: *Peirce, James, and Dewey* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1961), 180.

[284] Dewey, *Intelligence in the Modern World*, 290; Dewey, *Philosophy, Psychology and Social Practice*, 48.

[285] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893), 207: Le singulier et le concret, c'est-à-dire ce qu'ignorent les sciences positives nécessairement bornées à l'abstrait et au général, tel est toujours l'objet de la science de l'action; Fiachra Long, "Introduction," in Maurice Blondel, *The Idealist Illusion and Other Essays*, translated by Fiachra Long, 1–74 (Dordrecht: Spring Science and Business Media, 2000), 40.

had already developed similar lines of thought'.[286] In Blondel's case this correspondence extended to an understanding of religion as relevant human action.

Once the initial printing of the 1893 *L'Action* had been sold, Blondel refused to permit a reprinting so as to limit the possibility of misunderstandings of the text being used against him. This did not prevent the publication of an unauthorised Italian translation, nor the circulation of copies laboriously typed out by students. William James, not being able to find a copy, wrote to Blondel, who lent him his own. James's interest is understandable as Blondel's philosophy of action and his own pragmatism were quite similar.[287] However, there was a significant difference. For Blondel, human action indicated an immanent transcendence, and it was human action that needed to be understood, whereas for the pragmatists human action gave meaning to statements rather than being the focus of attention itself. In *L'Action*, Blondel wrote that

> The subject is scientifically bound to the object, contains it, and transcends it ... we only penetrate its living reality by placing ourselves not at the static point of view of the understanding, but at the dynamic point of view of the will.[288]

The entire system is dynamic, it is innately and permanently incomplete, it constantly refers beyond itself and beyond 'the understanding', and we are intimately involved ourselves. This is very different from the American pragmatism in which we are static observers evaluating isolated actions for their usefulness in providing meaning to statements. And whilst Peirce's pragmatism initially looks more socially and politically engaged than Blondel's, the unengaged nature of the human subject, the isolated nature of every action, and the often emotion-driven usefulness criterion, mean that coherent social and political action becomes impossible. It is Blondel's human action in a contingent world, driven by a willed will but reaching for the completion willed by the

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[286] Carol Nicholson, "Education and the Pragmatic Temperament," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pragmatism*, edited by Alan Malachowski, 249–71 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 251.

[287] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 286–88.

[288] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893), 97, 100: Le sujet est relié scientifiquement à l'objet, et le contient, et le dépasse … on n'en pénètre la vivante réalité qu'en se plaçant non pas au point de vue statique de l'entendement, mais au point de vue dynamique de la volonté.

willing will, that demands social and religious completion and, finding itself still incomplete, yearns for the transcendent. [289]

It would appear that Blondel coined the French term '*pragmatisme*' to describe his own philosophy in complete ignorance of Pierce's pragmatism, but then in order to avoid confusion ceased to use the term when he discovered Pierce's somewhat different usage, and instead employed 'philosophy of action': [290] a term that aligned his work with a more general French philosophical understanding that 'philosophy of action' meant 'philosophy of human action'. [291] As Stebbing suggests, Blondel's 'philosophy of action' is closer to the French 'Voluntarism' represented by Félix Ravaisson, [292] and both Ravaisson and Blondel reach beyond contingent human action to social and religious action and from there to a transcendence.

The subtitle of Blondel's 1893 thesis was '*Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique*, but the 'science of practice' [293] was not pragmatism, and we can understand why Blondel decided to abandon '*pragmatisme*' terminology. However, we can also understand pragmatism's and Blondel's methods as complementary, and that a combination of the two methods could offer a way of understanding both concepts and human action within an overall understanding of reality as action in changing patterns.

Henri Bergson?

[289] Stebbing, *Pragmatism and French Voluntarism*, 87.

[290] Susan L. Stebbing, *Pragmatism and French Voluntarism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), 85.

[291] Bertrand Saint-Sernin, "Blondel et l'École Française de l'Action," in *Maurice Blondel et la Philosophie Française*, edited by Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet, 103–21 (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007).

[292] Stebbing, *Pragmatism and French Voluntarism*, 8–9.

[293] science de la pratique

It is perhaps unfortunate that there was hardly any contact between Bergson and Blondel during their philosophical careers.[294] By the time he published the revised *L'Action* in 1936 Blondel had clearly read Bergson, but only it seems to find fault with the concept of an '*élan vital*', a ubiquitous trajectory in the action and change that constitute the world: a concept that Blondel believed to be without empirical foundation, that drew attention away from human action, that minimized our moral responsibility, and that failed to take seriously the transcendent indicated by human thought and action.[295] In 1936 he even accused of 'idolatry'[296] the

> literal sense which, under the name of *élan vital*, would presume to achieve the mystical union and to create a God in us, but also the idolatry of absorption in this whole where being and nothingness are absolutely confused.[297]

This is entirely unfair. Bergson was doing philosophy, not theology, whereas by 1936 Blondel's philosophy was increasingly theological.

Bergson and Blondel lived in very different philosophical worlds: the former in a secular academic world, and the latter in a largely Roman Catholic academic milieu. For Bergson the active universe was the fundamental reality,[298] whereas Blondel wanted to be 'a philosopher of the Christian spirit',[299] and so needed a philosophy of everything,

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[294] Claude Troisfontaines, ed., *Journées d'Études, 9–10 Novembre 1974: Blondel, Bergson, Maritain, Loisy* (Louvain: Institut Supérieur de Philosophie de Louvain, 1977), 5.

[295] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1, Le Problème des Causes Secondes et le Pur Agir* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1936), 154, 272, 286; *L'Action*, *Tome II, L'Action Humaine et les Conditions de son Aboutissement* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1936), 40, 528; Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 353–56.

[296] idolâtre.

[297] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936) 528: du sens propre qui, sous le nom d'élan vital, présumerait de réaliser l'union mystique et de fabriquer un Dieu en nous, mais aussi l'idolâtrie de l'absorption dans ce tout où l'être et le néant se confondent absolument.

[298] Paul Archambault, *Initiation à la Philosophie Blondélienne en Forme de Court Traité de Métaphysique* (Paris: Librairie Bloud & Gay, 1941), 115–16.

[299] Jean Lacroix, *Maurice Blondel: Sa Vie, son Oeuvre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), 10–11: un philosophe de l'esprit chrétien.

including religion.[300] Bergson's philosophy of the *élan vital* implied a spiritual foundation for reality, but there was no appeal to revelation as a parallel source of knowledge, whereas for Blondel human action and the universe pointed beyond themselves to a more fundamental transcendence,[301] so for the philosopher 'it's a matter of discovering a supernatural need in the human heart'.[302] This commitment became more pronounced during Blondel's philosophical career, and particularly in the trilogy, perhaps because he had recognized that his 1893 *L'Action* could be interpreted in a Bergsonian direction: that is, with human action understood as just one facet of the action that constitutes the universe[303]—potentially a danger to Blondel because the first three of Bergson's books had been placed on the Vatican's index of prohibited books in 1906.[304] This is just one factor that could have been both cause and symptom of the distant and often negative relationship between Bergson and Blondel, in relation to which Jean Ferrari expresses his surprise

> at Bergson's silence on Blondel and the almost aggressive incomprehension that Blondel showed towards Bergson. From the same generation, having had the same masters—Bergson left the École Normale Supérieure at the same time as Blondel was entering it—both driven by the highest philosophical demands, and whose works shaped twentieth century French philosophy, they probably never really encountered each other.[305]

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[300] Lacroix, *Maurice Blondel*, 11.

[301] Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron, "Blondel et Bergson," in *Maurice Blondel et la Philosophie Française*, edited by Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet, 125–39 (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007), 137–39.

[302] Lacroix, *Maurice Blondel*, 10: il s'agit de découvrir au coeur de l'homme le besoin surnaturel.

[303] Henri Bergson, *L'Évolution Créatrice* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1959). First published in 1907: *Creative Evolution*.

[304] Vieillard-Baron, "Blondel et Bergson," 135.

[305] Jean Ferrari, "Blondel et la Philosophie Française, de Descartes à Bergson," in *Maurice Blondel et la Philosophie Française*, edited by Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet, 23–47 (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007), 40: devant le silence de Bergson sur Blondel et l'incompréhension presque agressive dont Blondel a fait preuve à l'égard de Bergson. De la même génération, ayant eu les mêmes maîtres—Bergson sortait de l'École Normale

But perhaps Bergson did perform at least one positive role for Blondel. As Paul Archambault suggests, Bergson had established

> the triple supremacy … of spiritual activity over its material conditions, voluntary activity over its inner or outer determinations, and creative activity over its own resources: and the secondary causes that it admits to its cooperation. The soul, freedom, and God, have regained their character as autonomous realities, effective causes, and perfect acts. [306]

We have discovered multiple factors that would have influenced Blondel's focus on human action, so there is no reason to think that he drew his ideas from Bergson's works: but Bergson had clearly helped to establish the intellectual atmosphere within which the trilogy was written, and latterly appears to have provided some ideas against which Blondel could sharpen his own. Bergson had treated human action as a distinct reality:

> there is neither a rigid immovable substratum nor distinct states passing over it like actors on a stage. There is simply the continuous melody of our inner life—a melody which is going on and will go on, indivisible, from the beginning to the end of our conscious existence: [307]

Supérieure au moment où Blondel y entrait—habités l'un et l'autre par l'exigence philosophique la plus haute et dont les oeuvres marquent la philosophie française du XXe siècle, ils ne se sont sans doute jamais vraiment rencontrés.

[306] Paul Archambault, *L'Oeuvre Philosophique de Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Librairie Bloud & Gay, 1928), 37: la triple suprématie … de l'activité spirituelle sur ses conditions matérielles, de l'activité volontaire sur ses déterminations intérieures ou extérieures, de l'activité créatrice sur les causes secondes qu'elle admet à sa coopération. L'âme, la liberté et Dieu ont retrouvé leur caractère de réalités autonomes, de causes effectives, d'actes parfaits.

[307] Henri Bergson, *La Pensée et le Mouvant: Articles et Conférences Datant de 1903 à 1923* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1969), 106; Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, translated by M.L. Andison from *La Pensée et le Mouvant: Articles et Conférences Datant de 1903 à 1923* (Westport: Greenwood, 1946), 176.

but his focus was always on action in general as the basis of reality in general: '*there are changes, but there are underneath the change no things which change*'.[308] For Bergson, the whole of reality was understood in terms of action, movement, and change, whereas for Blondel this was initially the case only in relation to human beings, and only later do we find the possibility of defining reality as a whole in terms of action.

Thomas Aquinas[309]

Thomas Aquinas's theological philosophy exerted increasing influence on Blondel, both directly through his reading of Aquinas, and indirectly through Aquinas's significant influence on the Roman Catholic Christian doctrine of Blondel's time. The way in which a somewhat restricted version of Aquinas's philosophy was employed by the neo-Thomism popular with the Action Française social movement meant that Blondel was initially suspicious of the Thomist roots of neo-Thomism: but by 1899 he was reading Aquinas for himself, and by 1910 he had added Thomas Aquinas to the course that he was teaching on the history of philosophy and so had to read even more deeply in Aquinas's texts, and particularly the *Summa contra Gentiles*. Blondel never wrote the book about Thomas Aquinas's philosophy that he had once thought of writing, but he was increasingly persuaded of the continuing relevance and value of his writings, both to philosophy and to Christian theology, on which the 'Angelic Doctor' had had perhaps more influence than anyone since Jesus, Paul, and the gospel-writers. Aquinas is frequently and positively referenced in the 1930s trilogy.[310]

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[308] Bergson, *La Pensée et le Mouvant*, 104: *Il y a des changements, mais il n'y a pas, sous le changement, de choses qui changent*; Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 173. Italics in the original.

[309] Malcolm Torry, *Actology: Action, Change and Diversity in the Western Philosophical Tradition* (Eugene, OR: Resource/Wipf and Stock, 2020), 70–79.

[310] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 179, 267–72.

During the thirteenth century the Dominican friar Thomas Aquinas employed Aristotle's philosophy, which had recently become available in Europe via Muslim philosophers, to provide a conceptual structure for the theology of the Catholic Church. Aristotle's basic concepts were '*to on*', 'being'; '*ousia*', 'substance'; '*hulē*', 'matter'; '*to ti estin*' or similar, 'essence'; and '*morphē*' or '*eidos*', 'form':

> 'being' is used in various senses, but always with reference to one principle. For some things are said to 'be' because they are substances; others because they are modifications of substance; others because they are a process towards substance … [311]
>
> By matter I mean, for instance, bronze; by shape, the arrangement of the form; and by the combination of the two, the concrete thing: the statue. [312]

There is often confusion about the relationships between these concepts—for instance, the 'essence' of a thing, for which the verb 'to be' is used, '*to ti ēn einai*', 'the what it is to be', [313] is often interchangeable with 'substance', and we often find translations into English employing different English words to translate the same Greek word, and the same English word to translate a variety of the Greek terms. However, what is perfectly clear is that the priority that Aristotle gives to being, substance, matter, form, and essence, privileges Being over Action and beings over actions.

Aristotle of course understood that things change: for instance, things move, they change from potentiality to actuality, [314] or the temporary characteristics of a thing, the

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[311] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, edited by W.D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924). English translation from *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vols. 17 and 18, translated by Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, and London: William Heinemann, 1933, 1989), IV, 1003b5–8.

[312] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, VII, 1029a5–8.

[313] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 983a28.

[314] Aristotle, *Physics*, with an English translation from the *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics by St. Thomas Aquinas*, translated by Richard J. Blackwell et al. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), III, 1.

'accidents' ('*to sumbebēkos*', 'the thrown together'), might change. Aristotle suggested that there are four kinds of cause: the formal, material, efficient, and final causes.

> Of these we hold that one is the essence or essential nature of the thing (since the 'reason why' of a thing is ultimately reducible to its formula, and the ultimate 'reason why' is a cause and principle); another is the matter or substrate; the third is the source of motion ['*kinēseos*']; and the fourth is the cause which is opposite to this, namely the purpose or 'good'; for this is the end of every generative or motive process. [315]

The basic concepts listed above, and the four causes, suggest a rather static conception of reality: but if with Aryeh Kosman we regard '*energeia*' as a basic concept, and understand it as 'activity' rather than as 'actuality', and if we understand '*dunamis*' as 'capacity' rather than as 'potential', then we shall understand reality as the exercise of a capacity for activity rather than as the actualising of a potential: [316] an understanding that coheres with a recognition that '*ousia*', 'substance', has its origins in the verb 'to be'. Aristotle employs '*energeia*' to conceptualise an individual substance as 'the activity of a thing being what it is', [317] so a human being is 'at work being human'. [318] Coherent with this is that the First Mover is 'the *energeia* of divine substance'. [319] So Aristotle's ontology is one of 'being as activity' [320] and has as 'a central and governing concept … *the activity of being*'. [321]

> Knowing that substance is the paradigmatic form of being, and understanding now that this substance is *the activity of those things that are able to be fully what they are, being what they are*, we understand being. [322]

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[315] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 983a24–35.

[316] Aryeh Kosman, *The Activity of Being: An Essay on Aristotle's Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), vii–viii.

[317] Kosman, *The Activity of Being*, xi, 182,

[318] Kosman, *The Activity of Being*, 85.

[319] Kosman, *The Activity of Being*, 210.

[320] Kosman, *The Activity of Being*, 239.

[321] Kosman, *The Activity of Being*, x: italics in the original.

[322] Kosman, *The Activity of Being*, 239.

Thomas Aquinas understood that alongside Aristotle's concepts of being, essence, existence, form, and substance, we find the equally important concepts of '*energeia*', 'activity' or 'actuality', and '*motus*', which could represent qualitative and quantitative change more generally, and not just motion.[323] All of this change, Aquinas argued, stems from the motion of the heavenly spheres,[324] and ultimately from God, the 'first unmoved mover', or perhaps, given the broad meaning of '*motus*', 'first unchanging changer' could be a better translation:[325] but that term did not imply that the First Mover did not possess '*energeia*': that is, was not active. Aquinas rejects an infinite causal regress because 'then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover',[326] so any activity directly related to the First Mover cannot be like other activity, but it is activity nevertheless.

Aquinas understood the Catholic creeds to be theology, and Aristotle to be philosophy, but for him and for his colleagues the boundary between philosophy and theology would have been fluid, so making a philosophically-phrased argument for a theological commitment would not have been a problem. For Aquinas, every movement and every other change is moved or changed by other movements and changes and also by God, who continuously creates both the created order and all of its movement and at the same time remains unmoved and unchanged *and* the prime example of *energeia*. This is coherent because although change and motion are always from potentiality to actuality, and so cannot belong to God, God is 'pure act, without the admixture of any potentiality',[327] so possessing a kind of movement that is not from potentiality to

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[323] Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, translated by Pierre H. Conway from *Commentaria in Octo Libros Physicorum* (Columbus, Ohio: College of St Mary of the Springs, 1958–1962), VII, 1, §885; Simon Oliver, *Philosophy, God and Motion* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 92.

[324] Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, translated by John P. Rowan from *Sententia super Metaphysicam* (Chicago: 1961), V, 8, §873; *The Summa Theologica*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Brothers, 1947), 1a, 115, 3, responsio.

[325] Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Gentiles*, translated into English by Vernon J. Bourk (New York: Hanover House, 1955–1957), III, 64, 4.

[326] Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, I, 2, 3.

[327] Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, I, 9, 1.

actuality[328] and so does not compromise the description of God as 'pure Act'.[329] At the end of his introduction to the first volume of the 1936 *L'Action*[330] Blondel explains that both volumes are about the relationship between contingent actions and 'pure action',[331] and both are about the relationships between action, being, and thought,[332] but the first is designed 'to safeguard the pure idea of action',[333] and the second sets out 'from our human action and from experientially based reflection'.[334] By the 1930s, Blondel's philosophy was explicitly Thomist, both in relation to his own reading of Aquinas, and in relation to the 'Twenty-four Theses' that summarised the official interpretation of Aquinas's writings and in which

> potency and Act so divide being that whatsoever exists either is a Pure Act, or is necessarily composed of Potency and Act, as to its primordial and intrinsic principles.[335]

As well as '*energeia*' and '*motus*', Aristotle's other basic concepts were useful for Aquinas, and particularly useful was the medieval distinction between substance and accidents.[336] So when the priest consecrates the bread and wine at a celebration of the Eucharist, the substance of the bread can change to the substance of Christ's body, and the substance of the wine to the substance of Christ's blood, while the accidents remain those of bread and wine.[337] Even more important to Aquinas was the ability to follow the Catholic creeds in employing the concept of 'substance' to describe how Jesus can be

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[328] Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 3.

[329] Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, I, 9, 1.

[330] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936); *L'Action, Tome II* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1936).

[331] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936) 26: le pur agir.

[332] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936) 27.

[333] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936) 29: sauvegarder la pure idée de l'action.

[334] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936) 29: de notre action humaine, d'une réflexion expérimentalement nourrie.

[335] Thesis I, in Thomas Aquinas et al. *The Twenty-Four Fundamental Theses Of Official Catholic Philosophy* (Rome: Sacred Congregation of Studies, 2014).

[336] Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, III, 2, 6.

[337] Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, III, 75, 4–5.

both human and divine. The human nature in Christ is 'a particular substance' that is 'in union with a completed thing, viz. the whole Christ, as He is God and man'.[338]

Aquinas is aware that if we use human language to speak of God then we are using it analogically, but he is also clear that the root meaning of the language is in God and that we are using it analogically of ourselves.[339]

> Whatever is said of God and creatures, is said according to the relation of a creature to God as its principle and cause, wherein all perfections of things pre-exist excellently. Now this mode of community of idea is a mean between pure equivocation and simple univocation.[340]

Aquinas sometimes substitutes '*action*' for '*motus*',[341] and it is this word rather than '*motus*' that forms the connection between action and being that he expresses by the term '*in actu*'. This can be translated as either 'actually' or 'in act'. Aquinas distinguishes between '*essentia*', 'essence', and '*esse*', 'existence':[342] we can know the essence of a phoenix without knowing whether one exists.[343] Essence is therefore a potentiality, and a thing exists when the potentiality becomes '*in actu*', 'in act', 'in actuality', or 'actually'. For instance, a passage from Aquinas's *De Ente et Essentia*, 'On Being and Essence', is translated by Anthony Kenny like this:

> For through the form, which is the actuality of matter ('*est actus materiae*'), matter becomes something actual ('*ens actu*') and something individual.[344]

And by Robert Miller like this:

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[338] Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, III, 2, 3.

[339] Oliver, *Philosophy, God and Motion*, 118; Eric D. Perl, *Thinking Being: Introduction to Metaphysics in the Classical Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 175.

[340] Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, I, 13, 5.

[341] Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones Disputatae de Potentia Dei*, translated by the English Dominican Fathers (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1952), III, 7.

[342] Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, translated by Joseph Kenny (1965); Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Being* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 34; Perl, *Thinking Being*, 152–53.

[343] Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, §77.

[344] Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, §15.

> Through the form, surely, which is the act of the matter ('*est actus materiae*'), the matter is made a being in act ('*ens actu*') and a certain kind of thing. [345]

If we combine these two possible translations then we can think of a being as coming into being, from potentiality to actuality, or as generated by a constant 'act of existing' that ensures coherence between form and matter. [346] As for God, 'the first being must of necessity be in act, and in no way in potentiality.' [347] Because 'I happen' is a possible way of translating the Hebrew name of God normally translated as 'I am', [348] we can say that God happens necessarily.

As Burrell shows, Aquinas employs '*actus*' in a wide variety of contexts throughout his writings: of human action, of God's action, and of existence itself. '*Actus*' functions as a 'primitive term incapable of being reduced to any other', [349] as a 'master metaphor', and as coextensive with '*ens*', 'being'. [350]

We can see that Thomas Aquinas has expressed his conceptual structure as much in terms of 'action' as in terms of 'being', and in doing this he has aligned his use of *actus* with Aristotle's use of '*energeia*', which generally means 'energy' or 'action', [351] and can mean 'in act' or 'in actuality' when in the dative.

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[345] Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, §15.

[346] Norman Kretzmann, "Philosophy of Mind," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, edited by Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump, 128–59 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 149; John Wippel, "Metaphysics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, edited by Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump, 85–127 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 97; "Thomas Aquinas and the Axiom That Unreceived Act Is Unlimited," *The Review of Metaphysics* 51, no. 3 (1998): 533–64, 564; "Being," In *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, edited by Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[347] Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, I, 3, 1.

[348] Exodus 3:14.

[349] David Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 129.

[350] Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action*, 116–17.

[351] Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1889).

In both Aristotle and Aquinas, the connection between actuality and act is formed by the act that brings something into existence. The act delivers actuality. So while we can still translate both '*energeia*' and '*in actu*' as 'actually', we also need to keep in mind the fact that something exists *actually* because it has come into existence and there is a constant act of being. Action has occurred, and there is constant action. The consequence is that every being, including God, in order to exist at all, must exist '*in actu*': and here Aquinas would have found support in Aristotle's balancing of an unmoved mover with a God who is '*energeia*', 'action' or 'energy'.

> The activity [*energeia*] of God, which is transcendent in blessedness, is the activity of contemplation; and therefore, among human activities, that which is most akin to the divine activity of contemplation will be the greatest source of happiness.[352]

However, this is a direction that Blondel would have hesitated to take. To have understood '*in actu*' to mean 'in act' or 'in action' in relation to God would have constructed a second fundamental concept '*l'Action*', 'Action', alongside '*l'Être*', 'Being', that could have led to an understanding of a God who not only acts but who is action. First of all, this would have dislodged from their primary position such concepts as substance, essence, being, Being, nature, form, and so on, and would have compromised the basis for an understanding of transubstantiation in Eucharistic doctrine, and of the divine and human substances or natures in Jesus Christ; and secondly, to have understood God, Jesus, and the Eucharist, in terms of action rather than in terms of being, would have given to Blondel an understanding of God, the Eucharist, and other aspects of Christian doctrine, that would not have gone down well with the ecclesiastical authorities. So we can conclude that when in later life Blondel decided to write a trilogy that started with Thought, and with its contingent manifestations as human thought, then moved on to Being and beings, and only then to a reconsideration of Action,[353] understanding it as the category of action in general and no longer just as that of human

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[352] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by H. Rackham from *Ethica Nicomachea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, and London: William Heinemann, 1934), 1178b22–24.

[353] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893); *L'Action* (1936) I; *L'Action* (1936) II.

action, the shift was inevitable now that twentieth century scientific developments had shown that the whole universe is constant and ubiquitous action in changing patterns.

As we study Blondel's works we shall find that his attitude to Thomas Aquinas's theophilosophy evolved: an evolution made possible by the considerable diversity of interpretations that can be made of Thomas Aquinas's oeuvre, from mystical Platonist interpretations, through positivist Aristotelian understandings, to a rigid intellectual systematising [354] 'while rigorously evicting any intellectual dynamism'. [355] It was this diversity that made possible Blondel's transition from rejection of *L'Action Française*'s rigid neo-Thomist systematising to an appreciation of more dynamic and spiritual interpretations of Aquinas once he started to read Aquinas for himself in 1899: [356] a transition made feasible by the fading of *L'Action Française*'s influence and by the wide diversity of interpretations of Aquinas's theophilosophy circulating at the time, [357] and at least partly motivated by Blondel's desire to fend off ecclesiastical condemnation of his philosophy: a desire all the more insistent because his own and his wife's committed Roman Catholic families were constantly anxious about the possibility of such condemnation, [358] as was Blondel himself. [359] However, this did not mean that Blondel

[354] Emmanuel Tourpe, "Blondel et le Thomisme: Influences réciproques et irréductibles singularités," in *Blondel entre* L'Action *et la Trilogie*, edited by Marc Leclerc, 52–65 (Bruxelles: Éditions Lessius, 2003), 53: en une rigoureuse éviction du dynamisme intellectuel.

[355] Tourpe, "Blondel et le Thomisme: Influences réciproques et irréductibles singularités," 53. Le thomisme est une ontologie spirituelle, le blondélisme un spiritualisme réaliste.

[356] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 179.

[357] Emmanuel Tourpe, "Blondel et le Thomisme: Derrière le Marronnier," in *Maurice Blondel et la Philosophie Française*, edited by Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet, 223–37. (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007), 225.

[358] Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 279–80.

[359] Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 68.

became a neo-Thomist. As Emmanuel Tourpe puts it, 'Thomism is a spiritual ontology, Blondelism a spiritual realism'. [360]

> For the mature Blondel, as for the historic Thomas, it is the mystery of the actuality of being that gives itself to be seen and reflected upon. It is the givenness, initial because fundamental, of the *actus essendi* [act of being] that brings [Blondel's and Thomas's] views together. In Thomas, that given is interpreted as an act of beings, and therefore starting from participation in the determination of the created order by the perfection of the pure act. In Blondel, the given is rather seen to emerge from those beings that have acted and will act in the complexity of the operation that pushes the created order beyond itself ... [361]

In 1914 the Roman Catholic Church's Sacred Congregation of Studies published 'Twenty-four Theses' [362] that summarised an official understanding of Aquinas's philosophy as a contribution to the antimodernist campaign that Pope Pius X had instigated with his encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* in 1907 and the anti-modernist oath required of

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[360] Tourpe, "Blondel et le Thomisme: Influences réciproques et irréductibles singularités," 63. I have preferred 'spiritual realism' to either 'realist spiritualism' or 'realist spirituality' because neither 'spiritualism' nor 'spirituality' sufficiently reflect the spiritual realm understood as alongside the natural realm that the French 'spiritualisme' implies, and because it offers a parallelism with 'ontologie spirituelle', 'spiritual ontology'.

[361] Emmanuel Tourpe, "Blondel et le Thomisme: Derrière le Marronnier," in *Maurice Blondel et la Philosophie Française*, edited by Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet, 223–37 (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007), 235: Pour le Blondel de la maturité, comme pour le Thomas historique, c'est le mystère de l'actualité de l'être qui se donne à voir et à réfléchir. C'est la donnée, initiale parce que fondamentale, de l'*actus essendi*, qui fait converger leurs regards. Chez Thomas, elle est interprétée comme acte des étants, à partir donc de la détermination du créé par la perfection de l'acte pur, à travers la participation. Chez Blondel, elle est plutôt aperçue à partir des étants agis et agissants, c'est-à-dire à même l'effet, dans le nouement de l'opération qui pousse le créé par-delà lui-même.

[362] Thomas Aquinas et al. *The Twenty-Four Fundamental Theses Of Official Catholic Philosophy* (Rome: Sacred Congregation of Studies, 2014).

clerics from 1910 onwards.[363] Whilst we find echoes of the twenty-four theses in Blondel's later trilogy—presumably to indicate his adherence to the orthodoxy of the time—it is Blondel's own reading of Aquinas during the previous fifteen years that would have given him the broad understanding of Thomist philosophy and theology that enabled him to relate Aquinas's texts to his own theologically inflected philosophy on thought, being, and action.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Blondel and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin first met in 1920,[364] having corresponded since the previous year, and, given that by 1916 Blondel had already written *L'Action* and several apologetic works, we can conclude that initially it was Teilhard de Chardin who was influenced by Blondel. In particular, it looks as if Teilhard de Chardin's *Le Milieu Divin* was directly influenced by Blondel's philosophy.

> To begin with, in action I adhere to the creative power of God; I coincide with it; I become not only its instrument but its living extension. And as there is nothing more personal in a being than his will, I merge myself, in a sense, through my

[363] Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 1–3, 223–25.

[364] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Maurice Blondel, *Correspondence*, edited by Henri de Lubac, translated by William Whitman (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967); Henri de Lubac, "Preface," in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Maurice Blondel, *Correspondence*, 9–15, translated by William Whitman (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 13. An alternative date of 1919 for the meeting between Teilhard de Chardin and Blondel is offered by Alexander Dru, "Introduction: Historical and biographical," In Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, translated by Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan, 1–79 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 50–51, and by David Grumett, "Blondel, the Philosophy of Action and Liberation Theology," *Political Theology*, 11, no. 4 (2010): 507–529, 514, but without the detailed evidence offered by de Lubac.

> heart, with the heart of God. This commerce is continuous because I am always acting; and at the same time, since I can never set a boundary to the perfection of my fidelity nor to the fervour of my intention, this commerce enables me to liken myself, ever more strictly and indefinitely, to God.[365]

During the 1930s, textual similarities appeared, and Teilhard followed the journey taken by *L'Action* from individual action to family and then to society, for which he credited Blondel's metaphysics of action. He then took Blondel's ideas further by involving matter and the whole cosmos in action driven by a convergent evolution.[366] However, as we shall discover in Chapter 5, it looks as if Blondel's *L'Être et les Êtres* was in turn influenced by Teilhard de Chardin's more cosmic ideas; and by 1946 Blondel was following Teilhard de Chardin in understanding an evolution of action from the material universe, to life, to the complexity of human action, and then beyond that to 'the accomplishment of human destiny'.[367] As Marie-Jeanne Coutagne suggests, in relation to Blondel's later works, Teilhard de Chardin 'forces Blondel to allow himself to tackle head on ideas that will constitute the living framework of his work to come'.[368]

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[365] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Milieu Divin: Essai de Vie Intérieure* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957), 42–43; *Le Milieu Divin: An Essay on the Interior Life* (London: Collins/Fontana, 1964), 62–63: Dans l'action, d'abord, j'adhère à la puissance créatrice de Dieu; je coïncide avec elle; j'en deviens, non seulement l'instrument, mais le prolongement vivant. Et comme il n'y a rien de plus intime dans un être que sa volonté, je me confonds, en quelque manière, par mon coeur, avec le coeur même de Dieu. Ce contact est perpétuel, puisque j'agis toujours; et, en même temps, puisque je ne saurais trouver de limite à la perfection de ma fidélité, ni à la ferveur de mon intention, il me permet de m'assimiler à Dieu toujours plus étroitement, indéfiniment.

[366] Grumett, "Blondel, Philosophy of Action and Liberation Theology," 515–16.

[367] Maurice Blondel, "La Philosophie de l'Action," *Les Études Philosophiques* 1, no. 1 (1946): 1–12, 7: l'accomplissement de la destinée humaine.

[368] Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, "Le Verbe et le Lieu: La correspondance Blondel–Teilhard (1919–1920)," in *Blondel entre* L'Action *et la Trilogie*, edited by Marc Leclerc, 110–24 (Bruxelles: Éditions Lessius, 2003), 123: contraint Blondel à s'autoriser à aborder de front des idées qui constitueront la trame vive de son oeuvre à venir.

Although Blondel's '*action*' and Teilhard de Chardin's 'evolution' were clearly on the same page philosophically, there were considerable differences between their approaches. Tilliette defines Blondel's mysticism as one of 'abnegation',[369] and Teilhard de Chardin's as a 'conquering mysticism';[370] and Paul-Henri Coutagne makes a similar point, comparing Blondel's looking beyond human action towards a transcendence with Teilhard de Chardin's positive inclusion of human action in the cosmic adventure:[371] but the most significant difference appears to be Teilhard de Chardin's 'hyperphysicism'[372]—matter as conscious, and the entire evolutionary process understood as a single continuity—which Blondel condemned as minimising the distinctively human.[373] Grumett has identified two further points of tension: Blondel recognised suffering as an inevitable element of humanity's individual and social action, whereas Teilhard de Chardin rather avoided the issue until later in his theological career;[374] and Teilhard de Chardin was more interested in the material products of human action than was Blondel.[375]

In 1901 Blondel wrote to Auguste Valensin:

> The revelation of the mystery of the Incarnation, far from being a burden for the intelligence, is its most precious light … The problem of the Incarnation has appeared (perhaps even before any other philosophical question) as the touchstone of a true cosmology, of an integral metaphysics … I share … the ideas and feelings of Father Teilhard de Chardin in the face of the Christological

[369] abnégation.

[370] mysticisme conquérante.

[371] Paul-Henri Coutagne, "Le problème de *L'Action* chez Teilhard et Blondel," in *Maurice Blondel: Une Dramatique de la Modernité*, 188–200 (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1990), 195.

[372] hyperphysicisme.

[373] Xavier Tilliette, "Blondel et la Métaphysique," in *Maurice Blondel et la Quête du Sens*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 119–31 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1998), 128–29.

[374] Grumett, 'Blondel, Philosophy of Action and Liberation Theology', 516.

[375] Grumett, 'Blondel, Philosophy of Action and Liberation Theology', 517.

> problem … We are led to the *instauratio tota in Christo* [the restoration of all things in Christ]. [376]

So who influenced whom? We can conclude that Blondel's philosophy influenced some of Teilhard de Chardin's earlier work, and in Chapter 5 we shall be able to study significant resemblances between Blondel's *L'Être et les Êtres* and Teilhard de Chardin's writings and we shall be able to conclude that in places Blondel's trilogy was influenced by Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary ontology.

Scientific change

Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published in 1859, so Blondel would have been well aware of the idea that species evolve, thus transferring flora and fauna from the static category to the dynamic and evolutionary category: but when Blondel published the 1893 *L'Action* the world was still understood in terms of Isaac Newton's laws of motion that assumed that space was a rigid grid through which objects moved, that time was linear and universal, and that if two objects moved at speeds a and b towards each other then their relative speed was a + b. In a few short years at the beginning of the twentieth century a handful of physicists completely overturned this picture. Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity showed that two objects moving towards each other, each at the speed of light, resulted in a relative speed of the speed of light, not twice that figure; the General Theory of Relativity hypothesised that gravity bent space; and Quantum Theory proposed that the particles out of which the universe is constructed are not

[376] Maurice Blondel et Auguste Valensin, *Correspondence* (Paris: Aubier, Éditions Montaigne, 1957), 46–47: Le révélation du mystère de l'Incarnation, loin d'être une charge pour l'intelligence, en est la plus précieuse lumière … Le problème de l'Incarnation n'est apparu (peut-être même antécédemment à toute autre question philosophique) comme la pierre de touche d'une vraie cosmologie, d'une métaphysique intégrale … Je partage … les idées et les sentiments du P. Teilhard de Chardin en face du problème christologique … Nous sommes conduit à l'instauratio tota in Christo.

particles but are instead energy in prescribed patterns.[377] Throughout his career Blondel took an explicitly scientific approach that started with concrete human action and then argued towards a transcendence;[378] and as Jean Lacroix suggests, the scientific approach revealed 'something normative immanent in the very movement of action and increasingly demanding as spiritual dynamism progresses'.[379] Following a reference to Einstein, Blondel suggests that

> it is therefore from a philosophical point of view, and by a sort of spiritual conversion, that we must direct our sights, through this world of nature, to a constantly higher horizon … and the ever-enlarged spectacle that nature, better known, offers to our thought which frees itself from it, must therefore contribute to bringing out the transcendence of the spirit, at once in solidarity and incommensurable with all the greatness of the material and scientific order.[380]

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[377] Jeffrey Bub, "The Entangled World: How Can It Be Like That?" in *The Trinity and an Entangled World: Rationality in Physical Science and Theology*, edited by John Polkinghorne, 15–31 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 15–18; Paul Davies, *The New Physics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 4; Andrew Hodges, *Alan Turing: The Enigma* (London: Vintage, 2012), 44; Arthur Peacocke and Ann Pederson, *The Music of Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 14; John Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence: God's Interaction with the World* (London: SPCK, 1989), 2, 34, 46.

[378] Jean Lacroix, "L'Intention Philosophique de Blondel," in *Le Centenaire de Maurice Blondel 1861–1961 en sa Faculté des Lettres d'Aix-Marseille*. *Publications des Annales de la Faculté des Lettres Aix-en-Provence* ns 35 (1963), 101–32, 132.

[379] Lacroix, "L'Intention Philosophique de Blondel," 117: une normative immanente au mouvement même de l'action et toujours plus exigeante au fur et à mesure des progrès du dynamisme spirituel.

[380] Maurice Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II: Les Responsabilités de la Pensée et la Possibilité de son Achèvement* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934), 467: C'est donc d'un point de vue philosophique et par une sorte de conversion spirituelle qu'il nous faut orienter nos visées, à travers ce monde de la nature, jusqu'à un horizon constamment supérieur … et le spectacle toujours agrandi que la nature mieux connue offre à notre pensée qui se libère d'elle doit donc contribuer à faire ressortir la transcendance de l'esprit, à la fois

That 'ever-enlarged spectacle' included an understanding of the universe in terms of action rather than in terms of being.

Conclusions

We have explored a number of influences on Blondel's philosophy. Maine de Biran, Boutroux, and particularly Ravaisson, influenced his focus on human action; Descartes, Malebranche, Augustine, and Pascal, influenced his understanding of the relationship between theology and philosophy; Aquinas enabled him to ponder a variety of relationships, including that between being and action; and Leibniz, Spinoza, and the pragmatists, were all conversation partners as Blondel worked out where he stood philosophically. As we shall discover in Chapter 5, we can conclude that Pierre Teilhard de Chardin had a significant influence on Blondel's understanding of being and evolution; and we can hypothesize that Teilhard de Chardin, Boutroux, and Bergson informed the shift from *'action*' meaning human action to *'action*' meaning action in general.

Blondel frequently engaged in correspondence with a wide range of other philosophers and theologians, and was an active member of philosophical societies:[381] but none of this means that his philosophy was derivative. What is unique about Blondel's philosophy is the way in which he brings together the many influences on his thought into an understanding of human action and the will in which the immanent reveals the necessity of the transcendent; and as the influences evolved in the direction of understanding reality as a whole in terms of action, so Blondel's thought evolved in the same direction, but again in a distinctive way: towards a broader concept of action understood as the immanent that reveals the transcendent.

Assisted by his relative isolation in Aix-en-Provence, and latterly by retirement from his university post, Blondel's philosophy was very much his own; and as we shall conclude in

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solidaire et incommensurable avec toutes les grandeurs de l'ordre matériel et scientifique.

[381] Jean Ferrari, "Blondel et la Philosophie Française, de Descartes à Bergson," in *Maurice Blondel et la Philosophie Française*, edited by Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet, 23–47 (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007), 24–25.

our final chapter, it was an original philosophy that significantly influenced other philosophers. [382]

[382] Pierre de Cointet, "Introduction: Maurice Blondel, Philosophe," in *Maurice Blondel et la Philosophie Française*, edited by Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet, 11–19 (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007), 14–16.

Chapter 3

Convictions and controversies

Introduction

In this chapter a brief biography of Maurice Blondel will be required so that we can understand the theological motivations that had such an effect on the trajectory of his philosophy.[383] And because the ecclesiastical and political context within which Blondel worked, and the philosophical and theological critiques—both positive and negative—to which the 1893 *L'Action* and other early works were submitted, significantly influenced the direction of his philosophy, we shall study those as well.

Catholic Christian faith

Maurice Blondel was born in Dijon in 1861 to a well-off family with lawyers, doctors, and priests in the family tree, and with a longstanding commitment to Roman Catholicism.[384] Following attendance at the École Normale with the intention of becoming a professor of philosophy at one of the state universities, Blondel's own Catholic Christian faith proved a source of difficulty as he struggled to be appointed to posts in increasingly secular university departments: but in 1893 he successfully defended his doctoral thesis,

[383] A thorough biography of Blondel can be found in Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010).

[384] Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 25–32.

L'Action,[385] a subject that he had begun to study in 1882,[386] and two years later he was appointed Professor of Philosophy at the University of Aix-en-Provence where he stayed for the rest of his career.[387] The following years saw a variety of articles published, some of book-length, and often in response to criticisms levelled at previous publications, including *L'Action*.[388] Throughout his long philosophical career, Blondel's work, often on the boundary between philosophy and theology, came in for criticism from both the secular philosophical academy and conservative ecclesiastics, and, as we shall see, the philosophy became increasingly theological in a conservative Catholic direction, partly in order to counter accusations of unorthodoxy, but also as a reflection of Blondel's own passionate commitment to a Catholic Christian faith and to the Roman Catholic Church. Central to that faith was the incarnation,[389] which in 1889 he already understood to be 'the solution of the problem of immanence and transcendence'.[390] In 1890, while he was writing his thesis, Blondel attended the Oberammergau Passion Play, and in 1910 he published a booklet about it: 'The nature of Christian truth is to be incarnate: not a dogmatic affirmation that is not first of all action and life'.[391]

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[385] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1993: first published in 1893); *L'Itinéraire Philosophique de Maurice Blondel: Propos Recueillis par Frédéric Lefèvre* (Éditions Spes, 1928), 86–90.

[386] Maurice Blondel, *L'Itinéraire Philosophique de Maurice Blondel : Propos Recueillis par Frédéric Lefèvre* (Éditions Spes, 1928), 64.

[387] Illtyd Trethowan, "Introduction: Philosophical and Theological," in *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, by Maurice Blondel, translated by Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan, 80–116 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1994) 34–36.

[388] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893).

[389] Jean Brun, "Le 'Vinculum' Leibnizien et l'Action," in *Maurice Blondel: Une Dramatique de la Modernité*, 125–31 (Paris : Éditions Universitaires, 1990), 131.

[390] Maurice Blondel, *Lettres Philosophiques* (Paris: Aubier, Éditions Montaigne, 1961), 19: Où est la solution du problème de l'immanence et de la transcendance? elle est dans l'Incarnation et la Communion.

[391] Maurice Blondel, *Oeuvres Complètes*, *Tome II*, edited by Claude Troisfontaine (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 698: Le propre de la vérité chrétienne, c'est d'être *incarnée*; pas une affirmation dogmatique qui ne soit d'abord acte et vie.

Entries in Blondel's notebooks dated October 1886 record an intention to study action that is more detailed than the brief notes that he made in 1882 and is phrased in highly religious language:

> I want to show that the highest manner of being is to act, that the most complete manner of acting is to suffer and to love, that the true manner of loving is to adhere to Christ … By love alone we imitate God. Love is divine action, and it unites us to God … [392]

And then on the evening of the 12th of October 1886 Blondel learns that he is to leave to teach in Aix-en-Province:

> Lord, I want in all things, always and everywhere, to adhere to Jesus and to remain completely united to him. That in all thought and in all action I might speak and act for our Lord Jesus Christ. That this might be the thought of my thoughts, the action of my actions, that this might be my prayer when I do not pray and when I pray, my life and my death. In each of our activities, there is an infinitude. That this might be that of God. [393]

For more than one reason, it was Blondel's intense Christian faith that motivated his plan to study human action:

> I propose to study action, because it seems to me that in the Gospel the power to manifest love and to acquire God is attributed to action alone. I will study action because, at this time, we no longer know how to suffer in order to act and produce. The heart is lacking. We know, we understand, we refine, we

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[392] Maurice Blondel, *Carnets Intimes* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1961), 85–86: Je veux montrer que la plus haute manière d'être, c'est d'agir, que la plus complète manière d'agir, c'est de souffrir et d'aimer, que la vraie manière d'aimer, c'est d'adhérer au Christ. … Par l'amour seul nous imitons Dieu. L'amour est l'acte divin et il nous unifie à Dieu.

[393] Blondel, *Carnets Intimes*, 87: Seigneur, je veux en tout, toujours et partout, adhérer à Jésus et lui demeurer tout uni. Qu'en toute pensée, qu'en tout action, je dièse ou je fasse *per Dominum nostrum Jesus Christ*. Que ce soit la pensée de mes pensées, l'acte de mes actes, que ce soit ma prière quand je ne prie pas et quand je prie, ma vie et ma mort. Dans chacun de nos opérations, il y a un infini. Que ce soit celui de Dieu.

> contemplate, we enjoy; we do not live. ... [we must] live and act from the heart, in order to see with the mind.[394]

Whilst one of the motives for the increasingly theological content of Blondel's works was a desire to avoid condemnation by the Vatican—a fate suffered by some of his friends[395]—we can conclude that the chief motive was his own Christian faith. This was no mere adherence to doctrinal positions or liturgical obligations: it was passionate, and not too far from the ethos of Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*.[396] The fact that such a clear expression of religious experience should appear alongside both the beginning of a teaching post in a place to which he would later return as Professor of Philosophy, and the early stages of his thesis about human action, brings into sharp relief the largely nontheological 1893 thesis, the subject of which he proposed to the Sorbonne in entirely secular terms in 1887: 'What is an action? What is added to the intention for it to become an act? How is this operation *ad extra* possible, and what results from it?'[397] It must have taken Blondel serious intellectual and religious effort to distance the thesis from his passionately held Christian religious convictions: something that he knew he had to do if the thesis was to be acceptable to a secular academy, which was in any case going to be difficult to achieve given the thesis's argument from human action to transcendence. But in Blondel's mind, the thesis was not a secular object: before submitting it, he took it to church to dedicate it to God.[398]

The works that followed *L'Action* were frequently explicitly apologetic, in the sense of recommending the Christian Faith, but it is only since the publication of Blondel's *Carnets*

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[394] Blondel, *Carnets Intimes*, 85: Je me propose d'étudier l'action, parce qu'il me semble que dans l'Évangile il est attribué à l'action seule le pouvoir de manifester l'amour et d'acquérir Dieu. J'étudierai l'action parce que, en ce temps, nous ne savons plus souffrir pour agir et produire. Le coeur manque. On sait, on comprend, on raffine, on contemple, on jouit; on ne vit pas. … vivre et agir du coeur, pour voir de l'esprit.

[395] Blondel, *L'Itinéraire Philosophique*.

[396] Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (London: Collins, 1963).

[397] Maurice Blondel, *Lettres Philosophiques* (Paris: Aubier, Éditions Montaigne, 1961), 12: Qu'est-ce qu'une action? que s'ajoute-t-il à l'intention, pour quelle devienne acte? comment cette opération ad extra est-elle possible et qu'en résulte-t-il?

[398] Blondel, *Carnets Intimes*, 486.

Intimes ('Intimate Notebooks') in 1961 that 'the apologetic significance of Maurice Blondel's work,' including the 1893 *L'Action*, 'is beyond any possible dispute'.[399] Particularly significant is a letter to a priest that Blondel wrote in September 1893 about his intention

> to prove that Catholic thought is not sterile, and to make room for it in the modern doctrinal conflicts from which … it seems excluded. … to ensure that the notion of Revelation, and the very idea of the Christian supernatural, are taken into account in this obscure and restricted domain where philosophical currents are formed. … It is a secular apologetics that I am attempting.[400]

By the time Blondel was losing his sight and was dictating his 1930s trilogy on thought, being, and action, ideas on which he had been working since the publication of the thesis, he felt free to give full rein to his religious commitment, his religious experience, and his apologetic purpose. No longer did he have to satisfy a secular academy, and no longer did he fear the Vatican. Blondel died in 1949 having completed the purely theological second volume of the proposed three volumes of the book that followed the publication of the trilogy, *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien*.[401] As Gaston Maire summarises Blondel's motives:

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[399] Gaston Maire, "L'Apologétique Blondélienne," in *Hommage à Maurice Blondel*, 39–49 (Paris: Société les Belles Lettres, 1962), 39: la signification apologétique de l'œuvre de Maurice Blondel s'impose sans aucune contestation possible; Henry Duméry, *La Philosophie de L'Action: Essai sur l'Intellectualisme Blondelien* (Paris: Éditions Montaigne, 1948), 36; Emile Poulat, "La Pensée Blondélienne dans le Cadre de la Crise Moderniste," in *Maurice Blondel: Une Dramatique de la Modernité*, 19–31 (Paris : Éditions Universitaires, 1990), 28.

[400] Blondel, *Carnets Intimes*, 547, 551–52 : Prouver que la pensée catholique n'est point stérile et de lui faire place dans le conflit des doctrines modernes d'où … elle paraît exclue. … faire prendre en considération la notion de la Révélation et l'idée même du surnaturel chrétien dans ce domaine obscur et restreint où se forment les courants philosophiques. … C'est une apologie laïque que je tente.

[401] Maurice Blondel, *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien, Tome I, Autonomie Essentielle et Connexion Indéclinable*, fourth edition (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1950);

> Anxious to live his faith intensely and totally ... anxious, therefore, to devote himself, and to act as the speculative being that he recognizes that he is by nature ... [Blondel] sees no other role than to share with those around him, and in whose life he participates, the truth ... [402]

The ecclesiastical and political context

Whilst the title of this section does not contain the word 'philosophy', we shall see that a brief study of Blondel's ecclesiastical and political context, and his political involvement, are not without philosophical significance.

As with any philosopher, an understanding of the context aids understanding of their philosophy; and particularly important to the development of Blondel's philosophy was the shifting relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the French State during his lifetime. The French revolution, and all that followed, along with the Church's declining membership, theological divisions, and intellectual rigidity and isolation, [403] contributed to a trajectory towards the laicization of the French State, and 1905 saw a final separation between Church and State: although somewhat at odds with that development is the continuing funding of France's cathedrals and other religious buildings by the State if they were built before 1905. The multifaceted secularisation that occurred during this period was an important reason for the difficulty that Blondel

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Tome II, Conditions de la Symbiose Seule Normale et Salutaire (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1946).

[402] Gaston Maire, "L'Apologétique Blondélienne," In *Hommage à Maurice Blondel*, Publications de l'Université de Dijon XXVII, 39–49 (Paris: Société les Belles Lettres, 1962), 39: Soucieux de vivre intensément et totalement sa foi … soucieux, de ce fait, de se dévouer et d'agir en spéculatif qu'il se reconnaît être par nature … il ne se veut d'autre rôle que de faire partager par ceux qui l'entourent et à la vie de qui il participe, la vérité ...

[403] Alexander Dru, "Introduction: Historical and Biographical," in *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, by Maurice Blondel, translated by Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan, 1–79 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 22–23.

encountered when his thesis, *L'Action*, was examined. An account of the event will be found at the end of Chapter 4. The thesis contained explicitly theological material and exhibited a theological ethos, and it is only due to Blondel's ability to defend it during its public examination that a highly secular examining panel felt obliged to approve it unanimously. Unfortunately, that was not the end of Blondel's problems: academic institutions' suspicions about the religious intent of the thesis meant that for two years after the examination Blondel found it impossible to obtain a university post, and when he did obtain one it was in Aix-en-Provence, as far away from Paris as possible.[404]

Secular academics were not the only ones to be suspicious of Blondel's philosophy. Ecclesiastical functionaries were also nervous because it was not difficult to align Blondel's ideas with the Modernism that was disturbing minds in the Vatican, and also because French Catholic laity in politics were employing 'personalist' language not dissimilar from Blondel's to enable them to reconcile their Catholic Christian Faith with their active political engagement with an explicitly secular state.[405] However far apart Blondel tried to keep philosophy and theology during the early part of his career, and however much he permitted only philosophical relationships between them,[406] Vatican suspicion of the autonomy of the conscience translated easily into suspicion of Blondel's philosophy of action. It is clear from correspondence that Blondel did not regard himself as an exponent of modernism, but he kept in touch with many of the protagonists, including Joannès Wehrlé and Baron von Hügel; he attempted to moderate their expression of their ideas; and he tried to reconcile them when they fell out with each other.[407] His active relationships with so many of those of whom the Vatican was suspicious cannot have helped to distance him from suspicion. Later popes, such as Paul

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[404] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 21.

[405] Dru, "Introduction," 13–14; Peter Bernardi, "Maurice Blondel: Precursor of the Second Vatican Council," *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 22, nos 1 & 2 (2015): 59–77, and Loyola eCommons. Chicago: Loyola University Chicago, 2015, 27.

[406] Emile Poulat, "La Pensée Blondélienne dans le Cadre de la Crise Moderniste," in *Maurice Blondel : Une Dramatique de la Modernité*, 19–31 (Paris : Éditions Universitaires, 1990), 20–21.

[407] Maurice Blondel et al. *Au Cœur de la Crise Moderniste* (Paris: Aubier, Éditions Montaigne, 1960).

VI and John XXIII, were content to operate with a 'without contradiction'[408] criterion when evaluating philosophy, so were more able to value Blondel's philosophy as a contribution to philosophical theology;[409] and not only was Blondel's philosophy eventually tolerated: it has influenced numerous Catholic and other theologians and philosophers, and especially the '*ressourcement*' ('back to the original sources') theologians who influenced the outcome of the Second Vatican Council. The Council taught a unitary human destiny, replaced a Thomist conceptual rationalism with a more active understanding of tradition, and opened the Church to modern secular developments: all trends to be found within Blondel's works.[410] François Marty's research on Blondel's understanding of 'truth' in his 1896 *Letter on Apologetics* suggests direct influence on the texts of the Council.[411]

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[408] sans contradiction.

[409] Blandine Chelini-Pont, "L'Église de France et la Politique dans l'Entre-deux-guerres, un Chassé-Croisé à Demi-fécond," in *Maurice Blondel: Dignité du Politique et Philosophie de L'Action*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne and Pierre de Cointet, 29–44 (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2006), 44.

[410] Dru, "Introduction," 13–14; Bernardi, "Maurice Blondel"; Peter Bernardi, *Maurice Blondel, Social Catholicism, and Action Française: The Clash over the Church's Role in Society during the Modernist Era* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 3; Myles B. Hannan, "Maurice Blondel—The Philosopher of Vatican II," *The Heythrop Journal* 56 (2015): 907–918.

[411] Maurice Blondel, *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en Matière d'Apologétique et sur la Méthode de la Philosophie dans l'Étude du Problème Religieux*, in Maurice Blondel, *Les Premiers Écrits de Maurice Blondel*: *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en matière d'Apologétique (1896) Histoire et Dogme*, 5–95 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956); *The Letter on Apologetics*, in *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma* by Maurice Blondel, with an introduction and translated by Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan, 125–208 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994); François Marty, "La Question de la Vérité dans la *Lettre sur l'Apologétique*," in *Maurice Blondel et la Quête du Sens*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 101–8 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1998), 108.

A significant source of tension around the turn of the century was *L'Action Française*,[412] a French nationalist movement inspired by its complex leader Charles Maurras, an 'essayist and theoretician of a complete nationalism',[413] a monarchist, a defender of the Roman Catholic Church, and a somewhat antisemitic atheist.[414] The commonality between the monarchism and the advocacy for the Catholic Church appears to have been a love of authoritarian hierarchy. As Jean-Claud Ricci describes it, *L'Action Française*

> constituted a dangerous drift towards instrumentalising Catholicism by making it a simple social and political discipline.[415]

The reasons for the Vatican's forceful condemnation of *L'Action Française* in 1926 were complex: the movement was controlled by an atheist; its philosophy tended towards the positivist; and the Vatican wanted to see French-German rapprochement[416] rather than French nationalism.[417] Blondel was largely in agreement with the Vatican view, and wrote initially anonymous 'Testis' essays against the Jesuit Pedro Descoqs, a passionate supporter of *L'Action Française*. The essays defended Blondel's democratic social catholicism against charges of social modernism and 'integralism':[418] a 'one-sidedness' that Blondel had challenged in others' writings, and particularly those of neo-Thomists for whom the created order was divided between a spiritual realm able to receive God's grace and nature that was not. Blondel would always challenge such firm boundaries:

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[412] Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 249–56.

[413] Adrien Diakiodi, *Le Combat Philosophique de Maurice Blondel contre le Double Ignorance des Masses* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2015), 13: essayiste et théoricien du nationalisme intégral.

[414] Dru, "Introduction," 29–30.

[415] Jean-Claud Ricci, "Situation de Maurice Blondel dans le Contexte des Pensées Philosophiques et Politiques," in *Maurice Blondel: Dignité du Politique et Philosophie de L'Action*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne and Pierre de Cointet, 11–27 (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2006), 24: constituait une dérive dangéreuse tendant à instrumentaliser le catholicisme en faisant de lui une simple discipline sociale et politique.

[416] Chelini-Pont, "L'Église de France et la Politique dans l'Entre-deux-guerres," 36.

[417] Dru, "Introduction," 31.

[418] Bernardi, *Maurice Blondel, Social Catholicism, and Action Française*, 2: 'monophorisme' or 'intégrisme'.

between Church and State, between the immanent and the transcendent, between nature and grace, and between secular and sacred. The dispute was theological: for Blondel, there were no ultimate dualisms, whereas for ecclesiastics such as Descoqs a rather Augustinian distinction between the City of God and the City of this world enabled them to support a monarchist and protofascist organization as long as it supported the institution of the Church, even though its moral character left much to be desired, and it appeared to have no time for the inclusivity represented by Jesus' ministry, the early Church, and Paul's letters.[419] Christians since then have not been immune from defending political institutions, individuals, and ideas that support the Church as an institution but in significant ways deny the Christian Gospel.

Blondel was a patriot and not a nationalist,[420] and there was a philosophical reason for this: human action matters at every level—the individual, the family, society, the nation, and beyond—and is drawn always towards a transcendent reality beyond all of those human realities. This meant that any boundary located on the spectrum between the individual and the transcendent would be arbitrary;[421] any boundary between action and thought would be equally arbitrary; and any boundary between nation states would be socially constructed. In 1939 Blondel published *Lutte pour la Civilisation et Philosophie de la Paix* ('Battle for Civilization and Philosophy of Peace')[422] in which he discusses totalitarian and liberal regimes, and questions the notion of national self-determination, because first of all it is an analogy with individual self-determination, and secondly no nation can avoid relating across its boundaries. The book was timely, referencing as it does Germany's invasion of Czechoslovakia.[423] Blondel calls for a revival of 'the meaning and dynamism' of our 'human and Christian heritage',[424] and for a 'unity

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[419] Bernardi, *Maurice Blondel, Social Catholicism, and Action Française*, 3.

[420] Ricci, "Situation de Maurice Blondel dans le Contexte des Pensées Philosophiques et Politiques," 25.

[421] Léo-Paul Bordeleau, *Action et Vie Sociale dans l'Oeuvre de Maurice Blondel* (Ottawa: Éditions de l'Universitaire d'Ottawa, 1978), 41.

[422] Maurice Blondel, *Lutte pour la Civilisation et Philosophie de la Paix* (Paris: Flammarion, 1939).

[423] Blondel, *Lutte pour la civilisation et philosophie de la paix*, 144.

[424] Blondel, *Lutte pour la civilisation et philosophie de la paix*, 158: la signification et le dynamisme … héritage humain et chrétien.

in diversity that animates and vivifies the entire spiritual order'.[425] For Blondel, everything was integrated: the natural and the supernatural, the objective and the subjective, the individual and society, and theology and social action. As Paul Archambault puts Blondel's attitude: 'truth is one and reality is continuous'.[426]

Somewhat different from Blondel's attempts at integration was Jacques Maritain's separation of politics from considerations relating to the individual's supernatural destiny: a separation that enabled a more positive evaluation of Maurras' views and of *L'Action Française*.[427] Blondel thought differently: 'Maurras … What fury'; and lamented that so many were following him.[428] Blondel 'was aiming at a philosophy engaged in action',[429] in relation to which he corresponded with such social and political activists as Maurice Deslandres [430] and worked with them during the '*Sociales*'—the 'Social Weeks' of which his brother-in-law was one of the founders[431]—which convened in a different French city each year

[425] Blondel, *Lutte pour la civilisation et philosophie de la paix*, 188: unité dans la diversité qui anime et vivifie l'ordre spirituel tout entière.

[426] Paul Archambault, *L'Oeuvre Philosophique de Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Librairie Bloud & Gay, 1928), 126: la vérité est une et que le réel est continu.

[427] Claude Troisfontaines, ed., *Journées d'Études, 9–10 Novembre 1974: Blondel, Bergson, Maritain, Loisy* (Louvain: Institut Supérieur de Philosophie de Louvain, 1977), 6.

[428] Henri Bremond and Maurice Blondel, *Correspondance*, *Tome II*, edited by André Blanchet (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1970), 244: Quelle furia.

[429] Ricci, "Situation de Maurice Blondel dans le Contexte des Pensées Philosophiques et Politiques," 27: s'essaie a une philosophie engagée dans l'action.

[430] Patrice Rolland, "Le Catholicisme Social et la Politique: À Propos de la Correspondance de Maurice Deslandres avec Maurice Blondel," *Revue Française d'Histoire des Idées Politiques*. 37 (2013), 133–57, 136.

[431] Dru, "Introduction," 39; Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 233–42.

> to bring together professionals, workers, clergy, students and other interested people for collective reflection under the aegis of leading academics and practitioners on the topic selected for that year: [432]

but that did not mean support for any particular political institution or activity. The problem was that suspicion of Blondel's philosophy translated into suspicion of his political views when politically he was often on the same side as the Vatican.

Critique from two directions

It is not too difficult to divide Blondel's earlier books into philosophical and theological categories: *L'Action* belongs in the philosophical category, and the subsequent works of apologetics in the theological. However, the later trilogy is more difficult to locate. The studies of being, thought, and action (a revision of the 1893 *L'Action*) are philosophical in structure but frequently theological in content, and Xavier Tilliette has even suggested that if we did not know that Blondel was the author of both the 1893 *L'Action* and the trilogy then we might think that they were by different authors. [433] The problem is that Blondel is difficult to pigeon-hole as he was opposed to both 'rationalists and fideists'. [434]

It is understandable that in relation to both the 1893 *L'Action* and the later trilogy Blondel experienced critique, both positive and negative, from two different directions: philosophical and theological. For philosophers the philosophy was often too theological, whereas for theologians and ecclesiastical functionaries it was often not theological enough—or rather, it was not the right kind of theology. But there were exceptions, and

[432] David Grumett, "Blondel, the Philosophy of Action and Liberation Theology," *Political Theology* 11, no. 4 (2010): 507–529, 509.

[433] Xavier Tilliette, "Blondel et la Métaphysique," in *Maurice Blondel et la Quête du Sens*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 119–31 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1998), 119.

[434] Adrien Diakiodi, *Le Combat Philosophique de Maurice Blondel contre le Double Ignorance des Masses* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2015), 30: les rationalistes et les fidéistes.

there were philosophers who found *L'Action* and the trilogy to be eminently philosophical, and theologians who valued Blondel's theology.[435]

Negative philosophical critique

Blondel intended the thesis that gave birth to *L'Action* in 1893 to be philosophical. As he said in a letter to Émile Boutroux on the 16th of September 1886,

> I would like to study action and research how it is clarified in thought, and how it also clarifies and guarantees its sincerity, what it takes from it and what it adds to it ... Between Aristotelianism, which depreciates and subordinates practice to thought, and Kantianism, which detaches them and exalts the practical order to the detriment of the other, there is something to be defined, in a very concrete way, by the analysis of action, and I would like to determine that.[436]

And when on the 22nd of March 1987 Blondel submitted the proposal for his thesis, his plans were entirely philosophical:

> It seems to me that if action illuminates thought and guarantees its sincerity, in turn thought illuminates and regulates action. Between the ancient doctrine, according to which the will acts in accordance with an object, to the point of becoming one with it, and Kantianism, which places the will outside and above reason, there is undoubtedly something to be defined: it remains true that to act

[435] Oliva Blanchette, "Blondel, Maurice," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, second edition (Detroit: Gale, 2003) 440–41.

[436] Maurice Blondel, *Lettres Philosophiques* (Paris: Aubier, Éditions Montaigne, 1961), 10: Je voudrais étudier *L'Action* et rechercher comment elle s'éclaire à la pensée, et comment elle l'éclaire aussi et en garanti la sincérité, ce qu'elle y prend et ce qu'elle y ajoute … Entre l'aristotélisme qui déprécie et subordonne la pratique à la pensée et le kantisme qui les détache et exalte l'ordre pratique au détriment de l'autre, il y a quelque chose à définir et c'est d'une manière très concrète, par l'analyse de l'action, que je voudrais déterminer cela; Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 43–44.

> well, one must think well; it is perhaps even more true to say that to think well, you must act well. *In operibus lux* [light in works].[437]

However, not everyone understood Blondel's intentions to be entirely philosophical, and when Georges Perrot, Director of the École Normale, asked for a summary of the thesis, clearly having heard that it would be something other than philosophical, Blondel responded:

> It is easy to misunderstand, because the relationship between the order of knowledge and what is beyond it has perhaps never been defined as I am trying to do.[438]

Further letters defending the philosophical status of the thesis followed.

Similar debates occurred later on in articles and responses in journals: for instance, a review written by Léon Brunschvicg immediately after the publication of *L'Action* in 1893 suggested that Blondel 'had been diverted by his love of darkness and his need for mystery'.[439] Blondel responded that he had never deviated from 'philosophical argument' and that 'between belief and science … there is a perpetual point of

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[437] Blondel, *Lettres Philosophiques*, 11–13: Il me semble que si l'action s'éclaire à la pensée et en garantit la sincérité, à son tour elle l'éclaire et la règle. Entre le doctrine ancienne, selon laquelle la volonté agit conformément à un objet, au point de ne plus faire qu'un avec lui, et le kantisme qui place la volonté en dehors et au-dessus de la raison, il y a sans doute quelque chose à définir: il demeure vrai que pour bien agir, il faut bien penser; il est encore plus vrai peut-être de dire que pour bien penser, il faut bien agir. *In operibus lux*.

[438] Blondel, *Lettres Philosophiques*, 34–35: Il est aisé de se méprendre; car la relation entre l'ordre de la connaissance et ce qui le dépasse n'a peut-être jamais été défini comme je tente de le faire.

[439] Maurice Blondel, *Oeuvres Complètes*, *Tome II*, edited by Claude Troisfontaines (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 49, an article by Léon Brunschvicq in *The Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 1 (1893), 1: Détournée par son amour des ténèbres et son besoin du mystère.

connection: action'.[440] The dualism of modern thought was not the only option: unity was possible.

More positive philosophical critique

In his preface to Henry Duméry's 1948 *La Philosophie de l'Action*, Blondel thanks the author:

> M. Duméry has been able to present the philosophy of action as the only intellectualism that is integral and consistent with all of the facts on which the responsibilities of our true and complete destiny depend.[441]

As for Duméry's own assessment of the intellectual status of Blondel's philosophy:

> If action is truly a spiritual trajectory, if it is none other than the act of the conscious and voluntary subject, and even if it involves the mediation of an infinite Spirit, we have to say that the philosophy of action is a multidimensional intellectualism. … the philosophy of action is ... a dialectical intellectualism. The idea is not an abstract concept, detached and isolated, but an orientation of thought which leads the mind to its conclusion.[442]

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[440] Blondel, *Oeuvres Complètes*, *Tome II*, 51, 52, an article by Blondel in *The Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 2 (1894), 5–8: L'argumentation philosophique … Entre la croyance et la science … il y a un point de jonction perpétuelle, c'est l'action.

[441] Maurice Blondel in the preface to Henry Duméry, *La Philosophie de L'Action: Essai sur l'Intellectualisme Blondelien* (Paris: Éditions Montaigne, 1948), 9, 11–12: M. Duméry a pu présenter la philosophie de l'action comme le seul intellectualisme intégral et conséquent avec toutes les données d'où dépendent les responsabilités de notre véritable et complète destination.

[442] Duméry, *La Philosophie de L'Action*, 31, 83: Si l'action est vraiment un élan spirituel, si elle n'est autre que l'acte du sujet conscient et volontaire, si elle implique même la médiation d'un Esprit infini, il faudra dire que la philosophie de l'action est un intellectualisme aux dimensions multiples. … la philosophie de l'action est … un intellectualisme dialectique. L'idée n'est pas pour elle un concept abstrait, c'est-a-dire détaché et isolé, mais une orientation de pensée qui achemine l'esprit à son terme.

Duméry is well aware of the theological underpinnings of Blondel's philosophy:

> Being ... is ... Thought and Value ... a lived participation in living Value ... God is Being; we are beings in Being. The movement that generates us from God—us and all things—is the same that brings us back to him.[443]

Accordingly, Duméry includes an entire chapter on the philosophy of religion contained in *L'Action*, and emphasises that there is nothing anti-intellectual about the theology and religion that he finds there.[444] In the end, everything is religious.

> The philosophy of action discovers in nature itself the starting point of the spiritual and free order ... it identifies what there is of action in thought and of thought in action ... it recognizes that in all thought and action there is a religious dimension ... thought joins being through the mediation of action open to the spirit.[445]

As well as being accused of religion in the philosophy and philosophy in the religion, Blondel was accused of metaphysics with no access to an external reality and no attachment to the real. Duméry's response was that 'intellectualism is the practical impossibility of leaving thought behind':[446] a sentiment with which Blondel would have agreed.

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[443] Duméry, *La Philosophie de L'Action*, 130: L'être … est … Pensée et Valeur … un participation vécue à la Valeur vivante … Dieu est l'Être; nous sommes des êtres dans l'Être. Le mouvement qui nous engendre, nous et toutes choses, à partir de lui, est le même qui nous ramène à lui.

[444] Duméry, *La Philosophie de L'Action*, 169: La philosophie de l'action est un intellectualisme intégral … Nul n'est plus fondé à se réclamer de l'intellectualisme, s'il n'assure dans le domaine de la pensée et de l'être le souveraineté de l'esprit .

[445] Duméry, *La Philosophie de L'Action*, 169–70: La philosophie de l'action, c'est de découvrir dans la nature elle-même le point de départ de l'ordre spirituel et libre … c'est de dégager ce qu'il y a d'action dans la pensée et de pensée dans l'action … c'est de reconnaître à toute pensée et a toute action une dimension religieuse … la pensée rejoint l'être par la médiation de l'action ouverte à l'esprit.

[446] Duméry, *La Philosophie de L'Action*, 24: intellectualisme est proprement l'impossibilité de sortir de la pensée.

Xaviour Tiliette's modern defence of Blondel's works as philosophical returns to an earlier understanding of philosophy in order to argue that Blondel is a philosopher and not merely an apologist, and in order to defend his habit of writing different things to different correspondents:[447]

> This is not duplicity. It is the feeling … of a sort of identity between philosophy and Christianity, not in the sense of a confusion, but in the ancient sense of Christianity as true philosophy. Christianity is capable of a philosophy that has no cause to envy systems of rationality. … Blondel recovers there, across past centuries, the patristic definition of philosophy, identical to Christian wisdom, a philosophy of Christ, sanctified reason.[448]

This is as clear in the fourth and fifth parts of the 1893 *L'Action* as it is in the trilogy:[449]

> The true philosophy is the sanctity of reason. The will alienates us and assimilates us to its end, the understanding assimilates us and acquires its object for us: this is why, by giving ourselves to God through total devotion, we can best penetrate by our gaze: the purity of inner detachment is the organ of perfect vision.[450]

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[447] Xavier Tilliette, "Blondel et la Métaphysique," in *Maurice Blondel et la Quête du Sens*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 119–31 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1998), 121.

[448] Tilliette, "Blondel et la Métaphysique," 121, 123: Ce n'est pas duplicité. C'est le sentiment … d'une sorte d'identité entre la philosophie et le christianisme, non pas au sens d'une confusion, mais au sens ancien du christianisme comme la philosophie véritable; le christianisme est capable d'une philosophie qui n'a rien à envier aux systèmes de la rationalité. … Blondel retrouve là, par-dessus les siècles écoules, la définition patristique de la philosophie, identique à la sagesse chrétienne, philosophie du Christ, raison sanctifiée.

[449] Tilliette, "Blondel et la Métaphysique," 123.

[450] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 442; the first sentence is quoted in Tilliette, "Blondel et la Métaphysique", 123: la véritable philosophie est la sainteté de la raison. La volonté nous aliène et nous assimile à sa fin, l'entendement nous assimile et nous acquiert son objet : voilà pourquoi, en nous donnant à Dieu par un dévouement total, nous pouvons le mieux pénétrer par le regard; la pureté du détachement intérieur est l'organe de la vision parfaite.

This was not easy to grasp in the laicised France of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and it would have been particularly difficult to grasp the fact that in order to complete the kind of philosophy that Blondel was constructing it was essential to include religion on its agenda, although not necessarily explicitly Christian doctrine.[451] 'Christ' does not appear in the 1893 *L'Action*, although the name does appear a couple of times in the 1936 revision. 'Christianisme' occurs more often in the revision than in 1893.

Blondel's explicitly apologetic texts, such as the *Lettre* on apologetics,[452] were clearly theological, and were frequently criticised on theological grounds—for instance, for suggesting that the Word of God is united to humanity as well as being incarnate in Jesus Christ, or for advocating a 'Panchristism'[453] similar to that implied by Teilhard de Chardin's writings, which we have studied in the previous chapter and will study again in Chapter 5—but, as Xavier Tilliette suggests, 'Panchristism … Charitism—it is a single life of grace and charity that circulates in the veins of being and action'.[454] Such statements could be regarded as philosophy, theology, or both, and as far as both Tilliette and Blondel are concerned, philosophy and religion are different but inseparable.[455]

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[451] Tilliette, "Blondel et la Métaphysique." 123.

[452] Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics*, in *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma* by Maurice Blondel, with an introduction and translated by Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan, 125–208 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994); *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en Matière d'Apologétique et sur la Méthode de la Philosophie dans l'Étude du Problème Religieux*, in Maurice Blondel, *Les Premiers Écrits de Maurice Blondel*: *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en matière d'Apologétique (1896) Histoire et Dogme*, 5–95 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956. First published in 1896).

[453] Emmanuel Gabellieri, "Blondel, S. Weil et le Panchristisme: Vers une "Métaxologie," in *Maurice Blondel et la Quête du Sens*. Edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 53–65 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1998), 54–55.

[454] Tilliette, "Blondel et la Métaphysique," 129: panchristisme … charitisme … c'est une seule vie de grâce et de charité qui circule dans les veines de l'être et de l'agir.

[455] Tilliette, "Blondel et la Métaphysique," 123–27.

Blondel's books are often theological, but they are also philosophy throughout, although not necessarily in the way in which many French philosophers of the time would have understood that term.

De Tonquédec's negative theological critique

Blondel's 1893 *L'Action* appeared at the beginning of the modernist controversy in the Roman Catholic Church: a conflict between those theologians, such as Loisy and Maritain, who believed that modern scientific and literary studies were sources of knowledge that Christian theology must take into account, and ecclesiastical functionaries who believed that the Church's tradition as they had received it was the only criterion for Christian doctrine. Blondel wrote his 1930s trilogy after the most vociferous period of the conflict was over, but the hardening of ecclesiastical attitudes that the crisis had precipitated meant that the trilogy contained multiple passages designed to defend his clearly theological philosophy against ecclesiastical censure rather than to develop his own thought; and the first two volumes of the subsequent *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien* (the third was never published) had a similar secondary purpose. As Jean Lacroix points out, the defensive agenda often 'makes the reading painful'.[456]

There must have been discussions as to whether Blondel's philosophy was really philosophical theology that ought to have been put on the *Index* of prohibited books, but Blondel escaped the fate of such theologians as Maritain and Loisy, perhaps because he sought 'the living connection'[457] at the origin of both philosophy and theology in a transcendent reality rather than attempting to reconcile Christian doctrine with historical studies directly; and perhaps because he never allowed his philosophy to get anywhere close to the Church's doctrinal formulations. But that did not prevent negative

[456] Jean Lacroix, *Maurice Blondel: Sa Vie, son Oeuvre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), 9: rend la lecture pénible.

[457] Claude Troisfontaines, ed. *Journées d'Études, 9–10 Novembre 1974: Blondel, Bergson, Maritain, Loisy* (Louvain: Institut Supérieur de Philosophie de Louvain, 1977), 6: le lien vivant qui est à l'origine de l'une comme de l'autre.

theological critique by those who understood some of the potential implications of Blondel's philosophy. Particularly vulnerable to attack was Blondel's 'method of immanence'—that the immanence constituted by the human will and human action is the only means of access to anything beyond us and our world, and that that immanence requires for its completion a transcendence[458]—particularly as Blondel often expressed himself in such a way as to imply that God is immanent in us by our own will and action.[459] There is nothing remarkable in a definition of 'immanence' that Blondel gives in the *Letter on Apologetics.*[460]

> Modern thought, with jealous susceptibility, considers the notion of *immanence* as the very condition of philosophizing: … that nothing can enter our minds that has not emerged from them … and that there is nothing that is historic ideas, traditional doctrine, or externally imposed obligation, that is a relevant truth or acceptable precept for us without in some way being autonomous and autochthonous.[461]

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[458] Emmanuel Falque, *Métamorphose de la Finitude: Essai Philosophique sur la Naissance et la Résurrection* (Paris : Les Éditions du Cerf, 2004), 37; Emmanuel Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude: An Essay on Birth and Resurrection,* translated by George Hughes (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 15. Falque's position is that revelation and immanence can only meet in the resurrection (Falque, *Métamorphose de la Finitude*, 46–47; Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, 20).

[459] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 461.

[460] Maurice Blondel, *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en Matière d'Apologétique et sur la Méthode de la Philosophie dans l'Étude du Problème Religieux*, in Maurice Blondel, *Les Premiers Écrits de Maurice Blondel*: *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en Matière d'Apologétique (1896) Histoire et Dogme*, 5–95 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956).

[461] Blondel, *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine*, 34: La pensée moderne avec une susceptibilité jalouse considère la notion d'*immanence* comme la condition même de la philosophie; c'est-à-dire que, si parmi les idées régnantes il y a un résultat auquel elle s'attache comme à un progrès certain, c'est à l'idée, très juste en son fond, que rien ne peut entrer en l'homme qui ne sorte de lui … et que ni comme fait historique, ni comme enseignement traditionnel, ni comme obligation surajoutée du dehors, il n'y a pour lui vérité qui compte et précepte admissible sans être, de quelque

This is a position to which Blondel takes care not to commit himself[462] because it closes the door to the supernatural and to revelation. What he is committed to is an 'immanent method': that is, a philosophy that begins with human reality—with the immanent attempt to equate the willed will with the willing will—and then transitions to the supernatural.

> The method of immanence then can consist in nothing else than in trying to equate, in our own consciousness, what we appear to think, will, and do, with what we do, will, and think in actual fact.[463]

That was written in 1896. In 1912 Joseph de Tonquédec wrote *Immanence: Essai Critique sur la Doctrine de M. Maurice Blondel* ('Immanence: Critical Essay on Maurice Blondel's Doctrine') in the original preface of which he accuses Blondel of 'obscurity … incoherences and … contradictions'.[464] The third edition, published in 1932, and so before Blondel's trilogy appeared, contains a new preface that directly accuses the 1893 *L'Action* of being on the same ground as the modernists who had been condemned by the Vatican.

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manière, autonome et autochtone; Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics*, in *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma* by Maurice Blondel, with an introduction and translated by Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan, 125–208 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 152.

[462] Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, "Préface: La Philosophie ou la Sainteté de la Raison. Pourquoi ce Colloque?" in *Maurice Blondel: La Sainteté de la Raison*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 9–18 (Paris: Hermann, 2022), 9–10.

[463] Blondel, *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en Matière d'Apologétique*, 39: En quoi donc consistera la méthode d'immanence, sinon à mettre en équation, dans la conscience même, ce que nous paraissons penser et vouloir et faire, avec ce que nous faisons, nous voulons et nous pensons en réalité: de telle sorte que dans les négations factices ou les fins artificiellement voulues se retrouveront encore les affirmations profondes et les besoins incoercibles qu'elles impliquent; *The Letter on Apologetics*, 157.

[464] Joseph de Tonquédec, *Immanence: Essai Critique sur la Doctrine de Maurice Blondel* (Fourth edition. Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne et ses fils, 1933), vi: obscurité … incohérences et … contradictions.

> It is there, on this ruinous ground where the encyclical *Pascendi* locates the foundations of modernism, in this enterprise destructive of certain human certainties essential to the faith, that the author of *L'Action* appears in close cohesion and solid and lasting connection with certain more radical thinkers.[465]

The particular bone of contention that fuelled vociferous controversy for something like twenty years following the publication of the 1893 *L'Action*[466] is represented by the title of De Tonquédec's book: *Immanence*. De Tonquédec would have been quite happy with the ideas of the incarnation of the Word of God and of the Holy Spirit indwelling the believer, but he was somewhat concerned by Blondel's attachment to a term that had already made an appearance in *L'Action*:

> Perhaps, destined to receive divine life within himself, the human being had been able to play this role of universal link and to suffice for this creative mediation, because this immanence of God in us would be like the magnetic centre that would reconnect all things, just as a bundle of needles invisibly attaches itself to a powerful magnet.[467]

Blondel had also written that

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[465] de Tonquédec, *Immanence*, xli: C'est là, sur ce terrain ruineux où l'encyclique *Pascendi* place les fondements du modernisme, dans cette entreprise destructive de telles certitudes humaines indispensables à la foi, que l'auteur de *L'Action* apparaît en cohésion étroite, en liaison solide et durable avec certains penseurs plus radicaux.

[466] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 288–90.

[467] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 461: Peut-être que, destiné à recevoir en lui la vie divine, l'homme eût pu jouer ce rôle de lien universel et suffire à cette médiation créatrice, parce que cette immanence de Dieu en nous serait comme le centre magnétique qui relierait toutes choses, ainsi qu'un faisceau d'aiguilles invisiblement rattachées par un puissant aimant.

> it is through action that the soul takes on body and the body takes on soul; it is the substantial link; it forms a completely natural one. For us, transcendence implies immanence.[468]

All of this appeared unorthodox to de Tonquédec. However, Blondel also believed that the implication ran in the other direction, and he had been careful to write that 'immanence is only conceivable through transcendence': [469] but it has to be said that the immanent transcendent sometimes makes God so immanent that transcendence becomes a subsidiary aspect of the divine life.

> And what must be called God here is a very concrete and practical feeling: to find [that feeling] it is not the head that must be broken, it is the heart. How can we welcome that feeling into human life, so that this immanence of the transcendent to which we have consented finally completes the reflective activity of the will by equalizing that which wills with that which is willed and takes place in action? [470]

For de Tonquédec, immanence and transcendence were mutually exclusive:

> Immanence is interiority, and beings are immanent to each other to the extent that they understand each other, proportionally to the degree of depth or intimacy of their union. Immanence is opposed to transcendence, that is to say to the fact of being, in any sense, beyond the limits of a reality, outside the sphere where it can know, act or suffer.[471]

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[468] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 186: c'est par l'action que l'âme prend corps et que le corps prend âme; elle en est le lien substantiel; elle en forme un tout naturel. En nous la transcendance implique l'immanence.

[469] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 17: l'immanence n'est concevable que par la transcendance.

[470] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 374–75: Et ce qu'il faut ici nommer Dieu, c'est un sentiment tout concret et pratique: pour le trouver, ce n'est point la tête qu'il faut se rompre, c'est le coeur. Comment donc l'installer librement dans la vie humaine, pour que cette immanence consentie du transcendant complète enfin l'opération réfléchie de la volonté en égalant ce qui veut à ce qui est voulu et posé dans l'action?

[471] de Tonquédec, *Immanence*, 4: L'immanence, c'est l'intériorité, les êtres sont immanents les uns aux autres dans la mesure où ils se compénètrent, proportionnellement au degré de profondeur ou d'intimité de leur union. À l'immanence

In order to pursue his argument with Blondel, de Tonquédec develops a definition of immanence stronger than Blondel's:

> Immanence ... is synonymous with an intrinsic, indissoluble connection ... a mutual penetration in which [the essences] are linked and supported by necessary relationships.[472]

There is no suggestion that only one 'substance' is involved, but what this 'immanence' does assume is 'a tightly connected collection',[473] perhaps with the implication of 'a closely related whole' that cannot permit entrance across its boundary.

De Tonquédec correctly understands Blondel's view that it is our action, and in particular the action of our thought, that gives us access to external reality:

> Reality exists independently of our action, but it is action that enables us to grasp it ... Action-experience ... is truly the means of entering into a relationship with reality itself.[474]

De Tonquédec understands that for Blondel this is as true of God as it is of anything else;[475] and although he recognises that Blondel's purpose is apologetic rather than doctrinal, he cannot help believing that such theology is too human-centred, too far from God's revelatory initiative, and too likely to make God subject to our action. If God is 'something of action'[476] then the result is pantheism, and if 'God is not action itself'[477] then action will give us knowledge of God's effects but not knowledge of God.

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s'oppose la transcendance, c'est à dire le fait d'être, en un sens quelconque, au delà des limites d'une réalité, en dehors de la sphère où elle peut connaître, agir ou pâtir.

[472] de Tonquédec, *Immanence*, 11, 12: L'immanence … est synonyme de connexion intrinsèque, indissoluble … une compénétration où [les essences] s'enchaînent et se soutiennent par des rapports nécessaires.

[473] de Tonquédec, *Immanence*, 12: un ensemble étroitement lié.

[474] de Tonquédec, *Immanence*, 119, 126: La réalité existe indépendamment de notre action, mais c'est l'action qui nous donne prise sur elle … L'action-expérience … est vraiment le moyen d'entrer en relation avec le réel lui-même.

[475] de Tonquédec, *Immanence*, 118.

[476] de Tonquédec, *Immanence*, 140: quelque chose de l'action.

[477] de Tonquédec, *Immanence*, 141: Dieu n'est pas de l'action même.

De Tonquédec appears not have understood sufficiently that Blondel was committed to a *method* of immanence, in which we set out from the immanent in order to seek the transcendent, rather than to seek immanence itself, and was probably correct to suggest that for Blondel

> the immanence that he professes is not only a theory for him, it is his instinct and temperament: he practices and lives it. … It is in action, in concrete experience, that the union between the soul and truth is consummated.[478]

For Blondel, to study human action and the human will takes us beyond human action in order to find a reconciliation between the willing will and the willed will: so the immanent invites us to seek a transcendence, and there are places where de Tonquédec appears to have understood this. We shall discuss Blondel's method of immanence further in Chapter 5.

De Tonquédec believed that apologetics must be doctrinally correct or it is not apologetics. He summarises what he understands to be Blondel's apologetic strategy:

> There is no criterion that allows us to know the truth before having experienced it; and the possession of truth is strictly correlative to action. No demonstration, even an experiential demonstration, will enable us to know in advance that we should believe this rather than that. The criterion, here as elsewhere, is practice itself: and action, as always, carries within itself its own justification. Faced with the subject and our interior demands, Catholicism appears with its dogmas and its precepts; and it is through effective submission to Catholicism that the interior requirement achieves its objective.[479]

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[478] de Tonquédec, *Immanence*, lxxviii, 194: l'immanence qu'il professe n'est pas seulement pour lui une théorie, c'est son instinct, son tempérament: il la pratique, il la vit. … C'est dans l'action, dans l'expérience concrète, que se consomme l'union de l'âme avec la vérité.

[479] de Tonquédec, *Immanence*, 195: Il n'y a pas de critère qui permette de *savoir* la vérité avant de l'avoir *vécue*; et la possession de la vérité est rigoureusement corrélative à l'action. Aucune démonstration, même expérimentale, ne fera connaître d'avance qu'il faut croire ceci plutôt que cela. Le critère, ici comme partout, c'est la pratique même: et

De Tonquédec's verdict is that Blondel's apologetics can bring us face to face with the problem, but it cannot provide 'the solution … the solution escapes him'.[480] While the Church recognised 'the proper value of reason to the knowledge of God',[481] only Christian doctrine as the (Roman) Catholic Church had received it through the Scriptures and through two thousand years of tradition was legitimate theology and therefore the legitimate content of apologetics.

De Tonquédec's overall verdict on Blondel's apologetics, in *L'Action* and in subsequent texts, is that Blondel's method can validate false belief just as easily as true Christian belief; that 'practice without faith is not a valuable experience';[482] that 'the Church rejects the criterion of experience';[483] that 'the Gospel has a particular content';[484] that the believer needs 'intellectual stability';[485] and that therefore 'despite appearances to the contrary, [Blondel's] philosophy is eminently destructive'.[486]

Romeyer's more positive verdict

Blaise Romeyer published *La Philosophie Religieuse de Maurice Blondel* in 1943, after the trilogy was complete but before the first two volumes of *La Philosophie et l'Esprit*

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l'action, comme toujours, porte en elle-même sa propre justification. En face du sujet et de ses exigences intérieures, apparaît le catholicisme avec ses dogmes et ses préceptes; et c'est par la soumission effective au catholicisme que l'exigence intérieur atteindre son objet.

[480] de Tonquédec, *Immanence*, 195: la solution … la solution lui échappe.

[481] de Tonquédec, *Immanence*, 141: la valeur propre de la raison dans la connaissance de Dieu.

[482] de Tonquédec, *Immanence*, 238: la pratique sans la foi n'est pas une expérience valable.

[483] de Tonquédec, *Immanence*, 239: la critère de l'expérience est rejeté par l'Église.

[484] de Tonquédec, *Immanence*, 250: l'Évangile a un contenu.

[485] de Tonquédec, *Immanence*, 268: la stabilité intellectuelle.

[486] de Tonquédec, *Immanence*, 274: malgré des apparences contraires, sa philosophie est éminemment destructive.

Chrétien were published in 1944 and 1946. As Romeyer recognizes, and as I have discovered, Blondel's philosophy became more explicitly religious between the 1893 *L'Action* and the revised *L'Action* of 1936, in two different ways. Blondel now wanted

> to affirm the existence of the living God whom our real thinking and willing dynamism needs in order to be for us what it is; provided that by virtue of this innate dynamism we then become aware of the moral duty to choose, so that by freely ratifying the one who in fact commands wanting, thinking, and being, we realize what must and can be achieved by active imitation of the One who is 'pure Acting', 'perfect and absolute Thinking', and Being whose essence is to give or to love.[487]

Here we find clear influence of Aquinas's employment of Aristotle's concept of 'pure Act' as a way to understand God as first unmoved mover, and God understood in terms of the rather Platonic Ideas of 'pure Acting', 'perfect and absolute Thinking', and 'Being'.

Alongside this more intellectual religious element we find Blondel seeking an 'obedient desire . . . tied to the spirit's essence',[488] that is, to a supernatural order. Romeyer believes that these two new emphases enrich the essentially natural religious philosophy of the 1893 *L'Action* and that in the trilogy Blondel's religious philosophy has matured: by which he means that it has become an overtly religious philosophy rather than a philosophy innately religious.[489]

> …thanks to half a century of spiritual and intellectual maturation, the response is substantially perfect. We can show this by drawing attention to these three

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[487] Blaise Romeyer, SJ. *La Philosophie Religieuse de Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Aubier, Éditions Montaigne, 1943), 6: affirmer l'existence du Dieu vivant dont notre dynamisme réel à la fois pensant et voulant a besoin pour être en nous ce qu'il est; pour autant, par suite, qu'en vertu de ce dynamisme inné, nous prenons conscience du devoir moral d'opter si bien qu'en ratifiant librement ce que commandent en fait le vouloir, le penser et l'être, nous réalisons ce qui se doit et se peut réaliser au dedans d'active imitation de Celui qui est 'pure Agir', 'parfait et absolu Penser', Être dont l'essence est de se donner ou d'aimer.

[488] Romeyer, *La Philosophie Religieuse de Maurice Blondel*, 7: le désir [obédientiel] lui-même tient à l'essence de l'esprit.

[489] Romeyer, *La Philosophie Religieuse de Maurice Blondel*, 7.

> essential points: the religious philosophy of Mr. Blondel was at the very least incomplete in 1892, but is complete and correct today; it must have grown and matured; and perhaps also it must have been rectified, but how? By alteration, or by guaranteeing its essential identity? [490]

Romeyer credits Blondel with a rebirth of French philosophy:

> Philosophical Blondelism, particularly because of its religious achievement, deserves to be considered the richest philosophy of the healthy and salutary future that exists today in France and undoubtedly across the entire world. [491]

Whilst Romeyer finds the trilogy to be particularly to his liking, he regards the 1893 *L'Action* as a valuable starting-point, particularly in view of its subtitle: *Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique*.

> Stemming from the powerful generative intuition that the *L'Action* of 1893 revealed half a century ago, to the astonished intellectual world Blondelian philosophy has evolved and grown like a very rich spiritual seed until it has reached the maturity and completion of which the Trilogy is evidence. [492]

In a way coherent with the '*action*' at the heart of Blondel's philosophy, Romeyer is here treating the evolution of Blondel's philosophy in the same way that Newman treated

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[490] Romeyer, *La Philosophie Religieuse de Maurice Blondel*, 9: … grâce à un demi-siècle de maturation spirituelle et intellectuelle, la réponse est substantiellement parfaite. Nous ne pouvons, dès lors, en le montrant, qu'avoir l'attention attiré sur ces trois points essentiels: complète et correcte aujourd'hui la philosophie religieuse de M. Blondel était à tout le moins incomplète en 1892; elle a dû croître et mûrir; peut-être aussi se rectifier, mais comment? En s'altérant ou en garantant son identité substantielle?

[491] Romeyer, *La Philosophie Religieuse de Maurice Blondel*, 286: Le blondélisme philosophique, singulièrement par son sommet religieux, mérite d'être tenu pour la philosophie la plus riche de sain et salutaire avenir, qu'existe aujourd'hui en France voire même sans doute dans le monde entière.

[492] Romeyer, *La Philosophie Religieuse de Maurice Blondel*, 287: Issue de la puissante intuition génératrice que *L'Action* de 1893 révélait, il y a un demi-siècle, au monde intellectuel étonné, la philosophie blondélienne a évolue et crû comme une très riche semence spirituelle jusqu'à cette maturité et cet achèvement dont témoigne le *Trilogie*.

Christian doctrine:[493] as a legitimate development of what was already present at the beginning of the process.[494] Jacques Sys understands Newman's apologetics to set out from 'the act of faith that it tries to render intelligible',[495] and in Blondel's case apologetics seeks out and explicates the 'seed' of '*action*' which has grown into a mature tree into which all of 'feeling, thinking, wanting, producing, working, and shaping'[496] can be fitted, with the will being the

> substantial and natural principle that carries us into action … by externalizing or embodying action within us, our natural will operationalises the original spiritual and organic synergy that constitutes our individual lives.[497]

That our natural action gives birth to supernatural action was implied in 1893, but was explicit in 1936, so now human action is the origin

> of the essence of our human dynamism in the fundamental religious theism of Blondelian philosophy; and for what is manifested there as 'transnatural' or supernatural, in a complementary theism that constitutes the loyal, fervent and

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[493] John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Harmondsworth: Peli an, 1974).

[494] Paul Archambault, *L'Oeuvre Philosophique de Maurice Blondel*. (Paris: Librairie Bloud & Gay, 1928), 44–45; Peter Reifenberg, "Ollé-Laprune et Blondel, Héritiers de Newman," in *Maurice Blondel et la Philosophie Française*, edited by Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet, 79–101 (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007).

[495] Jacques Sys, "Apologétique et Philosophie chez John Henry Newman," in *Philosophie et Apologétique: Maurice Blondel Cent Ans Après*, edited by Philippe Capelle, 217–42 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1999), 241.

[496] Romeyer, *La Philosophie Religieuse de Maurice Blondel*, 287: sentir, penser, vouloir, produire, travailler, façonner.

[497] Romeyer, *La Philosophie Religieuse de Maurice Blondel*, 287–88: principe substantiel et naturel qui nous porte à l'action … en extériorisant ou en incarnant au dedans de nous l'action, notre vouloir de nature opère cette synergie originale à la fois spirituelle et organique qui constitue la vie individuelle.

> in-depth examination of the harmonization of the Catholic supernatural with our nature, of faith with our reason, and of our supernatural end ... [498]

Whilst it is true, as Romeyer has convincingly shown, that Blondel's philosophy evolved in a more theological direction, the religious motive for the philosophical quest was there from the beginning. As we discovered at the beginning of this chapter, Blondel's religious motives were active from the beginning; and as Jean-Noël Dumont points out, the sentence 'no-one sees God without dying' [499] appears at the beginning and at the end of Blondel's philosophical career. [500]

A significant hobby?

Blondel lectured and wrote on the arts, but bizarrely there is nothing in his writings about his passion for photography. [501] As Havelange suggests, in Blondel's photographs

> the world is constructed, within itself and outside itself, by the way that we look at it, and where the human person only exists in the immanence of elsewhere

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[498] Romeyer, *La Philosophie Religieuse de Maurice Blondel*, 291: pour l'essentiel de notre dynamisme humain, dans le théisme fondamental ouvrant, religieux de la philosophie blondélienne; pour ce qui s'y manifeste de 'transnaturel' ou de surnaturel, dans un théisme complémentaire qu'y constitue l'examen loyal, fervent et approfondi des harmonies du surnaturel Catholique avec notre nature, de la foi avec notre raison, de notre fin surnaturelle ...

[499] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), first published in 1893, 384; *Exigences Philosophiques du Christianisme* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), 243: nul ne voit Dieu sans mourir; *Philosophical Exigences of Christian Religion*, Translated by Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021), 202.

[500] Jean-Noël Dumont, "Faire de chaque Acte une Mort," in *Maurice Blondel: La Sainteté de la Raison*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 101–8 (Paris: Hermann, 2022), 107–8.

[501] Maurice Blondel, *Une Énigme Photographique*, with a commentary by Carl Havelange (Charleroi: Éditions Ereme, Musée de la Photographie de Charleroi, 2005), 27.

> and their permanent necessity. … Blondel, first of all, seems to use the gaze as he uses words: with both the same rigour and the same poetry. … The same passion for sense experience in the text and the image, and the same desire to make it intelligible. This agreement between the sensible and the intelligible is obviously at the heart of the philosophy of action, as it is at the heart of Maurice Blondel's best images.[502]

Human action is human action, thought is human action, political action is human action, society is human action: but however many agreements Havelange might have found between a photographic image and Blondel's philosophy of action, a photograph is still a static object. It is not itself human action, even though it was human action that created it and human action that sees and understands it. Might this be why Blondel did not mention his photography in his philosophical writings?

Conclusions

Blondel's context was not dissimilar to that of philosophers and theologians working in Europe and other parts of the world today. He lived in an academic world in tension between the Roman Catholic Church and a consciously secular academic and social context; and he lived as an individual caught between his passionate Christian faith, a fertile mind steeped in the philosophical currents of the day, the need to relate to a committedly secular academic world, and church authorities often rather keen to condemn theological views that were not their own. Throughout his long career Blondel retained his Christian faith, developed and expressed innovative theology and

[502] Blondel, *Une Énigme Photographique*, 49: le monde est construit, en soi et hors de soi, par le regard que l'on porte sur lui et où la personne humaine ne s'accomplit que dans l'immanence de l'ailleurs et sa permanente nécessité. … Blondel, tout d'abord, semble faire usage du regard comme il fait usage des mots: avec à la fois la même rigueur et la même poésie. … Même passion pour le sensible dans le texte et l'image, et même volonté de la rendre intelligible. Cet accord du sensible et de l'intelligible est évidemment au coeur de la philosophie de l'action, comme il est au coeur des meilleurs images de Maurice Blondel.

philosophy, stayed in touch with contemporary philosophical currents, and managed not to have his books banned by the Vatican. The tensions with which he lived meant that his philosophy evolved in relation to the changing philosophical, theological, academic, and ecclesiastical context, and particularly in relation to such controversies as those discussed above, so different concepts were central at different times—'*action*', 'apologetics', 'thought', 'being', 'spirit' 'immanence': but throughout, '*action*'—although sometimes submerged somewhat by interest in the will, being, and thought—remained at the heart of Blondel's philosophy.

When we study the various critiques of Blondel's philosophy, we find that sometimes the author's agenda simply takes over. For instance, whilst Diakiodi offers some useful commentary on Blondel's *L'Action*, much of his book uses Blondel to pursue a campaign for the emancipation of Africans from colonialism.[503] Diakiodi's book is the most extreme example of polemical use of Blondel's *L'Action* that I have discovered, but both in detail and generally many of the authors that I have studied have imposed their own agendas on the texts. Perhaps the accidental virtue of Diakiodi's approach is that his agenda is entirely clear, and the same is true of the theological commentators de Tonquédec and Romeyer.

As we have seen, the photography raises in an acute form the question of immanence, as does de Tonquédec's critique. The philosophy of Blondel's day was increasingly immanentist[504] in the sense that the human subject had become the ultimate location of reality. This was particularly true of Immanuel Kant's bracketing of the noumenon and of his proposal that the human subject constructs phenomena. Blondel's Latin thesis had been about Leibniz's '*vinculum substantiale*',[505] which had shifted relationships between individual monads from God's action to bonds within the created order. For Hegel, all

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[503] Diakiodi, *Le Combat Philosophique de Maurice Blondel contre la Double Ignorance des Masses*, 81: *L'Action* (1893) en donne quelques contours pour aider l'homme à quitter le monde mythique pour celui de la rationalité et acquérir une culture digne de ce nom.

[504] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 114–17.

[505] Donald Rutherford, "Metaphysics: The Late Period," in *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*, edited by Nicholas Jolley, 124–75 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

becoming was driven by an immanent dialectic; and for Spinoza, human being and action were modes of a single infinite substance.[506] This was the context within which Blondel developed a phenomenology of the human person[507] in which the transcendent and the immanent were intimately related. Blondel chose action as the means to achieve this resolution. As Oliva Blanchette puts it:

> Through action, a principle of transcendent truth and reality becomes immanent in us, even though the thought that discovers this immanence does not take the place of the necessity, or does not change anything in the character of this transcendent. Far from divorcing himself from the sweep of modern thought, then, Blondel espouses it in order to show that it must go beyond itself and find its ultimate truth in something more than just itself.[508]

The textual context makes it clear that for both Blondel and Blanchette, '*action*' here means 'human action'. It could equally well have meant action in general. Given the public understanding of '*action*' at the time as that is expressed by the contemporary dictionary definition,[509] why did Blondel not go down that road?

Human beings are essentially action, and therefore society is as well, but the universe appears to be full of objects, such as photographs, that we normally understand in terms of being rather than in terms of action. This could be one reason for Blondel not understanding the whole of reality in terms of action: a step that might appear a little more obvious to us. A second reason for not extending the concept of action from human action to the cosmos as a whole, as we have already suggested, could be Blondel's concern that to extend the concept of action elsewhere might eventually have involved Christian doctrine, and particularly the doctrine of God, in ubiquitous action: an

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[506] Benedict de Spinoza, *On the Improvement of the Understanding; The Ethics; Correspondence*, translated by R.H.M. Elwes (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 48, 54; Jonathan Bennett, "Spinoza's Metaphysics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, edited by Don Garrett, 61–88 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 61–71.

[507] Michael A. Conway, "A Positive Phenomenology: The Structure of Maurice Blondel's Early Philosophy," *The Heythrop Journal* 47 (2006): 579–600, 586–87.

[508] Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 116.

[509] Académie Française, *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr.

idea in danger of displeasing the ecclesiastical authorities with whom Blondel wished to remain in a positive relationship, and an idea that might not have been entirely welcome to Blondel himself. A further reason could be that to understand action as the foundation of all reality would have suggested that a human being is just one aspect of a universal action, whereas Blondel's Christian Faith would have insisted on a unique dignity for the human being. In May 1891, two years before the publication of *L'Action*, Pope Leo XIII had published his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*[510] on social justice, and in particular on the dignity of human work. Human action was at the heart of catholic social teaching, and so would have been at the heart of Blondel's faith, and therefore of his philosophy. So for a number of reasons, any step that would have subordinated human action to a broader conception of action would have been difficult for Blondel to take. And perhaps there was a further reason: At the examination of his thesis Blondel denied that he was a 'mystic', but the way in which he expresses his Christian faith can look distinctly mystical and as evidencing a desire for becoming like God.[511] The route to divinisation was human action, so it might have been difficult to see how any other kind of action really mattered.

We can conclude that Blondel's own life course, and the controversies in which he and others were embroiled, influenced his philosophy, and in particular the early restriction of the meaning of '*action*' to human action. When we consider both this chapter and the previous chapter together we can also begin to see how a number of factors might later on have encouraged a loosening of the concept of *action* in the direction of action in general: such factors as new philosophical influences, particularly Teilhard de Chardin, and changes in the tension between Blondel and the Roman Catholic Church and that between Blondel and a secular academic world.

[510] Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (The Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, first published in 1891).

[511] Yvette Périco, "*L'Action*: Synthèse de l'Homme et de Dieu," in *Maurice Blondel: Une Dramatique de la Modernité*, 180–87 (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1990).

Chapter 4

L'Action, 1893

Introduction

In chapter 1 we studied the introduction to Blondel's 1893 *L'Action* to obtain an outline of his philosophy and to develop a method for understanding how Blondel was using the concept of action. In this chapter we shall study all of the main chapters of his 1893 *L'Action* so that we can understand his philosophy in more detail, and we shall then employ our methodology to understand how '*action*' is used across the 1893 *L'Action* as a whole.

As we read Blondel's quite complex thesis, in which we find multiple loops, repetitions, and tangents, we shall discover that when he speaks of human action he means precisely that, and not the idea of human action; and that Blondel's aim was at least twofold: to create a philosophy of action—itself an innovation—and to show how human action could form a bond between the natural and the supernatural, and thus to legitimise the supernatural as a proper subject for philosophy.[512]

Part One

The first part of Blondel's *L'Action*, titled 'Is there a problem of action',[513] consists of two short chapters titled 'How we pretend that the moral problem does not exist'[514] and

[512] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 65.

[513] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, translated by Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 1: Y a-t-il un problème de l'action.

[514] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 1: Comment on prétend que le problème moral n'existe pas.

'That we fail to eliminate the moral problem and how'.[515] Whilst human action is the focus of *L'Action*, it becomes increasingly clear as we read it that theology, and particularly Christian ethics, are the underlying theme: so it is honest of Blondel to frame his initial ground-clearing exercise in ethical terms. The heart of the chapter, and of the ground-clearing in general, is that human action is something that it is impossible to deny, and conversely that theoretical debate can deliver no such certainty.

> We cannot know and affirm everything without denying everything; and the perfect science of the aesthete vanishes of itself in the absolute vanity of everything. … The speculative problem of action seems well eliminated. Will the practical problem be equally suppressed?[516]

A variety of other never referenced philosophical positions are discussed in order to be dismissed before we arrive at Blondel's clear preference for the 'acts and sacrifices'[517] of people

> who have taken their conscience seriously, and who believe they can find in their personal experience of duty a certain confirmation of the infinite value that they attach to their being.[518]

The undeniable fact of human action is at the heart of Blondel's philosophy as we find it in the 1893 *L'Action*, and it is this that generates any theory that we find. This is an approach very different from the theory-led approach that Blondel finds in other thinkers:

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[515] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 12: Qu'on échoue à supprimer le problème moral et comment.

[516] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 6: On ne peut tout connaître et tout affirmer, sans tout nier; et la science parfaite de l'esthète s'évanouit d'elle-même dans l'absolue vanité de tout. … Le problème spéculatif de l'action semble bien supprimé: le problème pratique le sera-t-il également?

[517] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 10: actes et … sacrifices.

[518] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 10: qui ont pris au sérieux leur conscience, et qui croient trouver dans leur expérience personnelle du devoir la confirmation certaine du prix infini qu'ils attachent à leur être.

> You have taken sides; and you now feign surprise that facts no longer correspond to your theory aimed against the facts. Your hypothesis is that there is nothing either real or false, as if everything were a matter of indifference and as if everything were equivalent. But if truth is, it is: a supposition that appears simple and legitimate, and it is the only one you forbid yourself.[519]

There are what we might call two foci to the ellipse of Blondel's philosophy: action, and the will. An issue to which we shall return is the relationship between the will and human action: but here what matters is the use that Blondel makes of the will in his argument that not to will is to will not to will, so the will is as undeniable as action.

Blondel goes on to suggest that we have two wills: the one that drives us to act (*le volontaire*) and the one that constitutes the choices that we actually make (*le voulu*): and they conflict

.[520] In both of them we will, so we can't avoid 'the moral problem'[521]

> because we do not will to dispense ourselves from being and acting: moral abdication is no more possible or honest than metaphysical abstention.[522]

Whilst the two short chapters in part I of *L'Action* at first sight appear to be an unnecessary tangent to the study of human action, they have in fact launched us into the heart of the argument that Blondel goes on to pursue—an argument that we can summarise as follows: that human action and the human will are undeniable and so constitute the most certain basis for philosophy; that we experience two wills, often opposed: what we will to will, and what we in fact will; that the former implies a transcendent reality; and that human action reveals and relates to both of those wills

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[519] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 15: Vous avez pris parti; et vous vous étonneriez volontiers que les faits ne répondent plus à votre théorie dirigée contre les faits: votre hypothèse, c'est qu'il n'y a rien de réel ni de faux, comme si tout était indifférent, comme si tout était équivalent. Et pourtant si la vérité est, elle est: supposition qui paraît simple et légitime, et c'est la seule que vous vous interdisez.

[520] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 19.

[521] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 21: le problème moral.

[522] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 21: car on ne veut pas se dispenser d'être et d'agir ; pas plus que l'abstention métaphysique, l'abdication morale n'est possible ni franche.

and so can reconcile them to each other. Ulrich Hommes suggests that in Blondel's oeuvre the will is not simply psychology: it is 'the fundamental nature of human existence'.[523] I would amend that verdict: both the will and action are foci of the ellipse of Blondel's philosophy.

Part Two

Two short chapters are entitled 'How we pretend to make nothingness the conclusion of experience, the destiny of science, and the purpose of human ambition'[524] and 'That there is no negative solution to the problem of action; and what the consciousness or will of nothingness conceals'.[525] An appendix is titled 'The natural orientation of the will: Does the problem of action have a positive solution?'[526]

In the first chapter Blondel discusses 'Critical Philosophy',[527] by which he means Kant's critiques of pure and practical reason. Kant had divided the speculative and the practical, but action can relate to both and so can reconcile them with each other:

> now human action pertains … to all of the powers in us—powers alien and hostile to each other—through thought, which illuminates human action's origin and accomplishment, [action] is of an intellectual order; through intention and good will, it belongs to the moral world; through execution, to the world of science. At one and the same time, it is an absolute, a noumenon, a phenomenon.[528]

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[523] Ulrich Hommes, *Transzendenz und Personalität* (Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann, 1972), 66: die Grundweise menschlichen Daseins überhaupt.

[524] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 23: Comment on prétend faire du néant la conclusion de l'expérience, le terme de la science et la fin de l'ambition humaine.

[525] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 31: Qu'il n'y a point de solution négative du problème de l'action; et ce que recèle la conscience ou la volonté du néant.

[526] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 40: L'orientation naturelle de la volonté: Le problème de l'action comporte-t-il une solution positive?

[527] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 27: La Philosophie Critique.

[528] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 27: or l'action humaine relève … de toutes les puissances étrangères et hostiles l'une à l'autre en l'homme: par la pensée qui en éclaire l'origine et

As Henry Duméry puts it: to act 'is to enter into communication with the absolute'.[529]

For anyone who might wish to separate 'the determinism of movements' from 'the freedom of intentions',[530]

> whether they know it or not, it is a question of metaphysics, morality, and science at the same time as the problem of life. Action is that synthesis of willing, knowing, and being, that bond of the constitution of the human being that cannot be cut without destroying what has been torn apart; it is the precise point where the world of thought, the moral world, and the world of science, converge; and if these worlds do not unite in [action] then it's all over.[531]

The second chapter extends an argument begun in part I: that whether we will to be, will not to be, or will not to will, we exercise will.[532] We can deny either being or phenomena, 'the invisible' or 'sensible reality', and either the subject or the object, but we cannot deny human action or the will.[533]

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l'accomplissement, elle est d'ordre intellectuel; par l'intention et la bonne volonté, elle appartient au monde moral; par l'exécution, au monde de la science. Tout à la fois, c'est un absolu, c'est un noumène, c'est un phénomène.

[529] Henry Duméry, *La Philosophie de L'Action: Essai sur l'Intellectualisme Blondelien* (Paris: Éditions Montaigne, 1948), 37.

[530] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 28: le déterminisme des mouvements … la liberté des intentions.

[531] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 28: qu'ils le sachent ou non, c'est une question de métaphysique, de morale et de science à la fois que le problème de la vie: L'action est cette synthèse du vouloir, du connaître et de l'être, ce lien du composé humain qu'on ne peut scinder sans détruire tout ce qu'on a désuni ; elle est le point précis où convergent le monde de la pensée, le monde moral, et le monde de la science ; et s'ils ne s'y unissent pas, c'en est fait de tout.

[532] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 37.

[533] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 38–39: l'invisible … la réalité sensible.

Part Three

The third part of Blondel's *L'Action* is titled 'The phenomenon of action: How we try to define action by science alone and to restrict action in the natural order'.[534] The question to be tackled is this: Is there something distinctive about human action, or is it simply an aspect of how everything works?—in which case it should be studied by using the methods of the natural sciences.

This third part is divided into a number of 'stages'.

The first stage of the third part

The first stage is titled 'From sense intuition to subjective science: The scientific conditions and unconscious sources of action'.[535]

During the first chapter, 'The inconsistency of sensation and scientific activity',[536] Blondel constructs a position in order to demolish it: a not infrequent tactic that requires us to decide where the position being explained is his own and where he is rejecting the position that he is explaining.[537] The position that Blondel constructs is that we employ science to discover 'something other than what we hear and see',[538] and that for scientists 'the universe is in sum a system of varied and rhythmic movements into which

[534] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 43: Le phénomène de l'action: Comment on essaye de définir par la science seule et de restreindre l'action dans l'ordre naturel.

[535] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 45: De l'intuition sensible à la science subjective: Les conditions scientifiques et les sources inconscientes de l'action.

[536] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 45: L'inconsistance de la sensation et l'activité scientifique.

[537] A similar interpretation problem frequently arises in relation to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1945).

[538] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 46: autre chose que ce qu'on entend et ce qu'on voit.

our actions are inserted'.[539] Similarly, mathematics has 'independence and complete self-sufficiency',[540] and to combine 'mathematical deduction' with 'facts of experience' has proved 'fruitful'.[541] The demolition then follows:

> is there in science that coherence and sufficiency that finally establishes the mind and the will in a complete peace of certitude and in full practical success? Or might we not find as a solution something given in the question itself? Is it science that explains the whole of action, or rather action which furnishes science with what it needs?[542]

In the second chapter, 'The incoherence of the positive sciences and the mediation of action',[543] Blondel shows that 'mathematical deduction' and 'facts of experience'[544] are not automatically coherent[545] but rather require human action to mediate between them.

> In this original situation it is as if there are three parts to take into account: (1) what the exact or a priori sciences determine; (2) what the observational sciences

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[539] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 48: l'univers est, somme toute, un système de mouvements variés et rythmés où rentrent nos actions.

[540] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 49: une indépendance et une suffisance entire.

[541] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 49: la déduction mathématique … faits d'expérience …féconde.

[542] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 50: y a-t-il dans la science cette cohérence et cette suffisance qui fixe enfin l'esprit et la volonté en pleine paix de certitude et en plein succès pratique ? ou bien ne prendrait-on pas pour solution une donnée nouvelle de la question même ? Est-ce la science qui explique tout de l'action, ou l'action qui fournit encore à la science de quoi subsister?

[543] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 51: L'incohérence des sciences positives et la médiation de l'action

[544] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 49: faits d'expérience.

[545] An understanding that Blondel might have gained from his teacher Émile Boutroux: Claude Troisfontaines, "Blondel et la Science: À l'École de Boutroux et de Lachelier," in *Maurice Blondel et la Philosophie Française*, edited by Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet, 141–57 (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007), 144–51.

describe; (3) something indeterminate that will be the object of a new science, one properly subjective or philosophical.[546]

That 'indeterminate' is clearly action, as Blondel has already suggested: and it is this passage that brings into question Paul Archambault's decision that at the heart of Blondel's *L'Action* is an 'integral realism'[547] rather than action. It is clearly the activity of science that provides the 'secret mediation' between the a priori and the observational in any particular science, and it is the usefulness of the results that validates the sciences.[548] As Dominique Lambert puts it, 'Objectivity lies not in what science determines, its content, but in what determines it, namely human action':[549] an insight at the heart of Gaston Bachelard's understanding that the task of 'explication' is one of continual 'systematic organisation' and the 'rectification' of 'error':[550] so everything becomes active relationships in a 'field of action' that is 'open'.[551]

Certainly, Blondel seeks an integral realism between the subjective and the objective, between the natural and the supernatural, and so on, but underlying the integration is human action, at least during the early period exemplified by the 1893 *L'Action*.

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[546] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 51: Dans cette donnée primitive, il y a comme trois parts à faire : 1° ce que les sciences exactes ou a priori déterminent; 2° ce que les sciences d'observation décrivent ; 3° un indéterminé, qui sera l'objet d'une science nouvelle, proprement subjective ou philosophique.

[547] Paul Archambault, *L'Oeuvre Philosophique de Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Librairie Bloud & Gay, 1928), 7, 16: réalisme intégral; Blondel, *L'Action* (1893), 461: réalité intégrale.

[548] Archambault, *L'Oeuvre Philosophique de Maurice Blondel*, 18: la médiation secrète.

[549] Dominique Lambert, "*L'Action* de Maurice Blondel. L'Actualité de sa Critique du Réductionnisme—Maurice Blondel's *Action*. The Actuality of his Critique of Reductionism," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, 76, no. 2 (2020):1075–90, 1083: L'objectivité est non pas dans ce que determine la science, ses contenus, mais dans ce qui la détermine, à savoir l'action
humaine.

[550] Gaston Bachelard, "Objectivity and Rectification: The Role of Detail the Objective." Translated by David Webb in 2021 from chapter 14 of Gaston Bachelard *Essai sur la Connaissance Approchée* (Paris: La Librairie Philosophique Vrin, 1928), 243, 249.

[551] Bachelard, "Objectivity and Rectification," 254.

As for a priori sciences such as mathematics:

> Though they seem grounded in reality and to rule over it, they are foreign to it; they cannot account for the simplest sensation, nor for the least act. … In their work of continuous integration, they make constant appeal to a synthetic procedure only capable of offering them a matter that is … completely formal.[552]

The gap between the mathematical and empirical sciences cannot be bridged by either of them.[553] As for empirical sciences,

> the synthetic character of sense data is … the result of an analysis foreign to the data themselves: the possibility of observation is already a postulate.[554]

Our experience of the world is radically diverse, and different experiences are incommensurable, so any application of mathematics assumes an illegitimate set of relationships between diverse realities.

> Everywhere at the origin of scientific procedures something artificial has to mask the unexplained passage from the order of quality to the order of measure. Everywhere a decree intervenes to set up a fictitious relationship that alone permits the one to symbolise the other.[555]

The other main postulate of the empirical sciences is that

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[552] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 61: Quoiqu'elles semblent être fondées dans la réalité et y régner, elles y sont étrangères; elles ne peuvent rendre compte de la plus simple sensation, ni du moindre acte. … Dans leur travail d'intégration continue, elles font constamment appel à un procédé synthétique seul capable de leur fournir une matière qui soit … toute formelle.

[553] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 62.

[554] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 63: le caractère synthétique des données sensibles est … le résultat d'une analyse étrangère à ces données mêmes: la possibilité de l'observation est déjà un postulat.

[555] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 68: Partout à l'origine des procédés scientifiques, il faut qu'un artifice masque le passage inexpliqué de l'ordre de la qualité à l'ordre de la mesure; partout un décret intervient pour instituer une relation fictive qui seule permet à l'un de symboliser avec l'autre.

> empirical continuity will always be an approximation, and will only represent in a symbolic way the mathematical continuity that alone has absolute rigour.[556]

The problem 'is resolved in practice':[557]

> the problem is resolved before anyone has to formulate it: it is resolved practically, which is to say that action, from which the sciences proceed, is not exhausted in them; that in supporting them it surpasses and overflows them; and that in fostering their growth and success it proves that there is in them more than the sciences can know or achieve.
>
> Thus it is that all of the subtleties of Zeno do not prevent Achilles from catching up with the tortoise. All of the incoherences of science do not prevent the scientist from dominating the phenomena and from actualizing … the conceptions and abstract calculations of the mind.[558]

We could say that 'we do science, and it works'. This is practical science rather than an ideological scientism.

> Science succeeds: so we must render an account of this success. ... the sciences do not have to preoccupy themselves with explaining the basis of things. They have only to constitute a system of coherent relationships, starting from different

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[556] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 77: la continuité empirique sera toujours une approximation, et ne représentera que d'une manière symbolique la continuité mathématique qui seule a une rigueur absolue.

[557] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 80: est résolue en fait.

[558] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 80: le problème est tranché, avant qu'on ait besoin de le formuler ; il l'est pratiquement, c'est-à-dire que l'action d'où procèdent les sciences ne s'y épuise pas, qu'en les soutenant elle les dépasse et les déborde, qu'en permettant leur croissance et leur succès elle prouve qu'il y a en elle plus que les sciences ne connaissent et n'atteignent.
C'est ainsi que toutes les subtilités de Zénon n'empêchent pas Achille d'attraper la tortue: toutes les incohérences de la science n'empêchent pas le savant de dominer les phénomènes et de réaliser … les conceptions et les calculs abstraits de l'esprit. (A, 80)

> conventions and to the extent that each of their different hypotheses is verified in practice.[559]

Science works because the empirical and the theoretical are bound together in the human action that constitutes the practice of the sciences:

> the action from which they proceed provides even greater proof that it surpasses them and that it cannot expect a single further clarification from them. ... The positive sciences are only the partial and subordinate expression of an activity that envelops, sustains, and overflows them.[560]

For Blondel, human action is a ubiquitous reconciling force. The 'willing will' is what we wish to will, but the 'willed will' is what we actually will to happen as our will meets multiple additional factors in the world around us; and because our willing will drives human action, and human action relates to multiple factors that include the willed will, human action can relate the willing will and the willed will to each other. Similarly, science, which is human action, relates to both theory and the empirical.[561] Without the actual doing of science the chasm between theory and empirical facts would be unbridgeable. This is an important result for Blondel because it reveals science to be founded on action rather than science being an autonomous activity able to evaluate the nature and sources of action. It is also an example of a relationship that will be increasingly important: the transcendent that is also immanent. The will and its related human action transcend the sciences that require them as their basis, and at the same time they are immanent to the sciences that study it.[562]

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[559] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 81, 83: La science est une réussite: c'est donc de cette réussite qu'il faut rendre compte. … les sciences n'ont point à se préoccuper d'expliquer le fond des choses. Elles ont seulement à constituer un système de relations cohérentes, à partir de différentes conventions et dans la mesure où chacune de leurs différentes hypothèses est contrôlée en fait.

[560] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 86: L'action dont elles procèdent prouve mieux qu'elle les dépasse et qu'elle ne peut en attendre une seule clarté de plus. … Les sciences positives ne sont que l'expression partielle et subalterne d'une activité qui les enveloppe, les soutient et les déborde.

[561] la volonté voulante … la volonté voulue.

[562] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 81.

The third chapter of the first stage of the third part of *L'Action* is titled 'The elements of consciousness and the subjective science of action'.[563] Here Blondel establishes a science of consciousness, or 'moral sciences'—a science of the subject rather than of the object—on the usual basis of the theoretical and empirical sciences. The argument is of course circular because he has already claimed that the positive sciences, which encompass both theory and experiment, are only coherent because the empirical and the theoretical are mediated by human action.

> The phenomenon is only what it is in function of an activity that contributes to producing it; we perceive it only according to the very order of its production; and the subject's constituting action is essential to it.[564]

Blondel recognizes that the subjective is never entirely constructed out of the empirical and the theoretical because it requires human action to unite them:

> Seen from the outside by the scholar, the subjective is precisely that which cannot be known either by calculation or by observation by the senses, because it is this which is constituted by the bond between them, and it introduces unity amid the multiplicity.[565]

Once every outside influence is bracketed, along with 'each synthesis'[566] constituted by the subject, what is left is 'the source of mental dynamism'.[567] 'Thus it is that the true science of consciousness can only be a science of action'.[568]

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[563] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 87: Les éléments de la conscience, et la science subjective de l'action.

[564] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 91: Le phénomène n'est ce qu'il est, qu'en fonction d'une activité qui contribue à l'engendrer; on ne le perçoit que selon l'ordre même de sa production; et l'action constituante du sujet y est essentielle.

[565] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 97: Vu du dehors par le savant, le subjectif est cela précisément qui ne peut être connu ni en fonction du calcul, ni en fonction de l'observation sensible, parce que c'est cela qui en constitue le lien et qui introduit l'unité au sein de la multiplicité.

[566] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 99: chaque synthèse.

[567] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 99: le ressort du dynamisme mental.

[568] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 99: C'est ainsi que la véritable science de la conscience ne saurait être qu'une science de l'action.

Blondel insists that action must not be reduced to fact.

> The least *act* has a reality, an importance, and a dignity … infinitely greater than the *fact* of the entire universe. … What is properly subjective, therefore, is not just what is conscious and known from the inside (properly understood, that is the case for every phenomenon): it is what makes the fact of consciousness exist, and it is the internal and always singular act of thought. A science of the subjective will inevitably be a mental dynamics.[569]

So the methods of other sciences are not appropriate. This is not psychology. A science of the subject starts from consciousness as action, and thus with 'the very work of the will'[570] and the foundational action-related phenomenon.[571]

> The fact is only by the act; and without the subjective phenomenon there would be no other. So whoever posits something requires a subject. The positive sciences converge on a science of action.[572]

In 1888 Blondel had written an article that explained that the moon and stars look larger at the horizon because that is how our perception works[573]—that is, due to the action of

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[569] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 99–100: le moindre *acte* a une réalité, une importance, une dignité … infiniment supérieure au *fait* de l'univers entier. … Ce qui est proprement subjectif, c'est donc non pas seulement ce qui est conscient et connu du dedans (tout phénomène, à le bien prendre, en est là); c'est ce qui fait être le fait de conscience; c'est l'acte interne et toujours singulier de la pensée. Une science du subjectif sera forcément une dynamique mentale.

[570] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 100: l'oeuvre même de la volonté.

[571] Philippe Capelle-Dumont, "Le Phénomène comme Alliance: *Vinculum* et *Nexus*. La Phénoménologie chez le Premier Blondel," in *Maurice Blondel: La Sainteté de la Raison*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 25–40 (Paris: Hermann, 2022), 39.

[572] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 102: Le fait n'est que par l'acte; et sans le phénomène subjectif il n'y en aurait point d'autre. Qui pose quelque chose requiert donc le sujet. Les sciences positives convergent à une science de l'action.

[573] Maurice Blondel, "Une Association Inséparable: L'Agrandissement des Astres à l'Horizon," *La Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 26 (1888): 490–97 ; *Oeuvres Complètes*, *Tome II*, edited by Claude Troisfontaines (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 489–97.

our brains; and what is remarkable about both that article and this chapter of *L'Action* is that they read as summaries of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, published in 1945, over fifty years after Blondel's *L'Action*: yet *Phénoménologie de la Perception* makes no mention of Blondel. What the *Phénoménologie de la Perception* shows is that what we see relates to the movement of the human body: to human action—precisely Blondel's point. [574]

The second stage of the third part

In the second stage of the third part of *L'Action*, 'From the threshold of consciousness to voluntary operation: The conscious elements of action', [575] Blondel leaves his discussion of science and turns to a discussion of the dynamism and freedom of action, which as always is understood as a fundamental reality. However, human action is always 'determined' in various ways, and it is these determinations that sciences can study: and because the will drives action, it is psychology that takes first place among the sciences.

> There is therefore a dynamic spontaneity which depends on subjective spontaneity: psychological determinism absorbs physical determinism, and, without suppressing it, substitutes for it, or superimposes itself on it, by employing it. It is therefore in consciousness alone that we must now seek the internal and determining principle of action. [576]

Perhaps it is no coincidence that it is in this section of *L'Action*, which Oliva Blanchette perhaps correctly regards as the heart of Blondel's thesis, that a religious agenda more

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[574] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1945).

[575] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 103: Du seuil de la conscience à l'opération volontaire: Les éléments conscients de l'action.

[576] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 104: Il y a donc une spontanéité motrice qui dépend de la spontanéité subjective: le déterminisme psychologique absorbe le déterminisme physique, et sans le supprimer, s'y substitute ou s'y superpose en l'employant. C'est donc dans la conscience seule qu'il faut maintenant chercher le principe interne, le principe déterminant de l'action.

clearly affects the direction of the argument.[577] First of all, Blondel has taken no account of involuntary human action such as reflex and unreflective reactions: but more importantly, by absorbing physical determinism in the psychological, which is the realm of ideas, he is getting a bit too close to the idealism that he has said that he wants to avoid. He is running this danger because he wants to prioritise the willing will over both the willed will and the action that results from the willed will so that he can maintain the individual's freedom's priority over anything else that determines human action. Blondel's longstanding friend and colleague Victor Delbos believed the will to be the foundation of Blondel's philosophy—

> It is … neither the ontological necessity of the Absolute, nor the practical necessity of Duty, that can serve as a foundation for thought: a fact is necessary, a fact which is both first and last, which contains in itself, or which by itself is capable of requiring, everything that is essential for it fully to be. This fact is the will, understood first in its most indeterminate meaning, the will to be;[578]

and he understands *L'Action* to be 'a study of the dynamic progress of the will'.[579] In this part of *L'Action* it would be easy to draw that conclusion. However, the focus soon changes in the direction of the human action that is the primary consideration and so constitutes the will, and that at the same time stems from the will.

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[577] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 66.

[578] Victor Delbos, "Compte Rendu sur *L'Action* (1893) de Maurice Blondel," *La Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* 7, no. 12 (1894): 634–41, 635: Ce n'est … ni la nécessité ontologique de l'Absolu, ni la nécessité pratique du Devoir qui peut servir de fondement à la pensée; il faut un fait, un fait qui soit à la fois premier et dernier, qui contienne en lui seul ou qui soit capable de requérir par lui seul tout ce qui lui est indispensable pour être pleinement. Ce fait, c'est la volonté, entendue d'abord dans sa signification la plus indéterminée, la volonté d'être.

[579] Delbos, "Compte Rendu sur *L'Action* (1893) de Maurice Blondel," 636: étude du progrès dynamique de la volonté.

The first chapter of the second stage of the third part is titled simply 'The conception of action'.[580] The fundamental message is that everything is action, from conception through to physical human action.

> Consciousness results from a series of elementary and unconscious acts, not just from the last;—it constitutes a synthesis and a distinct act;—it prepares and begins a series of new acts, the outcome of which it does not foresee, but which it proposes for itself at least provisionally. To conceive is to have acted, to be acting still, and to have to act further.[581]

But we don't act on every idea. Inhibition occurs, resulting in reflection, or reason, and we exercise 'freedom amid internal phenomena':[582] all of which is human action.

Chapter 2 of the second stage of the third part, 'The reason of action',[583] pursues this theme:

> This power for both understanding a system of complementary ideas and paralysing its immediate influence in order to reflect and deliberate on it … is what we commonly call reason; and the act that will proceed from this interior labour is what we ordinarily call … the human, rational, willed, and free act, or simply the act or action, without distinguishing sufficiently what deserves to be called that.[584]

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[580] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 105: La conception de l'action.

[581] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 109: la conscience résulte d'une série d'actes élémentaires et inconscients, non du dernier seulement;—elle constitue une synthèse et un acte distinct;—elle prépare et ébauche une série d'actes nouveaux dont elle ne prévoit pas le terme, mais qu'elle se propose comme fin au moins provisoire. Concevoir, c'est avoir agi, agir encore, et devoir agir au delà.

[582] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 115: la liberté, au sein des phénomènes internes.

[583] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 116: La raison de l'action.

[584] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 116: ce pouvoir de comprendre à la fois un système d'idées complémentaires et d'en paralyser l'influence immédiate pour y réfléchir et en délibérer … c'est ce qu'on nomme communément la raison; et l'acte qui procédera de ce travail intérieur, c'est celui qu'on appelle d'ordinaire, sans distinguer assez ce qui mérite

The reason for an act is something other than the contexts, actions, and so on, that influence it.

> Conscious action finds its explanation and its total rationale only in a principle irreducible to the facts of consciousness as well as to sensible phenomena: it is conscious of its own initiative only by attributing to itself a character of infinitude and transcendence to itself. [585]

Whilst the language is not itself theological, we know from an entry in his notebooks in 1886 that Blondel understood that 'in each of our activities there is an infinity: that of God'. [586]

Robert Koerpel describes Blondel's understanding of human rationality here as sacramental: [587] that is, the finite and contingent are an efficacious sign of a reality beyond them: but whilst we can understand that conscious action might attribute a transcendence to itself—as it will have to understand itself as somehow prior to anything that determines it, whether the determination is external or psychological—it is difficult to see why infinitude is required as well as transcendence. Blondel suggests that it is action that reveals the 'apparent infinity of a power proper to the agent', [588] and that is at the same time the result of various forces.

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de l'être, l'acte humain, l'acte raisonnable, l'acte volontaire, l'acte libre, l'acte ou l'action tout court.

[585] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 119: l'action consciente ne trouve son explication et sa raison totale que dans un principe irréductible aux faits de conscience comme aux phénomènes sensibles; elle n'est consciente de sa propre initiative qu'en s'attribuant un caractère d'infinitude et de transcendance.

[586] Maurice Blondel, *Carnets Intimes* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1961), 87: Dans chacun de nos opérations, il y a un infini. Que ce soit celui de Dieu.

[587] Robert C. Koerpel, "Maurice Blondel and the Sacramentality of Human Rationality," *The Heythrop Journal* 59 (2018): 804–16.

[588] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 120: apparent infini d'un pouvoir propre à l'agent.

> To the determinism of brute force, whether of animal instinct or mental spontaneity, is added the willed determination of the act, not to suppress it but to use it.[589]

Blondel here defines the 'apparent infinity of a power proper to the agent' as 'the willed determination of the act', which suggests that 'infinitude' here means 'transcendence'. The basis of Blondel's claims here is that human action 'is always a *beyond*',[590] or rather, 'an over-above', in relation to the bundle of determinants experienced by the agent: so the text would have been clearer if he had avoided such concepts as 'infinitude' and 'transcendence' and had simply pointed out that human action is never entirely determined by other external or internal factors. He does not do that: he transfers this 'over-above' to the will, rather than to human action itself:

> Free will has necessarily arisen in us, and it has adopted all of its origins.—Free will is necessarily involved in all of our reflected-upon acts, and it ratifies all of the consequences of its intervention or abstention. It is not just a necessary *possibility*: it is a necessary *fact*.[591]

We can agree that human beings have to assume a level of free will if they are to act and to take responsibility for their actions, but Blondel has not proved that our actions cannot be purely the result of determinants to which we are subject, and neither has he shown that free will is a fact. He has also risked dislodging human action as the primary fact.

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[589] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 120–21: Au déterminisme de la force brute ou de l'instinct animal ou de la spontanéité mentale s'ajoute, non pour le supprimer, mais pour l'employer, la détermination volontaire de l'acte.

[590] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 122: est toujours un *au-delà*.

[591] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 126: La volonté libre a nécessairement surgi en nous et elle a adopté toutes ses origines.—La volonté libre est nécessairement engagée dans nos actes réfléchis et elle ratifie toutes les suites de son intervention ou de son abstention. Elle n'est pas seulement une *possibilité* nécessaire; elle est un *fait* nécessaire.

Chapter 3 of the second stage of the third part of *L'Action* is titled 'The determination of freedom and the production of action'.[592] Here a more developed argument for transcendence is offered. Our freedom mixes itself with the pressures on us and adapts itself to them, and any goal that it sets then becomes an obligation to fulfil that goal and so is experienced as a heteronomous or transcendent obligation that is only fulfilled when what is willed results in action. 'Moral law is indispensable to freedom … Duty is thus erected into a positive fact, a scientific truth'.[593] Blondel solves the problem of the difference between the self-generated obligation and a moral law by appealing to 'the element common to every use of freedom and, underneath what is arbitrary and variable, taking hold of what remains necessary and inevitable'.[594] But as soon as the will particularises itself in action, it is still subject to the determinism of the context.

> Apparent contradictions: the will only tends to equal its internal momentum, and it seems to be seeking and begging from the outside the satisfaction that it can only appreciate within itself. It claims to be emancipating itself from all of the obstacles that stand in the way of its expansion, but it goes off to commit itself to the determinism of external powers. It is this necessity of action that we must explain and justify.[595]

It is the act rather than the intention that we and others notice,[596] and Blondel emphasises the fact that

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[592] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 129: La détermination de la liberté et la production de l'action.

[593] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 136: La loi morale est … indispensable à la liberté. Le devoir est ainsi érigé en fait positif, en vérité scientifique.

[594] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 136: l'élément commun à tout emploi de la liberté, et de ressaisir, sous ce qui est arbitraire et variable, ce qui demeure nécessaire et inévitable.

[595] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 137–38: Apparentes contradictions: elle ne tend qu'à égaler son intime élan, et il semble qu'elle quête et mendie au dehors la satisfaction qu'elle ne peut goûter qu'en elle-même; elle prétend s'affranchir de tous les obstacles qui entravent son expansion, et elle va se commettre dans le déterminisme des puissances extérieures. C'est cette nécessité de l'action qu'il faut expliquer et justifier.

[596] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 138.

> we become conscious of our freedom only in acting … freedom has revealed itself, among conflicting motives, only by taking on the shape of one of the particular motives and by playing an efficacious role in the midst of them. It must therefore keep acting in order to maintain its independence. … Thus born of action, kept going through action, and perfected by action, the consciousness of freedom and moral obligation tends towards action. [597]

An interesting addition follows:

> No doubt, the sincere intention is already an act by itself and, in certain cases, it seems that there is no material operation to translate it outwards. Nevertheless, we cannot doubt that every act of consciousness expresses itself through an action, which is to say through a particular state and a systematic disposition of the organs; and we cannot doubt that this intimate act, if it becomes the object of a decided attention and an express will that consents to it and doubles it in some fashion by adhering to it, determines an organic tension that sustains and reinforces the intention itself. [598]

So action both precedes and follows intention, and so both precedes and follows moral liberty: '… only by surpassing itself does liberty conserve and develop itself: genuine

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[597] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 138–39: nous n'avons pris conscience de notre liberté qu'en agissant … la liberté ne s'est révélée, dans le conflit des motifs, qu'en revêtant la figure d'un des motifs particuliers et qu'en jouant au milieu d'eux un rôle efficace: il est donc nécessaire que pour maintenir son indépendance elle continue à agir … Ainsi née de l'action, entretenue par l'action, perfectionnée par l'action, la conscience de la liberté et de l'obligation morale tend à l'action.

[598] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 140: Sans doute, l'intention sincère est déjà par elle-même un acte, et, en certains cas, il n'y a point, semble-t-il, d'opération matérielle qui puisse la traduire au dehors. Toutefois, il n'est pas douteux que tout acte de conscience s'exprime par une action, c'est-à-dire par un état particulier et une disposition systématique des organes; il n'est pas douteux que cet acte intime, s'il devient l'objet d'une attention décidée et d'une volonté expresse qui y consent et le redouble en quelque façon en y adhérant, ne détermine une tension organique qui entretient et renforce l'intention même.

autonomy would be truly heteronomy';[599] and only by assuming and exercising liberty can we decide that everything is determined.[600]

The third stage of the third part

The third stage of the third part of *L'Action* is titled 'From intentional effort to the first external expansion of action: The organic growth of willed action'[601] and is best understood as variations on a theme.

In between two streams of deterministic actions there is a free act, and science can reflect on both the determined streams and the free act.[602]

> Moral relations do not stay up in the air: it is important above all to be able to trace the framework in which they constitute themselves. … Subjective life spreads into the object only to complete itself there: it gives and it receives. … from a higher point of view, the act of consciousness, by embodying itself in action, penetrates the object and insinuates into it its own reality in order to make of the whole an original synthesis.[603]

The first chapter of the third stage of the third part is titled 'The body of action and subjective physiology',[604] and here the active and passive forms of organic life related to

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[599] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893)140–41: … la liberté ne se conserve et ne se développe qu'en se dépassant elle-même: l'autonomie actuelle serait vraiment hétéronomie.

[600] Oliva Blanchette, *For a Fundamental Social Ethic: A Philosophy of Social Change* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1973), 6.

[601] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 144: De l'effort intentionnel à la première expansion extérieure de l'action: La croissance organique de l'action voulue.

[602] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 146.

[603] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 148: Les relations morales ne restent pas en l'air: c'est à tracer le cadre où elles se constituent qu'il importe avant tout de pourvoir. … La vie subjective ne se répand dans l'objet que pour s'y compléter; elle donne et reçoit. … à un point de vue supérieur, l'acte de conscience, en prenant corps dans l'action, pénètre l'objet et lui insinue sa propre réalité pour former du tout une synthèse originale.

[604] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 150: Le corps de l'action et la physiologie subjective.

the human body are integrated with our consciousness of willed and accomplished action. We have a 'direct perception of the organism', [605] to which become attached 'all of the derived notions that we acquire of our own body and of other bodies'. [606]

> The consciousness of organic effort is then a conglomerate of very complex givens. As an effect of habit, these different contributions melt into one another and form a single whole, tied to the initiative of conscious action. [607]

Chapter 2 is titled 'The action of the body and the psychology of the organism'. [608] Every decision that we make throws an act into the 'confused multitude': [609]

> In penetrating into the system of our habits, [the act] upsets the equilibrium, provokes a new coalition of thoughts and desires, summons from the psychological organism a response to its call, and reveals the secret movements which would have remained hidden in the depths without this penetrating blow from the decision. [610]

We have more control over the movements of our limbs than over our will, and this leads Blondel into a discussion of a fundamental distinction: we constantly experience the division between the 'willing will' and the 'willed will'. [611]

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[605] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 154: perception directe de l'organisme.

[606] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 154: toutes les notions dérivées que nous acquérons de notre corps et des corps étrangers.

[607] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 156: La conscience de l'effort organique est donc un agglomérat de données très complexes. Par l'effet de l'habitude, ces apports différents se fondent et ne forment plus qu'un seul total, rattaché à l'initiative de l'action consciente.

[608] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 165: L'action du corps, et la psychologie de l'organisme.

[609] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 165: multitude confuse.

[610] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 165: en pénétrant dans le système de nos habitudes, il rompt l'équilibre, il provoque une coalition nouvelle des pensées et des désirs, il fait jaillir de l'organisme psychologique une réponse à son appel, il révèle les secrets mouvements qui, sans ce coup pénétrant de la décision, seraient demeurés cachés au coeur.

[611] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 166.

> A bizarre circle: the will cannot reach its completion except in action; and action, sometimes even the thought of action, splits, disconcerts, and represses the will. Freedom seemed triumphant, and it was: but no sooner does it appear than it is no longer triumphant.[612]

Blondel describes the divided will as 'two hearts in the human heart … not only do we not do all that we will': we often 'do what we do not will'.[613] Nevertheless, Blondel proposes that there is

> underneath reflected upon life, and even down to the last confines of the psychological automatism, a kind of reason that presides over the most obscure functions and that first prepares the way for willed activity before defeating it.[614]

In Chapter 2 we asked whether Blondel was a Platonist. Here reason, or perhaps Reason, appears to be less an Aristotelian category to which our individual reasons belong, and more a Platonic Form: a Reason alongside the Being, Thought, and Action, that will inform the later trilogy. This reason can become a passion in which 'it is not just *their* all, they want it to be all':[615] and passion can drag this reason[616] from the unconscious into consciousness.

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[612] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 168: Cercle bizarre: la volonté ne saurait rencontrer sa plénitude que dans l'action; et l'action, parfois même la seule pensée de l'action morcelle, déconcerte et refoule la volonté. La liberté semblait triomphante, elle l'était; mais à peine paraît-elle qu'elle ne l'est déjà plus.

[613] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 170: deux coeurs dans le coeur humain … non seulement nous ne faisons pas tout ce que nous voulons … faisons ce que nous ne voulons pas.

[614] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 173–74: au-dessous de la vie réfléchie et jusqu'aux derniers confins de l'automatisme psychologique une sorte de raison qui préside aux fonctions les plus obscures et qui prépare d'abord l'activité volontaire avant de lui faire échec.

[615] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 176: ce n'est pas seulement *leur* tout, ils veulent que ce soit *le* tout.

[616] raison.

> Action is the cement of organic life and the bond of individual consciousness. In the act there is more than the act itself: there is the unity of the agent, the systematic reconciliation of their forces, and the cohesion of their tendencies. [617]

In the third chapter of the third stage of the third part, titled 'The interior synergy and the constitution of individual life through action', [618] Blondel shows how

> action unites into one flow the dispersed forces of life in order to constitute the organic synthesis and to serve as mediator between all of the forms of physical and spiritual activity, and how it enriches the will by responding to the first movement of centrifugal expansion through a centripetal movement, the return of which composes the vital rhythm and closes the circle of individual life. [619]

As Victor Delbos puts it in a review of *L'Action*: 'There is no science of life that can exempt you from living: life alone reveals its secret, to those who really want it.' [620] And for Blondel, it is action that suffuses the life that reveals its secret, which is action.

> Action … envelops and sweeps along the most opposed tendencies; it makes of them a single body, and it makes of them *the* body. … Through the diffusion and

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[617] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 180: L'action est le ciment de la vie organique et le lien de la conscience individuelle: dans l'acte, il y a plus que l'acte même ; il y a l'unité de l'agent, la conciliation systématique de ses forces, la cohésion de ses tendances.

[618] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 181: La synergie intérieure et la constitution de la vie individuelle par l'action.

[619] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 181–82: L'action unit en un faisceau les forces éparses de la vie pour constituer la synthèse organique et pour servir de médiatrice entre toutes les formes de l'activité corporelle et spirituelle; comment elle enrichit la volonté, en répondant au premier mouvement d'expansion centrifuge, par un mouvement centripète dont le retour compose le rythme vital et ferme le circuit de la vie individuelle.

[620] Victor Delbos, "Compte Rendu sur *L'Action* (1893) de Maurice Blondel," *La Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* 7, no. 12 (1894): 634–41, 641: Il n'y a pas de science de la vie qui puisse dispenser de vivre: la vie seule révèle son secret, à qui la veut pleinement.

> the connection of the reflexes, the act reverberates throughout the organic synergy.[621]

In particular, action is revelatory of the unconscious:

> Revealing what is obscurely at work in the unknown depths of life, it brings to light, and gathers into a visible trajectory, those insubstantial threads that form the network of individuality.[622]

By action, we relate the subject to the object of ourselves, and so unite phenomena with the will.

> So in its origin every act is an indivisible unity wherein human initiative and the contribution of the universe meet.[623]

The fourth stage of the third part

The fourth stage of the third part of *L'Action* is titled 'From individual action to social action: Generation, fertilisation, and reproduction, of human actions',[624] and by a variety of steps extends the concept of action from the individual human being to society as a whole.

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[621] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 182–83: L'action enveloppe et emporte les tendances les plus opposées; elle en fait un corps unique, elle en fait le corps. … Par la diffusion et la connexion des réflexes, l'acte retentit dans toute la synergie organique.

[622] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 194: Révélant ce qui s'agite obscurément dans les profondeurs ignorées de la vie, elle amène à la lumière et groupe en un faisceau visible ces impalpables fils qui forment le réseau de l'individualité.

[623] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 196: en sorte que tout acte est, à son origine, une unité indivisible en laquelle se rencontrent l'initiative humaine et la contribution de l'univers.

[624] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 201: De l'action individuelle à l'action sociale: Génération, fécondation et reproduction des actions humaines.

The will detaches action from itself 'like a distinct creature' that it 'hands over to circulation', where it 'contracts an alliance with the object of its desire'.[625]

> In order to reach completion, the operation that proceeds from me and, through the material execution of the sensible phenomena, goes out to fall under the brute determinism of dead facts, needs to follow a reverse channel and serve as nourishment for other forces that regenerate its hidden life and more or less second its intentions.[626]

Chapter 1 of the fourth stage of the third part is titled 'The immediate expansion and sensible expression of action'.[627]

> It is a question of the sensible generation of *action*, not of the *phenomenon*. Before all reflexion, and every end deliberately pursued, there is an immediate and total expression of the actual operation, an action of action, which is like its primary sign and spontaneous imprint. It constitutes its initial production and its first work, the origin and means for all of the others.[628]

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[625] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 202: comme une créature distincte … livre à la circulation … contracte alliance avec l'objet de son désir.

[626] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 202: L'opération qui procède de moi et qui va, à travers l'exécution matérielle et les phénomènes sensibles, se soumettre au déterminisme brut des faits morts, a besoin, pour aboutir, de suivre une filière inverse et de servir d'aliment à d'autres forces qui en régénèrent la vie cachée et en secondent plus ou moins les intentions.

[627] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 203: L'expansion immédiate et l'expression sensible de l'action.

[628] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 204: C'est [question] de la génération sensible de l'action, non du *phénomène* qu'il s'agit. Avant toute réflexion et toute fin délibérément poursuivie, il y a une expression immédiate et totale de l'opération actuelle, une action de l'action, qui en est comme le signe primaire ou la trace spontanée. Elle en constitue la production initiale et la première oeuvre, origine et moyen de toutes les autres.

Human action is 'expressive of subjective life',[629] and it is always 'a determinate action' in addition to 'the physical agents already known'.[630] The action is not simply a phenomenon because

> in being produced outside, it keeps the coherent and ordered character of the individual synthesis the extension of which it is.[631]

We can put it like this: Because we cannot doubt human action, what human action achieves in the world actually represents the agent that performs the action and reveals that agent's reality, action, thought, and motivation, and the will that

> begins to penetrate the world with its intentions as it had already penetrated the organism with them. It aspires to become, as it were, the soul of all that surrounds and serves it. It claims to gain the universe and to absorb and therefore dominate it.[632]

'To will, to act, to operate, and to produce',[633] draws us towards the unforeseen that is also in conformity with our willing.

Chapter 2 of the fourth stage of the third part of *L'Action* is titled simply 'coaction'.[634]

> In order to act, one must accommodate oneself to one's milieu, and … this milieu contributes to the way of being and doing of whoever unfolds into it. … Our action then is never only our action. It is not enough for it to be led to go out of the individual's confines, it must also arouse powers alien to ourselves through a sort of natural affinity and through *coaction*, and its work, or its phenomenon, must result from a convergence and synthesis of operations coming from

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[629] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 204: expressif de la vie subjectif.

[630] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 205: L'action déterminée … des agents physiques déjà connus.

[631] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 207: en se produisant au dehors, elle garde le caractère cohérent et ordonné de la synthèse individuelle dont elle est le prolongement.

[632] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 209: commence à pénétrer le monde de ses intentions comme elle en avait déjà pénétré l'organisme. Elle aspire à devenir comme l'âme de tout ce qui l'environne et la sert. Elle prétend gagner l'univers et le dominer en l'absorbant.

[633] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 211: Vouloir, agir, opérer, produire.

[634] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 214.

> different origins. … The action of something else: that is what our personal action requires in order to enable and perfect our expansive synergy. [635]

This means that to study only the will and the end that it has in mind is to miss a significant aspect of any final cause, which must take account of many efficient causes. A consequence is that the sciences cannot restrict themselves to an individual's action: they must 'have as their objective to study the content of the operation … the coaction in the universal determinism'. [636] So whether it is the individual's action, or the action that impinges on the individual, it is 'action that constitutes the domain of these positive sciences'. [637]

> In producing itself, action transforms itself. But this transformation is what we were seeking in acting. Agents put themselves into what they do, and what they do fashions them. The centre of equilibrium of individual life moves, therefore, and transfers itself into the work to which the will consecrates itself. [638]

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[635] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 214–17: Pour agir, il faut s'accommoder à son milieu, et … ce milieu contribue à la façon d'être et de faire de qui s'y déploie. … Notre action n'est donc jamais seulement notre action: ce n'est pas assez qu'elle soit amenée à sortir de l'enceinte individuelle, il faut encore que, par une sorte d'affinité naturelle et par *coaction*, elle suscite des puissances étrangères à nous, et que son oeuvre ou son phénomène résulte d'une convergence et d'une synthèse d'opérations issues d'origines différentes. … L'action d'autre chose, voilà donc ce qu'exige notre action personnelle, pour permettre et parfaire notre synergie expansive.

[636] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 222: ont pour objet d'étudier le contenu de l'opération … la coaction dans le déterminisme universel.

[637] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 222: L'action qui constitue le domaine de ces sciences positives.

[638] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 223: En se produisant, l'action se transforme. Mais cette transformation même est ce qu'on cherchait en agissant. L'agent se met dans ce qu'il fait; et ce qu'il fait le façonne. Le centre d'équilibre de la vie individuelle se déplace donc et se transporte dans l'oeuvre à laquelle la volonté se consacre.

Chapter 3 of the fourth stage of the third part of *L'Action* is titled 'Influence and cooperation'.[639] Any work becomes 'a wheel in the general determinism'.[640] 'The completed work attains a relative independence … in acting, we act as if for all and in all',[641] and this is especially true of art, which can be appreciated by others as well as by ourselves. The same is true of knowledge and language, all of which is action:

> What we do to know ourselves is done to be known by others. It is the spectacle of *our reason*. It is therefore the spectacle of *reason as such*. From the moment the act is willed, it is implicitly addressed to everything that can understand and will. One and the same word is received in its entirety by a thousand hearers. Action is the multiplication of the interior word which, clothed in a body in order to offer itself to all sensibilities, proposes itself in communion with the universe, and by spreading there its fertilising seed to infinity it is the organ of spiritual reproduction.[642]

We have previously found Blondel employing 'reason' in a rather platonic sense. We can now modify that verdict. For Plato, the Forms were ontologically prior to the contingent world that we experience, but for Blondel it is the extensive impact of every individual's reason that underlies 'reason as such'. Not only is the causality reversed, but the resultant Reason is changing rather than unchanging, diverse rather than unitary, and generally dynamic rather than static. The same is true of action, which takes on a 'universal character'.[643] The work is

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[639] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 227: Influence et coopération.

[640] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 227: un rouage dans le déterminisme général.

[641] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 230: L'oeuvre achevée acquiert une indépendance relative … en agissant, on agit comme pour tous et en tous.

[642] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 231–32: Mais ce que nous faisons pour nous connaître est fait pour être connu par d'autres. C'est le spectacle de *notre raison*. C'est donc le spectacle de *la raison*. Du moment où l'acte est voulu, il s'adresse implicitement à tout ce qui peut comprendre et vouloir. Une même et unique parole est reçue tout entière par mille auditeurs. L'action est la multiplication du verbe intérieur qui, revêtu d'un corps pour s'offrir à toutes les sensibilités, se propose en communion à l'univers, et y répand à l'infini sa semence fécondante c'est l'organe de la reproduction spirituelle.

[643] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 232; caractère universel.

> not just … the product or the effect, but … the instrument and the bond of a more real union between consciousnesses that are naturally solitary and unknown to each another [644]

—and through our work we seek a 'complement' [645] in the other.

> Action … will constitute the different societies of which human beings become members, but which at heart they sustain and envelop with their personal wills. … the need for solidarity extends beyond humanity, up to an effective relationship between humanity and the universe; and it extends beyond the universe, no longer just to what is, but also to what is to be and to what we would will to be. [646]

The context is now cosmic, but still there is no equality between the willing will—'what we would will to be'—and the willed will in the midst of multiple determinants—'what is to be'. Human action functions as a bridge between the two wills, but they remain unaligned: even more so now that the context of multiple determinants has been expanded. Fourteen years later Blondel defined the goodness of action in relation to the extent to which it reconciled the two wills—'Action is truly good only if … it tends or adheres to that alone which ultimately reconciles the willed will to the willing will' [647]—

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[644] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 233: non seulement … le produit ou l'effet, mais … l'instrument et le lien d'une union plus réelle entre des consciences naturellement solitaires et inconnues les unes aux autres.

[645] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 240: complément.

[646] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 244: L'action … va constituer les différentes sociétés dont l'homme devient le membre, mais qu'au fond il soutient et qu'il enveloppe de son vouloir personnel, … ce besoin de solidarité s'étend au delà de l'humanité, jusqu'à une liaison effective de l'homme avec l'univers; il s'étend au delà de l'univers, non plus jusqu'à ce qui est, mais jusqu'à ce qui doit être et jusqu'à ce qu'on voudrait qui fût.

[647] Maurice Blondel, *Oeuvres Complètes*, *Tome I*, edited by Claude Troisfontaines (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995), 725, in Blondel's revision of an account of the 1893 examination of *L'Action* originally by Joannès Wehrlé: L'action n'est vraiment bonne que si … elle tend ou elle adhère à cela seul qui égale finalement la volonté voulue à la volonté voulante.

but in the 1893 *L'Action* the continuing gap between the wills results in an individual and social turn to superstition in an attempt to bridge the gulf.[648]

The fifth stage of the third part

The fifth stage of the third part of *L'Action* is titled 'From social action to superstitious action: The profound unity of wills and the universal extension of action'.[649]

The basis of society is not merely 'a play of signs on a calculus of useful forces, a compensatory equilibrium of economic laws, or the exterior side of facts';[650] and neither is it merely a 'common work':[651] it is rather a 'placing in common of energies and lives'.[652] So society requires that we recognise 'a subjective life quite like and equal to my own … another will'.[653] Such a society is required because 'society is the result of an unfolding and the very guarantee of action'.[654] Whilst a society is more than common action, it is action that both forms and maintains a society.

[648] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 69.

[649] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 245: De l'action sociale à l'action superstitieuse: L'union féconde des volontés et l'extension universelle de l'action.

[650] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 248: un jeu de signes, sur un calcul des forces utiles, sur un équilibre compensateur des lois économiques, sur l'extérieur des faits.

[651] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 248: l'oeuvre commune.

[652] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 248: énergies et les vies mises en commun.

[653] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 248: une vie subjective toute pareille et égale à la mienne … une autre volonté.

[654] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 249: la société est le terme de déploiement et la garantie même de l'action.

> Willed action is … the bond that builds up human society; it is the social function *par excellence*. Action is meant for society, and we are held together only by action.[655]

Chapter 1 of the fifth stage of the third part of *L'Action* is titled 'The willed unity and fruitful action of the common life: Family, country, humanity'.[656] Here Blondel discusses friendship, family, country, and humanity as a whole, which he calls 'the three principle progressive terms',[657] at which the 'movement of expansion and consolidation pauses'.[658] But always it is the individual will that generates the action that forms and maintains these different levels of society:

> However broad action might become, it is always the same will that animates all of its unfolding, and that spreads itself out in order to find itself better after each new excursion.[659]

An essential condition of individual action forming and maintaining society is that it should 'somehow embrace common action';[660] and ultimately

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[655] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 251: L'action volontaire est … le ciment qui édifie la cité humaine, c'est la fonction sociale par excellence. L'action est destinée à la société, et nous ne tenons les uns aux autres que par l'action.

[656] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 253: L'unité volontaire et l'action féconde de la vie commune: Famille, patrie, humanité.

[657] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 254: trois principaux termes progressifs.

[658] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 254: mouvement d'expansion et de reprise s'arrête.

[659] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 264: Quelque agrandie que soit l'action, c'est toujours la même volonté qui en anime tout le déploiement et qui s'étend pour se retrouver mieux elle-même après chaque nouvelle sortie.

[660] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 264: embrasse en quelque façon l'action commune.

> individual life … tends to become identical with universal life; or rather, it is this general and impersonal will that seems to be concentrated in each consciousness.[661]

Blondel concludes:

> Thus action, initially coming from the very personal intention of the agent, has gradually incorporated the family and the city so as to take flight throughout all of humanity. ... by willing and ... by acting we … go beyond the family and the city to reach and interest humanity in our actions. … action will once again cross the very confines of the human federation.[662]

This appears to assume action as social rather than as individual, but if we read this text in the context of a coaction in which every human action is affecting and affected by all other action, then we can understand social action as dynamic and diverse and as the coaction of the wills of every member of society, each willing will meeting increasing numbers of determinants and so keeping the willed will distanced from the willing will.

Chapter 2 of the fifth stage of the third part of *L'Action* is titled 'The universal extension of action: The tiered forms of natural morality',[663] and here Blondel charts the way in which attempts have been made to confine the extension of action in 'moral enclosures',[664] or perhaps 'moral pregnancies': an apt translation as it recognises that action breaks out of its enclosures. While the different 'enclosures' appear to be

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[661] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 275: la vie individuelle tend … à s'identifier à la vie universelle; ou plutôt, c'est cette volonté générale et impersonnelle qui semble se concentrer en chaque conscience.

[662] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 277: Ainsi l'action, issue d'abord de l'intention toute personnelle de l'agent, s'est peu à peu incorporé la famille et la cité pour prendre son vol dans l'humanité entière. … en voulant et … en agissant nous dépassons … la famille, la cité, pour atteindre et intéresser à nos actes l'humanité. … l'action va encore franchir l'enceinte même de la fédération humaine.

[663] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 279: L'extension universelle de l'action: Les formes étagées de la morale naturelle.

[664] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 278: enceintes morales.

mutually exclusive and unrelated, Blondel suggests that 'from the point of view of action they are reconciled'.[665]

'To act is in a way to entrust oneself to the universe.'[666] The individual loses themselves in action which Blondel now defines as 'moral'.[667] Calculation of outcomes is impossible, so utilitarianism is inadequate; and because action extends to the whole of humanity, 'morals'[668] contain their rule in themselves and not in our own wills: not because morals exist somehow apart from our wills, but because the action generated by our wills becomes universal as soon as it occurs.

> The ideas regulating conduct … are not a sudden revelation, but are a slow crystallization of the total experience, and like the expression of our social sense and of the meaning of universal life in us.[669]

This makes of morals a science that reflects on action.

> For action seeks out, from the law of the whole, the secret of the rhythm of the parts: it is the projection, into one point, of the complex unity.[670]

Our action might begin as self-will, but the action that returns to us is the opposite: it is disinterested.[671] This implies a 'metaphysical morality' and 'an ideal world':[672] but again, this 'ideal world' is always the coaction of the universe and every human will, and so is diverse, changing, and ubiquitously dynamic.

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[665] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 278: au point de vue de l'action [elles] sont conciliées et pour ainsi dire étagées.

[666] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 280: Agir, c'est en quelque façon se confier à l'univers.

[667] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 280.

[668] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 282: les moeurs.

[669] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 283–84: Les idées régulatrices de la conduite ne sont donc pas une révélation soudaine, mais une cristallisation lente de l'expérience totale et comme l'expression de notre sens social, du sens de la vie universelle en nous.

[670] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 284: Car l'action va chercher, dans la loi du tout, le secret du rythme des parties: elle est la projection, en un point, de l'unité complexe.

[671] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 287.

[672] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 290: morale métaphysique … un monde idéal.

> Speculative conceptions … are a particular synthesis of the universal reality digested and incorporated into thought by action … Metaphysics has its substance in the acting will.[673]

Blondel proposes a correlation between nature, the will, morality, and metaphysics.

> It is by operating in nature, and in searching for itself there, that the will is led to place a system of metaphysical truths outside the real order; and it is because these conceptions still harbour an impenetrable virtuality … that the will … freely pursues its moral *a priori* syntheses in this new domain.[674]

As always, all of this and its relationships is maintained by action.[675]

> Because moral action finds within itself something that comes neither from nature nor from thought, in proportion as it nourishes itself through practice it becomes more acutely conscious of its relative autonomy.[676]

Thus the autonomy of the will and the heteronomy of the moral law are reconciled, and

> instead of being the result, or at least the summation, of an antecedent necessity, human action … is the reason for all of this beautiful ordering. … Willed action … has absorbed all of the rest, in order to shape organs for itself little by little, and to make its own universe.[677]

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[673] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 297: Conceptions spéculatives … sont une synthèse particulière de l'universelle réalité digérée et incorporée à la pensée par l'action … La métaphysique a sa substance dans la volonté agissante.

[674] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 300: C'est en opérant dans la nature et en s'y cherchant elle-même que la volonté est amenée à placer, hors de l'ordre réel, un système de vérités métaphysiques; et c'est parce que ces conceptions recèlent encore une impénétrable virtualité … que la volonté … poursuit librement, dans ce domaine nouveau, ses synthèses morales *a priori*.

[675] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 302.

[676] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 301: Puisque l'action morale trouve en soi quelque chose qui ne vient ni de la nature ni de la pensée, à mesure qu'elle se nourrit d'elle-même par la pratique elle prend plus nettement conscience de son autonomie relative.

[677] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 303: En sorte qu'au lieu d'être le résultat ou du moins le résumé d'une nécessité antécédente, l'action humaine est … la raison de toute cette

Chapter 3 of the fifth stage of part three is titled 'Superstitious action: How we attempt to bring our action to completion and to be self-sufficient'.[678] Again the inequality between the willing will and the willed will awaits a resolution:[679]

> Since in willed action … there subsists an element the mysterious fecundity of which is exhausted by none of the forms of personal, social, or moral life; since after having brought into this abyss of the human will all the grandeurs of science, consciousness, affections, ideas, and duties, there remains a void; and since, no matter how stretched the enveloping lines may be, the circle cannot yet be closed: it is therefore necessary to push on further still.[680]

So what we 'cannot grasp, express, or produce', we 'project outside' ourselves in order to 'make it the object of a cult'[681] and an object of 'superstitious action'.[682]

> In every human act, then, there is the beginning of a budding mysticism. As soon as an act breaks the daily monotony, and as soon as we want to think of it as a

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belle ordonnance. … L'action volontaire a … absorbé tout le reste, pour se façonner peu à peu des organes et se faire son univers.

[678] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 305: L'action superstitieuse: Comment l'homme essaie d'achever son action et de se suffire.

[679] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life*. Grand Rapids (MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 69.

[680] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 305: Puisque dans l'action volontaire … subsiste un élément dont aucune forme de la vie personnelle, sociale ou morale n'épuise la mystérieuse fécondité; puisqu'après avoir apporté dans cet abîme de la volonté humaine toutes les grandeurs de la science, de la conscience, des affections, des idées, des devoirs, il reste un vide; puisque, si allongées que soient les lignes enveloppantes, le cercle ne peut encore se fermer, c'est donc une nécessité de pousser plus avant.

[681] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 306: ne peut étreindre, exprimer, ni produire … projette hors … pour en faire l'objet d'un culte.

[682] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 309: L'ction superstitieuse.

> self-sufficient whole, or to complete it like a distinct and viable creature, we sacralise it. [683]

The transcendence experienced in human action driven by the willing will has now been externalised, not just into religion or metaphysics, but also into more civic and domestic rituals as well. [684] So religion, metaphysics, and other ritual action, become means to the will's self-enclosure and not an end: and in the end such premature closures are inadequate to satisfy the will's need. [685]

> All attempts to bring human action to completion fail; and it is impossible for human action not to seek to complete itself and to be self-sufficient. [686]

The only conclusion that Blondel can draw is that no 'doctrine of immanence' [687] can satisfy the need for transcendence at the heart of human action: and in this respect Blondel has proposed a distinctive 'anthropology of the subject's infinitude'. [688] The following part therefore looks beyond the human will for resolution.

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[683] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 311: En tout acte humain, il y a donc une ébauche de mysticité naissante. Dès qu'il rompt la monotonie quotidienne, dès qu'on veut le concevoir comme un tout suffisant et l'achever comme une créature distincte et viable, on le sacre.

[684] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 313.

[685] Jean Leclercq, "La Raison, ses Reliances et ses Déliaisons. Réflexions à partir de Maurice Blondel," in *Maurice Blondel: La Sainteté de la Raison*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 41–56 (Paris: Hermann, 2022), 47.

[686] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 321: Tous les essais d'achèvement de l'action humaine échouent; et il est impossible que l'action humaine ne cherche pas à s'achever et à se suffire.

[687] Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life*, 71.

[688] Leclercq, "La Raison, ses Reliances et ses Déliaisons," 48: anthropologie de l'infinitude du sujet.

Part four

The fourth part of Blondel's *L'Action* is titled 'The necessary being of action: How the terms of the problem of human destiny are inevitably and voluntarily posited'. [689]

> In what we have willed and done up to now, that which wills and acts always remains higher than what is willed and done. [690]

This part of *L'Action* is divided into two sections, 'The conflict' [691] and 'The Alternative', [692] with the first part divided into a series of 'moments'.

The 'first moment' [693] of 'The conflict' is titled 'The will contradicted and defeated: The apparent termination of willed action'. [694]

> We might will to be self-sufficient, but we cannot be. Against the determinism of willed action seems to rise an opposed determinism, one stronger and more evident still. … the will does not seem to have willed itself: in what it wants it perpetually encounters invincible obstacles and odious sufferings; in what it does, incurable weaknesses or faults of which it cannot repair the consequences. [695]

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[689] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 323: L'être nécessaire de l'action: Comment les termes du problème de la destinée humaine sont forcément et volontairement poses.

[690] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 323: ce que, dans ce qu'on a voulu et fait jusqu'ici, ce qui veut et ce qui agit demeure toujours supérieur à ce qui est voulu et fait.

[691] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 325: Le Conflit.

[692] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 357: L'Alternative.

[693] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 325: première moment.

[694] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 325: La volonté contredite et vaincue: Apparent avortement de l'action voulue.

[695] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 325–26: Nous voudrions nous suffire: nous ne le pouvons pas. Contre le déterminisme de l'action voulue paraît se dresser, plus fort et plus évident encore, un déterminisme opposé. … la volonté ne semble pas s'être voulue elle-même; dans ce qu'elle veut, elle rencontre perpétuellement d'invincibles obstacles ou d'odieuses souffrances; dans ce qu'elle fait, se glissent d'incurables faiblesses ou des fautes dont elle ne peut réparer les suites.

An important element of the external determinism is our own acts:

> Acts live on: they are indestructible. … action is indelible: no compensation is ever an absolute reparation … the consequences unfold to infinity in time and space as if to reveal to us the interior energy of action through the visible extent of its effects. [696]

The 'second moment' [697] of 'The conflict' is titled 'The will affirmed and maintained: The indestructibility of willed action', [698] and here Blondel is concerned with 'the act and the very being of the will' and not with 'the object' [699] of the will. And however significant the external determinisms, willing has 'no other recourse but to will itself'. [700]

The 'third moment' [701] of 'The conflict' is titled 'The one thing necessary: The inevitable transcendence of human action'. [702] Not only is there an abyss between what we will to will and what we actually will, but there is one between the two 'me's. I cannot know myself, and I cannot will myself. 'It is impossible for me to reach myself directly: between me and me, there is an abyss that nothing has been able to fill.' [703] And the same is true of any other object that we decide to pursue:

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[696] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 330: Les actes vivent, ils sont indestructibles. … L'action est indélébile; nul dédommagement n'est jamais une absolue réparation; … les conséquences se déploient à l'infini, dans le temps et l'espace, comme pour nous révéler l'énergie intérieure de l'action par la grandeur visible de ses effets.

[697] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 333: deuxième moment.

[698] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 333: La volonté affirmée et maintenue: Indestructibilité de l'action volontaire.

[699] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 333–34: l'acte ou l'être même de la volonté … l'objet.

[700] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 335: ne réserve plus au vouloir que la ressource de se vouloir.

[701] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 339: troisième moment.

[702] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 339: L'unique nécessaire: L'inévitable transcendance de l'action humaine.

[703] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 338: il m'est impossible de m'atteindre directement; de moi à moi, il y a un abîme que rien n'a pu combler.

> Life is more subtle than any analysis, more logical than any dialectic. What we immediately feel, without needing to be able to express it, is that the will is not satisfied with any of the objects that it has willed: there is always less in what is done or desired than in what does and desires. [704]

As Hans Urs Von Balthasar has pointed out, [705] we can understand the relationship between the I that wills and the I that is willed in terms of a distinction between what I am in reality and the roles through which we present ourselves in society. [706] We can also understand the distinction as one between the self as our object and the self as subject, or as one between ourselves as phenomena and ourselves as noumena.

In order to bridge these abysses, Blondel revisits the cosmological argument: that everything is caused so there must be a first cause, and suggests that in the context of action the argument is stronger than an argument based on phenomena.

> Nothing of what is known, possessed, or done, is sufficient unto itself or is annihilated. It is impossible to stay within it, and impossible to do without it. [707]

We cannot deny the contingent; the contingent is not a sufficient or necessary explanation of itself; and as the contingent is all that is immediately available to us, the necessary and sufficient must be found within contingency, not separately from it. The

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[704] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 337: La vie est plus subtile que toute analyse, plus logique que toute dialectique. Ce qu'on sent d'emblée, sans qu'on ait besoin de pouvoir l'exprimer, c'est que la volonté ne se contente d'aucun des objets qu'elle a voulus; il y a toujours moins dans ce qui est fait ou désiré que dans ce qui fait et désire.

[705] Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Volume I, "Prolegomena," translated by Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 481.

[706] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (London: Allen Lane, 1969).

[707] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 343: Rien de ce qui est connu, possédé, fait, ne se suffit ni ne s'annihile. Impossible de s'y tenir; impossible d'y renoncer.

transcendent is immanent, so we require a bridge between them.[708] 'The entire order of nature is inevitably a guarantee of what surpasses it.'[709]

> In our knowledge and action there subsists a constant disproportion between the object itself and thought, and between the work and the will. The conceived ideal is incessantly surpassed by the real operation, and the reality obtained is incessantly surpassed by an ever-reviving ideal. One after the other, thought outstrips practice, and practice outstrips thought: so the real and the idea must coincide as this identity is given in fact: but it is given to us only to escape us no sooner than it is given.[710]

This cycloidal action that is an act of faith because it believes in a real realisation[711] inspires a version of the teleological argument appropriate to the context of human action:

> We are only necessarily led to conceive of this real mystery by discovering at the same time a power and a wisdom that infinitely surpass us.[712]

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[708] Illtyd Trethowan, "Introduction: Philosophical and theological," in Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, translated by Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan, 80–116 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 90.

[709] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 344: L'ordre entier de la nature nous est forcément un garant de ce qui le dépasse.

[710] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 344–45: Dans notre connaissance, dans notre action, il subsiste une disproportion constante entre l'objet même et la pensée, entre l'oeuvre et la volonté. Sans cesse l'idéal conçu est dépassé par l'opération réelle, et sans cesse la réalité obtenue est dépassée par un idéal toujours renaissant. Tour à tour, la pensée devance la pratique, et la pratique devance la pensée; il faut donc que le réel et l'idéal coïncident, puisque cette identité nous est donnée en fait; mais elle ne nous est donnée que pour nous échapper aussitôt.

[711] Francesco de Nigris, "Believing and Willing Within the Correlation Between the Willing and the Willed in Blondel's *Action*: A Reinterpretation of Immanentism and Transcendence." *Religions* 16: no.1 (2025): 88.

[712] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 345: Nous ne sommes nécessairement amenés à concevoir ce mystère réel qu'en y découvrant du même coup une puissance et une sagesse qui nous surpassent infiniment.

The disproportions between thought and practice, the real and the ideal, and the efficient and final causes, require that there be a 'one thing necessary': [713]

> It is in practice itself … that the certitude of 'the one thing necessary' has its foundation. In what touches the total complexity of life, only action is necessarily complete and total as well. It bears on the whole; and that is why from it, and from it alone, arises the indisputable presence, and the binding proof, of *Being*. [714]

So far the argument is undeniably philosophical, but is it robust? The key to Blondel's argument is in the title of this 'third moment': 'The one thing necessary: The inevitable transcendence of human action'. [715] The individual's human action is undeniable, so we have to regard it as necessary. The contingent universe, including other human action, has a relative necessity by virtue of its coaction with our willed action, as has our action in the world, because the willed will does not match the willing will. The contingency drives us to seek a necessary underlying cause. We now have a choice. We can either locate that underlying cause beyond ourselves and beyond the contingent universe, or we can locate it within our willing will, other willing wills, and the past and present action of the universe. Blondel chooses the former option, and also decides that the resulting cosmological argument is a teleological argument because we now have a necessary underlying cause that he can label 'Being'. If Blondel had taken the latter option, locating the underlying necessity in human action rather than in something other that transcends both human action and the universe, then we would no longer have cosmological or teleological arguments. Necessity would be corralled within the human will, and that necessity would be relative to the determinations of the world: it would be our 'being in the world'. Contingency, diversity, change, and the generally dynamic,

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[713] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 350.

[714] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 350: C'est … dans la pratique même que la certitude de "l'unique nécessaire" a son fondement. En ce qui touche à la complexité totale de la vie, seule l'action est nécessairement complète et totale, elle aussi. Elle porte sur le tout ; et c'est pourquoi d'elle et d'elle seule ressort l'indiscutable présence et la preuve contraignante de l'*Être*.

[715] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 339: L'unique nécessaire: L'inévitable transcendance de l'action humaine.

would be ubiquitous. We would be in the world of Action, rather than in the world of Being in which Blondel has landed himself.

Apart from his theological agenda, what was it that led Blondel's argument down the road that it took? A strong possibility is his aligning of necessity and transcendence. This was not inevitable. Blondel was correct to suggest that we cannot help regarding our own human action as somehow necessary, clearly so in relation to past action, but also in relation to current willed action: but that does not mean that our wills or our action are somehow transcendent. For Blondel, contingency, whilst itself meaning that things might have been otherwise, indicates a necessary foundational reality, but again that does not require a transcendent reality. The necessary existence of the universe would have done perfectly well. Perhaps if Blondel had not assumed that the necessary was necessarily transcendent, and had understood that the experienced necessity of human action, and the relative necessity of the contingent universe, did not necessarily require a further necessary foundation, then perhaps he would have thought twice before taking the unnecessary theological step that he then took: [716]

> At the end of what is finite, quickly reached from the very first reflexion, we find ourselves in the presence of what the phenomenon and nothingness equally hide and manifest: in the face of one of whom we can never speak from memory as though of a stranger or of one who is absent, and one for whom in all languages and in all consciousnesses there is a word and a feeling for this recognition: God. [717]

Our action generates the thought of God in two different ways:

> It is because in acting that we find an infinite disproportion in ourselves that we are constrained to look to infinity for the equation of our action … it is because in

[716] Jean Leclercq and Nicolas Monseu, "Le Phénomène religieux: Une 'École Française'?" in *Maurice Blondel et la Philosophie Française*, edited by Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet, 159–82 (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007), 163.

[717] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 350: Au terme, vite atteint, de ce qui est fini, dès la première réflexion, nous voici donc en présence de ce que le phénomène et le néant recèlent et manifestent également, en face de qui l'on ne peut jamais parler de mémoire comme d'un étranger ou d'un absent, devant celui qu'en toutes les langues et en toutes les consciences il y a une parole et un sentiment pour reconnaître, Dieu.

> affirming absolute perfection that we never succeed in equalling our own affirmation that we are constrained to look for its complement and its commentary in action. The problem that action raises only action can solve. [718]

Jean-Luc Marion finds several ways in which we will 'infinitely': there is an infinity of necessities that define the horizon against which we act; our actions go beyond any number of determinants; we experience multiple motives; and there are multiple objects. [719]

> By acting with a will that infinitely transcends its own real intentions, we always discover ourselves already transported into infinity, as if into a horizon all the more our own because we are unaware of it most of the time. [720]

We are therefore decentred: and as Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron has pointed out, this is to argue in the opposite direction from Descartes. Descartes argued from the idea of infinity to our finitude, whereas Blondel has argued from the willing will and human action to an 'actual infinite', or an 'infinite existent, or Being'. [721] And as Vieillard-Baron has also pointed out, 'the fundamental problem posed here is the conversion of a willed

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[718] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 352: c'est parce qu'en agissant nous trouvons une infinie disproportion en nous-mêmes, que nous sommes contraints à chercher l'équation de notre propre action à l'infini. … c'est parce qu'en affirmant l'absolue perfection nous ne réussissons jamais à égaler notre propre affirmation, que nous sommes contraints à en chercher le complément et le commentaire dans l'action. Le problème que pose l'action, l'action seule peut le résoudre.

[719] Jean-Luc Marion, "Le Conversion de la Volonté selon *L'Action*," in *Maurice Blondel: Une Dramatique de la Modernité*, 154–65 (Paris : Éditions Universitaires, 1990), 157–58.

[720] Marion, "La Conversion de la Volonté selon *L'Action*," 159 : En agissant par une volonté qui transcende infiniment ses propres intentions réales, l'homme se découvre toujours déjà déporté dans l'infini, comme dans un horizon à lui d'autant plus propre qu'il l'ignore la plupart du temps.

[721] Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron, "Philosophie Apologétique et Philosophie de la Religion." In *Maurice Blondel et la Quête du Sens*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 11–20 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1998), 13: un infini actuel, ou infini existent, ou Être.

infinity into an actual infinity'.[722] However, Blondel is aware that 'as soon as we think we know God enough, we no longer know him':[723] so again Blondel turns to a discussion of action. The thought of God both arises from our action and determines our action.[724]

> The living thought that we have of him is and remains alive only if it turns to practice: if we live by it and nourish action with it. Here, as everywhere else, knowledge is never anything but a consequence and an origin of activity.[725]

Because it is the necessity related to human action that founds the argument for the existence of God, Blondel has made God subject to human action, which he here recognises. He did not state this consequence of the argument in that form, but no doubt some of those who evaluated his theology negatively had recognised the argument's theological consequences.

Following 'The conflict', Blondel offers 'The alternative', and here he summarises the options available to us: human action calls on us to use our free will to choose between becoming gods ourselves, embracing 'the death of action', and turning towards God, hidden at the heart of human action.

The 'first option'[726] is titled 'The death of action'.[727] 'Instead of adoring God in God, we adore ourselves in our senses and in nature'.[728] The philosophical point is that we can

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[722] Vieillard-Baron, "Philosophie Apologétique et Philosophie de la Religion," 13: Le problème fondamental ici pose est la conversion d'un infini visé en un infini actuel … .

[723] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 351: dès qu'on estime connaître assez Dieu, on ne le connaît plus.

[724] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 351.

[725] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 354: La pensée vive que nous avons de lui n'est et ne reste vive que si elle se tourne à la pratique, si on vit d'elle et si l'on en nourrit l'action. Ici, comme partout, la connaissance n'est jamais qu'une suite et qu'une origine d'activité.

[726] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 359: première option.

[727] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 359: La mort de l'action.

[728] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 362: Au lieu d'adorer Dieu en Dieu, l'homme s'adore dans ses sens et dans la nature.

choose to limit the exercise of our wills to the world or to ourselves rather than seeking 'the infinite': [729] but the text then becomes entirely theological:

> He wills that God be no longer for him, and God is no longer for him. But, keeping the creative will always in his depths, he adheres to it so firmly that it becomes completely his. His being remains without Being. And when God ratifies this solitary will, it is damnation. [730]

The 'second option' [731] is titled 'The life of action: The substitutes and the preparations for perfect action'. [732]

> To restore the fulfilment of his original nature in willed action, must he not let the First Cause take first place in it again? It is up to us to make way. [733]

We must first of all admit our dependence and then reflect:

> In what comes from itself through reflexion, the human will senses the irremediable insufficiency of its act as much as the invincible need to bring it to completion. [734]

A right will will return to 'the practical rule which appeared from the start as the safeguard of active sincerity and the key to human destiny: to give ourselves and the

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[729] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life*. Grand Rapids (MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 74–75.

[730] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 371: il veut que Dieu ne soit plus pour lui; et Dieu n'est plus pour lui. Mais, gardant toujours en son fond la volonté créatrice, il y adhère si fermement qu'elle devient toute sienne. Son être reste sans l'Etre. Et quand Dieu ratifie cette volonté solitaire, c'est le dam.

[731] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 374: seconde option.

[732] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 374: La vie de l'action: Les succédanés et les apprêts de l'action parfait.

[733] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 374: Pour rétablir dans l'action voulue la plénitude de sa nature originelle, ne faut-il pas qu'il laisse la Cause première y reprendre la première place ? C'est à l'homme de céder le pas.

[734] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 375: En ce qui vient d'elle par la réflexion, la volonté humaine sent l'irrémédiable insuffisance de son acte autant que l'invincible besoin de l'achever.

universe to what we believe to be the good'.[735] But only God is good,[736] so to serve the Good is to serve God.

> Hence there is nothing absolutely good and willed, except what we do not will of ourselves, and what God wills in us and of us.[737]

Blondel then discusses the renunciation and often suffering to which 'the unfolding of moral life'[738] can lead. Action is now ours, but 'it must first be willed as entirely from God'.[739] The transcendent is now immanent if we choose that it shall be, and if we are willing to agree that philosophy acting alone can arrive at statements about God[740] rather than simply about a human felt necessity. As Illtyd Trethowan has pointed out: it is only once the 'second option'[741] has been taken that the question of the Christian revelation is broached.[742] Before that there is plenty of discussion of the supernatural and of transcendence, but these remain philosophical possibilities without content until the Christian revelation provides Trinitarian content, which is what happens in the fifth part of *L'Action*.

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[735] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 375–76: la règle pratique qui, dès l'origine, était apparue comme la sauvegarde de la sincérité agissante et la clef de la destinée humaine: se donner soi et l'univers à ce qu'on croit le bien.

[736] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 377.

[737] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 379: Il n'y a donc d'absolument bon et voulu que ce que nous ne voulons pas de nous-mêmes, ce que Dieu veut en nous et de nous.

[738] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 380: le déploiement de la vie morale.

[739] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 385: il faut d'abord qu'elle soit voulue comme toute de Dieu.

[740] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 74–77.

[741] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 374.

[742] Illtyd Trethowan, "Introduction: Philosophical and Theological," in *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, by Maurice Blondel, translated by Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan, 80–116 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 91.

Part five

The fifth part of Blondel's *L'Action* is titled 'The completion of action: The end of human destiny', [743] and constitutes text that was withdrawn before the examination of the thesis and that was then revised and added back in before the thesis was published. [744] 'Action cannot be completed in the natural order': [745] and although science cannot admit the supernatural, it cannot exclude it: [746] an essential recognition for any philosopher or theologian operating at a time of rapid scientific change. Here theology and philosophy are not the same, but they can co-operate. [747]

Chapter 1 of the fifth part is titled 'The notion of dogmas and of revealed precepts, and the philosophical critique'. [748]

> Through the development of practical activity, and thanks to the effort of the will to equal itself to its own *élan*, we have seen how the need was born for an exterior correspondence and a necessary complement for our inner action. [749]

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[743] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 389: L'achèvement de l'action: Le terme de la destinée humaine.

[744] An account by Joannès Wehrlé of the examination of Blondel's thesis in 1893, in Maurice Blondel, *Oeuvres Completes*, *Tome I*, edited by Claude Troisfontaines, 691–745 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995), 691–93. The account of the examination by Wehrlé was rewritten by Blondel in 1907. Also see Peter Henrici, "Les Structures de *L'Action* et la Pensée Française," in *Maurice Blondel: Une Dramatique de la Modernité*, 32–43 (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1990), 41.

[745] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 389: L'action ne s'achève pas dans l'ordre naturel.

[746] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 390.

[747] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 393.

[748] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 394: La notion de dogmes et de préceptes révélés et la critique philosophique.

[749] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 394: C'est par le développement de l'activité pratique et grâce à l'effort de la volonté pour s'égaler à son propre élan, qu'est né, on a vu comment, le

What we have actually seen, of course, is Blondel making what we can only call a theophilosophical choice, and it is this that leads him to the idea of revelation as conveyed by the 'expressive symbols which alone can bring to us from outside the positive answer that we are calling for'.[750] And so, for instance, miracles might be 'strange and disconcerting', but to understand their possibility is a highly modern recognition that 'the idea of fixed laws in nature is only an idol. Each phenomenon is a particular case and a unique solution'.[751]

> It is not, then, from revelation itself (on the hypothesis that it is), nor from natural phenomena (on the hypothesis that it is not), that the idea of revealed precepts or dogmas can come. It is from an interior initiative that this notion springs forth.[752]

The treatment then becomes entirely Christian, although framed in philosophical language:

> And it is not only to believe and to act, to know and to do the truth, it is to remedy the inevitable deficiencies of action that assistance is essential for us. What we do, even in the properly natural order, has infinite repercussions. And if we have done wrong, our failing always contains something absolutely irreparable. To annihilate evil, therefore, we need a power and an expiation of

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besoin d'une correspondance extérieure et d'un complément nécessaire à notre action intime.

[750] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 395: des symboles expressifs qui seuls peuvent, du dehors, apporter à l'homme la réponse positive qu'il réclame.

[751] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 396: étrange et déconcertant … l'idée de lois fixes dans la nature n'est qu'une idole; chaque phénomène est un cas singulier et une solution unique; Nancy Cartwright, *The Dappled World: A Study of the Boundaries of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[752] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 397: Ce n'est donc pas de la révélation même (dans l'hypothèse où elle est), ni des phénomènes naturels (dans l'hypothèse où elle n'est pas), que peut venir à l'homme l'idée de préceptes ou de dogmes révélés. C'est d'une initiative interne que jaillit cette notion.

> which we can never find in ourselves the most feeble part. … To give, preserve, and restore life, we need a saviour. [753]

As to how in practical terms this returns Blondel to a consideration of action:

> It is here, once again and especially, that the sovereign efficacy and the mediating power of action makes itself manifest. For on the one hand it is through the channel of action that the revealed truth penetrates deep into thought without losing anything of its supernatural integrity; and on the other hand, if believing thought, as obscure as it remains amid the rays that faith fans out from its inaccessible centre, has any meaning and value, it is because it ends up in action and finds in literal practice its commentary and its living reality. [754]

We need to receive the gift, 'and action is the only receptacle that can contain it'. [755] And so, for instance, if we don't have faith then we must act as if we had it. [756]

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[753] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 399: Et ce n'est pas seulement pour croire et pour agir, pour connaître et pour opérer la vérité, c'est pour remédier aux inévitables défaillances de l'action qu'un secours est essentiel à l'homme. Ce qu'il fait, même dans l'ordre proprement naturel, a un retentissement infini. Et, s'il a mal fait, sa faute enferme toujours quelque chose d'absolument irréparable. Pour anéantir le mal, il faut donc une puissance et une expiation dont nous ne trouvons jamais en nous la plus faible part. … Pour donner, garder et restaurer la vie, il faut un sauveur.

[754] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 400: C'est ici, encore et surtout, que se manifeste la souveraine efficacité et la puissance médiatrice de l'action. Car, d'une part, c'est par le canal de l'action que la vérité révélée pénètre jusqu'à la pensée sans rien perdre de son intégrité surnaturelle; et, d'autre part, si la pensée croyante, tout obscure qu'elle demeure parmi les rayons que la foi répand de son inaccessible foyer, a un sens et une valeur, c'est parce qu'elle aboutit à l'action et trouve dans la pratique littérale son commentaire et sa vive réalité.

[755] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 402: L'action est le seul réceptacle qui le puisse contenir.

[756] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 403.

> God acts in this action and that is why the thought that follows the act is richer by an infinity than that which precedes it. It has entered into a new world where no philosophical speculation can lead it or follow it. [757]

Chapter 2 of the fifth part of *L'Action* is titled 'The value of literal practice and the conditions of religious action'. [758] Philosophy can go as far as asking how 'the willed end' can 'be equal to the very principle of the willed aspiration': [759] but after that, revelation is required. The relationship can also be from revelation to philosophy: 'revelation must transcend the grasp of reason', [760] but it has a relationship with reason in that it provides subject matter for philosophy to study. [761] Whichever way the relationship between theology and philosophy runs, action is always required.

> What we cannot know, nor especially understand distinctly, we can do and put into practice. That is the usefulness and the eminent reason of action. It is not only the provisional vehicle to bring the coveted gift to consciousness. Its mediation is not passing, but permanent. It is the perpetual means for interior conversion and the instrument of the kingdom of faith. [762]

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[757] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 403: Dieu agit dans cette action; et c'est pour cela que la pensée qui succède à l'acte est plus riche d'un infini que celle qui le précède. Elle est entrée dans un monde nouveau où nulle spéculation philosophique ne peut la conduire ni la suivre.

[758] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 405: La valeur de la pratique littérale et les conditions de l'action religieuse.

[759] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 406: le terme voulu … égaler … au principe même de l'aspiration volontaire.

[760] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 406–7: Révélation … doit échapper à la raison.

[761] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 407; René Virgoulay, *Philosophie et Théologie chez Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 106.

[762] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 408: Ce qu'on ne peut connaître ni surtout comprendre distinctement, on peut le faire et le pratiquer : là est l'utilité, la raison éminente de l'action. Elle n'est pas seulement le véhicule provisoire qui apporte à la conscience le don convoité; sa médiation n'est point passagère, mais permanente; elle est le perpétuel moyen de la conversion intérieure et l'instrument du règne de la croyance.

As always, there is nothing unfree about this.

> The requirements of human action, and the conditions it requires to reach completion, follow one another like a continuous chain. By the profound movement of our freedom we are led to will to ally ourselves with God and to form one synthesis with him. [763]

No longer is coaction between our action, the action of others, and the contingent world's determinations: it is primarily with God, and it is in that context that 'our action is pregnant with universal life. [764] It is not only a function of the individual; it is a function of the great social body.' [765] Both faith and religious action stem from a divine source; [766] both faith and action are required, and are always 'the finite infinite' [767] (and not 'the infinite as finite', as in Blanchette's translation); [768] and ultimately 'practice and dogma are in themselves identical'. [769]

> We wanted to do everything by ourselves, it seemed; and now … we are led to recognize that we do nothing and that God alone, acting in us, grants us to be and to do what we will. … Only wills can be married in this way, so as to become, in a close cooperation, one and the same thing … that is why the power of manifesting love and acquiring God is attributed only to action. [770]

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[763] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 411: les exigences de l'action humaine et les conditions qu'elle requiert pour s'achever s'enchaînent d'une façon continue. Par le mouvement profond de sa liberté, l'homme est amené à vouloir s'allier à Dieu et à ne former qu'une synthèse avec lui: tout acte tend à être une communion.

[764] Jonathan Martin Ciraulo, "From Circle to Cycloid: The Philosophical Value of Religious Cult in Maurice Blondel's *L'Action*," *Religions* 15 (2024): 283.

[765] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 412: notre action est grosse de la vie universelle ; elle n'est pas une simple fonction de l'individu, elle est une fonction du grand corps social.

[766] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 416.

[767] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 418: l'infini fini.

[768] Maurice Blondel, *Action: Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, translated by Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 418.

[769] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 419: la pratique et le dogme sont identiques en soi.

[770] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 422–23: Nous voulions, semble-t-il, tout faire de nous-mêmes; et voici que … nous sommes amenés à reconnaître que nous ne faisons rien, et

The will's autonomy is now completely compromised by God rather than partially compromised by a contingent universe's determinations. No doubt driven by his own Christian faith, Blondel has given up on the possibility that the transcendence implied by human action can be located in the human will, and has located it in a divine realm beyond this universe: an understanding of grace and faith that will forty years later in *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien* become a 'natural' or 'transnatural' desire that is both ours and God-given. [771]

Chapter 3 of the fifth part is titled 'The bond of knowledge and of action in being'. [772]

> Since the inevitable determinism of action, embracing all of the series of necessary means, forces us to this end, it follows that there is in us a certain knowledge of being which we cannot run away from. [773]

'*l'Être*', 'Being', 'illuminates every reason and in [its] presence every will has to declare itself', [774] so in order to 'affirm the reality of objects' [775]

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que Dieu seul, agissant en nous, nous donne d'être et de faire ce que nous voulons. … Seules, les volontés peuvent se marier ainsi, de manière à ne former, dans une coopération étroite, qu'une même chose …. Et c'est pour cela qu'à l'action seule il est attribué le pouvoir de manifester l'amour et d'acquérir Dieu.

[771] Ryan A. Longton, "A Reconsideration of Maurice Blondel and the 'Natural' Desire," *The Heythrop Journal* 56 (2015): 919–930.

[772] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 424: Le lien de la connaissance et de l'action dans l'être.

[773] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 427: Puisque l'inévitable déterminisme de l'action, enveloppant toute la suite des moyens nécessaires, nous amène forcément à ce terme, il en résulte qu'il y a en nous une connaissance certaine de l'être, à laquelle nous ne pouvons nous dérober.

[774] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 435: illumine toute raison et en face de qui il faut que toute volonté se prononce.

[775] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 435: affirmons la réalité des objets.

> we must implicitly raise the problem of our destiny and subordinate all that we are, and all that is for us, to a choice.[776]

It is perfectly legitimate to argue that the experienced necessity of human action provides us with knowledge of being—Descartes' argument for the reality of the self and of our world, with human action substituting for human thought—but that only raises the question of our destiny within a theological context in which action is the route to knowledge and so to knowledge of God.[777]

An argument not part of any theological agenda is that for the 'solid truth' of objects:

> we act in them and on them, and they act on us and in us. The knowledge, active and passive, that we have of them, is, according to what we have to conceive, the double ground of the phenomenon, sensible and real.[778]

Blondel therefore proposes that

> the objective reality of beings is … tied to the action of a being who, in seeing, makes be what they see, and who, in willing, becomes themselves what they know.[779]

And finally, in the context of a quotation from the beginning of the fourth gospel—'In the beginning was the Word'[780]—we can only understand the following as panchristism:[781]

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[776] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 435–36: il est nécessaire que nous posions implicitement le problème de notre destinée, et que nous subordonnions tout ce que nous sommes et tout ce qui est pour nous à une option.

[777] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 442.

[778] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 454: nous agissons en elles et sur elles, elles agissent sur nous et en nous. La connaissance, active et passive, que nous avons d'elles est, selon ce qu'il nous faut concevoir, le double fondement du phénomène, sensible et réel.

[779] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 459: La réalité objective des êtres est donc liée à l'action d'un être qui, en voyant, fait être ce qu'il voit, et qui, en voulant, devient lui-même ce qu'il connaît.

[780] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 465, quoting John 1:1 in Latin: Principio erat Verbum.

[781] Brownsberger, William. "The Christology of Maurice Blondel and Sacred Heart Devotion," *Gregorianum* 88 no. 2 (2007): 291–310,

> Down to the last detail of the last imperceptible phenomena, the mediating action creates the truth and being of all that is. And it would indeed be strange if anything could be explained outside of him without whom nothing was created, and without whom everything that was created becomes nothing again. [782]

René Virgoulay suggests that this is still philosophy:

> Blondelian Christology—*a fortiori* panchristism—represents only a very limited part of his truly philosophical work. We might be surprised at how small this development is when we know the immensity of its hidden roots. This testifies to a rigour that aims to respect at the same time the supernatural reality of the theological mystery and the rational requirements of philosophy. [783]

I beg to differ. This is theology.

Blondel's 'Conclusion'

At the end of the fifth part of his *L'Action* Blondel provides a concluding chapter.

> To act is to seek [the] agreement of knowing, willing, and being, and to contribute to producing or compromising it. Action is the double movement that bears being to the end that it is aiming at as to a new perfection, and that reintegrates the final cause into the efficient cause. In the fullness of its mediating role, it is a return of the absolute to the absolute; and it absolves the relativity that it

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[782] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 465: Jusqu'au dernier détail du dernier des phénomènes imperceptibles, l'action médiatrice fait la vérité et l'être de tout ce qui est. Et il serait étrange en effet qu'on pût expliquer quoi que ce soit hors de celui sans qui rien n'a été fait, sans qui tout ce qui a été fait redevient néant.

[783] René Virgoulay, *Philosophie et Théologie chez Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 94: La christologie blondélienne—*a fortiori* le panchristisme—ne représente qu'une part très restreinte de l'oeuvre proprement philosophique. On peut s'étonner de la petitesse de cette émergence quand on sait l'immensité de son soubassement enfoui. Cela témoigne d'une rigueur qui veut respecter en même temps la réalité surnaturelle du mystère et l'exigence rationnelle de la philosophie.

> contains and sustains between these two terms. To absolve is to give truth and being to what does not have it itself. [784]

As for the relationship between action and being, 'the role of action, then, is to develop being and to constitute it'. [785]

> There is no act that does not sum up the adverse tendencies, and does not form a system with those that are overcome as well as with those that overcome. The motives, before thought, are contradictory, but they remain in solidarity in action. [786]

But for Blondel the process does not stop with action:

> The entire movement of the interior life culminates in the necessary affirmation of being, because this movement is grounded on this necessity itself. [787]

And similarly,

> The logic of action had shown the permanent reconciliation of contraries in the order of phenomena … Being is never in the idea separated from action; and metaphysics itself, considered first under its speculative aspect, is true only inasmuch as, like a rung in the system of phenomena, it enters into the general

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[784] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 467: Agir, c'est chercher cet accord du connaître, du vouloir et de l'être, et contribuer à le produire ou à le compromettre. L'action est le double mouvement qui porte l'être au terme où il tend comme à une perfection nouvelle, et qui réintègre la cause finale dans la cause efficiente. Dans la plénitude de son rôle médiateur, elle est un retour de l'absolu à l'absolu; le relatif, qu'elle enveloppe et qu'elle soutient entre ces deux termes, elle l'absout. Absoudre, c'est donner le vrai et l'être à qui ne l'a pas de soi.

[785] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 467: Le rôle de l'action, c'est donc de développer l'être et de le constituer.

[786] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 472: Point d'acte qui ne résume les tendances adverses et ne forme un système aussi bien avec les vaincus qu'avec les vainqueurs: les motifs, qui, devant la pensée, sont contradictoires, demeurent solidaires dans l'action.

[787] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 472: tout le mouvement de la vie intérieure aboutit à l'affirmation nécessaire de l'être, parce que ce mouvement est fondé sur cette nécessité même.

> dynamism of life. Action grounds the reality of the ideal and moral order; it contains the real presence of what, without it, knowledge can only represent, but of what, with it and through it, is vivifying truth. [788]

The 'vital centre' [789] of 'being and life' [790] belongs

> not in the objects attained by the senses, nor in the ends that desire strives for, nor in intellectual speculation, nor in moral prescriptions, but in action: for it is through action that the question of the relationship between human beings and God is inevitably decided in fact. [791]

Blondel's philosophy of action had prepared the way for an ontology that he would go on to develop in the second element of his later trilogy. [792]

The examination of the thesis

Blondel had encountered opposition to his proposal to write a thesis about human action, and it was an intervention by one of the teachers at the École Normale, Émile Boutroux, that had made it possible: and it was Boutroux who was the first to ask

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[788] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 478: La logique de l'action avait montré la perpétuelle conciliation des contraires, dans l'ordre des phénomènes … L'être n'est jamais dans l'idée séparée de l'action; et la métaphysique même, considérée d'abord sous son aspect spéculatif, n'est vraie alors qu'autant qu'elle rentre, comme un échelon du système des phénomènes, dans le dynamisme général de la vie: l'action fonde la réalité de l'ordre idéal et moral; elle contient la présence réelle de ce que, sans elle, la connaissance peut simplement représenter, mais de ce qui, avec elle et par elle, est vivante vérité.

[789] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 487: point vital.

[790] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 487: L'être et la vie' (A, 487).

[791] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 487: non dans les objets qu'atteignent les sens, non dans les fins où se porte le désir, non dans les spéculations intellectuelles, non dans les prescriptions morales, mais dans l'action: car c'est par elle que se tranche forcément, en fait, la question des rapports de l'homme et de Dieu.

[792] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 90–91.

questions during Blondel's four hour public defence of his thesis at the Sorbonne in 1893. Boutroux, himself a committed Roman Catholic Christian, recognised that Blondel's agenda was religious as well as philosophical, so he had to persuade the other more secular examiners that the thesis made a successful philosophical argument, which he did.[793] Blondel's opening remarks had made it clear that his aim had been to argue philosophically from the human will and human action to a philosophy of the supernatural, and it was perhaps only Boutroux among the examiners who had understood Blondel's argument from human action to a transcendence and then to a supernatural; and he would also have recognised that this argument had steered a course between contemporary neo-Thomism's outdated reliance on theological argument and Immanuel Kant's separation of known phenomena from unknown noumena.

The first set of questions during the examination determined that Blondel was arguing as a philosopher and not as a mystic. Boutroux then suggested that Blondel's argument was based on the presupposition that the will could only be satisfied by the infinite, to which Blondel responded that the first chapters of the thesis had successfully challenged the existence of an infinite, which was only reintroduced when it became necessary philosophically. Boutroux then questioned the necessity of an object willed matching a willed object: an equality at the heart of Blondel's argument, for which he had argued on the basis that we experience a contradiction if we will infinitely without willing the infinite. Boutroux declared himself satisfied by the argument of the thesis. It would appear that no other member of the examining panel got anywhere close to understanding the sweep of Blondel's argument, and that further questioning focused on particular issues: for instance, on the relationship between freedom and determinism, in relation to which Blondel explained that a consciousness of freedom relies on a consciousness of a transcendence within the chain of determinisms. In response to the

[793] A revision by Blondel of an account of the examination by Joannès Wehrlé, in Maurice Blondel, *Oeuvres Complètes*, *Tome I*, edited by Claude Troisfontaines (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995), 715. Boutroux's 'je trouve le fond de votre thèse riche et solide … on peut dire que votre effort considérable qu'il a réussi', 'I find the substance of your thesis rich and solid … we can say that your considerable effort has succeeded', appears in Blondel's 1907 revision of the account, and not in Wehrlé's original.

final questions, Blondel made it clear that his thesis was designed to tackle religious questions philosophically and not to treat them theologically. [794]

This brief summary of the public examination of Blondel's thesis coheres with Paul Archambault's verdict on what Blondel's philosophy is not:

> The philosophy of action *is not a fideism,* disregarding the consistency and value of human knowledge, *nor is it a voluntarism or pragmatism*, subordinating it to the dictatorial demands of the will or the 'heart'. [795]

Neither is Blondel's philosophy of action '*an idealist subjectivism* which would enclose the thinking and acting subject in the closed world of their representations and operations'; [796] and nor is it 'a conscious or unconscious *individualism* that would seek to surreptitiously reintroduce, in the spheres of morality and religion, the principle of free inquiry'. [797] The philosophy of action is not a 'naturalism'. [798]

The summary of the examination also coheres with Archambault's summary of the positive strategy of the 1893 *L'Action*:

> It is impossible not to pose the problem of action; impossible to find a refuge in nothingness; impossible to be satisfied with everything that the immense order

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[794] Maurice Blondel, *Oeuvres Complètes*, *Tome I*, edited by Claude Troisfontaines (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995), 691–745; Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 5–21.

[795] Paul Archambault, *L'Oeuvre Philosophique de Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Librairie Bloud & Gay, 1928), 193: La philosophie de l'action *n'est pas un fidéisme,* méconnaissant la consistance et la valeur de la connaissance humaine, *et pas davantage un volontarisme ou pragmatisme*, la subordonnant aux exigences dictatoriales de la volonté ou du "coeur".

[796] Archambault, *L'Oeuvre Philosophique de Maurice Blondel*, 195: *un subjectivisme idéaliste* qui enfermerait le sujet pensant et agissant au monde clos de ses représentations et opérations.

[797] Archambault, *L'Oeuvre Philosophique de Maurice Blondel*, 196: *un individualisme* conscient ou inconscient qui chercherait à réintroduire subrepticement, dans les choses de la morale et de la religion, le principe du libre examen.

[798] Archambault, *L'Oeuvre Philosophique de Maurice Blondel*, 197: naturalisme.

> of phenomena embraces; impossible not to recognize the inadequacy of the natural order, not to feel a subsequent need; and impossible to find in oneself and by oneself something to satisfy this need. It is impossible to stop, impossible to retreat, and impossible to move forward alone. … From the conflict that works on every human conscience, the idea of God has arisen. … There comes a time when the mind most convinced of established credibility needs, in order to believe as if that were indispensable to salvation, makes an act, an act of faith. For it is in such an act, and through it, that the supernatural is introduced, mysteriously, but effectively, no longer as an idea alone, but as a real and life-giving presence. [799]

Blondel's integral realism

As Emmanuel Gabellieri has pointed out, Blondel dissolves the boundary between immanence and transcendence and so the boundary between phenomena and noumena; [800] and so, Archambault has suggested, 'integral realism' [801]—the realism of the existential and the eternal, and of the natural and the supernatural, with the

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[799] Archambault, *L'Oeuvre Philosophique de Maurice Blondel*, 24–25, 28: Impossible de ne point poser le problème de l'action. Impossible de trouver un refuge dans le néant. Impossible de se contenter de tout ce qu'embrasse l'ordre immense des phénomènes. Impossible de ne pas reconnaître l'insuffisance de l'ordre naturel, de ne point éprouver un besoin ultérieur, et impossible de trouver en soi et par soi de quoi contenter ce besoin. Impossible de s'arrêter, impossible de reculer, impossible d'avancer seul. … Du conflit qui travaille toute conscience humaine, l'idée de Dieu a surgi. … Il arrive un moment où l'esprit le plus convaincu de la crédibilité établie a besoin, pour croire comme il est indispensable au salut, de faire un acte, un acte de foi. Car c'est dans un tel acte, et par lui que s'introduit le surnaturel, mystérieusement, mais effectivement, non plus en idée seulement, mais comme une présence réelle et vivifiante, alors même qu'elle demeure insaisissable à la conscience distincte.

[800] Emmanuel Gabellieri, "The Triple Phenomenality of Action, Thought, and Being in Maurice Blondel," *Duquesne Studies in Phenomenology* 4, no. 1 (2024) : 78–98, 78.

[801] Archambault, *L'Oeuvre Philosophique de Maurice Blondel*, 7: réalisme intégral.

supernatural logically prior to the natural[802]—is a useful description of Blondel's philosophy: but without human action there is no boundary-crossing and no integral realism, so action remains the bedrock of Blondel's philosophy, and an integral realism one of its consequences. There is a particular reason for making this point: As Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron has pointed out, it is difficult for Blondel to be both Pascalian and Cartesian. For Descartes, 'the idea of the infinite … is of an infinite which is perfect and which is existent', whereas for Pascal the infinite is 'incomprehensible; and the distance is infinite' between nature and the supernatural.[803] Either the infinite is absorbed into the finite, or there is an unbridgeable gulf between them. This problem makes it difficult for Blondel to argue both that the infinite is transcendent and that the inequality of the willing and willed wills leads us to think the infinite, and therefore to think the transcendent, and therefore to think God: but it is still the case that Blondel can argue from human action to a bond between the natural and the supernatural, because it remains the same active human mind that thinks both the finite and the infinite. However, the problem remains that such an argument cannot decide for any particular content for the ideas of the infinite, the transcendent, and God,[804] particularly in a context in which a number of different religious options are available:[805] so that task is left to an act of faith: 'philosophy requires faith, and the person who reflects coherently on his destiny, on action, must move to an act of faith or renounce their coherence'.[806] And even if it were possible via philosophy alone to provide a level of definition to the supernatural, the infinite, the transcendent, or God, the question would still remain: Has

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[802] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 88–89; Adam C. English, "'Science cannot Stop with Science': Maurice Blondel and the Sciences," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 2 (2008): 269–92, 291.

[803] Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron, "Philosophie Apologétique et Philosophie de la Religion," in *Maurice Blondel et la Quête du Sens*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 11–20 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1998), 13–14: l'idée de l'infini … est l'idée … d'un infini qui est parfait et qui est existant. … l'incompréhensible; et la distance est infinité entre les ordres.

[804] Vieillard-Baron, "Philosophie Apologétique et Philosophie de la Religion," 15.

[805] Vieillard-Baron, "Philosophie Apologétique et Philosophie de la Religion," 16–17, 20.

[806] Vieillard-Baron, "Philosophie Apologétique et Philosophie de la Religion," 14: La philosophie nécessite la foi, et l'homme qui réfléchit de façon cohérente sur sa destinée, sur l'action, doit passer à l'acte de foi ou renoncer à sa cohérence.

Blondel shown that the supernatural must exist, or merely that the idea of the supernatural is not irrational?[807]

Every philosophy starts somewhere, and Blondel has shown us what philosophy can look like if it begins with human action: and what he has particularly shown is how fertile such a philosophy is. As Emmanuel Gabellieri puts it, Blondel's philosophy of action is 'empirical … ethical … metaphysical … [and] mystical'.[808] It is all of these whether or not we take seriously the theological turn that Blondel takes towards the end of the 1893 *L'Action*. In this respect we must take seriously Jean Leclercq's question as to what conclusion the reader of *L'Action* is likely to draw as they close the book. Will they go away with the idea that action is an *a priori* concept, or that it is diverse human activity? Which way they make that choice could determine whether they find human action to be the gateway to the infinite, the transcendent, and God.[809] If that question had been put to Blondel, he would probably have refused the presupposition that it would not be possible to take both routes at the same time: but he would also have been clear that his thesis was about human action, and that it was that that mediated between the willing will and the willed will, and that opened the way to the infinite, the transcendent, and God.

We shall now study some selections from the book so that we can see how Blondel is using the concept of action.

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[807] Vieillard-Baron, "Philosophie Apologétique et Philosophie de la Religion," 15.

[808] Emmanuel Gabellieri, "Phénomène de l'Action et Métaphysique du Don. Les Multiples Fécondités de Maurice Blondel," in *Maurice Blondel: La Sainteté de la Raison*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 130–52 (Paris: Hermann, 2022), 131: *empirique* … *éthique* … *métaphysique* … *mystique*. (Italics in the original.)

[809] Jean Leclercq, "La Raison, ses Reliances et ses Déliaisons. Réflexions à partir de Maurice Blondel," in *Maurice Blondel: La Sainteté de la Raison*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 41–56 (Paris: Hermann, 2022), 55.

'Action readings' in L'Action*, 1893*

In our study of the introduction to Maurice Blondel's *L'Action*[810] in Chapter 1 we developed a categorisation:

- 'Selection' is the selection of texts in which '*action*' means action in general.
- 'Construction' chooses passages in which '*action*' has a restricted meaning but that can be easily rewritten so that '*action*' means action in general.
- 'Extension' is the application of texts, without rewriting, from a context in which '*action*' has a restricted meaning to a context in which '*action*' means action in general.

In this chapter we shall first of all ask whether there are texts in the 1893 *L'Action* that fit the 'selection' category because '*action*' already means action in general. We shall then perform some 'construction' by selecting texts that we can rewrite so that '*action*' means action in general. We shall then perform some 'extension' by selecting some texts the meanings of which we can extend to additional fields in which the meaning of '*action*' is no longer restricted but instead means action in general.

Selection

In order to decide whether any passages in *L'Action* should be placed in the 'selection' category we shall study carefully those passages that most look as if they might belong there.

In the appendix to Part Two of *L'Action* Blondel offers a route map for the following stages of the argument towards a positive solution to the problem of action:

[810] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1993). First published in 1893.

> From the first awakening of sensible life all the way to the highest forms of social activity, a continuous movement is unfolded in us, the rigorous sequence and fundamentally voluntary character of which it is possible to manifest at one and the same time. So as we make our way through the long inquiry that we must undertake, we shall have to take note that the apparent necessity of each stage results from an implicit willing. … the successive kinds of action will be connected to each other in such a way that scientific rigour will be communicated, one stage at a time, to explorations that hitherto have not benefited from it. [811]

What is interesting about this passage is that Blondel is taking the concept of human action beyond its normal location in the individual human being, both back towards 'the first awakening of sensible life' and forwards towards 'the highest forms of social activity'. This is not action in general, so we cannot 'select' this passage: a passage that is as close as we get to '*action*' meaning action in general in the 1893 *L'Action*.

During a discussion that questions the autonomy of the sciences, Blondel appears to have in mind the fact that it is human action that underlies the sciences, but what he writes is a classic case for extension because without amendment of the passage '*action*' can mean action in general: 'Is it science that explains all of action, or rather action that furnishes science with what it needs?' [812] If we did not know that '*action*' here means human action, we would be able to interpret the passage as saying that the sciences are constituted by both human and non-human action, and that they study both human and non-human action. This is clearly the case.

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[811] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 41–42: À partir du premier éveil de la vie sensible jusqu'aux plus hautes formes de l'activité sociale, se déploie en nous un mouvement continu dont il est possible de manifester à la fois l'enchaînement rigoureux et le caractère foncièrement volontaire. Ainsi chemin faisant à travers la longue enquête qu'il nous faut instituer, devra-t-on remarquer que l'apparente nécessité de chaque étape résulte d'un vouloir implicite. … les termes successifs de l'action seront reliés entre eux de telle façon que la rigueur scientifique se communiquera de proche en proche à des études qui ne l'ont pas encore reçue.

[812] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 50: Est-ce la science qui explique tout de l'action, ou l'action qui fournit encore à la science de quoi subsister?

Further on in the argument, Blondel is again discussing human action, but again, without amendment, his text can be understood to apply more broadly if we take '*action*' to mean action in general, which we can:

> The problem is resolved before anyone has to formulate it; it is resolved practically, which is to say that action, from which the sciences proceed, is not exhausted in them; that in supporting them it surpasses and overflows them; and that in fostering their growth and success it proves that there is in them more than the sciences know and achieve. [813]

This passage raises a question about our selection methodology. It appears in *L'Action*, in which '*action*' generally means 'human action', but both within the passage, and in its immediate context, '*action*' could mean either human action or action in general. Perhaps all we can say is that the passage only ambiguously belongs in the 'selection' category and so should not be there. The same is true of multiple other passages in *L'Action*, including this one:

> Just as there are nodes in sound waves … action does not spread out without turning back and without further concentration. Thus there is established, by simultaneous actions and reactions, a circulation and an exchange from life to life. From two beings one and the same fecundity is formed; there is constituted … a *coenergy*. This is no longer a mere cooperation … It is a real society, a single existence in its very multiplicity, and a community that functions as a prolific organism and for which it is the union itself that causes the fecundity. [814]

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[813] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 80: le problème est tranché, avant qu'on ait besoin de le formuler; il l'est pratiquement, c'est-à-dire que l'action d'où procèdent les sciences ne s'y épuise pas, qu'en les soutenant elle les dépasse et les déborde, qu'en permettant leur croissance et leur succès elle prouve qu'il y a en elle plus que les sciences ne connaissent et n'atteignent.

[814] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 245–46: De même que dans les ondulations sonores il y a des nœuds … l'action ne se disperse pas sans retour et sans concentration ultérieure. Ainsi s'établit, par actions et réactions simultanées, une circulation et un échange de vie à vie. De deux êtres, il se forme une seule et même fécondité ; il se constitue … une *coenergie*. Ce n'est plus une simple coopération … c'est une société réelle, et une existence unique

Our planet can be understood as a single organism with ubiquitous feedback mechanisms,[815] and there is every reason for understanding the entire universe in that way: so again, if this passage were to be taken on its own, '*action*' could be understood as action in general: but the passage appears in the 1893 *L'Action* in which action is generally understood as human action, so again we have to say that the passage can only ambiguously be placed in the 'selection' category and so does not properly belong there.

A passage in the fourth part of Blondel's 1893 *L'Action* raises another interesting question:

> Acts live on; they are indestructible. … action is indelible; no compensation is ever an absolute reparation … the consequences unfold to infinity in time and space as if to reveal to us the interior energy of action through the visible extent of its effects.[816]

Both the book as a whole, and the context of this passage, are about human action, so we must assume that the 'acts' that Blondel refers to here are human acts: but again, on its own, the passage can be read as a statement that all acts, whether human or otherwise, 'live on; they are indestructible …' However, if taken within its context, this passage belongs in the 'extension' section of this chapter and not in the 'selection' category.

The passages selected for discussion here are those that could most easily have been included in the 'selection' category if taken on their own: but they cannot be, as all of them are in a context in which action is human action, and in none of them is action unambiguously action in general. All of them belong in the 'extension' category, which means that we have found no passages that belong unambiguously in the 'selection' category.

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dans sa multiplicité même c'est une communauté qui fonctionne comme un organisme prolifique, et dont c'est l'union même qui fait la fécondité.

[815] James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

[816] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 330: Les actes vivent, ils sont indestructibles. … L'action est indélébile; nul dédommagement n'est jamais une absolue réparation … les conséquences se déploient à l'infini, dans le temps et l'espace, comme pour nous révéler l'énergie intérieure de l'action par la grandeur visible de ses effets.

Construction

'Construction' rewords texts so that '*action*' means action in general.

In the appendix to part II of *L'Action* we find a passage that invites construction:

> On the other hand, as we discover how our acts irresistibly expand and by what hidden impulse they surpass themselves ceaselessly like the ripples caused by a stone falling into deep water, we shall be prepared little by little for the ultimate question: Yes or no: for one who limits himself to the natural order, is there any coherence between the willing will and the willed will; and does action, which is the synthesis of this double willing, finally find in itself the wherewithal to be self-sufficient and to define itself? Yes or no: will our life be restricted to what is from ourselves and from nature, without recourse to anything transcendent?[817]

We can rewrite as follows:

> On the other hand, as we discover how actions expand and by what hidden impulses they surpass themselves ceaselessly like the ripples caused by a stone falling into deep water, we shall be prepared little by little for the ultimate question: Yes or no, for one who limits himself to the natural order, is there any coherence between human action, the will, and all other action; and does action, which is the synthesis of all of these actions, finally find in itself the wherewithal to be self-sufficient and to define itself? Yes or no: will the action that constitutes the cosmos be restricted to what is from ourselves and from nature, without recourse to anything transcendent?

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[817] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 42: D'autre part, en découvrant comment nos actes s'épanouissent irrésistiblement et par quelle intime impulsion ils se dépassent sans cesse ainsi que les remous d'une pierre tombée dans l'eau profonde, on sera préparé peu à peu à la question suprême: Oui ou non, pour qui se borne à l'ordre naturel, y a-t-il concordance entre la volonté voulante et la volonté voulue; et l'action qui est la synthèse de ce double vouloir trouve-t-elle enfin en elle-même de quoi se suffire et se définir ? Oui ou non, la vie de l'homme se restreindra-t-elle à ce qui est de l'homme et de la nature, sans recours à rien de transcendant?

Blondel's original text asks the reader to decide between a reconciliation between the willing will and the willed will immanent to human action and a reconciliation external to human action. The slightly rewritten text demands the same decision in relation to the action that constitutes the universe, so is an example of construction.

A further excellent candidate for construction is Blondel's discussion of consciousness: 'The fact of consciousness is … the product … of all the antecedent acts, conscious or unconscious, that converge on it and are summed up in it.' [818] It is not only consciousness that 'is the product of all the antecedent acts'. All action is, so we can rewrite this passage with '*action*' meaning action in general rather than just human action: 'Every action is … the product … of all of the antecedent acts, human and non-human, that converge and are summed up in it.' There is something highly Leibnizian about this understanding of reality. For Leibniz, every monad mirrors the entire universe; and here we find every action influencing and influenced by every other to differing degrees.

A particularly interesting candidate for construction relates to Blondel's discussion of human freedom. Whilst thought and the resulting human action are determined by antecedent action, consciousness can generate 'a distinct act: … a series of new acts the end of which it does not foresee'. [819] This is the root of Blondel's position that freedom and determinism are not inconsistent.

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[818] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 96: Le fait de conscience est … le produit … de tous les actes antérieurs, conscients ou inconscients, qui convergent et se résument en lui. Aussi n'est-il pas isolé des autres phénomènes, mais il soutient avec tous les autres ce double rapport : — d'un côté, le fait subjectif est la condition de tous les phénomènes qui sont l'objet des sciences positives ; en sorte que la connaissance de ces phénomènes dépend de lui et n'est possible que par sa présence inaperçue dans toute intuition sensible et dans toute affirmation scientifique ; — d'autre part, le fait subjectif a pour conditions tous ces mêmes phénomènes ; en sorte que la réalité même de ce fait dépend d'eux, et que la conscience la plus obscure porte en elle et représente tout le déterminisme de ses antécédents.

[819] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 96: un acte distinct … une série d'actes nouveaux dont elle ne prévoit pas le terme

> Consciousness results from a series of elementary and unconscious acts, not just from the last;—it constitutes a synthesis and a distinct act;—it prepares for and gives birth to a series of new acts, the end of which it does not foresee, but which it proposes for itself at least as provisional. To conceive is to have acted, to be acting still, and to be about to act further.[820]

We can rewrite this passage to construct an understanding that across the universe novelty and determinism are not inconsistent:

> Every action results from a series of actions, not just from the last;—it constitutes a synthesis and a distinct pattern of action;—it prepares for and begins a series of new acts the end of which it does not foresee. We can make provisional predictions as to how the many entangled changing patterns of action might evolve, but that is all. In relation to human action, to conceive is to have acted, to be acting still, and to be about to act further. More generally, everything is action, changing patterns of action constantly generate largely unpredictable new changing patterns of action, and those again generate largely unpredictable new changing patterns of action. …

In relation to human action, what we will can be frustrated when it comes to practical action, so our freedom is inevitably constrained.

> In our action … there is a habitual waste. Never … do we do all that we will as we will it: unforeseen resistances, frictions, and collisions, wear down, diminish, and deviate the will. In general, we know ourselves quite well, but at each moment we are also ignorant of ourselves: and it is this moment that is decisive for acts. Our desires often hide our true desires from us.[821]

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[820] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 109: la conscience résulte d'une série d'actes élémentaires et inconscients, non du dernier seulement;—elle constitue une synthèse et un acte distinct;—elle prépare et ébauche une série d'actes nouveaux dont elle ne prévoit pas le terme, mais qu'elle se propose comme fin au moins provisoire. Concevoir, c'est avoir agi, agir encore, et devoir agir au delà.

[821] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 170: Il y a … dans nos actions un déchet habituel. Nous ne faisons … jamais tout ce que nous voulons comme nous le voulons ; des résistances imprévues, des frottements, des heurts usent, entament et dévient la volonté. On se

We can rewrite as follows to draw out a more general extended meaning:

> The universe suffers a habitual waste. Never does every possible action emerge, and often an intended or predicted changing pattern of action is frustrated by entanglements with other changing patterns of action: unforeseen resistances, frictions, and collisions wear down, diminish, and deviate the streams of action. In general, we know ourselves and the universe quite well, but at each moment we are also ignorant of ourselves and of the universe; and it is this moment that is decisive for acts.

Extension

We have already discussed above a number of passages that initially looked as if they belonged in the 'selection' category but in fact belong in this one because their context makes it clear that '*action*' means human action. Here we shall discuss some other passages in which '*action*' means human action but for which no rewriting would be required for '*action*' to mean action in general if the passages were in contexts in which it meant that.

Early in *L'Action* Blondel argues that whereas theoretical debate can deliver no certainty, human action is impossible to deny and so provides an essential basis for philosophical and ethical enquiry. Blondel's statement could clearly be extended to all action, human and otherwise: 'The speculative problem of action seems well eliminated'. [822]

A particular problem relates to Blondel's treatment of the will. Because not to will is to will not to will, the will is as undeniable as human action: but is the will itself an example of human action?

At the heart of Blondel's argument is the difference between *le volontaire*, the willing will, the fundamental will that drives us to act, and *le voulu*, the willed will that constitutes the particular constrained choices that we make. [823] In neither case can we

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connaît bien en général, mais à chaque instant on s'ignore et c'est ce moment qui décide des actes. Nos désirs souvent nous cachent nos vrais désirs.

[822] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 6: Le problème spéculatif de l'action semble bien supprimé.

[823] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 19.

'will to dispense ourselves from being and acting; moral abdication is no more possible or honest than metaphysical abstention'.[824] Here and elsewhere[825] Blondel clearly distinguishes the will, in both of its manifestations, from both acting and being: but once we embark on extension we find such boundaries collapsing. The willing will—the will that we want to have—is human action; the willed will is human action; all of it is action. Our willing, our doing, our making, our moral action, our immoral action: all of it is action in changing patterns. The extension of this recognition is that everything else is action as well, so that '*action*' now means action in general rather than just human action. This means that any boundaries that we define or recognise within the universe's vast network of action constitute what we would normally call causal relations between different changing patterns of action, and that such boundaries are social constructions and are themselves action in changing patterns, like everything else. We create them, we change them, and their changing—their action in changing patterns—change us by entangling[826] with the changing patterns of action that constitute ourselves: that is, by complexly influencing and being influenced by the changing patterns of action that we are.

Conclusion

On the basis of our summary of *L'Action* and the ways in which we have been able to categorise Blondel's text, we can agree with Yvette Périco's understanding of Blondel's

[824] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 21: se dispenser d'être et d'agir; pas plus que l'abstention métaphysique, l'abdication morale n'est possible ni franche.

[825] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 38–39.

[826] In French, 'intrication': a metaphor that Maurice Blondel employed in *La Pensée, Tome II* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934), 57, to describe the relationship between abstract and concrete thought. 'Entanglement' is also employed as a metaphor in Jeffrey Bub, "The Entangled World: How Can It Be Like That?" in *The Trinity and an Entangled World: Rationality in Physical Science and Theology*, edited by John Polkinghorne, 15–31 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2010).

1893 *L'Action*: that it is a 'dynamic' [827] and 'concrete anthropology … an authentic science of the real, of the human being in its totality', [828] with the implication that

> in order to attain the reality of a subject we must consider facts of consciousness as actions in the life of someone's consciousness … each person gradually discovers themselves by analysing their action and by perceiving at the same time an outline of what they wanted to be; [829]

and that what Blondel is seeking is unity between 'the life of the senses … intellectual life … [and] spiritual life'. [830] *L'Action* is a thorough exploration of human action.

We have found that there are no passages in *L'Action* in which '*action*' can be unambiguously understood as meaning action in general, and that passages in which it initially appears that that is what '*action*' means, when read in their contexts, are found to be primarily about human action but sometimes gesture towards a broader understanding of action. We have also discovered that fairly often only minor amendments to a passage can enable '*action*' to mean action in general; and that the meaning of '*action*' in some passages can be extended from meaning human action to meaning action in general. For an additional example consider this passage:

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[827] Yvette Périco, *Maurice Blondel: Genèse du Sens* (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1991), 15: anthropologie concrète … une science authentique du réel, science de l'homme dans sa totalité.

[828] Périco, *Maurice Blondel*, 60 : anthropologie dynamique.

[829] Périco, *Maurice Blondel*, 16, 22: Pour atteindre la réalité d'un sujet, il faut donc considérer les faits de conscience comme des actes dans la vie de la conscience … Cheque homme se découvre progressivement en analysant son action et perçoit en même temps l'esquisse de ce qu'il voudrait être.

[830] Périco, *Maurice Blondel*, 38: la vie sensible … la vie intellectuelle … la vie … spirituelle.

> Action unites into one flow the dispersed forces of life, to constitute the organic synthesis, and to serve as mediator between all the forms of physical and spiritual activity: [831]

If this passage was not in a context in which '*action*' normally means 'human action', then 'all the forms of physical and spiritual activity' would imply all of the activity that constitutes the universe and beyond, and 'the organic synthesis' would represent one element of that: but this passage is in a 'human action' context, so we have to take 'all the forms of physical and spiritual activity' to mean 'all the forms of human physical and spiritual activity' and to require extension before it can mean 'all the forms …'. As Henry Duméry suggests, Blondel means by '*action*' 'integral spiritual action: its extension covers all human activities, starting from the simple work of the artisan'. [832]

Some passages in *L'Action*, such as those relating to the will, need rather more construction than others, but in principle the whole of *L'Action* could be placed in the construction and extension categories.

> The substance of human beings is action: they are what they do. *Ev τω εργω το ov* [being is in action]. We are, we know, we live, only *sub specie actionis* [under the category of action]. Not only does action manifest what we were already, but it also makes us grow and go out of ourselves. [833]

This is not difficult to rewrite:

> The substance of the universe is action: it is what it does. '*En tō ergō to on*' (being is in action). We are, we know, we live, only *sub specie actionis* (under the

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[831] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 181: L'action unit en un faisceau les forces éparses de la vie pour constituer la synthèse organique et pour servir de médiatrice entre toutes les formes de l'activité corporelle et spirituelle.

[832] Henry Duméry, *La Philosophie de L'Action: Essai sur l'Intellectualisme Blondelien* (Paris: Éditions Montaigne, 1948), 36: l'agir spirituel intégral, son extension recouvre la totalité des activités humaine, depuis le simple travail de l'artisan.

[833] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 197: la substance de l'homme c'est l'action, il est ce qu'il fait. *Ev τω εργω το ov*. Nous ne sommes, nous ne connaissons, nous ne vivons que *sub specie actionis*. Non seulement l'action manifeste ce que nous étions déjà, mais encore elle nous fait croître et sortir.

> category of action); and the universe exists only *sub specie actionis*. Not only is action what everything already is, but action constantly generates new action and so creates an ever new universe.

In his *L'Être et les Êtres*, which we shall study briefly in the next chapter, Blondel tackled the relationship between action and being: 'the role of action, then, is to develop being and to constitute it'.[834] This sentence can easily be placed in the 'extension' category as no 'construction' is required.

Whilst much of *L'Action* has been a philosophical exploration of human action, the latter part, and particularly part five that was removed before the examination and added back in before *L'Action*'s publication, is clearly, in Anselm's words, 'faith seeking understanding', which suggests that the whole of *L'Action* can be interpreted in that way. We can draw that conclusion simply by reading the text, but as we saw in chapter 3 it is now no secret that Blondel's fundamental motivation in writing *L'Action* was religious.[835]

We can conclude that none of Blondel's 1893 *L'Action* is unambiguously subject to 'selection', that all or most of it can be 'constructed' so that '*action*' means action in general, and that the meanings of passages can be 'extended' to relate to contexts in which '*action*' means action in general, and therefore that a thesis entirely about human action could easily have been one about action in general. This leaves open the question as to why it was not. The evidence that we have collected in the previous two chapters suggests that multiple factors were involved in Blondel's decision to restrict his treatment to human action: one is clearly that he was working within a philosophical tradition focussed on human action; and another that to have extended the meaning of '*action*' from 'human action' to 'action in general', which would have implied that being, transcendence, and the supernatural could have been interpreted as action, could have led to difficult conversations with ecclesiastical authorities and could have posed problems for Blondel's own deeply felt religion. Or perhaps the decision to restrict the thesis to human action was simply that this looked like sufficient of an agenda for the

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[834] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) 46: Le rôle de l'action, c'est donc de développer l'être et de le constituer.

[835] Fiachra Long, "Blondel's Religious Postulate in *Action* (1893)," *The Irish Theological Quarterly* 61, no.1 (1995): 57–69, 57.

thesis that Blondel needed to write, and to have broadened it to action in general could have looked like an impossible task.

We now turn to the works that Blondel wrote between the 1893 *L'Action* and the 1936 revision of it.

Chapter 5

Blondel's writings between the two *L'Action*s

Introduction

Between the publication of *L'Action* in 1893 and the publication of the two-volume *L'Action* over forty years later, Blondel wrote a variety of works, most of which were of a more theological character. In chapter 2 we have already mentioned the articles about Descartes, Pascal, Malebranche, Augustine, and Spinoza, all published during these years. Here we shall discuss three shorter works published during this period, and we shall then study the first two books of the 1930s trilogy—*La Pensée* ('Thought') and *L'Être et les Êtres* ('Being and Beings') by allocating texts to the categories of 'selection', 'construction', and 'extension', so that we can discover how Blondel is using the concept of '*action*' in these important books written not long before the two-volume revision of the 1893 *L'Action*, the third book of the trilogy, which will then be given two chapters of its own.

We shall find that during the period between the 1893 and 1936 editions of *L'Action*, Blondel's writings—both the explicitly apologetic literature and the ostensibly philosophical—become increasingly theological; that attention shifts from human action to an argument that the supernatural is a proper subject for philosophy;[836] that for much of this period explicit discussion of '*action*' is left to one side, but that the human being and human society continue to be understood in terms of their action; that the Church is understood in terms of its evolving tradition; and that in the first two books of the trilogy the meaning of '*action*' evolves from human action towards action in general. The philosophy of action worked out in the 1893 *L'Action* has not been left behind.

[836] Maria do Cèo Patrão-Neves, "Qu'est-ce que la Philosophie?" in *Maurice Blondel et la Quête du Sens*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 67–77 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1998), 68–72.

Three years after he published *L'Action*, Blondel wrote a long letter to the Director of the *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne*: the *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en matière d'Apologétique et sur la Méthode de la Philosophie dans l'Étude du Problème religieux*[837] ('Letter on the Requirements of Contemporary Thought in Apologetics and on the Method of Philosophy in the Study of the Religious Problem': usually called the 'Letter on Apologetics'), in which he explores the relationship between philosophy and religion as a means of responding to those who had thought it illegitimate for him to provide a theological resolution to the tensions explored in *L'Action*.[838] 'Religion is not to be simply a philosophy, and philosophy is not to be absorbed in any way by religion'.[839] The distinction, which Blondel explores more fully in an article published in 1906—'philosophical knowledge is specifically distinct from any other'[840]—was an essential aspect of the neo-Thomism of the time. However, that does not mean that there are not relationships between philosophy and theology. As in

[837] Maurice Blondel, *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en Matière d'Apologétique et sur la Méthode de la Philosophie dans l'Étude du Problème Religieux*, in *Les Premiers Écrits de Maurice Blondel*: *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en matière d'Apologétique (1896) Histoire et Dogme* by Maurice Blondel, 5–95 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956); Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics*, in *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma* by Maurice Blondel, with an introduction and translated by Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan, 125–208 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994).

[838] Fiachra Long, "Introduction," in Maurice Blondel, *The Idealist Illusion and Other Essays*, translated by Fiachra Long, 1–74 (Dordrecht: Spring Science and Business Media, 2000), 32.

[839] Blondel, *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en Matière d'Apologétique*, 34: pour que la religion ne soit pas seulement une philosophie, et pour que la philosophie ne s'absorbe en rien dans la religion; *The Letter on Apologetics*, 151.

[840] Maurice Blondel, *The Idealist Illusion and Other Essays*, translated by Fiachra Long (Dordrecht: Spring Science and Business Media, 2000), 115.

L'Action, human action, and here particularly the activity of the human mind,[841] can reconcile the 'scientific spirit' with the 'religious spirit',[842] and the 'method of immanence' grants access to transcendence,[843] and in particular to a revelation[844] that gives content to the otherwise 'undetermined supernatural' for which Blondel's 'open' philosophy can make room.[845] Philosophy that studies religion need be no less autonomous than any other kind, and it is this kind of philosophy that we find frequently in Blondel's writings during this period:[846] a philosophy that studies both the natural and

[841] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 169; René Virgoulay, "Philosophie Séparée et Philosophie Intégrale d'après la *Lettre* de 1896," in *Maurice Blondel et la Quête du Sens*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 21–30 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1990), 30.

[842] Jean Ladrière, "Science et Apologétique," in *Philosophie et Apologétique: Maurice Blondel Cent Ans Après*, edited by Philippe Capelle, 77–102 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1999), 89 : l'esprit scientifique … l'esprit religieux.

[843] Peter Rožić, "Dire Quelque Chose qui Compte: De la Méthode d'Immanence de Blondel à la Theologie Fondamentale de Lubac." *Bogoslovska smotra* 83, no.4 (2013): 743–62 ; René Virgoulay, *Philosophie et Théologie chez Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 125–26, 138–40.

[844] Alain Cugno, "Rationalité de la Foi et Apologétique," in *Maurice Blondel et la Quête du Sens*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 79–85 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1998), 80–82.

[845] Dominique Folscheid, "Apologétique et Dialectique de la Raison," in *Maurice Blondel et la Quête du Sens*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 45–52 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1998), 51; Illtyd Trethowan, "Introduction: Philosophical and Theological," in Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, translated by Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan, 80–116 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 113.

[846] Paul Favraux, "D''Histoire et Dogme' aux 'Exigences Philosophiques du Christianisme': Nécessité d'un réalisme supérieur," in *Blondel entre* L'Action *et la Trilogie* edited by Marc Leclerc, 315–30 (Bruxelles: Éditions Lessius, 2003), 323; René Virgoulay, "Philosophie Séparée et Philosophie Intégrale d'après la *Lettre* de 1896," in *Maurice Blondel et la Quête du Sens*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 21–30 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1998), 25–26.

the supernatural and that Blondel can therefore call an 'integral philosophy'.[847] This is genuine apologetics that takes seriously the human person, the Christian Faith, and a secular world, and seeks to mediate between them.[848] However, as Alain Cugno has pointed out, what Blondel does not do is work out a philosophical relationship between reason and faith: rather, he assumes an 'amicable separation'[849] between them. This leaves faith on the theological side of the theology/philosophy divide when it could so easily have functioned as an important bridge between them.[850] A possible explanation is Blondel's own passionate Christian faith and its deep attachment to the Roman Catholic Church. The Christian tradition and the Christian Church were where Blondel exercised faith, whereas philosophy was where his reason belonged.

In the *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en matière d'Apologétique* Blondel states that there is no such thing as 'Christian philosophy',[851] but in the midst of continuing discussion as to whether there was such a thing,[852] and in response to claims that there was no such thing as a Christian philosophy from both philosophical and theological directions,[853] by 1931 he had changed his mind and had retracted that rather blunt statement.[854] In response to a challenge to his understanding that

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[847] Blondel, *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en Matière d'Apologétique*, 91; *The Letter on Apologetics*, 204; René Virgoulay, "Philosophie Séparée et Philosophie Intégrale d'après la *Lettre* de 1896," in *Maurice Blondel et la Quête du Sens*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 21–30 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1990), 26, 30.

[848] Sullivan, John. "Christian Credibility in Maurice Blondel." *The Heythrop Journal* 57 (2016): 984–98.

[849] Alain Cugno, "Rationalité de la Foi et Apologétique," in *Maurice Blondel et la Quête du Sens*. Edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 79–85 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1998), 85: séparation amoureuse.

[850] Cugno, "Rationalité de la Foi et Apologétique," 83.

[851] Blondel, *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en Matière d'Apologétique*, 54; *The Letter on Apologetics*, 171.

[852] Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 379–411.

[853] Oliva Blanchette, "The Rationale for a Catholic Philosophy: According to Maurice Blondel," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 60, no. 2 (2004): 329–48.

[854] Maurice Blondel, "Y-a-t-il une Philosophie Chrétienne?" *La Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 38, no. 4 (1931): 599–606, 605, 606.

philosophy could reason about the transcendent, Blondel published an article that suggests that a transcendent God enables us

> to see in time less a physical reality than an aspect of becoming and the condition of growth … to introduce everywhere a genetic and dynamic point of view which makes the physical and spiritual universe an immense history and drama.[855]

As René Virgoulay suggests, Blondel held

> the conviction that between philosophy and Christianity, in its Catholic form, the relationship is intrinsic: philosophy can only be integral if it is open to integral Christianity, an openness determined by the notion of the supernatural.[856]

And as Avery Dulles puts it, this is a mediating position between theology treated as philosophy and philosophy and theology kept rigorously apart;[857] it represents a tension that Blondel worked with throughout his career; and it is a relationship between philosophy and theology that continues to influence the 'Christian philosophy' of such movements as Radical Orthodoxy today.[858]

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[855] Blondel, "Y-a-t-il une Philosophie Chrétienne?" 602: voir dans le temps moins une réalité physique qu'un aspect du devenir et que la condition d'une croissance … introduire partout un point de vue génétique et dynamique qui fait de l'Univers physique et spirituel une immense histoire et un drame.

[856] René Virgoulay, "La 'Lettre' (1896) de Maurice Blondel," in *Philosophie et Apologétique: Maurice Blondel Cent Ans Après*, edited by Philippe Capelle (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1999), 36: La conviction qu'entre la philosophie et le Christianisme sous sa forme catholique, le rapport est intrinsèque: la philosophie ne peut être intégrale que si elle est ouverte au christianisme intégral, ouverture que détermine la notion du surnaturel.

[857] Avery Dulles, "Can Philosophy be Christian?" *First Things*, April 2000. https://www.firstthings.com/article/2000/04/can-philosophy-be-christian

[858] Adam C. English, *The Possibility of Christian Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2007), 3–5; John Milbank et al. (editors), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

In relation to the purposes of this thesis: if philosophy has the right to study the supernatural as well as the natural, and can apply the same methods and concepts to both the natural and the supernatural, then there is every reason to extend the meaning of '*action*' from human action to the natural and supernatural universes.

Histoire et Dogme

In 1897, Blondel wrote *Histoire et Dogme* ('History and Dogma') as a direct response to a contemporary controversy about biblical interpretation. A papal encyclical had welcomed modern developments in biblical studies, but what followed was a polarization between those who somewhat uncritically employed modern literary criticism in relation to biblical texts,[859] and those who relied entirely on more traditional methods of interpretation.[860] The inadequacies of both extrinsicism and historicism,[861] the former locating itself firmly in dogma and the latter in a history that takes no account of spiritual realities,[862] revealed the need for

> an intermediary between history and dogma … a link between them which would bring about the synthesis and maintain solidarity without compromising their relative independence.[863]

[859] Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 182–90.

[860] Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan, "Prefatory Note to History and Dogma," in Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, translated by Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 211–17.

[861] Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 194–96.

[862] Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 196–202.

[863] Blondel, *Histoire et Dogme*, 200: Un intermédiaire entre l'histoire et le dogme … un lien qui en opère la synthèse et en maintienne la solidarité sans en compromettre l'indépendance relative; *History and Dogma*, 264.

Blondel's response is 'tradition',[864] which

> relies no doubt on texts, but at the same time it relies primarily … on an experience always in act which enables it to remain in some respects master of the texts instead of being strictly subservient to them.[865]

Tradition is not texts: it is human action;[866] and as Paul Archambault puts it: 'A view of Tradition obtained through the philosophy of action: this is ultimately what *History and Dogma* brings us'.[867] The book also raises an important question: if the individual human being, society, and now the Church, are understood in terms of action, then it is difficult to see how other theological realities, and particularly God, can be isolated from this action-based understanding of reality.

L'Illusion Idéaliste

In 1898 Blondel published an article in which he envisages the human action of thought engaging with both ideas and external reality.[868]

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[864] Blondel, *Histoire et Dogme*, 201: la tradition; *History and Dogma*, 264; Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 202–9; René Virgoulay, *Philosophie et Théologie chez Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 157–60.

[865] Blondel, *Histoire et Dogme*, 204: se fonde sans doute sur les textes, mais elle se fonde en même temps et d'abord … sur une expérience toujours en acte qui lui permet de rester, à certains égards, maîtresse des textes au lieu d'y être strictement asservie; *History and Dogma*¸ 267.

[866] Robert C. Koerpel, "Between History and Dogma: On the Spirit of Tradition in the Demands and Limitations of Modernity," *New Blackfriars* 95, issue 1055 (2014): 3–20, 3.

[867] Paul Archambault, *L'Oeuvre Philosophique de Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Librairie Bloud & Gay, 1928), 114: Une vue de la Tradition obtenue par la philosophie de l'action: voilà en fin de compte ce que nous apporte *Histoire et dogme*.

[868] Paul Gilbert, "La Philosophie en France entre 1898 et 1930," in *Blondel entre* L'Action *et la Trilogie*, edited by Marc Leclerc, 21–36 (Bruxelles: Éditions Lessius, 2003), 22, 33–36.

> What is more in keeping with the secular effort of philosophy than to make thinking tighten more closely on reality, on the concrete, on the living, to take more account of the particular, the individual, the person, to value more highly the dignity of the interior life, to recognise the superiority of love and action over theory, to establish the irreducible originality of practice?[869]

By the end of the article Blondel has critiqued Kantian idealism and neo-Thomist realism, both of which he accuses of an 'intellectual illusion'[870] that separates ideas from the act of thinking; and he has shown that the action of thought is the bridge between ideas and the contingent reality that we perceive with our senses.[871] He closes by asking how thought and being relate to each other. Blondel took up these ideas again in an article written in 1906 when he argued that knowledge has two sources, spontaneity, or prospection—knowledge integral to human action—and technique, or reflection—knowledge obtained from thought about the action. Twenty years later correspondence with Etienne Gilson, for whom documentary evidence was sufficient for the study of history, and for whom facts and interpretation were identical, appears to have confirmed Blondel in his view that ideas and the contingent facts of their history are separate and that the relationships between them matter.[872] The distinction between ideas and contingent facts requires the philosopher to study separately action

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[869] Maurice Blondel, "L'Illusion Idéaliste," *La Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 6 (6) (1898), 726–45, 45: Quoi en effet de plus conforme à l'effort séculaire de la philosophie que d'amener la pensée à serrer de plus près le réel, le concret, le vivant; à tenir plus de compte du fait particulier, de l'individuel, de la personne; à estimer plus haut la dignité de la vie intérieure; à reconnaître la supériorité de l'amour et de l'action sur la théorie ; à avérer l'irréductible originalité de la pratique? English translation quoted from Maurice Blondel, *The Idealist Illusion and Other Essays*, translated by Fiachra Long (Dordrecht: Spring Science and Business Media, 2000), 87.

[870] René Virgoulay, "L'Illusion Idéaliste," in *Blondel entre* L'Action *et la Trilogie*, edited by Marc Leclerc (Bruxelles: Éditions Lessius, 2003), 155–67.

[871] Fiachra Long, "Introduction," in Maurice Blondel, *The Idealist Illusion and Other Essays*, translated by Fiachra Long, 1–74 (Dordrecht: Spring Science and Business Media, 2000), 3, 43.

[872] Fiachra Long, "The Blondel–Gilson Correspondence through Foucault's Mirror." *Philosophy Today* 35, no. 4 (1991), 351–61, 357.

and the idea of action, and also to understand their connection.[873] We shall find 'prospection'/'eternal truths' distinction and relationship reappearing in the first volume of *La Pensée* written soon after the Blondel–Gilson correspondence.[874]

Already the themes of the trilogy have been established—thought, being, and action—and it is when he writes his trilogy that Blondel will employ action as the mediator between thought and being. Yet again we find a publication that responds to a particular problem—in this case idealism—tackling fundamental questions about reality, ideas, being, thought, and action.

Une énigme historique: Le Vinculum Substantiale

At the same time as Blondel presented *L'Action* for examination in 1893, he submitted a thesis in Latin that forty years later he summarised in a publication in French titled *Une Énigme Historique, le 'Vinculum Substantiale' d'après Leibniz et l'Ébauche d'un Réalisme Supérieur*[875] ('A historical enigma, the "Vinculum Substantiale" [substantial bond] according to Leibniz, and the outline of a superior realism'.) What had attracted Blondel to Leibniz's 'substantial bond' was the suggestion of a spiritual substance, one 'more *substantial* than the elements which it dominates and raises to its higher unity':[876] and

[873] Fiachra Long, "Blondel on the Origin of Philosophy," *Philosophy Today* 33, no. 1 (1989): 21–27, 23–24.

[874] Maurice Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I: La Genèse de la Pensée et les Paliers de son Ascension Spontanée* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934), 156–57.

[875] Maurice Blondel, *Une Énigme Historique, le 'Vinculum Substantiale' d'après Leibniz et l'Ébauche d'un Réalisme Supérieur*, second edition (Paris: Éditions Gabriel Beauchesne, 1930), vi. The original Latin thesis of 1893 can be found in Maurice Blondel, *Oeuvres Completes*, *Tome I*, edited by Claude Troisfontaines (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995).

[876] Blondel, *Une Énigme Historique*, viii: plus *substantielle* que les éléments qu'elle domine et qu'elle élève à son unité supérieure.

one that he could reinterpret as a '*Vinculum* in practice':[877] the human action that could bridge the gulf between thought and being.[878]

The apologetic works

In the works that we have studied, a theme that emerges more strongly than in *L'Action* is the supernatural, for which Blondel increasingly uses the word 'God':[879] an identification that continues beyond this period.[880] On the basis of the literature that we have studied here, and on the basis of the evidence for Blondel's religious motives adduced in chapter 3, we can draw this conclusion: that Blondel's work was apologetic from beginning to end,[881] and that the concrete realism of both *L'Action* and the more

[877] Blondel, *Une Énigme Historique*, 132: le *Vinculum* en exercice.

[878] Emmanuel Gabellieri, "Blondel, S. Weil et le Panchristisme: Vers une 'Métaxologie'," in *Maurice Blondel et la Quête du Sens*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 53–65 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1998), 57–58.

[879] Dieu.

[880] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action*, *Tome I, Le Problème des Causes Secondes et le Pur Agir* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1936), 31, and 266 other occurrences; Blondel, *Une Énigme Historique*, 45, 108; Maurice Blondel, *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en Matière d'Apologétique et sur la Méthode de la Philosophie dans l'Étude du Problème Religieux*, in Maurice Blondel, *Les Premiers Écrits de Maurice Blondel*: *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en matière d'Apologétique (1896) Histoire et Dogme*, 5–95 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956. First published in 1896), 88.

[881] René Virgoulay, *Philosophie et Théologie chez Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 27–28.

explicitly apologetic works were the foundation for the integral and spiritual 'superior realism' [882] that would characterise the subsequent trilogy. [883]

René Virgoulay asks whether the explicitly apologetic works are 'philosophical apologetics' or 'applied philosophy'. [884] He argues that Blondel did not cease from writing more clearly philosophical works during this period—for instance, *L'Illusion Idéaliste* [885]—and that he was already working on material that would end up in the trilogy and in *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien*. [886] We can also argue that because Blondel was always clear about the difference between philosophy and theology, and about philosophy's right to discuss the supernatural, what we would normally regard as theological propositions, such as those relating to the supernatural, Being, and God, can always be regarded as proper subjects for philosophical exploration. The boundary between philosophy and theology was always porous, so Blondel's works during this period can be regarded as applied philosophy. Peter Henrici finds at the base of this philosophy a 'concrete ontology' [887] about beings rather than about Being: but we can argue that because all of this literature is contingent responses to the contingent, the foundation for Blondel's applied philosophy is human action, and sometimes action

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[882] Paul Favraux, "D''Histoire et Dogme' aux 'Exigences Philosophiques du Christianisme': Nécessité d'un Réalisme Supérieur," in *Blondel entre* L'Action *et la Trilogie*, edited by Marc Leclerc (Bruxelles: Éditions Lessius, 2003), 315–30.

[883] Maria do Cèo Patrão-Neves, "Qu'est-ce que la Philosophie?" in *Maurice Blondel et la Quête du Sens*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 67–77 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1998), 72–77.

[884] René Virgoulay, *Philosophie et Théologie chez Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 39–49: apologétique philosophique … philosophie appliquée.

[885] Maurice Blondel, "," *La Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 6, no. 6 (1898): 726–45.

[886] Maurice Blondel, *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien, Tome I*, fourth edition (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1950); Maurice Blondel, *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien, Tome II* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1946); Virgoulay, *Philosophie et Théologie chez Maurice Blondel*, 48–49.

[887] Peter Henrici, "Les Écrits 'Intermédiaires' de Blondel: À la Recherche d'une Ontologie Concrète," in *Blondel entre* L'Action *et la Trilogie*, edited by Marc Leclerc, 299–314 (Bruxelles: Éditions Lessius, 2003), 299: à la recherche d'une ontologie concrète..

more broadly understood. This is the thread that runs through all of the publications that we have discussed in this chapter.

Particularly important for the purpose of this thesis is the frequency with which human action enters the argument in each of the works studied in this chapter. This is particularly the case with *Histoire et Dogme*, and also in the shorter *De la Valeur Historique du Dogme* ('On the Historic Value of Doctrine'):

> it is absolutely indispensable to accept a thesis analogous to the one which I tried to defend from the point of view of a philosophy of action, by showing how 'Christian knowledge' organizes itself within the Church's tradition. [888]

Blondel has by no means left behind his philosophy of human action: [889] and whilst it is explicitly human action that mediates between the natural and the supernatural, and that constitutes the tradition of the Church, the institutional nature of the action that constitutes tradition suggests that a broader concept of action is in fact at work here. We might therefore understand tradition as action in changing patterns pushed along by a variety of factors that include God and the Church, with both God and the Church understood in terms of action in changing patterns, and God as Action: action itself.

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[888] Maurice Blondel, *De la Valeur Historique du Dogme*, in *Les Premiers Écrits de Maurice Blondel*: *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en matière d'Apologétique (1896) Histoire et Dogme* by Maurice Blondel, 229–45 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956), 235: il est indispensable d'en venir à une thèse analogue à celle que, du point de vue d'une philosophie de l'action, j'ai essayé de soutenir, en montrant la façon dont "la science chrétien" s'organise dans la tradition de l'Église; English translation in Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, translated by Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 215.

[889] Maria do Cèo Patrão-Neves, "Qu'est-ce que la Philosophie?" in *Maurice Blondel et la Quête du Sens*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 67–77 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1998), 68–72.

The First Volume of La Pensée

During the 1930s, with his sight failing and with the assistance of a former student, Blondel completed a trilogy about thought, being, and action, for which he had been making notes throughout his career.[890] The way in which the five volumes of the trilogy and the following two volumes of *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétienne* were constructed by Blondel's former student out of dictation and piles of notes must be a significant reason for the 'variations on a theme' and frequently repetitive and tangential nature of much of the material.

The first volume of *La Pensée*,[891] 'Thought', published in 1934, decides that thought is always more than thought that is known, so philosophy can only leave thought as a mystery while our minds choose from among available spiritual routes: which in turn opens the way to a divine basis for thought. The second volume, published the same year, concludes that thought can only be understood in relation to a divine order.

'Action readings' in the first volume of La Pensée

As before, we shall seek examples of passages suitable for inclusion in the 'selection', 'construction', and 'extension' categories.

Selection

Whilst Blondel frequently distinguishes '*la pensée*', 'thought', as a distinctive reality alongside both '*l'être*', 'being', and '*l'action*' 'action', there are places where connections are drawn:

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[890] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 413–18.

[891] Maurice Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I: La Genèse de la Pensée et les Paliers de son Ascension Spontanée* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934).

> thought is as much about love and action as it is about reason, because, even in its infancy and in its errors, it tends to embrace both itself and its object, to unify and universalize, to become both central and subordinate, to identify with the whole.[892]

Thought is here aligned with action, but because only human action is involved, we ought not to include the passage in the selection category. There are numerous such passages in the first volume of *La Pensée*.

The following passage might or might not fit into the selection category.

> Thus thought, from its most humble origin, imperiously and impetuously reveals its final and total design which is to universalize itself, to extend to everything, and undoubtedly to distinguish itself from everything that is not itself, but at the same time to master all accessible reality and to encompass through science and action everything that it can conceive and desire in the order of truth and the good.[893]

Here the human action of thought is the method employed by thought as it universalises itself, that is, as it explores the universe insofar as it is accessible to thought: but that does not mean that '*action*' here means action in general. It is human action that enables thought to encompass 'everything that it can conceive and desire in the order of truth and the good'. Similarly, Blondel writes of intelligence and objects in the world being united 'in an act where everything appears instantaneous and simultaneous';[894]

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[892] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 116: la pensée est aussi de l'amour et de l'action en même temps que de la raison, car, même en ses balbutiements et en ses erreurs, elle tend à s'embrasser elle-même et à embrasser son objet, à s'unifier et à s'universaliser, à se faire centre et à se subordonner, à s'identifier au tout.

[893] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 104: Ainsi la pensée, dès sa plus humble origine, révèle impérieusement, impétueusement, son dessein final et total qui est de s'universaliser, de s'étendre à tout, de se distinguer sans doute de tout ce qui n'est pas elle, mais en même temps de maîtriser tout le réel accessible et d'envelopper par la science et l'action tout ce qu'elle peut concevoir et souhaiter dans l'ordre du vrai et du bien.

[894] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 93: en un acte où tout paraît instantané et simultané.

and of 'the action of our thoughts and wills that contribute to the music of the cosmos'.[895] These passages too restrict '*acte*' and '*action*' to human thought.

Selection can go two ways, of course. We can select into a category, or we can discard an item from it. There are passages in the first volume of *La Pensée* that we would not even think of selecting. For instance, Blondel worries that if we shape science in accordance with Einstein's theories of special and general relativity then 'we must posit the relative, the changing, and the indefinite, as the absolute, the certain, and the definitive'.[896] Blondel seems to be far from happy with this eventuality, and so has journeyed a long way from the confident employment of the relative, the changing, and the indefinite, with which he seemed to have been entirely happy in relation to human beings in *L'Action*.[897] So as well as not selecting this passage, we can resist what Blondel says here, and in the cause of construction we can rewrite the passage as 'we must posit the relative, the changing, and the indefinite, as normative, as we should'.

A particularly interesting passage describes

> life … [as] a function of the universe; it involves total interaction; it presents in its productions, and in the materials that it organizes, this asymmetry which is that of cosmic movements.[898]

If the universe in which we experience life is constituted by 'cosmic movements' then we can place this passage in the selection category. If the meaning of 'cosmic movements' is restricted to those aspects of the universe that life organises, then we cannot.

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[895] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 115: L'action de nos pensées et de nos volontés qui meuvent le clavier secret.

[896] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 291: il faut … poser le relatif, le changeant, l'indéfini comme l'absolu, le certain et le définitif.

[897] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893).

[898] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 37–38: la vie … est en fonction de l'univers ; elle implique l'interaction totale; elle présente dans ses productions, et dans les matériaux qu'elle organise, cette dissymétrie qui est celle même des mouvements cosmiques.

There are plenty of places in *La Pensée* where we are left in doubt as to whether '*action*', '*acte*' or '*agir*' refer to action in general, only to human action, or to some other restricted understanding of action: but there are also passages that clearly do belong in the selection category. For instance, when Blondel discusses causality, he does so in terms of action:

> If the primitive fact is not a simple and exhaustive given, any more than the affirmation of the spiritual subject in its hyperorganic effort, it is because in fact the feeling of causality is never clearly given to us and is never exactly analyzable: there is always a simultaneous and indissoluble plurality of actions and reactions constantly associated in a reciprocal multicausality. [899]

'*action*' here is action in general, so no amendment is required for us to place this passage in the 'selection' category.

Construction

At the beginning of the first volume of *La Pensée* [900] Blondel recognises our complete interdependence with the world, but still he often restricts action to human action. [901] The world is a 'solid object' while thought is 'diffuse and interactive'. [902] If we were to understand the world as diffuse and interactive action then '*action*' would be action in general and not just human action.

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[899] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 155: Si le fait primitif n'est pas une donnée simple et exhaustive, pas plus que l'affirmation du sujet spirituel dans son effort hyperorganique, c'est qu'en effet, le sentiment de la causalité n'est jamais en nous une donnée claire et exactement analysable : il y a toujours pluralité simultanée et indissoluble d'actions et de réactions constamment associées dans une multicausalité réciproque.

[900] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 7.

[901] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 2, 5, 6.

[902] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 6: ce monde subsistant comme un *solidum quid* . . . pensée à la fois diffuse et synergique.

Sometimes all we need in order to achieve construction is to change a single word. Take for instance this somewhat Leibnizian passage that understands the connectedness of the universe:

> What is true for the philosopher, as for the scientist, and as for any being who acts, who feels, or even simply who is, is to be, at the same time, effect and cause, in a complex reality where nothing can be absolutely detached from everything else. This solidarity, whether physical, organic, mental, or metaphysical, governs all legitimate speculation, all positive science, and all effective action. [903]

Instead, we can reconstruct the text as follows: 'This entangling, whether physical, organic, mental, or metaphysical, governs all legitimate speculation, all positive science, and all effective action'. For aspects of reality to entangle with each other suggests an active process, whereas their solidarity suggests a permanent state of togetherness, so by changing 'solidarity' [904] to 'entangling' we have understood the world as well as ourselves in terms of action, and so '*action*' as action in general.

Sometimes more wholesale reconstruction is needed. Blondel requires a unified human being able to think thoughts, so the multiplicity of human action is experienced as a problem:

> life retains a character irreducible to this division of actions and reactions which fragment the organized being by extracting it, so to speak, from its interior unity. [905]

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[903] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 268: Ce qui est vrai pour le philosophe comme pour le savant, comme pour tout être qui agit, qui sent ou même simplement qui est, c'est d'être, à la fois, effet et cause, dans un complexus où rien ne peut être absolument détaché du tout. Cette solidarité, qu'elle soit physique, organique, mentale ou métaphysique, domine toute spéculation légitime, toute science positive, toute action effective.

[904] solidarité.

[905] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 54: la vie conserve un caractère irréductible à ce découpage d'actions et de réactions qui morcèlent l'être organisé en l'extrayant pour ainsi dire de son unité intérieure.

Construction enables us to resist this implication. We could rewrite as follows:

> life is characterized by multiple actions and reactions which constitute the unity of the constantly changing human immersed in a cosmos constituted by changing patterns of action.

Extension

Blondel recognises that it is human action that distinguishes human beings as distinctive, and each individual as distinctive:

> The dominant fact that the philosopher simply has to note here, without trespassing into biology or prejudging any metaphysical solution, is the appearance of individuated beings that form systems which, while depending on the entire environment in which they are immersed, concentrate unified forces within themselves with a view to performing original and specific actions and reactions.[906]

Here as elsewhere[907] '*action*' means human action, no doubt for reasons with which we are now familiar: that that is the tradition within which Blondel is working, and that is the way to insulate his philosophy from potentially problematic theological implications—but scientific change since the writing of the 1893 *L'Action* means that he can no longer resist describing the cosmos in terms of action:[908] 'cosmic movements'.[909] The result is human beings constituted by their action and a cosmos that acts. The passage leaves open the question as to whether the 'environment' within which human

[906] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 36: Le fait dominant que le philosophe a simplement à constater ici, sans s'ingérer dans la biologie et sans préjuger aucune solution métaphysique, c'est l'apparition d'êtres individués formant des systèmes qui, tout en dépendant de tout le milieu où ils plongent, concentrent en eux des forces unifiées en vue d'actions et de réactions originales et spécifiques.

[907] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 51.

[908] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 37–38.

[909] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 38: mouvements cosmiques.

beings' 'actions and reactions' occur is itself 'actions and reactions'. We can rewrite as follows:

> The dominant fact that the philosopher simply has to note here, without trespassing into biology, physics, or chemistry, or prejudging any metaphysical solution, is the appearance of events that form changing systems which, while depending on the entire environment in which they are immersed, concentrate diverse and changing forces within themselves with a view to performing original and specific actions and reactions.

Blondel describes perception in terms of human action:[910]

> the thought that thinks these objects tends to complete them, to bring together their aspects or their successive states, to fix ...[911]

But however much knowledge is an exploratory process, and however much 'to fix' is a verb, the outcome is somewhat less dynamic:

> … to fix their more essential truth in a unity that submerges their extents or durations: that immaterializes them in some way and that increases this character of real intelligibility that was already in them in a rough form.[912]

Similarly, however much knowledge can be attained by '*prospection*', which we can translate as 'prospecting' or 'exploration',[913] that activity is driven by 'eternal truths': by a 'living truth' that 'acts in the thinking being to make it capable of knowing not only

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[910] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1945), came to the same view ten years later.

[911] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 134–35: la pensée qui pense ces objets tend à les compléter, à réunir leurs aspects ou leurs états successifs, à fixer …

[912] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 134–35: à fixer, dans une unité qui domine l'étendue ou la durée, leur vérité plus essentielle, à les immatérialiser en quelque façon et à accroître ce caractère d'intelligibilité réelle qui était déjà en eux sous une forme ébauchée.

[913] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 156–57.

empirical or subjective realities, but also the need, the demanding presence, and the duty, of a real order in itself to be realized in ourselves'.[914]

We can extend these ideas from human action to action in general by suggesting that thought does not complete objects, but continues to explore them; that it does not fix truth in a unity that disposes of spatiality and temporality, but rather pursues truth into an ever-changing diversity within a context of changing spatiality and temporality; and that any order either proposed or discovered must be understood to be contingent, local, and temporary, and immediately dissolved. It is not just the exploring human being to which the word '*action*' applies, but the cosmos within which we explore.

When Blondel discusses the thinking self, he suggests that the thinking subject must be neither discredited nor given too elevated a status: instead, we must understand 'its moving equilibrium', or its 'equilibrium in the midst of movement':[915] both a stability and an aspiration for infinity. Here is an understanding of the self framed in terms of action in changing patterns, even if that was not Blondel's own intention. We can then go on to understand all reality in those terms, and so the cosmos as well as the human being in terms of 'equilibrium in the midst of movement'.[916]

Conclusions from our 'action reading' of the first volume of La Pensée

L'Action[917] was philosophy with occasional theological implications, and in *L'Action* '*action*' was always human action. *La Pensée*[918] is also philosophy with occasional theological implications, but here there is more recognition that the universe as a whole

[914] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 156–57: vérités éternelles … vivante vérité … agit effectivement en l'être pensant pour le rendre capable de connaître non seulement les réalités empiriques ou subjectives, mais aussi le besoin, la présence exigeante, le devoir d'un ordre réel en soi et à réaliser en nous.

[915] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 369: son équilibre en movement.

[916] équilibre en movement.

[917] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893).

[918] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*; *La Pensée, Tome II*.

is constituted by action. Human action and action in general sometimes remain in largely separate compartments, with human action the centre of attention, but the introduction of a significant cosmic kind of thought[919] offers the possibility of human action functioning within an overall action in general; and although *La Pensée* understands '*la pensée*', 'thought', as a form of human action[920]—'a subjective act that confers a unity of consciousness on an indefinite multiplicity'[921]—it often divorces thought from other human action in a way that *L'Action* does not.

As the book progresses, philosophical exploration of the notion of thought gives way to philosophical apologetics: that is, an argument for theism framed in terms of a philosophy of thought. Most of the time God is here understood in somewhat Platonic terms as a transcendent reality to which our thought leads us. God is *l'Être*, 'Being', and *l'Être* is God, rather than God being *l'Action*, Action, and *l'Action* being God.

'Thought'[922] is conceived throughout as in a separate category to both being and action—hence the separate book devoted to it, and the frequent places where '*la pensée*', 'thought', and '*l'action*', 'action', are found side by side.[923] An important relationship between them is constituted by

> the fundamental paradox of acting as well as thinking. Because finally, to act with all the force of the term, we must be capable of an initiative that introduces a radical novelty into the apparent determinism of the universe. And all of our partial actions are nothing but transmitted impulses if they are not linked to a principle of initiative which constitutes a kind of creation. Likewise, to think is not a question of passively accepting data, as too easily those who are not surprised

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[919] René Virgoulay, *L'Action de Maurice Blondel, 1893: Relecture pour un Centenaire* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1992), 79.

[920] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 104.

[921] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 403: acte subjectif qui confère une unité de conscience à ce qui est une multiplicité indéfinie.

[922] la pensée.

[923] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 249, 253, 266, 344, 387, 391.

> by anything, and who regard the facts as sufficient in themselves, might imagine.[924]

Perhaps if thought had been framed more clearly in terms of human action, and so as a subcategory within the category of human action, then more coherence would have been possible between *L'Action*[925] and *La Pensée*.[926] There are hints in the first volume of *La Pensée* that this could have been a possibility: for instance, Blondel describes thought in terms of 'the intrinsic act of thinking';[927] 'thought in action';[928] 'the intellectual act';[929] 'the original act of subjective life';[930] 'an act of consciousness';[931] and 'the act of constituting the intelligible order'[932]—and he suggests that

> some focus on the aspect of the result obtained, on the objective likelihoods of either the thinking action or the thought concept … the complete solution [of the] problem [of thought] implies the study, necessarily complementary, of being and action which are the foundation and cause of thought itself.[933]

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[924] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 249: le paradoxe foncier de l'agir comme du penser. Car enfin, pour agir dans toute la force du terme, il faut être capable d'une initiative qui introduit dans l'apparent déterminisme de l'univers une nouveauté radicale. Et toutes nos actions partielles ne sont rien que des impulsions transmises si elles ne se rattachent pas à un principe d'initiative qui constitue une sorte de création. De même, pour penser, il ne s'agit pas d'accepter passivement des données, comme l'imaginent trop facilement ceux qui ne s'étonnent de rien et qui regardent les faits comme se suffisant à eux-mêmes.

[925] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893).

[926] Blondel, *La Pensée*, *Tome I*; *La Pensée, Tome II*.

[927] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, viii: l'acte intrinsèque de penser.

[928] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, ix, xii, xiv, xvi, xviii: la pensée en acte.

[929] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, xix: l'acte intellectuel.

[930] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, xxii, 64: acte original de la vie subjective.

[931] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 143: un acte de conscience.

[932] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 215: l'acte de constituer l'ordre intelligible.

[933] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, xvii, xl: Certaines s'attachent à l'aspect du résultat obtenu, aux vraisemblances objectives soit de l'action pensante, soit du concept pensé … la solution complète [du] problème [de la pensée] implique l'étude, nécessairement

Thought is human action, and crucially

> true consciousness is only born in a reflection, however rudimentary this complex act might be, which produces, *totus simul*, the initial act, the decisive and metaphysical act which alone constitutes the first 'thought of thought'.[934]

But however active thought might be, Blondel still treats it as a reality separate from human action. A distinct possibility is that Blondel had a theological reason for doing that. What Blondel needed was a philosophical basis for apologetics that would isolate thought from other human action and that would double isolate it by isolating human action from 'physical necessities'.[935] Thought therefore offered a trajectory towards a transcendent reality: a trajectory that Blondel appears to have hesitated to embark on in relation to human action or in relation to action more generally. Thought divorced from human action enabled God to be divorced from human action, which would not have been so easy to achieve if thought had been understood as a variety of human action: and Blondel probably needed God to be isolated from human action so that he could maintain coherence with his own theological convictions and retain his constructive relationship with the ecclesiastical authorities. What Blondel did permit near to the end of the first volume of *La Pensée* was a different form of action. In the context of a discussion of the 'idol'[936] of the 'God of the scientists and philosophers'[937]—an idol 'which we make a simple object of knowledge'—he discusses 'the original and sovereign action of the living God, in the relationships which unite us to him'.[938] Here is no human

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complémentaire, de l'être et de l'action qui sont le support, le ressort de la pensée elle-même.

[934] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 154: la vraie conscience ne naît qu'en une réflexion, si rudimentaire que soit cet acte complexe où se produit, *totus simul*, l'acte initial, l'acte décisif et métaphysique qui constitue, et lui seulement, la première 'pensée de la pensée'.

[935] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 5: nécessités physiques.

[936] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 393: idole …

[937] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 393: Dieu des savants et des philosophes.

[938] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 393: dont on fait un simple objet de connaissance, sans réserver l'action originale et souveraine du Dieu vivant, dans les rapports qui nous unissent à lui.

action—no 'act of reason and of faith in God': [939] this is God's relationship-generating action, itself an important theological step that looks as if it was inspired by a reading of Karl Barth's 1919 *Römerbrief*, [940] which presumably Blondel would have known by the time he wrote *La Pensée*. As Yvette Périco puts it, the human spirit requires

> the action of a force that transcends it, of a force that surpasses all knowledge of the understanding, a force that is the life of another spirit … God's approach is equivalent to a divine interior approach by action … The complete truth, the ultimate sense to discover, is the primary and efficacious action of a living God towards the deepest intimacy of the person. [941]

For Blondel, God is *not*

> only the category of the ideal, tending indefinitely to realize himself in and through the movement of a future without end; [a] movement that must be called the only truth, the only pure act. [942]

Instead, God is the reality that

> seems to be not only that which makes thought not the same thing as being, but is that which makes the reality of particular existences imply, in order to subsist and to be thought, the action and light of a Being that establishes the

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[939] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 398: acte de raison et de foi en Dieu.

[940] Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, translated by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

[941] Yvette Périco, *Maurice Blondel: Genèse du Sens* (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1991), 187–88, 217–18: L'action d'une force qui le transcende, d'une force qui surpasse tout savoir de l'entendement, force qui est vie d'un autre esprit … L'approche de Dieu équivaut à une approche intérieure du divin par l'action … la vérité complète, le sens ultime à découvrir, c'est donc l'action première et efficace d'un Dieu vivant au plus intime de l'homme.

[942] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 400: n'est que la catégorie de l'idéal, tendant indéfiniment à se réaliser dans et par le mouvement d'un devenir sans terme; [une] mouvance même qu'il faut nommer la seule vérité, le seul acte pur.

> substantiality and truth of these existences, without being confused with them.[943]

However fundamental human thought might be, it points beyond itself:

> Thus our most developed, most initiating, and most self-confident thought, far from calling its own activity a 'pure act', suspends this subjective life, always on the run and in search of itself, to what tradition has called, in a precise and absolute sense, the 'Thought of thought' and the 'truly pure Act'.[944]

This is Aristotle's 'unmoved mover':[945] a 'pure act … superior to all of our passive or active states'.[946]

But perhaps such clear demarcations are not required. In the light of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation we have no need to resist an alignment between God and human action, and we have no need to retain thought as a category separate from action, and so can understand thought as a variety of human action, with somewhat porous boundaries around the subcategory of thought. A further possibility is that we can then understand everything—thought, other human action, the cosmos, subatomic particles, and God—as action in changing patterns, and the meaning of '*action*' as action in general rather than as just human action. Just occasionally we have seen Blondel moving in that direction, and then pulling back. The road that he did take was to separate human thought from human action, to discuss relationships between them, to understand human thought as implying a transcendence, and thus to isolate God from human action and from action in general by locating Thought and contingent human

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[943] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 406: semble non seulement ce qui fait que la pensée n'est pas la même chose que l'être, mais ce qui fait que la réalité des existences particulières implique, pour subsister et pour être pensée, l'action et la lumière d'un Être qui fonde la substantialité et la vérité de ces existences, sans se confondre avec elles.

[944] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 159: Ainsi notre pensée la plus développée, la plus initiatrice, la plus sûre d'elle-même, loin d'appeler 'acte pur' sa propre activité, suspend cette vie subjective, toujours en fuite et en quête d'elle-même, à ce que la tradition a nommé, en un sens précis et absolu, la 'Pensée de la pensée' et l''Acte vraiment pur'.

[945] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 186: moteur immobile.

[946] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I*, 174–75: acte pur … supérieur à tous nos états passifs ou actifs.

thought between God and human action; and that road also distinguished human action from the action of the cosmos, thus placing Thought, thought, and human action between God and the action of the cosmos. Blondel now seems to be using '*action*' to refer to the action of the cosmos as well as to human action, but a boundary remains between human action and the action of the cosmos, and God is as far from action as ever.

The Second Volume of La Pensée

L'Action[947] studied human action; the first volume of *La Pensée*[948] began a discussion of human thought; and the second volume[949] continues that discussion: so between them *L'Action* and *La Pensée* constitute a sustained exploration of 'the polyphony of human thought and action'.[950]

As with the first volume of *La Pensée*, this is a long book, and there are plenty of digressions, which makes summarising and translating difficult and frequently arbitrary tasks; and again, as with the first volume, this second volume can be described as variations on a theme. One of the themes is the difference between thought related to ideas and thought about objects in the world; and Blondel constantly explores relationships between the will, thought, and human action.

> In what sense thinking is an act, and in what sense wanting is thinking: this is what we have not tried hard enough to understand when we juggle these terms

[947] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), first published in 1893.

[948] Maurice Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I, La Genèse de la Pensée et les Paliers de son Ascension Spontanée* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934).

[949] Maurice Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II, Les Responsabilités de la Pensée et la Possibilité de son Achèvement* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934).

[950] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 255: la polyphonie des pensées et des actions humaines.

> that are artificially opposed to each other and that seem foreign, irreducible, and even hostile to each other.[951]

The 'action readings' that follow will reveal a continuing broadening of the meaning of '*action*' from human action to action more generally, and we shall also find thought understood as human action as well as prior to action: and because human action can now be conceptualised as one type of a more general action, we can understand thought as one type of human action and thus as one type of action in general. We are closer to '*action*' being understood as action in general. However, one disjunction will not be resolved: just as at the end of the 1893 *L'Action* we were left with an unresolved tension between the willing will and the willed will, so here we are left with the tension between thinking thought and thought thought: between thought related to ideas, and thought about objects in the world.

'Action readings' of the second volume of La Pensée

Selection

> Concrete thinking … proceeds from the reciprocal action of the universal and the singular.[952]

We can 'select' this important passage because although the 'thinking' is human action, the 'reciprocal action of the universal and the singular' is action that constitutes reality as a whole and in relation to which '*action*' means action in general and the universe of universals and particularities is understood in terms of action. Blondel is suggesting that concrete thought, which sets out from particulars understood in terms of action, cannot avoid universalizing, simply because it uses language that inevitably brings particulars

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[951] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 420: En quel sens le penser est un acte, en quel sens le vouloir est un penser, c'est ce que l'on ne cherche pas assez à comprendre lorsqu'on jongle avec ces termes artificiellement opposés et qui semblent étrangers, irréductibles, hostiles même l'un à l'autre.

[952] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 54: La pensée concrète … procède … de l'action réciproque de l'universel et du singulier.

into categories: so it is our thought that brings the singular and the universal into relationship with each other. This relationship is dynamic, because particulars change constantly; and it is reciprocal because particulars inform thought that categorises them, and thought influences our understanding of the particular singular realities.

But it is not just concrete thinking that can be described in such dynamic terms: 'living thought' [953]—the way that we actually think—reconciles the two modes in practice: that is, we think both concretely, about particulars, and abstractly, about universals, and we constantly create relationships between the two modes as we think. Blondel had already employed contingent action to reconcile the singular with the universal in a 1903 article on moral logic in which 'exercised activity' [954] generates moral laws.

> Diverse phenomena [and] multiple inviting principles of action spontaneously form a systematized whole prior to reflection ... each lends its intrinsic power to the overall idea which embraces them all and organizes them into … syntheses. The reflected and sorted act thus confers on the empirical relativity of the facts a fixity. [955]

And now in *La Pensée* the two modes of thought, the concrete and the abstract, 'find themselves constantly reconciled, at least in practice, by the movement of living

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[953] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 62: pensée vivante.

[954] Maurice Blondel, "Principe Élémentaire d'une Logique de la Vie Morale," In *Les Premiers Écrits de Maurice Blondel*: *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en Matière d'Apologétique (1896) Histoire et Dogme*, by Maurice Blondel, 123–47 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956), 130: activité exercée; Fiachra Long, "Maurice Blondel's Moral Logic," *Philosophical Studies* 32 (1988): 213–23, 216.

[955] Maurice Blondel, "Principe Élémentaire d'une Logique de la Vie Morale," In *Les Premiers Écrits de Maurice Blondel*: *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en Matière d'Apologétique (1896) Histoire et Dogme*, by Maurice Blondel, 123–47 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956), 130–31: Divers phénomènes … les multiples principes d'action qui nous sollicitent forment spontanément devant la réflexion un tout systématisé … chacun prête sa puissance intrinsèque à l'idée d'ensemble qui les embrasse tous et les organise en synthèse antagonistes … L'acte réfléchi et trié confère ainsi au relatif empirique des faits une fixité … qui en fait le fondement resistant des oppositions logiques

thought'.[956] Here everything is verbs, and everything is dynamic. We could put it this way: 'thought thought' is constituted by the action that constitutes the cosmos, ourselves, and the microcosmos, and we can understand that 'thinking Thought',

> Thought of Thought, is a pure act. It is therefore not action that encroaches on thought; it is thought that illuminates and uses action for its own development.[957]

What is left uncertain in this passage is whether the 'pure act' is properly dynamic: Is the pure act active? Given that living thought constantly reconciles abstract 'thinking thought' with dynamic concrete 'thought thought', we might conclude that abstract thinking thought, Thought of Thought, pure act, is dynamic: but if Blondel is using 'pure Act' in the Aristotelian sense then it represents the lack of movement of the first mover. The question remains open.

Thought is 'a light and a force',[958] and it is 'a drama',[959] and no amendment is required for any of this to welcome an interpretation of '*action*' as action in general, with human thought and action understood as particular kinds of action.

As we have frequently discovered, a theological agenda underlies *La Pensée*, and when Blondel turns to a consideration of God's relationship with the cosmos, we find a variety of realities described in terms of action. God is described in terms of 'the constant action of God in the world … the immanent and transitive action of God in the world',[960] and here the combination of 'immanent' and 'transitive' implies that both God and the world are understood in terms of their action, so '*action*' is here action in general. And when

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[956] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 62: se trouve cependant concilié sans cesse, au moins pratiquement, par le mouvement de la pensée vivante.

[957] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 435: la Pensée de la Pensée, est un acte pur. Ce n'est donc pas l'action qui vient empiéter sur la pensée; c'est la pensée qui éclaire et emploie l'action à son propre développement.

[958] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 73–74: une lumière et une force.

[959] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 173: un drame.

[960] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 285, 295: L'action constante de Dieu dans le monde … l'action immanente et transitive de Dieu dans le monde.

Blondel discusses relationships between the human being and society, he understands that social conflict means that societies are always characterised by 'a balance in movement',[961] and so in terms of action. So in relation to God, society, and human beings, dynamic thought-forms are not only appropriate: they are essential. Not only is '*action*' here action in general, but we are very close to the whole of reality being understood in terms of action.

We have been quite selective: there are many other texts in the second volume of *La Pensée* in which '*action*' implies action in general, or in which other 'action' words, such as 'giving', relate to God or the cosmos and not just to human beings; so there are many passages that could have been allocated to the 'selection' category, suggesting that for Blondel '*action*' now means 'the operation of any agent, physical, chemical, mechanical, or immaterial'[962]—action in general, and not just human action: but we also have to conclude that '*action*' does not necessarily encompass thought.

Construction

This particularly interesting passage invites construction:

> All the partial successes of thought are in fact comparable to those lake conch shells in which torrential waters settle. First, once the silt has been deposited, the limpidity of the lake reflects the light of the sky: similarly, brought by the troubled flow of empirical life, our ideas appear clarified, like pure essences.[963]

[961] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 163–64: un équilibre en mouvement.

[962] Académie Française, *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr: L'opération d'un agent quelconque, physique, chimique, mécanique, immatériel.

[963] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 103: Toutes les réussites partielles de la pensée sont en effet comparables à ces conques lacustres où viennent se décanter les eaux torrentueuses. D'abord, une fois le limon déposé, la limpidité du lac reflète la lumière du ciel : telles, apportées par le flot trouble de la vie empirique, nos idées paraissent clarifiées, à l'image des pures essences.

The passage assumes that static and unchanging essences are the necessary complements to dynamic and changing 'empirical life', so here only empirical life, and not ideas, are dynamic. However, if we were to assume that there was only change and the dynamic, then we could construct an immediate relationship between thought related to ideas and thought about objects in the world, and so could reconstruct static and unchanging 'essences' as dynamic and changing and express the difference between empirical life and clarified ideas as the chaotic and the patterned respectively: 'brought by the troubled flow of empirical life, our ideas appear clarified, like a symphony'.

Extension

The relationship between the two different modes of thought—thinking thought and thought thought—is dynamic: 'this alternative dynamism is constant', [964] and the two kinds 'overtake each other by a cyclical movement'. [965] There is nothing static here. All that is required is an extension of the dynamism to each of the kinds of thought: to experience of particulars, which is clearly intrinsically dynamic, and to ideas, which are also dynamic if we distance ourselves from Plato's unchanging Forms.

Blondel frequently appeals to a transcendent reality underlying what we experience of ourselves and of the world around us.

> We cannot hold on to any of our thoughts, because their role is to connect us to the transcendent, and because we are only aware of lower, partial and immanent things through the always enveloped presence in our thought and action of a reality and truth superior to any positive givens, to the entire empirical order, and to all of the starting points, as well as to all of the points of support, that the external world or our subjective knowledge can provide us with. [966]

[964] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 49: ce dynamisme alternatif est constant.

[965] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 50: se dépassent l'une l'autre par un mouvement cycloïdal.

[966] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 77: Nous ne pouvons nous tenir à aucune de nos pensées parce que leur rôle est de nous rattacher au transcendant et parce que nous n'avons

If Blondel's focus had been action in general rather than human action then we can see how he could have generalised this conviction:

> In all action, including human thought and action, we are aware of a reality and a truth superior to any positive givens, to the entire empirical order, to all the starting points and points of support that the external world or our subjective knowledge can provide us with.

It is not insignificant that only a minor change is required in Blondel's text.

Even though there is a difference between thinking thought and thought thought—between thought related to ideas, and thought about objects in the world—in practice the two belong together in thought as it is lived. Blondel suggests that

> no thought is at rest: proceeding from an impulse of life, it tends invincibly to move, and to surpass itself; and from the moment it becomes aware of itself it cannot fail to contribute to this subsequent becoming that it no longer endures as a simple spectator without at the same time being an actor, cooperator, or rebel.[967]

It is not just thought that could be described like this, so we only need to change the first few words and then omit a few to construct a more general statement:

> nothing is at rest: proceeding from an impulse of life, everything tends invincibly to move and to surpass itself, and nothing can fail to contribute to the

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conscience des choses inférieures, partielles, immanentes, que par la présence, toujours enveloppée, en notre pensée et en notre action, d'une réalité et d'une vérité supérieures à toute donnée positive, à tout l'ordre empirique, à tous les points de départ comme à tous les points d'appui que le monde extérieur ou notre connaissance subjective peuvent nous fournir.

[967] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 90: nulle pensée n'est en repos: procédant d'un élan de la vie, elle tend invinciblement à se mouvoir, à se dépasser, et du moment où elle prend conscience de soi, elle ne peut pas ne point contribuer à ce devenir ultérieur qu'elle ne subit plus en simple spectatrice sans être en même temps actrice, coopératrice ou rebelle.

> subsequent becoming in which it is at the same time actor, cooperator, or rebel.[968]

For Blondel, the contingent world is full of movement, so

> speculation is neither true nor good if it remains outside movement, detaches itself from life, and claims to govern practice from above, without reaction or learning lessons from experience and from initiatives on the guiding ideas of human societies.[969]

Everything is moving, not just human life: so this idea can easily be extended to the idea that

> speculation is neither true nor good if it remains outside the movement of the cosmos and claims to govern practice from above, without reaction or learning lessons from experience and from initiatives on the guiding ideas of the universe.

It would be no surprise to discover that Blondel had been reading Bergson.

Thought is action, as Blondel suggests: 'all thought is metaphysics in action':[970]

> In short, does thought—as we experience it in ourselves, and whatever the roots that prepare and nourish the visible stem, the flowers, and the fruits of consciousness—include a science demanding nothing beyond the oceans that it travels or the shores that it touches?[971]

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[968] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, rien n'est en repos: procédant d'un élan de la vie, tout tend invinciblement à se mouvoir, à se dépasser, et rien ne peut manquer de contribuer au devenir ultérieur dont il est à la fois acteur, coopérateur ou rebelle.

[969] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 201: la spéculation n'est pas vraie ni bonne qui reste en dehors du mouvement, qui se détache de la vie, qui prétend gouverner de haut la pratique, sans réaction ni leçon des expériences et des initiatives sur les idées directrices des sociétés humaines.

[970] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 169: Toute pensée … est une métaphysique en acte.

[971] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 34–35: Bref, la pensée—telle que nous l'expérimentons en nous et quelles que soient les racines qui préparent et nourrissent la tige visible, les fleurs et les fruits de la conscience—comporte-t-elle, une science ne réclamant rien au delà des océans qu'elle parcourt ou des rives qu'elle aborde?

Here everything is action. And philosophy too is always moving on:

> And it is the current obligations of philosophy to which we have to pay attention by taking advantage of the very crises that are affecting it. Everything is not said, and nothing will ever be completely said, in this order of philosophical thought that cannot be limited … [972]

This too can be generalised, in this case towards any and every academic discipline.

> And it is the current obligations of literature, art, religion, and so on, to which we have to pay attention by taking advantage of the very crises that are affecting them. Everything is not said, and nothing will ever be completely said, in this order of philosophical thought that cannot be limited …

In his final chapter, Blondel turns again to the relationship between thought, being, and action. With all three there are problematic Platonic relationships between the Form and the world of our experience: between Being and beings, Thought and thoughts, Action and actions. Here Blondel defines '*action*' as 'to change and to self-modify', [973] and identifies 'pure Action' [974] with Aristotle's 'the Immobile', [975] so Action is distanced from action, and so from human action and from every other action. However, if we were to interpret 'pure Action' [976] as 'the Mobile', as 'Action itself'; [977] and if as well we were to interpret '*action*' [978] as action in general rather than as human action, then Action and action have a relationship to each other that is similar to the relationship between Being

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[972] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 203: Et c'est des obligations actuelles de la philosophie que nous avons à nous rendre compte en profitant des crises mêmes qui la travaillent. Tout n'est pas dit, et rien ne le sera jamais tout à fait, dans cet ordre de la pensée philosophique qui ne peut se borner …

[973] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 408: changer, se modifier.

[974] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 408: l'Acte pur.

[975] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 408: l'Immobile.

[976] l'Acte pur.

[977] l'action même.

[978] les actions.

and beings and to that between Thought and thoughts: 'thinking Thought' and 'thought thought'. Here thought is

> permeated with a life described as light, a breathing of love, and salvation in the beatitude of a pure act. [979]

We remain in doubt as to whether Blondel understood Being as having being, Thought as thinking, and Action—pure Act—as active.

Conclusions relating to the second volume of La Pensée

We have shown that there are many places in the second volume of *La Pensée* where '*action*' means 'action in general', where not much amendment is required for passages about human action to be read as passages about action in general, and where passages that in their context are about human action can easily have their meanings extended to be about action in general. Blondel has stretched the meaning of '*action*' beyond human action to action in general and could easily have written volumes about action in general of which human action is a particular subset.

We have also revealed significant parallels between Blondel's treatment of action and his treatment of thought, and therefore that thought can generally be understood as a kind of human action and therefore as a kind of action. So why did Blondel write two volumes on thought? Perhaps because thought is strongly related to the will and to human action, which are major concerns in the 1893 *L'Action*; perhaps because thought was more theologically amenable than action, whether human action or action more generally, even though thought is a form of human action; and probably for both of those reasons. But however important thought was to Blondel, he kept coming back to human action as a fundamental reality:

[979] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 396: pénétrée d'une vie dont il a été dit qu'elle est lumière, respiration d'amour et salut dans la béatitude d'un acte pur.

> … Or perhaps we must say that there would be neither nature nor consciousness without this unnoticed presence, without this action both immanent and distinct … .[980]

Here is perhaps the clearest recognition in this volume that the word '*action*' can refer to the fundamental reality that underlies all being, thought, and action, and not just to human action. Whilst Blondel still usually uses '*action*' to refer to human action and to particular human actions, there are multiple places in the second volume of *La Pensée* where '*action*' means action in general. If we follow this logic, then thought, whether of ideas or of objects in the world, is a particular category of human action, which obviously raises the question as to whether Blondel ought to have distinguished thought from action in the way that he frequently does: a question to which Blondel gives two answers. Thinking is a kind of action—'an action and a suffering';[981]

he separates out being, action, and thought—'Being and acting are not the same as thinking';[982]and he sometimes understands thought as more fundamental than action:

> It is therefore not action that encroaches on thought; it is thought that illuminates and uses action for its own development.[983]

However, sometimes being is primary[984]—'being is in fact the principle, the centre, and the goal of all thought and action';[985] and sometimes it is action that is primary:

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[980] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 381–82: … Ou plutôt faudrait-il dire qu'il n'y aurait ni nature, ni conscience sans cette présence inaperçue, sans cette action à la fois immanente et distincte … .

[981] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 435: un agir et un pâtir.

[982] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 402: Être et agir ne s'identifient pas à penser.

[983] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 435: Ce n'est donc pas l'action qui vient empiéter sur la pensée ; c'est la pensée qui éclaire et emploie l'action à son propre développement.

[984] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 492.

[985] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 402: l'être est en effet le principe, le centre, le but de toute pensée et de tout agir.

> If thinking does not happen without being, then thinking and being do not happen without action, without being connected by an original operation, or without an initiative, without which passivity would be nothing.[986]

So what is logically prior to what? Even if it is not clear as to whether contingent action, thinking, or being, have priority, in principle there is resolution 'at the pinnacle', at the higher level of abstraction, where thought, being, and action merge into action:

> Concrete thinking tends to make reality present, to assimilate it and mark it with its own originality. It therefore proceeds from the reciprocal action of the universal and the singular, without ceasing to be in all its phases *sub specie totius et unius* [under the category of the whole and the one].[987]

For Blondel, thought remains in a category of its own, but here it is clearly a subcategory of action in relation to which it has a 'vital function':[988] but once we mean by '*action*' any action, we have to say that action has a 'vital function' in relation to thought. The priority has changed, and the foundational role that Blondel has given to 'Thought' and 'thought'[989] has now been bequeathed to '*Action*' and '*action*'. No longer does 'true contemplation unite knowledge and action' so that 'they can never be separated with impunity'. Action now has that role.[990] We could put it this way: all thought can be understood as action in changing patterns in the brain—a dynamic entanglement. Some of that action in patterns is reflection on sense data and so on the particulars of the world; and some of it is reflection on reflection that we experience as thought about

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[986] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 408: Si penser ne va pas sans être, penser et être ne vont pas sans *agir,* sans se relier par une opération originale, sans une initiative, faute de laquelle la passivité ne serait que néant.

[987] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 54: La pensée concrète tend à se rendre présente la réalité, à l'assimiler et à la marquer de sa propre originalité. Elle procède donc de l'action réciproque de l'universel et du singulier, sans cesser d'être en toutes ses phases *sub specie totius et unius.*

[988] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 409: la pensée … fonction vitale.

[989] Pensée … pensée.

[990] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 409: la contemplation véritable unit la connaissance et l'action … on ne peut jamais impunément tendre à séparer.

universals. These are changing patterns of action in the brain entangling with changing patterns of action in the brain.

> It is therefore a question of showing how being is still something other than thought, how action can become mediator and achiever; how, however, everything that we can consolidate of thought, action, and being in relation to ourselves ultimately remains in need of a single consistent solution. [991]

So, as Paul Archambault suggests,

> It is a question of establishing between being, thinking and acting an essential and organic unity which, in order to be required everywhere, no longer requires anything beyond it. [992]

But just as there was no final reconciliation between the willing will and the willed will at the end of the 1893 *L'Action*, so here at the end of *La Pensée* there is no final reconciliation between thinking thought and thought thought; between the pure act and contingent caused thoughts; between universals and particulars; and so on. However, previous volumes have already indicated the two places in which we should look for the required reconciliations: in action, and in God, and so perhaps in a God who is Action and the source of all action.

As in previous chapters, we have seen how easy it would have been for Blondel to understand thought as a subcategory of human action, human action as a subcategory of action in general, and so thought as a subcategory of action in general.

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[991] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 517: Il s'agit donc de montrer comment l'être est encore autre chose que la pensée, comment l'action peut devenir médiatrice et réalisatrice ; comment cependant tout ce que nous pouvons consolider de la pensée, de l'action, de l'être en nous demeure finalement besogneux d'une solution seule consistante.

[992] Paul Archambault, *Initiation à la Philosophie Blondélienne en Forme de Court Traité de Métaphysique* (Paris: Librairie Bloud & Gay, 1941), 41: Il s'agit d'établir entre l'être, le penser et l'agir une unité essentielle et organique qui, pour être partout requise, ne requière plus rien au delà d'elle.

L'Être et les Êtres

We now turn to the second part of the 1930s trilogy, *L'Être et les Êtres*,[993] 'Being and beings'.[994]

In both *L'Action* and *La Pensée* Blondel had occasionally spread his horizon beyond human action to action in general, but attention had remained firmly focused on the human being's action and thought. In this second part of the trilogy attention is paid as much to Being and beings in general as to the being of human beings and the multiplicity of contingent human beings.

L'Être et les Êtres is a long book, and we don't have the space for a complete summary. However, what we must do is study those passages in which we find implicit and explicit references to Teilhard de Chardin's writings that by this stage in Blondel's career appear to have become a significant influence. For instance, in a section of *L'Être et les Êtres* that echoes some of the significant influences on his philosophy we find Blondel assuming that matter is not dynamic until made so,[995] and we also find places in which matter is dynamic in much the same way as Bergson and Teilhard de Chardin thought it to be.

But how did that influence occur, if it did? Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a Jesuit and a palaeontologist whose religious order did not permit him to publish his theology. His books were finally published after his death in 1955, by which time Blondel had also died. Although Teilhard de Chardin's books could have had no influence on Blondel's writings, what we know from correspondence is that during 1919 Blondel read essays

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[993] Maurice Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres* (Paris: Librairie Felix Alcan, 1935).

[994] There would be an argument for writing this book title *L'Être et les êtres* in order to emphasise the distinction between 'Being', capitalised, meaning the universal Platonic Form 'being itself', and 'beings', the multitude of particular contingent beings. In order to be consistent with the general capitalisation of main terms in book titles we retain the double capitalisation here and throughout this thesis, but *L'Être et les Êtres* should always be understood as 'Being and beings': that is, being itself and contingent beings.

[995] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 116.

that Teilhard de Chardin had written during the First World War,[996] and that those essays contained ideas that later appeared in Teilhard de Chardin's publications, and particularly in *Le Milieu Divin* which was finally published in 1957.

The correspondence was mediated by Auguste Valensin. Teilhard de Chardin sent an essay or essays to Valensin with a letter, and Valensin forwarded these to Blondel, who then wrote to Valensin with a paper of several pages in response.

> The world is unquestionably divinized … but if … this is to attain its full meaning and potency, it must go hand in hand with a vocation for the supernatural, with grace offered and received, lacking which all the divine force entering a creature does him no good. … Fr Teilhard seems to think we can enter into communion with the Whole (including Christ) without first limiting ourselves to communion with the One, the Transcendent, the Word incarnate, in His concrete and singular human form; with this, as I see it, he is veering away from the truly beautiful and profound thought that inspires him.[997]

The paper was forwarded to Teilhard de Chardin, who sent a letter back—

> While we may differ in our *leanings*, or least in what we tend to *stress*, our differences probably do not amount to much more than that—he emphasizing the transcendence of the universal Christ; I, His 'physicalness'. These attitudes ought to complement one another.[998]

And so the mediated correspondence of letters and long accompanying papers continued for several weeks.

Which of Teilhard de Chardin's essays were sent to Blondel we don't know, but the letters and accompanying detailed papers show that they were read carefully. A long discussion between Blondel and Teilhard de Chardin took place on the 28th of March 1920 and

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[996] Several of the essays were later published as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Écrits du Temps de la Guerre* (Paris: Éditions Eduard Grasset, 1965), translated as *Writings in Time of War*, translated by René Hague (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

[997] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Maurice Blondel, *Correspondence*, edited by Henri de Lubac, translated by William Whitman (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 21, 26.

[998] Teilhard de Chardin and Blondel, *Correspondence*, 36.

further essays and responses were exchanged in 1925.[999] If Blondel had only read a few of the essays later published in *Écrits du temps de la guerre*[1000] then he would have encountered many of the ideas that appeared in the books published after Teilhard de Chardin's death.

As de Lubac puts it, Blondel was a philosopher and Teilhard de Chardin a scientist and a mystic, but 'a real exchange … an exemplary dialogue'[1001] took place: one that cannot have failed to influence Blondel's ideas as he began work on the notes that would eventually find their way into the trilogy and *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien*: hence the passages in *L'Être et les Êtres* that look as if they could have been written by Teilhard de Chardin.

Blondel argues that there is a reality underlying '*le vivant*'[1002]—which we can translate either as 'living being' or as 'life'—that 'supports, or underlies, the living, or living beings',[1003] because their 'ontological reality and essential function have a deeper foundation'.[1004] Blondel suggests that to understand a living being we have to understand 'the sum of its becoming',[1005] and that we must also

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[999] Henri de Lubac, "Preface," In Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Maurice Blondel, *Correspondence*, 9–15. Translated by William Whitman (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 13.

[1000] Teilhard de Chardin, *Écrits du Temps de la Guerre*.

[1001] de Lubac, "Preface," 15.

[1002] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 84–86: Le vivant, si rudimentaire qu'il soit, présente déjà une *unité* caractéristique et spécifiée. Il n'est pas seulement une juxtaposition de parties ou une connexion plus ou moins complexe … Unité, spontanéité spécifique, pérennité, n'est-ce point là le trépied de l'être, et les vivants ne participent-ils pas en eux-mêmes à sa mystérieuse consistance? Voilà ce que d'instinct le sens populaire ne peut s'empêcher d'affirmer.

[1003] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 86: soutiennent les vivants.

[1004] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 88: sa réalité ontologique et sa fonction essentielle ont une assise supérieure.

[1005] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 92: la somme de tout son devenir.

> discover a deeper meaning, a more intimate unity, and a more permanent reality, in order to feel entitled to recognize in it the true traits of being and to integrate it into our ontological certainties. [1006]

In a way reminiscent of Ravaisson, Maine de Biran, Bergson, and Teilhard de Chardin, [1007] there is 'an organic hierarchy of beings that are both distinct and linked in their very contingency': [1008]

> matter is what is vitalizable and spiritualizable, and spirit is what is deifiable to some degree and by grace. [1009]

Somewhat unlike Bergson and Teilhard de Chardin, Blondel is clear about the unidirectionality of the process—hence the combination already noted of matter being dynamic and matter only becoming dynamic when made so—which means that matter is not dynamic until vitalized and spiritualized. Blondel also asks: 'Is becoming, in its totality, a being?' [1010] He suggests that 'becoming' [1011] implies a being that is 'transcendent to change', [1012] which in turn requires 'a notion of the absolute'. [1013] There is no 'pure becoming', [1014] and Blondel finds too vague certain contemporary ideas about evolution and integration. [1015] He proposes

> an original impulse, a force of nature the development of which occurs both through an instinctive automatism and through an increasingly conscious

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[1006] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 93: découvrir une signification plus profonde, une plus intime unité, une réalité plus permanente, afin de nous sentir en droit d'y reconnaître des traits véritables de l'être et de l'intégrer dans nos certitudes ontologiques.

[1007] See chapter 2.

[1008] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 116: une hiérarchie organique d'êtres distincts et liés dans leur contingence même.

[1009] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 116: la matière est ce qui est vitalisable, la vie ce qui est spiritualisable, l'esprit ce qui est, à quelque degré et par grâce, déifiable.

[1010] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 117: le devenir, dans sa totalité, est-il un être.

[1011] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 120: devenir.

[1012] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 120: transcendant au changement.

[1013] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 120: une notion de l'absolu.

[1014] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 121: pur devenir.

[1015] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 125: évolution … intégration

> finality ... the power to produce the spirit and God himself, understood in the sense of an infinite becoming, always abandoning himself … [1016]

Such ideas dissolve theologically rather than intrinsically the incommensurability between 'beings and the very principle of their trajectory and sublimation'. [1017]

> Contingent existences are dependent on indefinite relationships both between themselves and with regard to their Principle; while … the Absolute is in no way relative to the relative, nor the necessary to the contingent. [1018]

There being no clear conceptual route between Being and beings, '*Dieu*', 'God', is rather frequently employed as a bridge between them: [1019] and to provide for current relationships between beings, and for the achievement of an eventual reconciliation, Blondel returns to the subject of his 1893 Latin thesis on Leibniz's *vinculum substantiale*, 'substantial bond': [1020]

> In outline, it is a matter of understanding how all this becoming of beings forms a complexus where, on the one hand, the foundations necessarily support each other, and where, on the other, susceptible existences are constituted to acquire relative autonomy and to cooperate decisively in their own destiny. And we will finally have to show what is this keystone, this vital and substantial *vinculum* [bond], this *nexus unionis* [uniting nexus], that achieves assimilation to varying

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[1016] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 125: une poussée originelle, une force de nature dont le développement s'opère à la fois par un automatisme instinctif et par une finalité de plus en plus consciente … la puissance de produire l'esprit et Dieu même entendu au sens d'un devenir infini, toujours se délaissant lui-même …

[1017] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 125: les êtres et le principe même de leur élan et de leur sublimation.

[1018] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 128: les existences contingentes sont dépendantes d'indéfinies relations soit entre elles, soit à l'égard de leur Principe ; tandis que … l'Absolu n'est aucunement relatif au relatif, ni le nécessaire au contingent.

[1019] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 207, 208, 213–14, 217.

[1020] Philippe Capelle-Dumont, "Le Phénomène comme Alliance: *Vinculum* et *Nexus*. La Phénoménologie chez le Premier Blondel," in *Maurice Blondel: La Sainteté de la Raison*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 25–40 (Paris: Hermann, 2022), 35–37.

> degrees, the infinite supreme end of which, we are told, is, to different degrees, and in spite of failures along the way, the goal assigned to all beings. [1021]

Leibniz's concept of the *vinculum substantiale* was interior to material reality and achieved reconciliation between the monads out of which reality was constituted, whereas previously that function was fulfilled by God ensuring that each of the monads reflected the entire universe. Blondel is here using the concept to suggest that a unifying force is preparing material reality for the ultimate step into an 'absolute Being': [1022] a process similar to the convergence towards the 'Omega Point' envisaged by Teilhard de Chardin. [1023]

> What we now have to show is … the mutuality of this normal ascension of the world of beings taking place little by little … according to the primitive and essential plan. Let us examine successively, step by step, the degrees of this material and spiritual construction, in order to see how far it rises naturally, to what threshold it leads us, and what perspective it opens to us on the secret of Being and the reason of beings. [1024]

[1021] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 216: Il s'agit de comprendre comment tout ce devenir d'êtres en ébauche forme un complexus où—pour une part, les assises se soutiennent nécessairement les unes les autres, où—pour une autre part, se constituent des existences susceptibles d'acquérir une autonomie relative et de coopérer décisivement à leur destin propre. Et nous aurons enfin à montrer quelle est cette clef de voûte, ce *vinculum vitale et substantiale,* ce *nexus unionis* qui réalise à des degrés différents l'assimilation, fin suprême dont on nous disait sans restriction, sinon sans échec, qu'elle est, à des degrés inégaux, le but assigné à tous les êtres.

[1022] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 220: Être absolu.

[1023] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Phénomène Humain* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1955), 262, 286–87, 290, 293.

[1024] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 260: Ce que nous avons maintenant à montrer c'est … l'entr'aide de cette ascension normale du monde des êtres se réalisant peu à peu … selon le plan primitif et essentiel. Examinons donc successivement, échelon par échelon, les degrés de cet édifice matériel et spirituel, afin de voir jusqu'où il s'élève naturellement, à quel seuil il nous conduit et quelle perspective il nous ouvre sur le secret de l'Etre et la raison des êtres.

We know that Blondel had read essays that Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote between 1916 and 1919 and in which he was already exploring such ideas as the spiritual aspect of matter; that he met Teilhard de Chardin in 1919; and that he then corresponded with him.[1025] Teilhard de Chardin's concept of ubiquitous evolution from matter to the noosphere looks remarkably like Blondel's proposal here. *L'Être et les Êtres* was written fifteen years after the Blondel–Teilhard correspondence, so in this case it would appear that Teilhard de Chardin influenced Blondel.

For Teilhard de Chardin, evolution towards the Omega Point is propelled by a 'within' of matter:[1026] a purposeful within not dissimilar from Blondel's, for whom matter plays a 'normative, ontogenic, indispensable and indestructible role … in the total and supreme plan of creation';[1027] and for Blondel reality can be both material and spiritual,[1028] particularly in relation to Leibniz's *vinculum substantiale*.[1029] Matter has a function that is

> unsupplementable throughout the entire history of beings, a function that is not only preparatory, auxiliary, and transitory, but which is inserted at the most intimate depth of all reality in the making, and that remains indispensable to the

[1025] Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, "Le Verbe et le Lieu: La correspondance Blondel–Teilhard (1919–1920)," in *Blondel entre* L'Action *et la Trilogie*, edited by Marc Leclerc (Bruxelles: Éditions Lessius, 2003), 110–24; Alexander Dru, "Introduction: Historical and biographical," in Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, translated by Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan, 1–79 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1994).

[1026] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Phénomène Humain* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1955), 41–42: dedans; *The Human Phenomenon*, translated by Sarah Appleton-Weber (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), 22–23.

[1027] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 261: rôle normatif, ontogénique, indispensable, indestructible … dans le plan total et suprême de la création.

[1028] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 262.

[1029] Maurice Blondel, *Une Énigme Historique, le "Vinculum Substantiale" d'après Leibniz et l'Ébauche d'un Réalisme Supérieur*, second edition (Paris: Éditions Gabriel Beauchesne, 1930); Jérémy-Marie Pichon, "Blondel *via* Teilhard: Pour une Anthropologie Intégrale," in *Maurice Blondel: La Sainteté de la Raison*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 221–31 (Paris: Hermann, 2022), 227–29.

> evolution and even to the final state of spiritual beings. Matter is a function that contributes to their realization, obligation, consolidation, and sanction, and must therefore be considered as consubstantial with beings who could not have emerged without it.[1030]

Matter is 'a reality linked to all others, as the universal expression of their contingency, imperfection, dependence, aspiration, mutual obstacle, reciprocal stimulation, total complexus, and possibility of union or antagonism',[1031] and it is the 'first degree' of the 'material and spiritual edifice'.[1032] The second degree is 'life',[1033] which exhibits organization, internal finality, and proliferation:[1034] 'living beings … offer this double character of being integrated with each other, in a solidarity that perpetuates them'.[1035] Blondel suggests that a 'double trajectory'[1036] is operating here: one that is 'vital and spiritual';[1037] and that the lower degrees of the material and spiritual edifice are 'attracted from above':[1038] so the 'third degree … personality'[1039] attracts life, which in

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[1030] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 263–64: insuppléable au cours de toute l'histoire des êtres, une fonction qui n'est pas seulement préparatoire, auxiliaire et transitoire, mais qui s'insère au fond le plus intime de toute réalité en devenir, qui reste indispensable à l'évolution et même à l'état final des êtres spirituels, une fonction qui contribuant à leur réalisation, à leur obligation, à leur consolidation, à leur sanction doit donc être considérée comme consubstantielle aux êtres qui n'auraient pu s'élever sans elle.

[1031] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 264–65: une réalité liée à toutes les autres, comme l'expression universelle de leur contingence, de leur imperfection, de leur dépendance, de leur aspiration, de leur obstacle mutuel, de leur stimulation réciproque, de leur complexus total, de leur possibilité d'union ou d'antagonisme.

[1032] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 260: première degré … édifice matériel et spirituel.

[1033] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 265: la vie.

[1034] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 266.

[1035] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 266: les vivants … offrent ce double caractère d'être intégrés les uns avec les autres, dans une solidarité qui les perpétue.

[1036] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 270: double élan.

[1037] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 270: vital et spirituel.

[1038] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 271: aimantés par en haut.

[1039] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 272: troisième degré … personnalité.

turn attracts matter. Intrinsic to persons in this third degree are changing obligations,[1040] a 'moral dynamism':[1041] and it is via the dynamic, and not via the static, that human minds can relate to each other and form society.[1042] As Pierre de Cointet points out, the human being's context here is not only the dynamic reality of society, but a transcendence that constantly calls human reality to surpass itself.[1043]

In the 'fourth degree'[1044] solidarity between human beings is complemented by the final Cause, God, and the spiritual,[1045] and in particular by a 'divine plan'[1046] that in this context does not privilege human beings over the rest of the created order.[1047]

> Thus we can already see how the whole of nature, without losing the value specific to each of its layers, is assumed, raised, assimilated, and substantiated, in such a way as to constitute not a 'pleroma' sufficient in itself, but a world, a cosmos, that is to say an organic beauty and a spiritual order which, in relation to our views, trials, and present imperfections, we can call *caelum novum* and *terra nova* [new heaven and new earth].[1048]

[1040] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 275.

[1041] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 276: dynamisme moral.

[1042] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 280–81.

[1043] Pierre de Cointet, "Maurice Blondel: L'Humanisme Difficile: Réponse à l'Enquête du Conseil Pontifical pour la Culture, 'Pour un Humanisme Chrétien à l'Aube du Nouveau Millénaire'," *Bulletin des Amis de Maurice Blondel* NS 16 (2001): 6–17.

[1044] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 285: quatrième degré.

[1045] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 286–89.

[1046] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 288: plan divin.

[1047] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 286; de Cointet, "Maurice Blondel: L'Humanisme Difficile."

[1048] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 290: Ainsi aperçoit-on déjà comment la nature entière, sans perdre la valeur propre à chacun de ses étagements, est assumée, soulevée, assimilée, substantifiée de manière a constituer non pas un "plérome" se suffisant à lui-même, mais un monde, un cosmos, c'est-à-dire une beauté organique et un ordre spirituel que, par rapport à nos vues, à nos épreuves, à nos imperfections présentes, on peut appeler *caelum novum et terra nova*.

In Platonic fashion Blondel then substitutes 'divine goodness' [1049] for Being, and suggests that this goodness can

> elevate to itself, adopt, and perfect these sketches of existence, without risk of lowering itself to them, nor of sublimating itself in them and causing to disappear their own nature and their power to retain their originality or to enjoy their bliss. [1050]

He also suggests that

> To justify these views, which connect concrete ontology to all spiritual dynamism, we have not had to appeal to truths of another order than those of a truly realist metaphysics that fulfils its own conditions. [1051]

Whether Blondel would have understood this passage to be theological is an interesting question. If by 'theology' we mean the detail of the Roman Catholic Church's Christian doctrine, which Blondel probably did, then he would not have regarded the general terms in which he discusses God and the supernatural as 'theology' and would have understood 'a communication of grace' [1052] that bridges the gulf between 'the created and the uncreated' [1053] as philosophy. Reason can recognise 'a place for the idea of the supernatural in the most autonomous philosophy', [1054] and we can envisage how 'superior forms arise': [1055] but we then need to take account of 'the congenital tendency

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[1049] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 286, 290–91: la divine bonté.

[1050] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 290–91: élever à elle, pour adopter, pour perfectionner ces ébauches d'existence, sans risque ni de s'abaisser en elles, ni de sublimer en soi et de faire évanouir leur propre nature et leur pouvoir de garder leur originalité ou de goûter leur béatitude.

[1051] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 296: Pour justifier ces vues, qui rattachent l'ontologie concrète à tout le dynamisme spirituel, nous n'avons pas eu à faire appel aux vérités d'un autre ordre que celles d'une métaphysique vraiment réaliste et allant jusqu'au bout de ses exigences.

[1052] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 299: une communication de grâce.

[1053] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 299: le créé et l'incréé.

[1054] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 301: une place à la notion du surnaturel dans la philosophie la plus autonome.

[1055] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 302: des formes supérieures soulèvent.

that assigns God as object to the spiritual being',[1056] and of 'the incommensurability between contingent being and absolute Being'.[1057] It is not a hypothesis that is required, but rather a 'disposition of dependence and humility all the better to allow for greater intimacy without the risk of forgetting distances'.[1058] Unity between beings is given by Being,[1059] but reconciliation between Being, beings, and God, along with the maintenance of the distinctions between them,[1060] is always God's achievement.[1061] As far as reason is concerned, all of this is hypothesis: but it is not contrary to reason[1062] and so is proper to philosophy. In relation to the question 'Is creation really compatible with the absolute sufficiency of Being, which is all being and which seems to be all being?'[1063] Blondel discusses some possible responses, and particularly

> the meaning of creation, even with regard to human reason, even more so if we think of divine wisdom and charity … it is for and by the very good of creatures that [God] glories in their growth and their happiness.[1064]

At the end of part three of the book, Blondel asks for further research on '*action*'.[1065]

[1056] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 302: la tendance congénitale qui assigne à l'être spirituel Dieu comme objet.

[1057] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 302: l'incommensurabilité entre l'être contingent et l'Etre absolu.

[1058] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 303: disposition de dépendance et d'humilité permettant d'autant mieux une intimité plus grande sans risque d'un oubli des distances.

[1059] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 306.

[1060] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 306.

[1061] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 305.

[1062] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 307.

[1063] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 310: La création est-elle réellement compatible avec l'absolue suffisance de l'Etre qui est tout être et qui semble tout l'être?

[1064] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 315: le sens de la création, même au regard de la raison humaine, à plus forte raison si l'on songe à la sagesse et à la charité divines … c'est pour et par le bien même des créatures qu[e Dieu] se glorifie de leur croissance et de leur bonheur.

[1065] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 323: l'action.

> Is it not under the veil of *action*, and to the extent that there is nevertheless real *action* in some of them—even though created beings seem passive—that the true solution actually takes place? [1066]

The ground is thus prepared for the third part of the trilogy: the two volumes of the revised *L'Action*: and much of that preparation appears to have been significantly influenced by Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary and theologically inflected philosophy.

'Action readings' in L'Être et les Êtres

Selection

Perhaps the clearest and most important example of selection is Blondel's preview of the solution that he will offer to the problem that no particular beings conform to 'the compelling idea that we have of being and without which we would not be aware of any reality'. [1067] We might have expected him to frame a solution in terms of being and beings, but instead it is entirely in terms of action:

> There is, to support, make effective, and sanction [beings'] secondary and derivative activity, a first cause, a principle of efficiency, a norm both transcendent and immanent, in all contingent existence. It is therefore not enough to posit as abstract and general assertions these conditions constantly necessary for every creature: it is important to take them into account in every singular detail, and in every real and spiritual development of authentic beings. We have no other purpose than to animate, to see in action, and to highlight, the

[1066] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 323–24: N'est-ce pas sous le voile de *L'Action* et dans la mesure où, tout passifs que semblent les êtres créés, il y a cependant un réel *agir* en certains d'entre eux que s'opère en fait la solution véritable?

[1067] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 132: l'impérieuse idée que nous avons de l'être et sans laquelle nous n'aurions conscience d'aucune réalité.

> most theoretically certain truths, but also the most practically stimulating ones.[1068]

The entire passage takes '*action*' as action in general, and there is no sense of a restriction to human or any other particular kind of action.

We shall now turn to some more particular examples of selection.

> Despite everything, beings would not be beings if they remained completely passive, if they were left to themselves, if they had nothing to give of themselves, if they were not good or lovable.[1069]

This passage, like many others, envisages being to be intrinsically active, so no amendment is required, and selection is possible. This is not the whole story about Being as far as Blondel is concerned, and other parts will require construction or simply not to be selected, but to understand Being as the action of self-giving love is clearly fundamental.

> In what way is the inevitable realism spontaneously expressed which, it has often been said, makes every thinking being a metaphysician? This invincible tendency is translated, embodied, and clarified, by the affirmation which, implicit or formulated, poses an act of faith in reality, even if this reality is that of thought:

[1068] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 133–34: il y a, pour soutenir, rendre efficace et sanctionner leur activité seconde et dérivée, une cause première, un principe d'efficience, une norme à la fois transcendante et immanente à toute existence contingente. Il ne suffit donc pas de poser comme des assertions abstraites et générales ces conditions constamment nécessaires à toute créature; il importe d'en tenir compte dans tout le détail singulier, dans tout le développement réel et spirituel des êtres authentiques. Nous n'avons pas d'autre dessein que de vivifier, de voir en action, de mettre en valeur les vérités les plus théoriquement certaines, mais aussi les plus pratiquement stimulantes.

[1069] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 25: Les êtres malgré tout ne seraient pas des êtres s'ils restaient tout passifs, s'ils étaient laissés à eux-mêmes, s'ils n'avaient rien à donner d'eux, s'ils n'étaient pas bons ni aimables.

> and the verb is the soul of this assertion. Also, the power to give meaning to the little word 'is', and to pose it first as the vital act of the mind, portrays itself … as reason itself which, immediately, and very primitively, goes directly to reality, to being as to its own object. [1070]

This text appears before a variety of difficulties with realism are discussed, whereas we would have expected it to have appeared afterwards as a means of circumventing them. Here realism is described entirely in active terms. We express it; it creates each of us as a metaphysician; it is an act of faith; we give meaning to 'is', which is an act of the mind that we choose to be significant; and reason 'goes … to reality'. [1071] All of this is action, and as Blondel puts it, 'the verb is the soul of this assertion'. [1072] That verb is '*être*', 'to be': and as Blondel emphasises, it is a *verb*. No construction is required here, and selection is entirely feasible. Blondel goes on to say that we must avoid a 'game with concepts', and instead must seek 'the drama of reality'. [1073] A complex analysis of multiple factors is then envisaged: an analysis of 'the idea of being, thus understood as the study of the internal dynamism that it conceals in its depths'. [1074] Not only is the human being understood in terms of action, but so are realism and reason. Above all, '*être*' is understood in terms of '*action*'.

[1070] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 35: De quelle manière s'exprime spontanément le réalisme inévitable qui, on l'a souvent répété, fait de tout être pensant un métaphysicien ? Cette invincible tendance se traduit, s'incarne, se précise par l'affirmation qui, implicite ou formulée, pose un acte de foi dans le réel, ce réel fût-il celui de la pensée; et le verbe est l'âme de cette assertion. Aussi le pouvoir de donner un sens au petit mot *est* et de le poser d'abord comme l'acte vital de l'esprit se présente … comme la raison elle-même qui, d'emblée et tout primitivement, va directement au réel, à l'être comme à son objet propre.

[1071] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 35: va … au réalité.

[1072] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 35: le verbe est l'âme de cette assertion.

[1073] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 38: jeu de concepts … le drame de la réalité.

[1074] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 42: l'idée d'être, ainsi comprise comme l'étude du dynamisme interne qu'elle recèle en ses profondeurs.

Blondel asks which realities are beings and begins to answer the question by alluding to ubiquitous action:

> the universe is not a closed cycle, an eternal return that locks the future into a fixed order without it having to be seen as a story, a drama, and an ascension. From this dynamic point of view, the factual givens take on an infinitely more instructive meaning, because they can serve to manifest, as though by milestones, the orientation, the integration, and already the final meaning of natural things and spirits [or minds]. From such a perspective also the changes themselves reveal a norm, a guiding idea, a solidarity that can be said to be constitutive through a reciprocal action of cooperating causes.[1075]

Everything here is dynamic, 'a reciprocal action of cooperating causes',[1076] so '*action*' is action in general, and selection is feasible without making any changes to either the text or its clear meaning.

At the beginning of the third part of the book Blondel writes that

> we must not believe that the natural and spiritual universe only forms a juxtaposition of isolatable and variously perishable parts: the connection which relates them forms a drama where undoubtedly the part of contingencies and losses of freedom can vary indefinitely, but where an interior norm rules, judges, and sanctions the entire history of the universe.[1077]

[1075] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 70: l'univers n'est pas un cycle clos, un retour éternel qui enferme le devenir dans un ordre fixe, sans qu'il faille y voir une histoire, un drame, une ascension. À ce point de vue dynamique, les données de fait prennent un sens infiniment plus instructif; car elles peuvent servir à manifester, comme par des jalons, l'orientation, l'intégration et déjà la signification finaliste des choses naturelles et des esprits. D'une telle perspective aussi les changements mêmes révèlent une norme, une idée directrice, une solidarité qu'on peut dire constitutive par une action réciproque des causes coopérantes.

[1076] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 70: une action réciproque des causes coopérantes.

[1077] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 226–27: il ne faut pas croire que l'univers naturel et spirituel ne forme qu'une juxtaposition de parties isolables et diversement périssables :

Whilst 'norm' sounds rather static, in practice a norm is changing patterns into which the ubiquitous action of the drama constantly falls: a definition to which Blondel gives support when he discusses the singular, transcendent, and immanent 'norm' that ensures the consistency of beings where he clearly has something highly dynamic in mind:

> an ascending norm, a movement: movement which, without abandoning anything, goes from the physical universe to the minds and spirits, and from the spirits and minds to infinity: otherwise beings would not be able to achieve the consistency that assures them of the solid truth of their being.[1078]

Given the context, in which 'movement' is ubiquitous, 'solid truth' can only be a 'moving solid truth'. If Blondel had written '*action*' instead of '*mouvement*' then '*action*' would have meant action in general; and as the entire universe is understood in terms of action, and '*action*' increasingly means action in general, selection is required.

In his conclusions, Blondel recognises that taking account of the beings that we experience requires

> the dynamic and genetic character of an ontology which must account for the very causes and purposes, without limiting itself to recording opaque facts or inert notions.[1079]

Precisely. And it is the action of God that is finally the cause of all of this activity:

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la connexion qui les relie forme un drame où sans doute la part des contingences et les chutes de la liberté peuvent indéfiniment varier, mais où cependant une norme intérieure règle, juge et sanctionne toute l'histoire de l'univers.

[1078] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 251: une norme ascensionnelle, un mouvement : mouvement qui, sans rien abandonner, va de l'univers physique aux esprits et des esprits à l'infini ; faute de quoi les êtres ne pourraient réaliser la consistance qui leur assure la solide vérité de leur être.

[1079] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 327: le caractère dynamique et génétique d'une ontologie qui doit rendre raison des causes mêmes et des finalités, sans se borner à enregistrer des faits opaques ou des notions inertes.

> Therefore, creatures could not represent their Author if they were only pure passivity and total indeterminacy. However little it may be, they too have a kind of specified activity: but, because their impetus does not originally come from themselves, and because their spring comes from an original cause which infinitely exceeds them, their reality is linked to a becoming, to a change … Not only do creatures all depend on a divine motion, even in what is specific and apparently proper to them: they also depend, to a certain extent, on each other … [1080]

In the light of conclusions like this, we are left wondering why Blondel did not ask whether both being and thought could be subsumed under the notion of action. A possible explanation for Blondel not taking this route can be found in *La Pensée* in which God is active but also in which Blondel aligns Action with God, and in Thomist fashion interprets God, the 'pure Act' and the first cause, as not in fact dynamic. [1081]

Construction

When he discusses the question as to whether 'becoming' is a being, Blondel suggests not.

[1080] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 334–35: Dès lors les créatures ne pourraient représenter leur Auteur si elles n'étaient que pure passivité et indétermination totale. Si peu que ce soit, elles ont, elles aussi, une sorte d'activité spécifiée; mais, parce que leur élan ne vient pas primitivement d'elles, et parce que leur ressort procède d'une cause originelle qui les dépasse infiniment, leur réalité est liée à un devenir, à un changement … Non seulement les créatures dépendent toutes d'une motion divine, même en ce qu'elles ont de spécifique et apparemment de propre ; mais elles dépendent aussi, jusqu'à un certain point, les unes des autres ...

[1081] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 408: l'Acte pur. … l'Immobile.

> We find here, through an immense abstraction made out of all particular changes, a supreme effort to concretize what by definition cannot be given either as everything at once … nor as an actual and solid unity.[1082]

He suggests that 'in vain we seek support in thought in the face of movement'.[1083] Blondel asks whether a 'transcendent metaphysics of change itself'[1084] might be possible. The answer is 'yes', and such a metaphysic would be able to rewrite

> The very idea of becoming … necessarily implies that of a being transcendent to change itself, which could not be conceived without the presence of a notion of the absolute.[1085]

as

> The very idea of becoming … necessarily implies that of a being constituted by change, in relation to which we might conceive of an absolute also so constituted.

When Blondel explores the possibility that 'Being' is 'God',[1086] he finds himself speculating about time: whether it preceded the act of creation, or was created with the universe. Either way,

> all becoming really implies a principle of reference or production absolutely transcendent (external and superior) to what is moved and changing: without which movement and change, as such, would absolutely not exist: because, for

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[1082] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 119: Nous retrouvons ici, à travers une immense abstraction faite de tous les changements particuliers, un effort suprême pour concrétiser ce qui par définition ne saurait être donné ni comme tout à la fois … ni comme unité actuelle et solide.

[1083] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 119: Vainement on cherche un appui dans la pensée en face du mouvant.

[1084]Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 119: métaphysique transcendante au changement lui-même.

[1085] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 120: L'idée même du devenir … implique nécessairement celle d'un être transcendant au changement lui-même, qui ne pourrait être conçu sans la présence d'une notion de l'absolu.

[1086] L'Être … Dieu.

there to be series, continuity, and diversity, it is necessary that a force of unity connects, supports, and unifies this moving process. [1087]

That is not necessary. What is necessary is action to propel the movement and change. A minimal but significant rewriting of the last line is required: 'it is necessary that action connects, supports, and unifies this moving process'.

When discussing the 'tiering' that leads from matter, to life, and then to personality, Blondel envisages the process as attracted by 'a fully stable and consistent reality', [1088] as that was the only route to cohesion—to a 'solid unity'. [1089] The problem with this proposal is that any 'fully stable and consistent reality' can only be local and temporary, and it will change constantly, which means that whatever attracts the multitude of beings into the 'solid unity' will also have to change constantly. 'A fully dynamic and diverse reality' would be more likely to achieve the required attraction as it would be able to relate to beings at every level in the 'tiering', and would be able to continue to do so however much beings changed. This suggests that the 'Being in itself' [1090] that Blondel then envisages beings participating in must be equally dynamic and diverse.

Extension

Near to the beginning of the preamble to *L'Être et les Êtres*, Blondel finds that both our experience of contingent beings, and our minds' drive towards comprehending the idea of Being, are essential to constructing an ontology; that as our experience and our ideas

[1087] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 166: tout devenir implique réellement un principe de référence ou de production absolument transcendant (extérieur et supérieur) à ce qui est mû et changeant : sans quoi le mouvement et le changement, en tant que tels, ne seraient absolument pas; car, pour qu'il y ait série, continuité, diversité, il est nécessaire qu'une force d'unité relie, soutienne, unifie ce mouvant processus.

[1088] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 284: une réalité pleinement stable et consistante.

[1089] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 284: unité solide.

[1090] l'Être en soi.

are not commensurate, we need both of them; and that we therefore need a dialectical ontology.

> It is therefore towards a dynamic rather than a static ontology that we must direct an investigation that is simultaneously faithful to the two aspects everywhere implicated by our primary experience and by our primary notion of being. [1091]

Given that ontology is now dynamic, its subject matter must be equally dynamic. We know that contingent beings and our experience of them are radically dynamic, and that the ontology must be dialectical and therefore dynamic, which suggests that Being is best understood as itself dynamic. A minor addition to the text shows how its meaning can easily be extended to represent the ubiquity of the dynamic:

> It is therefore towards a dynamic rather than a static ontology that we must direct an investigation that is simultaneously faithful to the two aspects everywhere implicated by our primary experience and by our primary notion of being, both of which are dynamic.

When Blondel discusses the problem that no number of phenomena can indicate the unity of a particular being, he suggests that

> it is no longer just a matter of seeking in the multiple realities that experience offers to us something that can ascribe to each being a moving, changing, and approximate unity. It is a question of asking ourselves whether Being, understood and subsisting in all of its force as a *Unum*, or even as a *Unus et Solus*, includes a plurality of other true beings. [1092]

[1091] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 16–17: C'est donc vers une ontologie dynamique plutôt que statique que nous devons orienter une enquête simultanément fidèle aux deux aspects partout impliqués dès notre première expérience, dès notre première notion de l'être.

[1092] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 66: Il ne s'agit plus seulement de chercher dans les multiples réalités qu'offre l'expérience ce qui peut conférer à chacune une mouvante et approximative unité. Il s'agit de nous demander si l'Etre, compris et subsistant en toute

A similar point is made a little later in relation to the change that we experience in beings:

> if there is no becoming in the essential notion that we necessarily have of being, considered in its pure and perfect idea, then we are nevertheless led to recognize being in phenomena that are becoming. [1093]

If Being includes a plurality of 'moving' or 'changing' beings, then should we not extend that understanding to the Being in which they are 'included'? Instead of suggesting that beings can be dynamic when Being might not be, we could suggest that dynamic beings imply dynamic Being. A minor amendment is required:

> It is a question of asking ourselves whether Being, understood and subsisting in all of its force as a moving *Unum*, or even as a moving *Unus et Solus*, includes a plurality of other true moving beings. …
>
> … there is becoming in the essential notion that we necessarily have of being, considered in its pure and perfect idea, otherwise it is difficult to understand being in phenomena that are becoming.

In the course of arguing that our experience offers us the concept of Being just as much as particular beings, Blondel appeals to our constant use of the word 'being' and of the concept underlying it:

> We cannot discover any means of annihilating our idea of being, and this subjective necessity imposes on us the search for the objective meaning, the intellectual value … And it is on this power of affirmation, this intrinsic dynamism, and this efficiency of the concept of being, that we have to make a reasoned judgment. [1094]

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sa force comme un *Unum* ou même comme un *Unus et Solus,* comporte une pluralité d'autres êtres véritables.

[1093] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 71: s'il n'y a point devenir dans l'essentielle notion que nous nous faisons nécessairement de l'être, considéré en sa pure et parfaite idée, nous sommes cependant amenés à reconnaître de l'être dans les phénomènes en devenir.

[1094] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 157: Car de ce que nous ne découvrons aucun moyen d'annihiler notre idée de l'être, il résulte que cette nécessité subjective nous impose la

The idea of Being *does* something. It 'imposes', it exercises power, it is dynamic, and it is efficient. We can extend this recognition to the whole of language, as Wittgenstein does when he recognises that language is as much an activity and a form of life as is anything else:[1095] and if language is our only access to an understanding of reality, then we have to say that reality itself—Being itself—is an activity and a form of life that imposes, exercises power, is dynamic, and is efficient. The concept of 'Being'[1096] has 'efficacy'.[1097]

Being and Action

We have discovered that many passages, and particularly those that relate Being and Action to each other, and beings and action to each other, can be located in the 'selection', 'construction', and 'extension' categories: and it is of interest that it is as easy to locate passages from this book about 'Being and beings' in those categories as it has been to locate in them passages from Blondel's previous volumes about action and thought: both concepts more easily aligned with the idea of action than either Being or beings. This immediately suggests an innate connection between Being and Action, and between beings and action, in Blondel's philosophy.

Paul Archambault frames the question about Being like this:

> Does a Being in itself, by itself, and for itself, exist, and does it respond to the requirements of this idea?
>
> By what they have, as well as by what they lack, beings seem to call for a Being in which their relative interiority and efficiency find their foundation, and through which they can hope to be completed.

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recherche du sens objectif, de la valeur intellectuelle ... Et c'est sur cette puissance d'affirmation, ce dynamisme intrinsèque, cette efficience du concept d'être que nous avons à porter un jugement motivé.

[1095] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen/Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2001), 10.

[1096] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 157: l'Être.

[1097] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 157: efficacité.

> It is the problem of God, of creation, and of the relationship between God and created beings. [1098]

When Blondel concludes his study of a series of 'aporias' [1099] with the suggestion that Being must be understood as both trinity and unity, as only then can perfect intelligibility and intelligence be understood as characteristics of Being, he finds that there is still a problem with understanding how Being can be characterised by both distinction and conformity. [1100] In the Trinitarian context, Being 'gives all, receives all', [1101] which suggests that there is action, change, and diversity within Being. Whether or not we call this unity in trinity 'Being' or 'God', [1102] Blondel suggests that Aristotle's concept of 'the pure Act' [1103] can enable us to understand Being as the God of love: 'In God, charity is not something added on top, an extrinsic and anthropomorphic description'. [1104] If the 1893 thesis *L'Action* had been followed by an understanding that every being is action in changing patterns, and that Being is Action, then thought, Thought, beings, and Being, could have been understood in those terms: in which case it would have been far easier to reconcile Being as Action with Being as a God of love. As it is, we are left wondering whether Blondel means 'pure Act' in the Aristotelian sense of not itself changing, or as the intrinsically dynamic and the most dynamic possible.

We frequently find Blondel reconciling Being with beings by identifying Being with God, migrating into the theological language of the creation of the universe by a generous

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[1098] Paul Archambault, *Initiation à la Philosophie Blondélienne en Forme de Court Traité de Métaphysique* (Paris: Librairie Bloud & Gay, 1941), 60: Existe-t-il un Être en soi, par soi, pour soi, qui réponde, lui, aux exigences de cette idée? Parce qu'ils ont, comme par ce qui leur manque, les êtres semblent appeler un Être en qui leur intériorité relative, leur efficience relative trouvent leur fondement, et par qui ils puissent espérer s'achever. C'est le problème de Dieu, de la création, des rapports entre Dieu et les êtres créés.

[1099] Apories.

[1100] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 190.

[1101] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 191: donne tout, reçoit tout.

[1102] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 192.

[1103] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 193: l'Acte pur.

[1104] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 194: La charité n'est pas, en lui, quelque chose de surajouté, une dénomination extrinsèque et anthropomorphique.

God, and then migrating back to 'Being' or 'Absolute' language, with Being now understood in trinitarian terms.

> And if there is no intelligibility in Being except through the intimate Trinitarian generation of which we have sketched the process, how can we not admit at the same time that, if there are beings, and for there to be beings within the Absolute, no other explanation of their existence can equal, supplement, or rule out this view of creative intentions?[1105]

This raises in an acute form the question of the relationship between metaphysics and theology, and shows it to be a question that we cannot avoid in this context. It is on this boundary that Blondel spent his theophilosophical career, and he chose to make the boundary permeable: which suggests that an understanding of human beings in terms of action could have informed an understanding of all contingent beings in terms of action, which via the theological diversion into Being as God could have informed an understanding of Being as (Trinitarian) Action: action itself. But did Blondel's thought move in that direction? Early in *L'Être et les Êtres* Blondel is convinced that

> it is not our thought or our action that seems to us to contain or realize the being that we are or the beings that we know, use, or produce. Rather, it is the being that spontaneously appears as the container of thinking, knowing, and acting.[1106]

[1105] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 207: Et s'il n'y a point d'intelligibilité dans l'Etre sinon par l'intime génération trinitaire dont nous avons balbutié le processus, comment ne pas admettre du même coup que s'il y a des êtres et pour qu'il y ait des êtres en dedans de l'Absolu, nulle autre explication de leur existence ne peut égaler, suppléer, écarter cette vue des intentions créatrices?

[1106] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 40: ce n'est point notre pensée, ce n'est point notre action qui nous semblent contenir ou réaliser l'être que nous sommes ou les êtres que nous connaissons, que nous utilisons, que nous produisons ; mais c'est l'être qui spontanément apparaît comme le réservoir du penser, du connaître, de l'agir.

Blondel now employs his 'simply grammatical and logical analyses' [1107] to recognise that it is in realities that impose themselves 'on our experience and action' [1108] that we find 'being', [1109]

> as if it was from these compelling givens that we then abstracted a more or less generalized and blurred notion of being. [1110]

When Blondel asks how to understand what binds together the diversity of beings, he appears not to recognise that there is a clue to an important possibility in his description of their context:

> by fragmenting reality into diverse beings made more or less independent of each other by the very way in which they seem to behave and in the way in which we represent them in order to act on them and with them, we do not manage to justify this fragmentation or to hypostasize separately, otherwise than by a partially misleading abstraction, these so-called beings, all entwined as they are in a network of inseparable actions and reactions. [1111]

Blondel appears not to have noticed that in order to bind beings together he does not need 'a God who loved to extend and exteriorize himself', [1112] nor a cosmos that is 'the only absolute'. [1113] The 'network of inseparable actions and reactions' [1114] would be an entirely adequate binding of diverse beings into a cosmos. So whether theologically or

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[1107] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 64: analyses simplement grammaticales et logiques.

[1108] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 67: à notre expérience et à notre action.

[1109] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 67: l'être.

[1110] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 67: comme si c'était de ces données impérieuses que nous abstrayions ensuite une notion plus ou moins généralisée et estompée de l'être.

[1111] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 108: en fragmentant la réalité en êtres divers et rendus plus ou moins indépendants les uns des autres par la manière même dont ils semblent se comporter et dont nous nous les représentons pour agir sur eux et avec eux, nous ne réussissons pas à justifier ce morcelage et à hypostasier séparément, sinon par une abstraction partiellement trompeuse, ces prétendus êtres, tous enlacés dans un réseau d'actions et de réactions inséparables.

[1112] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 108: un Dieu qui a aimé à se répandre et à s'extérioriser.

[1113] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 108: le seul absolu.

[1114] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 108: réseau d'actions et de réactions inséparables.

philosophically Blondel knows that he cannot write about 'Being'[1115] without also writing about action and thinking, he still thinks that there is something about Being that is not captured by doing that.

> To be is not only to think, to know, or to act, although we cannot do without thinking, knowing, and acting, not only to study what being is, but to understand what it is.[1116]

However, a somewhat different understanding of the connection between being and action is represented by the parallel treatments to which Blondel submits both of them. Throughout, a radical distinction is maintained between contingent beings and the idea of an absolute Being, with any connection understood as relying on an identification between God and Being and between God and the created order of contingent beings. A similar radical distinction is also maintained between multiple contingent actions and the idea of 'absolute Action':[1117] a concept that raises similar questions to those related to Being.

> How is the idea of pure action not a pseudo-idea, nonsense, worse still, an intrinsic contradiction? And if pure action, hypothetically admitted as the principle of agents and acts that are not simple hypotheses but facts, is only conceived and affirmed according to the factual data offered by physical or moral agents, should we not conclude that pure action is as if forced to express itself in imperfect actions, or even that conversely it is only the unreal limit of transitive and always impure actions via a mixture of passions and reactions?[1118]

[1115] l'Être.

[1116] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 523: Être n'est pas seulement penser, ni connaître, ni agir, quoique nous ne puissions nous passer de penser, de connaître et d'agir non seulement pour étudier ce qu'est l'être, mais pour comprendre ce qu'il est.

[1117] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 342: l'Agir absolu.

[1118] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 343: comment l'idée d'acte pur n'est-elle pas une pseudo-idée, un non-sens, pire encore, une contradiction intrinsèque? Et si le pur agir, hypothétiquement admis comme principe des agents et des actes qui, eux, ne sont pas de simples hypothèses mais des faits, n'est conçu et affirmé qu'en fonction des données de fait qu'offrent les agents physiques ou moraux, ne faudrait-il pas en conclure ou que le pur agir est comme forcé de s'exprimer en d'imparfaites actions, ou même

As we have often discovered, we are left in some doubt as to whether pure action is itself action rather than being a somehow inactive source of action. If pure Act, Action, is itself unchanging, then it is being treated alongside Being rather than the one being understood as a function of the other. Blondel had ordered concepts like this:

> it is not our thought or our action that seems to us to contain or realize the being that we are or the beings that we know, use, or produce. Rather, it is the being that spontaneously appears as the container of thinking, knowing, and acting.[1119]

We could write the components in an alternative order:

> it is not our thought or our being that seems to us to contain or realize the action that we are, or the action that we know, use, or produce. Rather, action generates thinking and being; being generates thinking and action; and thinking generates being and action.

But Blondel could have gone further, in line with his suggestion that if we are looking for 'a positive representation of this Being that is the cause of itself',[1120] then

> it always seems to us that there is something before it that determines it, that it has or is a nature suffered rather than freely and eternally posed by a single act where everything would be contemporary and permanent.[1121]

This 'single act' is the 'pure Act':

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qu'inversement il n'est que la limite irréelle des actions transitives et toujours impures par un mélange de passions et de réactions?

[1119] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 40: ce n'est point notre pensée, ce n'est point notre action qui nous semblent contenir ou réaliser l'être que nous sommes ou les êtres que nous connaissons, que nous utilisons, que nous produisons ; mais c'est l'être qui spontanément apparaît comme le réservoir du penser, du connaître, de l'agir.

[1120] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 153: une représentation positive de cet Être cause de soi.

[1121] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 154: il nous semble toujours qu'il y a avant lui quelque chose qui le détermine, qu'il a ou qu'il est une nature subie plutôt que librement et éternellement posée par un acte unique où tout serait contemporain et permanent.

> everywhere we have shown, under the motion of the One of whom it is said to act, and not only in things but in itself since it has traditionally been called the 'Pure Act', a universal dynamism that launches all becoming towards Being. [1122]

Here, rather than 'Pure Act' being understood in the Aristotelian sense of itself being unmoving and unchanging, it is understood as a 'universal dynamism', suggesting that Being is a universal being, and Thought a universal thought, and so all functioning within the universe rather than somehow separately from it. If underlying 'Being' [1123] there is 'a single and unique act', [1124] a 'pure Act', [1125] which is itself genuinely dynamic, then perhaps a hierarchical reconstruction of the list of concepts could be formulated by rewriting again the passage above:

> it is not our thought or our being that seems to us to contain or realize the action that we are or the beings that we know, use, or produce. Rather, it is the action that spontaneously appears as the generator of thinking, knowing, and being.

As Blondel himself puts it: 'The total sum of becoming is not being, any more than being is outside of its action', [1126] but rather 'to be is to act'. [1127] If Being is Action, then a Being in itself, by itself, and for itself, exists, and it does respond to the requirements of this idea. [1128]

Perhaps it is in *L'Être et les Êtres* more than in any of Blondel's other works that we find the justification for Paul Archambault's view that Blondel's philosophy is better described

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[1122] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 524: partout nous avons montré, sous la motion de Celui dont il est dit *semper agit,* et non seulement dans les choses mais en soi puisqu'on l'a traditionnellement nommé "l' Acte pur", un dynamisme universel qui lance tout le devenir vers l'Etre.

[1123] l'Être.

[1124] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 40: un acte unique.

[1125] Acte pur.

[1126] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 383–84: La somme même du devenir n'est pas l'être, pas plus que l'être n'est en dehors de son agir.

[1127] Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres*, 90, 341, 344: être c'est agir.

[1128] Paul Archambault, *Initiation à la Philosophie Blondélienne en Forme de Court Traité de Métaphysique* (Paris: Librairie Bloud & Gay, 1941), 60.

as an 'integral realism' [1129] rather than as a philosophy of action. We have shown that much about action in this volume can be read as about action in general; that many passages need only minor amendment in order to be about action in general; and that many passages that in their context are about human action can have their meanings extended so as to refer to action in general: and all of this is particularly true of passages that understand Being as Action and being as action. So it is not only that Blondel could easily have written *L'Être et les Êtres* with action understood as the action of the cosmos and with human action understood as a subset of that action, but that he could easily have written it, and often did so write it, with being understood as the being of the cosmos with human beings understood as a subset of that being. Whilst we frequently find diversity among discussions of the relationships between being, action, and thought, and between Being, Action, and Thought—although as always the contingent and the universal are not always clearly distinguished from each other—the theological diversion that understands Being as trinitarian suggests the priority of Action, Action as generating Thought and Being, and contingent action as giving birth to being and thought.

Conclusion

In 1893 Blondel removed the final and most theological part of his doctoral thesis before it was examined, and then reinserted it before publishing the first version of *L'Action* in 1893. The thirty years following were even more theological than the fifth part of *L'Action*: they were positively apologetic, in the theological sense, arguing either for the legitimacy of theology, or for specifically Christian theology. And then came the trilogy, the first two parts of which we have briefly discussed here. Although *La Pensée* and *L'Être et les Êtres* were clearly philosophical in both their expression and their argument rather than being explicitly apologetic works, there were considerable continuities with the publications that preceded them. All of this literature understands

[1129] Archambault, *L'Oeuvre Philosophique de Maurice Blondel*, 7.

the supernatural as a legitimate subject for philosophy, and that philosophy can pave the way for theology: although Blondel was always clear that only revelation could provide theological content.

Whilst in the 1893 *L'Action* '*action*' means human action, our ability to locate passages from the literature studied in this chapter in the 'selection' category tells us that in the writings that followed the 1893 *L'Action* the meaning of '*action*' was often 'action in general', and that human action came to be seen as a particular kind of action in general. The original focus on human action clearly owed much to influence by Ravaisson and Maine de Biran, whereas the shift to understanding '*action*' to mean action in general was probably due to influence by Teilhard de Chardin and perhaps to further reflection on Leibniz's *vinculum substantiale*.

We have discovered that in both *La Pensée* and *L'Être et les Êtres* numerous passages can be allocated to the 'construction' category, meaning that minor amendments can change the meaning of '*action*' from human action to action in general; and we have also discovered that multiple passages can be allocated to the 'extension' category, suggesting that the meaning of '*action*' can easily be extended from human action to action in general. This all suggests that throughout this period Blondel could consistently have understood action as action in general.

What is not entirely clarified by the end of *L'Être et les Êtres* are the relationships between Thought, Being, and Action, and between thought, being, and action: an agenda taken up in the third book of the trilogy—an extended and revised *L'Action*.

Chapter 6

The first volume of the 1936 *L'Action*

Introduction

Following the publication of the two volumes of *La Pensée* [1130] and of *L'Être et les Êtres*, [1131] Blondel turned his mind to the revision of his 1893 thesis *L'Action*. [1132] Again a two-volume work emerged, the second volume of which was a substantial revision of the 1893 thesis, and the first of which was new material, mainly about causation, and in particular about the relationship between contingent causes and a first cause. This chapter studies the first volume in order to study how '*action*' is being used.

Terminology

Before we study the third book in Blondel's 1930s trilogy we need to understand a complexity relating to the capitalisation or otherwise of Being, being, Action, action, and Thought, thought. Contingent beings, actions, and thoughts are always in lower case, but the idea of Being, Action, or Thought, is sometimes capitalized and sometimes not. Take this example:

[1130] Maurice Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I, La Genèse de la Pensée et les Paliers de son Ascension Spontanée* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934); *La Pensée, Tome II, Les Responsabilités de la Pensée et la Possibilité de son Achèvement* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934).

[1131] Maurice Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres* (Paris: Librairie Felix Alcan, 1935).

[1132] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), first published in 1893.

> Already for the use of the word being [*être*] we had been … torn between contingent realities and the single Substance [*Substance*] that too dryly rational thought would want to invest exclusively with this great name of Being [*Être*]. [1133]

And this:

> Absolute Action [*Agir*] cannot be said to be first cause or cause of itself in the sense that this term would imply that in God there is an effect ... There is pure action [*agir*] only where the act [*acte*] itself is totally immanent and adequate to itself, and where the outpouring remains eternally and totally lively and productive. [1134]

In this passage in which we again find the pure Act to be itself dynamic it is not clear why the second '*agir*', 'action', and the '*acte*', 'action', are in lower case.

Blondel includes his own discussion of terminology early in the 1936 *L'Action* and at various other points. '*L'Action*' is common, but so are '*Acte*', and '*Agir*'. Capitalised, these refer to 'pure Action', and uncapitalised they usually refer to contingent actions: although, as we have seen, capitalisation is not always consistent. So why and how does Blondel employ all three of '*acte*', '*action*', and '*agir*'?

> 'To act' [*Agir*] is … essentially a verb which, it seems, formulates the secret of being and affirms it in its radical function; hence the often repeated assertion: to be is to act [*agir*] and that which does not act [*agit*] is not. [1135]

[1133] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action, Tome I, Le Problème des Causes Secondes et le Pur Agir* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1936), 24: déjà pour l'emploi du mot être nous avions été … écartelés entre les réalités contingentes et l'unique Substance qu'une pensée trop sèchement rationnelle voudrait investir exclusivement de ce grand nom d'Etre.

[1134] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome I* (1936), 182–83: l'Agir absolu ne peut être dit cause première ou cause de soi dans le sens où ce terme impliquerait qu'en Dieu il y a un effet … Il n'y a pur agir que là où l'acte même est totalement immanent et adéquat à soi, mais où cependant le jaillissement reste éternellement et totalement vif et productif.

[1135] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 38: Agir est … essentiellement un verbe qui, semble-t-il, formule le secret de l'être et l'affirme en sa fonction radicale; d'où l'assertion si souvent répétée: être, c'est agir et ce qui n'agit point n'est pas.

Blondel explains why he now prefers '*agir*' to '*acte*' and '*action*': '*agir*' brings out 'the most dynamic aspect and fruitful initiative',[1136] whereas '*acte*' derives from 'a passive past participle, *actus, actum*, and thereby suggests the idea of a result obtained rather than a strong initiative'.[1137] '*action*'

> primarily indicates the initiating impulse in that it is alive and fruitful, productive and finalising at the same time ... '*action*' can designate ... the continuous and progressive series of means employed ... Finally, '*action*' can signify the result obtained, the work acquired, the completion achieved,[1138]

whereas the verb and noun '*agir*'

> is not neutral, it is not transitive … it implies … the pure idea of an internal initiative, the original fertility of which does not need to manifest itself in external effects in order to be essentially itself: that is, without any indispensable mixture of passivity.[1139]

'*agir*' is a 'gushing',[1140] as opposed to 'scattered and multiplied flows in divergent channels'.[1141] The more dynamic meaning of '*agir*', and the fact that it does not imply 'an end', but rather expresses the process of activity, is clearly an important reason for Blondel preferring '*pur agir*' to '*acte pur*'.[1142]

[1136] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 39: l'aspect le plus dynamique et la féconde initiative.

[1137] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 168–69: un participe passé et passif, *actus, actum*; il suggère par là même l'idée d'un résultat obtenu plutôt que d'une vive initiative.

[1138] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 40–41: indique primitivement l'élan initiateur en ce qu'il a de vif et de fécond, de productif et de finaliste à la fois … L'action peut désigner … la série continue et progressive des moyens employés … L'action enfin peut signifier le résultat obtenu, l'oeuvre acquise, l'achèvement réalisé.

[1139] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 39–40: n'est pas neutre, il n'est pas transitif … il implique … la pure idée d'une initiative interne dont l'originale fécondité n'a pas besoin de se manifester en effets extérieurs pour être excellemment elle-même, sans mélange indispensable de passivité.

[1140] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 169: jaillissement.

[1141] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 169: flots épars et multipliés en canaux divergents.

[1142] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 170.

However, there are connections: '*agir*', the dynamic initiative, gives birth to '*acte*', the 'act' understood as an object, and to '*action*', which can be understood as a completed dynamic initiative. Blondel can therefore write:

> The solution to this problem of universal activity hangs on the certainty that we now have to define and justify, that of Being which has long been called pure Act [*Acte*], or which it would perhaps be better to name, more paradoxically but more vitally, pure Action [*Agir*]. [1143]

An additional important difference between '*action*', '*acte*', and '*agir*', is that only the third, '*agir*', is a noun that is also a verb: a situation similar to that of '*être*', which can be translated as the noun 'being' and the verb 'to be'. In the context of a study of action, and of pure Action, there is something particularly appropriate about a noun, '*agir*', that is also a verb, '*agir*'. Our problem is that there is no English equivalent. We could translate '*agir*' and '*Agir*' as 'acting', 'Acting': a gerund, and so a present participle as well as a noun: but 'Action', 'action', is often the most natural English translation, and 'Acting', 'acting', is not. The French '*agir*' is an infinitive, 'to act', and so is the very basis of a verb, so as a verb '*agir*' is not a noun, whereas 'acting', a present participle, is a noun when it is a verb. '*Agir*', by being both solely a verb and solely a noun, can therefore represent an absolute action in ways in which 'Acting' cannot. Perhaps all one can do is translate all of '*Acte*', '*Action*', and '*Agir*', as 'Act' or 'Action', and '*acte*', '*action*', and '*agir*', as 'act' or 'action', and note which French word is being translated.

> The solution to this problem of universal activity hangs on the certainty that we now have to define and justify, that of Being which has long been called pure Act [*Acte*], or which it would perhaps be better to name, more paradoxically but more vitally, pure Action [*Agir*].

Blondel's introduction to L'Action*, 1936, volume I*

[1143] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 127: La solution de ce problème de l'activité universelle est suspendue à la certitude que nous avons maintenant à définir et à justifier, celle de l'Etre qu'on a dès longtemps appelé l'Acte pur ou qu'il vaudra peut-être mieux nommer, plus paradoxalement mais plus vitalement, le pur Agir.

Blondel begins by recognising that in his previous books he has

> studied the multiple aspects of the particular facts to which we apply the term 'action' rather than focusing on the action itself: and perhaps we were less concerned with defining 'the act of acting' … than with examining the outcomes or various modes of action.[1144]

So in this volume he intends to ask 'What is it to act? … in what direction does action tend to go, passing through where, and to what end?'[1145]

> Is action conceivable as immanent in itself, as an intimately fruitful life and as absolutely determinable and specified in itself, without this eternal completion and this perfect definition being incompatible with the pure essence of an absolute Action?[1146]

Blondel then speculates about the relationship between thought and action:[1147] and whereas up to here the introduction to the first volume of the 1936 *L'Action* has treated '*l'action*' as any action, here it is human action that Blondel has in view: a human ideal action related both to 'Thought' and to 'Being'[1148] and which Blondel identifies with 'the pure Act'.[1149] And then again we find ourselves studying action in general: 'what does not act is not; everything that is acts'.[1150] The main theme of this first volume is then

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[1144] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 9–10: plutôt étudié les multiples aspects des faits particuliers auxquels on applique le terme d'action qu'on ne s'est attaché à l'agir lui-même ; et peut-être s'est-on moins soucié de définir 'l'acte d'agir' … que d'examiner les productions ou les divers modes de l'action.

[1145] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 10: qu'est-ce qu'agir? … où tend, par où passe, à quel but va l'action?

[1146] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 10: L'action est-elle concevable comme immanente à elle-même, comme une vie intimement féconde et absolument déterminable et spécifiée en soi, sans que cet éternel achèvement et cette parfaite définition soient incompatibles avec la pure essence d'un Agir absolu?

[1147] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 11.

[1148] la Pensée … l'Être.

[1149] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 11: l'Acte pur.

[1150] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 15: ce qui n'agit pas n'est pas; tout ce qui est agit.

introduced: How are we to conceive of 'the pure Act' when we are aware of contingent actions and 'secondary causes'? [1151]

Simply to study action is clearly quite problematic.

> If it is true that action is not reducible to the idea of action, and that acting is something other than thinking, then we cannot content ourselves here with the method applicable to analysis or synthesis of perceptions, notions, and mental constructions. [1152]

The agent's action 'will remain eternally as having been, as an initiative the repercussions of which will carry the agent's responsibility to infinity'. [1153]

At the heart of this volume is the usual complex and mysterious relationship between contingent realities and the Platonic idea, in this case of Action, now normally represented by the verb-based noun '*Agir*' rather than by the relatively less appropriate noun '*Action*' normally encountered in the 1893 thesis. This conundrum—

> the mystery of a pure Action which seems to have nothing to produce if it is perfect and never to be completed if it always has to act [1154]

—invites an early excursion into theology when Blondel tries to construct 'a conceivable relationship between two orders as incommensurable as the initiative of creatures and the incommunicable sovereignty of God'. [1155]

[1151] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 18–19: l'Acte pur … les causes dites seconds.

[1152] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 19: S'il est vrai que l'action n'est point réductible à l'idée de l'action et qu'agir est autre chose encore que penser, nous ne pouvons nous contenter ici de la méthode applicable à l'analyse ou à la synthèse des perceptions, des notions et des constructions mentales.

[1153] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 20: demeurera éternellement comme ayant été, comme une initiative dont les contrecoups porteront à l'infini la responsabilité de l'agent.

[1154] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 24: le mystère d'un pur Agir qui semble n'avoir rien à produire s'il est parfait ou n'être jamais achevé s'il a toujours à agir.

[1155] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 24–25: une relation concevable entre deux ordres aussi incommensurables que l'initiative des créatures et l'incommunicable souveraineté de Dieu.

At the end of his introduction Blondel explains that both volumes of the 1936 *L'Action* [1156] are about the relationship between contingent actions and 'pure action', [1157] and both are about the relationships between action, being, and thought, [1158] but the first is designed 'to safeguard the pure idea of action', [1159] and the second sets out 'from our human action and from experientially based reflection'. [1160]

> Here then are the two distinct investigations to be pursued: speculative research to establish the theory of action and to attempt a formal specification and intelligible definition of action; and methodical experience of faithful action in the light of a right and coherent conscience for the purpose of exercising its internal law. [1161]

Blondel recognises that seeking a definition of action would not be appropriate because of the concept's 'protean character': [1162] that is, it is axiomatic so cannot be defined in terms other than itself. As Henry Duméry puts it, 'action, in the Blondelian sense,

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[1156] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936); *L'Action, Tome II, L'Action Humaine et les Conditions de son Aboutissement* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1936).

[1157] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 26: le pur agir.

[1158] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 27.

[1159] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 29: sauvegarder la pure idée de l'action.

[1160] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 29: de notre action humaine, d'une réflexion expérimentalement nourrie.

[1161] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 30–31: Voilà donc les deux enquêtes à poursuivre distinctement : recherche spéculative pour établir la théorie de l'action et pour tenter une spécification formelle, une définition intelligible de l'agir ; expérience méthodique de l'action fidèle à la lumière de la conscience droite et cohérente jusqu'au bout de son exercice avec sa loi interne.

[1162] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 133: D'un côté, l'agir apparaît comme indéfinissable par son caractère protéiforme ; d'un autre côté, il requiert, semble-t-il, une immanence parfaitement définissable et transcendante à tout changement. Comment sortir de cette apparente impasse?

appears as a reality irreducible to any other parallel philosophical notion'.[1163] But there are places where a definition is attempted: for instance, where action

> proceeds … from an internal unity, from a cause that triggers an initiative that perseveres through the ripples that it creates, from a purpose which responds to the *primum movens* [first movement] and animates the entire deployment of the continued operation.[1164]

Action is always in a context[1165] and so is always different, and the only common factor turns out to be the first cause.

> This means that pure action [*l'agir*] is the key to any doctrine of action [*l'action*] and that, starting from transitive reality, we must connect this certain reality to the pure Act [*Acte*], even more certain and the only absolutely definable and perfect reality.[1166]

The division into two volumes then receives a theological justification:

> The first [volume is] devoted to the search for what essentially constitutes action in God, and also the action of creatures elevated to the dignity of also being causes by cooperating in their own destiny. The second volume will show how this destiny can and must be accomplished, setting out from the humblest origins of a good will that is ignorant or still uncertain of its ways and its supreme end,

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[1163] Henry Duméry, *La Philosophie de L'Action: Essai sur l'Intellectualisme Blondelien* (Paris: Éditions Montaigne, 1948), 39 : L'action, au sens blondélien, apparaît … comme une réalité irréductible à toute autre notion philosophique parallèle.

[1164] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 74: L'action est tout autre chose qu'un fait. Les faits sont des reconstitutions abstraites de données ... Agir au contraire procède … d'une unité interne, d'une cause qui déclenche une initiative persévérant à travers ses irradiations, d'une finalité qui répond au *primum movens* animant tout le déploiement de l'opération poursuivie.

[1165] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 321–22.

[1166] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 322: C'est dire que l'agir pur est la clef de toute doctrine de l'action et qu'il y a lieu en partant de la réalité transitive de rattacher cette réalité certaine à l'Acte pur, plus certain encore et seul absolument définissable et parfait.

> and which, using the universal order as a means to rise to its transcendent goal, can thus open or close itself to the reception of the action [*action*] that liberates it and allows it to realize its spiritual action [*agir*]. [1167]

As we shall discover, this is by no means the only time that philosophical positions will be justified by theological arguments.

Following his introduction, Blondel offers a 'liminal part', or perhaps 'threshold'. [1168] As always, the tension is between

> the secret ideal that we carry within us of pure, free, and perfect action [*agir*], and the failures and promiscuities that subject our liberating impulse to natural or acquired passivities. [1169]

Blondel then asks how we can explain

> that there really are secondary agents, compatible with the pure Action [*Agir*] to which they can and must bear witness. [1170]

In these last two passages we find again the additional tension between '*agir*' used of human action and '*agir*' used of action more generally.

[1167] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 31–32: Le premier consacré à la recherche de ce qui constitue essentiellement l'agir en Dieu et aussi l'action des créatures élevées à la dignité d'être causes, elles aussi, en coopérant à leur propre destin. Le second tome montrera comment peut et doit s'accomplir cette destinée, à partir des plus humbles origines d'une bonne volonté ignorante ou incertaine encore de ses voies et de sa fin suprême et qui, usant de l'ordre universel comme d'un moyen pour s'élever jusqu'à son but transcendant, peut ainsi s'ouvrir ou se fermer à l'accueil de l'action qui la libère et lui donne de réaliser son agir spirituel.

[1168] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 35: partie liminale.

[1169] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 45: le secret idéal que nous portons en nous d'un pur, libre et parfait agir et les défaillances, les promiscuités qui assujettissent notre élan libérateur à des passivités natives ou acquises.

[1170] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 47: qu'il y a réellement des agents seconds, compatibles avec l'Agir pur auquel ils peuvent et doivent rendre témoignage.

> Unable immediately to provide a real definition of action [*l'action*] ... we have no better resource than the critical examination of the concrete uses that are commonly made of the disputed words that must be reduced to their most precise and technically philosophical meaning.[1171]

Part one

In terms of practical action Blondel commits himself to study a variety of kinds of human action, God's action, physical forces, and so on,[1172] and suggests that while we do that we must resist both the univocity of '*agir*' and its equivocity: 'it is between these two excesses that we will have to find the way to a solution specifying the different genres or degrees of action'.[1173] Blondel correctly thought that the atom is 'intensely agitated and complicated',[1174] and that 'neither absolute rest nor pure action'[1175] is 'the law of all becoming':[1176] although we now know that action is indeed ubiquitous at both the micro and macro levels,[1177] whereas Blondel suggests that we should return to a medieval idea that if something is moved by something else then it is only the initiator that is truly active.[1178] Two truths need to be kept together: 'there are real and progressive activities in the world of nature, in physical elements, and in living organisms',[1179] but their

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[1171] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 48: Ne pouvant d'emblée fournir une définition réelle de l'action … nous n'avons pas de meilleure ressource que l'examen critique des emplois concrets qui sont communément faits des mots litigieux qu'il s'agit de réduire à leur sens le plus précis et le plus techniquement philosophique.

[1172] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 52.

[1173] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 53: c'est entre ces deux excès qu'il nous faudra trouver le chemin d'une solution spécificatrice des différents genres ou degrés de l'agir.

[1174] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 55: intensément agité et compliqué.

[1175] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 56: Ni repos absolu, ni pur agir.

[1176] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 56: la loi de tout devenir.

[1177] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 57–58.

[1178] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 58.

[1179] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 65: il y a des activités réelles et progressives dans le monde de la nature, dans les éléments physiques et les organismes vivants.

ultimate origin remains a transcendent Action, whether we think this to be the case or not: [1180]

> These secondary actions, while indefinitely developing their increasing complexity and their more than apparent initiative, nonetheless remain fundamentally passive in their origin, relating to an absolute in their cooperation, subordinate to a transcendent end which commands and exceeds them. [1181]

Are human actions 'truly actions', [1182] or are they simply 'physical, biological, or instinctive manifestations that we have previously analysed?' [1183] And is there 'a vital principle that remains independent of rational activity', [1184] 'the soul', [1185] that animates our action, rather than the body and its senses functioning 'as instruments of the spirit/mind [and as] already embodied needs and abilities'. [1186] We can't separate the various levels of human life, [1187] and 'we find in our actions more than there is in our conceptual analyses', [1188] but our ideas about universals and the transcendent 'are

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[1180] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 68.

[1181] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 65: ces actions secondes, tout en développant indéfiniment leur complexité croissante et leur initiative plus qu'apparente, n'en demeurent pas moins foncièrement passives en leur origine, relatives à un absolu dans leur coopération, subordonnées à une fin transcendante qui les commande et qui les dépasse.

[1182] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 69: vraiment des actions?

[1183] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 69: des manifestations physiques, biologiques ou instinctives que nous avons précédemment analysées.

[1184] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 70: un principe vital qui resterait indépendant de l'activité raisonnable.

[1185] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 70: l'âme.

[1186] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 71: comme instruments de l'esprit, sont déjà incarnés des besoins, des aptitudes.

[1187] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 73.

[1188] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 73: Il se trouve dans notre agir plus qu'il n'y a dans nos analyses conceptuelles.

already a real presence within us, a vital immanence of these intelligible realities that illuminate, nourish, and stimulate our action'. [1189]

Blondel makes a distinction:

> Action is something other than a fact. Facts are abstract reconstructions of givens ... Action, on the contrary, proceeds … from an internal unity, from a cause that triggers an initiative that perseveres through the ripples that it creates, from a purpose which responds to the *primum movens* [first movement] and animates the entire deployment of the continued operation. [1190]

Blondel now sets out to understand '*action*' [1191] by studying 'properly human acts'. [1192] He raises the question as to how the 'doctrine of the pure act' [1193] might cohere with

> the requirements of our reason as with the demands of our experience and [how it] allows us to resolve the problem of the compatibility of secondary causes with the certainty of the absolute and of the sovereign action of God. [1194]

[1189] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 73: sont déjà en nous une présence réelle, une immanence vitale de ces réalités intelligibles qui éclairent, nourrissent, stimulent notre agir.

[1190] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 74: L'action est tout autre chose qu'un fait. Les faits sont des reconstitutions abstraites de données ... Agir au contraire procède … d'une unité interne, d'une cause qui déclenche une initiative persévérant à travers ses irradiations, d'une finalité qui répond au *primum movens* animant tout le déploiement de l'opération poursuivie. Although the French '*fait*', 'fact', might sometimes refer to an abstract reconstruction, '*fait*', 'done', suggests that a fact might best be interpreted as a description of completed or continuing action. (The same goes for the English 'fact', from the Latin 'factum', 'done'.

[1191] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 75: l'action.

[1192] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 75: les actes proprement humains.

[1193] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 98: doctrine de l'acte pur.

[1194] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 98: les exigences de notre raison comme avec les requêtes de notre expérience et permet de résoudre le problème de la compatibilité des causes secondes avec la certitude de l'absolu et du souverain agir de Dieu.

It is the reality of our own action that demands the truth and reality of 'a transcendent action',[1195] just as thought demands the truth of Thought, and being demands the truth of Being. To deny secondary causes would make a first cause unintelligible,[1196] and contingent action implies a 'true Action'.[1197] In the 1893 *L'Action* Blondel had approached the subject of action from the standpoint of human action, but now he is treating it as he treated Thought and Being: as a dialectic between Action and multiple contingent actions, with the required reconciliation being an infinity and therefore a transcendence: God.[1198]

Part two

Blondel sets out to remove blockages in the way of an 'ontological affirmation in what concerns the objective certainty of sovereign Action',[1199] and to 'give a meaning … to the mysterious content of pure Action'.[1200] He asks the question: 'Is action a reality that involves being specified and defined as an intelligible essence and effective subsistence?'[1201] and then returns to a discussion of the connections between Being, Thought, and Action:

> Action [*L'action*] is not only the link which, in the order of becoming, unites thought and reality, as well as unconscious faculties and ideal aspirations, within individuals and humanity as a whole. For such functions to be accomplished

[1195] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 109: un agir transcendant.

[1196] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 109.

[1197] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 109: véritable Agir.

[1198] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 548.

[1199] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 123: toute affirmation ontologique en ce qui concerne la certitude objective du souverain Agir.

[1200] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 123: donner un sens … au mystérieux contenu du pur Agir.

[1201] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 125: L'action, est-ce une réalité qui comporte d'être spécifiée et définie comme une essence intelligible et une subsistance effective?

> without remaining deceptive, a higher connection must still be conceivable and real. The solution to this problem of universal activity hangs on the certainty that we now have to define and justify, that of Being which has long been called pure Act [*Acte*], or which it would perhaps be better to name, more paradoxically but more vitally, pure Action [*Agir*]. [1202]

Characterising 'pure Act' as 'vital', and as 'paradoxical' in relation to Being, suggests that again the pure Act is understood to be itself somehow dynamic rather than unchanging.

A number of '*apories*', 'aporias', are then tackled: for instance, can the word '*agir*' refer both to a transitive action that changes the active agent, as in 'actions of God' [1203]—'as this plural would seem to subordinate eternity to time and absolute unity to the multiplicity of contingent relations' [1204]—and to the action of a God understood in the context of eternity and as 'immobile, inactive, and in the tranquillity of the heavenly Sabbath'. [1205]

> If action were thus essentially linked to a becoming, and if the grammatical form of this term necessarily evoked a transitive operation, it would in fact be necessary to purify from all action [*action*], and even from all acting [*agir*], the

[1202] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 127: L'action n'est pas seulement le lien qui, dans l'ordre du devenir, unit la pensée et la réalité, les facultés inconscientes et les aspirations idéales au sein des personnes et de l'humanité. Pour que de telles fonctions s'accomplissent sans rester décevantes, il faut encore qu'une connexion plus haute soit concevable et réelle. La solution de ce problème de l'activité universelle est suspendue à la certitude que nous avons maintenant à définir et à justifier, celle de l'Etre qu'on a dès longtemps appelé l'Acte pur ou qu'il vaudra peut-être mieux nommer, plus paradoxalement mais plus vitalement, le pur Agir.

[1203] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 131: actions de Dieu.

[1204] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 131: car ce pluriel semblerait subordonner l'éternité au temps et l'unité absolue à la multiplicité des relations contingents.

[1205] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 131: immobile, inactif, dans la quiétude absolue du sabbat céleste.

> idea of the absolute and the affirmation of a perfect reality: Being would only exist in this case where there is no activity.[1206]

Blondel suggests that the conception of 'a true acting'[1207] is 'first in living thought[1208] rather than in a theoretical extrapolation from experience (a rather Kantian notion), and evidence for this is that we are aware of the imperfection of our action, which suggests that we have a 'pure act'[1209] in mind: although how this 'pure act' relates to *the* 'pure Act' remains an open question.

> On the one hand, action [*agir*] appears indefinable due to its protean character; on the other hand, it seems to require a perfectly definable immanence that transcends all change. How to get out of this apparent impasse?[1210]

What we have also noticed as we have studied the meaning that Blondel gives to 'pure Act' across his oeuvre is that he initially understood 'pure Act' as an unchanging changer, or an inactive actor, and later on sometimes understood it as somehow itself dynamic. The impasse that we here notice is that Action, or pure Act, is all of protean and indefinable, transcending all change, and absolutely dynamic.

Blondel then fails to answer the question as to whether '*action*' can be used of both 'actions of God'[1211] and an 'immobile' God,[1212] and instead tackles further aporias and

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[1206] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 131: Si l'action était ainsi liée essentiellement à un devenir, si la forme grammaticale de ce terme évoquait forcément une opération transitive, il faudrait en effet purifier de toute action et même de tout agir l'idée de l'absolu et l'affirmation d'une parfaite réalité: l'Etre ne serait en ce cas qu'où il n'y a pas activité.

[1207] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 132: un véritable agit.

[1208] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 132: première dans la pensée vivante.

[1209] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 132: Acte pur.

[1210] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 133: D'un côté, l'agir apparaît comme indéfinissable par son caractère protéiforme ; d'un autre côté, il requiert, semble-t-il, une immanence parfaitement définissable et transcendante à tout changement. Comment sortir de cette apparente impasse?

[1211] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 131: actions de Dieu.

[1212] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 131: immobile, inactif, dans la quiétude absolue du sabbat céleste.

then draws a conclusion: Because action raises questions in relation to the First Cause, the created order, and human reason,

> it is therefore not surprising that the problem of action eminently contains that of being, thinking, and knowing, and that of power, will, and value.[1213]

Blondel offers a summary of where his argument has got to:

> 1° the idea of a pure Act [*Acte*] is not a pseudo-idea;—2° it alone allows us to have the feeling of our action [*action*] and to extend the meaning of the word 'act' [*agir*] to secondary causes;—3° it is therefore important to deepen this implicit idea of a pure Action [*Agir*] …;—4° the action [*agir*] of contingent beings is only possible because this secondary action [*agir*] is capable of participating and cooperating with creative action [*action*], according to a providential plan that free agents can refuse or to which they can unite.[1214]

The problem is that our experience gives us no verification of a transcendent Action, no language is adequate to the mystery of the 'pure Action',[1215] and we can assume no analogy from contingent beings to 'Action';[1216] and then again the terminology shifts between 'Action' and 'God':[1217] a God for whom everything is necessary but who is also 'free and active';[1218] a God whom philosophy has the right to study, but a God whose definition and activity remain theologically rather than philosophically defined. For

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[1213] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 157: Il n'est donc pas surprenant que le problème de l'agir contienne éminemment celui de l'être, du penser et du connaître, celui du pouvoir, du vouloir et du valoir.

[1214] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 159: 1° l'idée d'un Acte pur n'est pas une pseudo-idée ;—2° elle seule nous permet d'avoir le sentiment de notre action et d'étendre le sens du mot agir à des causes secondes;—3° il importe donc d'approfondir cette idée implicite d'un pur Agir …;—4° l'agir des êtres contingents n'est possible que parce que cet agir second est susceptible de participer et de coopérer avec l'action créatrice, selon un plan providentiel auquel les agents libres peuvent s'unir ou se refuser.

[1215] pure Agir.

[1216] Agir.

[1217] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 161–63: Agir … Dieu.

[1218] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 186: libre et actif.

instance, there are two senses of 'divine action': [1219] one as it is applied 'to pure action and to its transcendent immanence', [1220] and the other when it is applied to 'creative and providential work'. [1221] The former is 'to act for oneself', [1222] whereas the latter is the external creation of beings. [1223] The problem is that

> no created being can have being, life, movement, or effectiveness, except in God, with him, and through him. Therefore, what meaning and justification can the appearance of agents other than God have? [1224]

But we *do* experience ourselves as agents. This is not a contradiction, because the first Cause 'is also sovereign Love', [1225] and because

> it is a question of infusing the creature's own action with a freedom and a power of choice and realization which can go as far as turning against God and incurably persisting in this attitude of rebellious independence. [1226]

At the same time,

> the gratuity of creation fully safeguards the purity of transcendent Action, and the work of goodness cannot in any way compromise the order of necessity. [1227]

[1219] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 190: l'agir divin.

[1220] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 190: à l'acte pur et à sa transcendante immanence.

[1221] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 190: l'oeuvre créatrice et providentielle.

[1222] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 190: agir pour soi.

[1223] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 191.

[1224] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 195: nul être créé ne saurait avoir d'être, de vie, de mouvement, d'efficace qu'en Dieu, avec lui et par lui. Dès lors, quel sens, quelle justification peut comporter l'apparition d'autres agents que Dieu?

[1225] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 195: est aussi souveraine Charité.

[1226] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 197: il s'agit d'infuser à l'action propre de la créature une liberté, un pouvoir d'option et de réalisation qui peut aller jusqu'à se tourner contre Dieu et à persister incurablement dans cette attitude d'indépendance révoltée.

[1227] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 197: La gratuité de la création sauvegarde pleinement la pureté de l'Agir transcendant et l'oeuvre de la bonté ne saurait compromettre en rien l'ordre de la nécessité.

No longer is Action itself the reconciliation of transcendent Action and contingent actions: it is now God, identified as the 'First Cause', [1228] and God's action in creation, that reconcile them. [1229]

Secondary causes 'depend on the one in whom and through whom they have being, life, movement, will, and action': [1230] and they are *causes* because 'they can decide their fate'. [1231] In these secondary causes 'divine action is already infused'. [1232] But the fundamental question will still not go away:

> Is there intelligibly and really a pure Act, an action independent of all passion, an act which, superior to any transitive operation or reaction, would be entirely in itself alone, without ceasing to be perpetually alive and fertile? [1233]

And how can we descend from the pure Act to 'subordinate agents'? [1234]—a similar problem to Plato's ascent to Ideas and a subsequent return to 'what is only appearances and shadows'. [1235]

> To act [*Agir*] is not to change, to pass, to have to complete oneself or to leave oneself: it is to be substantial fecundity, intelligibility and goodness, all at the same time. It is therefore not from us and our deficient experiences that we must draw conclusions in relation to this pure Action [*Agir*]; it is from its definition and its excellence that we must draw both the idea and our own performance of what we have to be and to do in order to fulfil our role as causes, to be true agents, to

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[1228] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 198: Cause première.

[1229] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 198.

[1230] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 198: dépende constamment de celui en qui et par qui elles ont l'être, la vie, le mouvement, la volonté et l'action.

[1231] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 198: elles peuvent décider de leur sort.

[1232] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 201: L'action divine est déjà infuse.

[1233] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 204–5: y a-t-il intelligiblement et réellement un pur Agir, une action indépendante de toute passion, un acte qui, supérieur à toute opération transitive et à tout choc en retour, serait tout entier en soi seul, sans cesser d'être perpétuellement vif et fécond?

[1234] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 205.

[1235] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 205: ce qui n'est qu'apparences et ombres.

> achieve this assimilation in which our destiny is to strive with all our natural, spiritual, and additional resources. [1236]

Blondel is here returning to the strategy of the 1893 *L'Action* in which human action was where distinct realities were reconciled. Here human action is inspired by the pure Act and is resourced by 'our natural, spiritual, and additional resources': but it is difficult to see how inspiration can be anything other than 'our natural, spiritual, and additional resources', leaving us still on the opposite side of the chasm from the pure Act unless that pure Act is itself somehow active.

Part three

As Blondel turns to a study of secondary causes' relationship to a First Cause, a theological shift takes place: 'pure action' [1237] becomes the action of God, rather than being God, suggesting that 'pure action' is an attribute of a God otherwise defined, and ontologically prior to Action:

> Since the pure action [*agir*] of God, however absolutely sufficient it may be in its transcendence, does not exclude the possibility of active creatures, it is now important to determine the specific traits of the creaturely actions that are normally mixed with initial and concomitant passivity, to the point that we could call them derivative, impure, and mixed actions. [1238]

[1236] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 216: Agir, ce n'est pas changer, passer, avoir à se compléter ou à sortir de soi: c'est être, à la fois, substantielle fécondité, intelligibilité et bonté. Ce n'est donc pas de nous et de nos déficientes expériences qu'il faut conclure contre ce pur Agir; c'est de sa définition et de son excellence qu'il faut inspirer l'idée et l'exercice même de ce que nous avons à être et à faire pour remplir notre rôle de causes, pour être de vrais agents, pour réaliser cette assimilation à laquelle notre destinée est de tendre par toutes nos ressources naturelles, spirituelles et additionnelles.

[1237] le pur agir.

[1238] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 213: Puisque le pur agir de Dieu, si absolument suffisant qu'il soit dans sa transcendance, n'exclut pas la possibilité de créatures agissantes, il importe maintenant de déterminer les traits spécifiques de ces actions

A list of different kinds of secondary causes follows: for instance,

- an action that precedes, prepares, nourishes, and arouses the appearance of the conscious idea. …[1239]
- a whole series of reactions of life on thought, and of good and bad habits on the maxims from which agents draw inspiration and on the basis of which they apply themselves.[1240]

The question then arises as to whether such multiplicity, if related to secondary causes, can enable those causes to relate to the first Cause and then to God.[1241] This raises the usual Platonic problem: wherever we shift the problem of the relationship between the One and the Many, the problem of the relationship between them shifts with it.

And then Blondel seeks reconciliation between secondary causes and the First Cause by appealing to human life rather than to God:

> it is about our human solidarity with all its lower forces, with a view to our own destiny and our current or possible relationship with the transcendent principle of all action.[1242]

Blondel is moving back and forth between statements about human action and statements about action in general, and here he discusses attempts to reconcile the activity of the cosmos with God's action, and argues that the cosmos has exhibited constant innovation and the irreversibility of movements 'until the appearance, growth,

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normalement mêlées de passivité initiale et concomitante au point qu'on pourrait les appeler des actions dérivées, impures et mixtes.

[1239] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 215: une action qui précède, prépare, nourrit, suscite l'apparition de l'idée consciente.

[1240] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 216: toute une série de réactions de la vie sur la pensée, des habitudes bonnes ou mauvaises sur les maximes dont s'inspire et se réclame l'agent.

[1241] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 216–17.

[1242] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 218: il s'agit de notre solidarité humaine avec toutes ses forces inférieures, en vue de notre destinée propre et de notre relation actuelle ou possible avec le principe transcendant de toute action.

and immortality of minds',[1243] which he believes to constitute an argument for God's involvement. There is a 'system of forces'[1244] subject both to the First Cause and to other cosmic powers, and God has designed and now maintains a system that should be read alongside the evolutionary system described in *La Pensée*, an important stage of which is life.

> Life … constitutes … a novelty irreducible to the multiplicity of elements and forces which contribute to its advent in the world. It is a provisional outcome of cosmic dynamism: but it is also an original initiative which itself only ever appears as a transitive action, a passage, an effort towards perpetuation, a growing tendency towards a finality, and a preparatory order for consciousness and thought.[1245]

Life is the product of both 'universal dynamism and the certainty of divine action itself',[1246] and it gives birth to secondary causes and so to 'real action among the real secondary causes'.[1247] We are dependent on 'the first Cause',[1248] and we and other things 'proceed'[1249] from it. The process is subject to a 'critical examination' that 'accords

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[1243] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 222: jusqu'à l'apparition, à la croissance et à l'immortalité des esprits.

[1244] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 222: un système de forces.

[1245] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 224: La vie … constitue … une nouveauté irréductible à la multiplicité des éléments et des forces qui contribuent à son avènement dans le monde. Elle est un aboutissement provisoire du dynamisme cosmique ; mais elle est aussi une initiative originale qui elle-même n'apparaît jamais que comme une action transitive, un passage, un effort vers une perpétuation, une tendance croissante vers une finalité et un ordre préparatoire à la conscience et à la pensée.

[1246] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 226: le dynamisme universel et la certitude de l'agir divin lui-même.

[1247] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 227: un véritable agir chez les véritables causes seconds.

[1248] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 231: la Cause première.

[1249] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 231: procèdent.

with all of the requirements and connections of an integral philosophy'[1250] and that is 'a teaching of kindness, beauty, modesty, patience, temperance, resignation, gratitude, admiration, and confident expectation':[1251] and so philosophy becomes personal ethics as well as a metaphysic in which secondary causes experience a

> double connection to their first principle and to their final end through the stages and the trials which make up … what will appear more and more clearly as the universal drama, as the history of the action of creatures, and as the route of secondary causes towards their participation in the pure action [*agir*] of God.[1252]

Here pure action is a characteristic of God and is intimately connected with human action and action in general, and in this context Blondel proposes a 'scale of causes'[1253] which echoes the 'tiering' from matter, to life, and to personality, that he proposed in *L'Être et les Êtres*,[1254] but he does not follow this idea up and immediately turns his attention to experience

> in the conscious and free agent of an idea of the infinite, of the universal, of the good transcending all of the particular determinations that can solicit it—the *sine qua non* condition of all consciousness of being the cause of every act specific to an agent, even an imperfect act, and of any truly initiating effectiveness.[1255]

[1250] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 232: examen critique … s'accorde avec toutes les exigences, toutes les connexions d'une philosophie intégrale.

[1251] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 233: un enseignement de bonté, de beauté, de modestie, de patience, de tempérance, de résignation, de gratitude, d'admiration et d'attente confidante.

[1252] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 233: double rattachement à leur principe premier et à leur fin dernière, à travers les étapes et les épreuves qui composent ce … qui apparaîtra de plus en plus clairement comme le drame universel, comme l'histoire de l'action des créatures, comme l'itinéraire des causes secondes vers leur participation au pur agir de Dieu.

[1253] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 234: échelle des causes.

[1254] Maurice Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres* (Paris: Librairie Felix Alcan, 1935), 284: une réalité pleinement stable et consistante.

[1255] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 235: chez l'agent conscient et libre, d'une idée de l'infini, de l'universel, du bien transcendant à toutes les déterminations particulières qui

Further theological discussion then takes place about the relationship between secondary causes and 'God's sovereign domain'. [1256]

> The congenital impulse that constitutes the rational and free being cannot with impunity or sincerely confine, satisfy, or absolve itself in the immanent order of finite and perishable goods, while consciousness and will only exist to function for a transcendent purpose. [1257]

Blondel suggests that it is by God's action that 'our immanence carries an affirmed and active transcendence' [1258]—this being a necessary defence against the critics of the 'method of immanence' that we discussed in Chapter 3—and because reason alone cannot solve the problem of 'the metaphysically necessary and insurmountable incommensurability of the infinite and the finite', [1259] Blondel recommends charitable and spiritual activity: 'there is intelligibility only where intelligence and substantially personal charity are united'. [1260] This mention of intelligence in a context of both concrete human action and the supernatural was a response to a different longstanding controversy in which Blondel had pitted this understanding of intelligence against intelligence understood as reactionary and anti-modernist. [1261] Blondel summarises:

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peuvent le solliciter, est la condition *sine qua non* de toute conscience d'être cause de tout agir propre à un agent même imparfait, de toute efficacité réellement initiatrice.

[1256] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 237: le souverain domaine de Dieu.

[1257] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 238: l'élan congénital qui constitue l'être raisonnable et libre ne saurait impunément ni sincèrement se cantonner, se satisfaire, s'absoudre dans l'ordre immanent des biens finis et périssables, alors que la conscience et la volonté n'existent qu'en fonction d'une finalité transcendante.

[1258] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 241: notre immanence porte d'une transcendance affirmée et agissante.

[1259] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 250: l'incommensurabilité métaphysiquement nécessaire et insurmontable de l'infini et du fini.

[1260] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 252: il n'y a intelligibilité que là où s'unissent intelligence et charité substantiellement personnelles.

[1261] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 292–94.

Dependence on God eliminates 'all bad passivity and passion',[1262] and enables us to understand that

> the entire universe is a test, a field of application and, through our complete subjection, an instrument of victory and liberation for those who know how to see and develop on earth the reign of sovereign Action.[1263]

The language becomes increasingly theological when Blondel asks how there can be action of any kind.

> The initiative comes absolutely and totally from God who, by a prevenient grace, gives to the contingent being the means to give what is necessary and to be born again, *dat nobis Deus gratis id quod illi dare debemus necessario ad salutem* [God gives us freely what we must necessarily give him for salvation].[1264]

At the same time, the individual contingent being must exchange a 'gift of nature and the whole world for an infinitely superior gift, the precious pearl of divinity'.[1265] Our actions 'remain enveloped in passivities',[1266] and no clear classification of different actions is possible. The only legitimate classification is that all of them depend on the 'pure Act':[1267]

[1262] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 256: toute mauvaise passivité et passion.

[1263] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 256: l'univers entier est une épreuve, un champ d'application et, à travers notre immense assujettissement, un instrument de victoire et de libération pour qui sait voir et développer sur la terre le règne du souverain Agir.

[1264] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 262: l'initiative vient absolument et totalement de Dieu qui, par une grâce prévenante, donne à l'être contingent de quoi donner le nécessaire et naître à nouveau, *dat nobis Deus gratis id quod illi dare debemus necessario ad salutem.*

[1265] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 262: don de nature et le monde entier contre un don infiniment supérieur, la perle précieuse de la divinité.

[1266] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 263: restent enveloppées des passivités.

[1267] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 263: Acte pur.

> by comparison and with relative truth, the actions of the secondary causes are each more active than the other and provide a notion that approximates more closely to true action. [1268]

Blondel sums up his strategy by suggesting that in order to avoid Plato's journey into 'pure Ideas in themselves', [1269] and his subsequent descent into 'appearances' [1270] rather than 'things', [1271] the 1936 *L'Action* has started from secondary causes and then sought their roots in Pure Action. [1272] A dialectic is therefore indicated: from pure Act to contingent action, and from contingent action to pure Act, with the dialectic constituted by human action. A significant difference from the Platonism with which Blondel is comparing his approach is that for Plato the 'appearances' have a lesser reality than the 'pure Ideas', whereas for Blondel both contingent action and the pure Act are equally real. Plato's Ideas and appearances are related by the philosopher's journey from the appearances to the Ideas, whereas Action and contingent action are continuously related by God, who is pure Act and the first cause of contingent action, and by human action that is inspired by the pure Act and constituted by contingent action. The ubiquitously active character of all of this suggests that it would be more appropriate to understand 'pure Act' as the absolutely dynamic rather than as Aristotle's unmoved and unchanging pure Act.

'Required conclusion'

Action's originality is its relationship to both 'efficient and final causes'. [1273]

[1268] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 263: par comparaison et même avec une vérité relative, les actions des causes secondes sont plus actives les unes que les autres et fournissent une notion plus approximative d'un agir véritable.

[1269] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 266: pures Idées en soi.

[1270] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 267: apparences.

[1271] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 266: aux choses.

[1272] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 267.

[1273] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 272: la cause efficiente et de la cause finale.

> To act, in its completed form, is truly to realize thought, to enliven being, and to perfect the substantial unity of power, intelligence, and wisdom, in a perfect unity of love. [1274]

Blondel lists various kinds of contingent action: 'of instinct, passion, vital trajectory, direct and revolutionary impetuosity, gregarious or mystical force'. [1275]

> We have in fact discovered little by little that, even if we set out from the lowest physical operations, the dynamism of nature progressively verifies the metaphysical formula: *omnia intendunt assimilari Deo*. [1276]

In an essay written before the trilogy but only published just before his death Blondel developed Aquinas's *omnia intendunt assimilari Deo*, [1277] 'all things aim to assimilate to God', in the direction of God's 'supernaturalising action' in human beings that functioned as a substitute for an analogy between human beings and God: an active process rather than a more static likeness; [1278] and in general here Blondel claims to find within the 'changing' [1279] and the 'becoming' [1280] 'a fixity of orientation, an internal purpose', [1281] and it is this that leads

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[1274] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 272: Agir, en sa forme achevée, c'est vraiment réaliser la pensée, vivifier l'être, parfaire l'unité substantielle de la puissance, de l'intelligence, de la sagesse dans une parfaite unité d'amour.

[1275] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 272: de l'instinct, de la passion, de l'élan vital, de l'impétuosité directe et révolutionnaire, de la force grégaire ou mystique.

[1276] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 272: Nous avons en effet découvert peu à peu que, même à partir des plus basses opérations physiques, le dynamisme de la nature vérifie progressivement la formule métaphysique: *omnia intendunt assimilari Deo*.

[1277] Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Gentiles*, translated into English by Vernon J. Bourke (New York: Hanover House, 1955–1957), book 3, ch. 19.

[1278] Maurice Blondel, *Exigences Philosophiques du Christianisme* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), 219; *Philosophical Exigences of Christian Religion*, Translated by Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021), 181.

[1279] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 276: changement.

[1280] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 276: devenir.

[1281] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 276: une fixité d'orientation, une finalité interne.

> to the idea, the affirmation, and the absolute and necessary truth of pure Action, in which alone is found the perfect intelligibility and the substantial specification of stable and immutable action, without stagnation, inertia, or sterility. [1282]

It isn't possible to define action 'in a static fashion and by a simple concept', [1283] but it is possible to define it by attending to 'the dynamism from which it proceeds and which it realizes little by little in pursuit of the ends towards which it aims'. [1284] This process can't even stop at 'the pure Act'. [1285] The definition of action must

> shed light on the relationships between the staged phases where the exercise of action is manifested: so that its dynamic essence is determined by the law of its development and by its attachment to the unique and pure type of Action [*Agir*] in which specification and exercise are identical, while in all imperfect agents the effort of theoretical specification and the effective exercise of activity must contribute to a reciprocal causality. [1286]

Then Blondel yet again emphasizes the importance of validating theory about thought, beings and action, by studying 'truly active, practical and enlightening life', [1287] and he warns against regarding theory about action as sufficient without the study of 'practical

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[1282] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 276: à l'idée, à l'affirmation, à la vérité absolue et nécessaire du pur Agir, en qui seul se trouve la parfaite intelligibilité et la substantielle spécification de l'action stable et immuable, sans stagnation, sans inertie, sans stérilité.

[1283] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 277: de façon statique et par un simple concept.

[1284] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 278: dynamisme dont elle procède et qu'elle réalise peu à peu à la poursuite des fins où elle tend.

[1285] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 278: l'Acte pur.

[1286] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 278: éclaire la relation des phases étagées où se manifeste l'exercice même de l'agir; en sorte que son essence dynamique se détermine par la loi même de son développement et par son rattachement au type unique et pur de l'Agir où spécification et exercice sont identiques tandis que chez tous les agents imparfaits l'effort de spécification théorique et l'exercice effectif de l'activité doivent concourir en une causalité réciproque.

[1287] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 278–79: la vie réellement agissante, pratiquante, éclairante.

and ethical life',[1288] and also against dispensing with traditional ideas, as much in the political sphere as in the intellectual.

> We can in fact start from thought to pose the problem of being, to arrive at the problem of acting, and to specify action theoretically, by finally showing that thinking, being, defining pure action, and resolving in principle the problem of secondary causes, does not exempt us from acting.[1289]

What is required is 'a doctrine of practice',[1290] by which Blondel means that theory about action must be put into practice by human action, and that is how Action and contingent action are in practice related to each other. This is because Blondel wants to know whether 'even associated in their imperfect union, theory and practice can resolve the philosophical enigma and satisfy the demands of our destiny'.[1291]

> Theory and practice not only constantly need each other in a sort of cycloidal march, but they always have recourse to givens transcendent to both.[1292]

As Jonathan Ciraulo points out, a cycloid is a useful image for Blondel's thought from the 1893 *L'Action* onwards.[1293]

Blondel then summarises the results of the first volume of the 1936 *L'Action* in preparation for the second volume:

[1288] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 281: la vie pratique ou morale.

[1289] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 283: On peut en effet partir de la pensée pour poser le problème de l'être, pour aboutir au problème de l'agir, pour spécifier théoriquement l'action, en montrant finalement que penser, être, définir le pur agir et résoudre en principe le problème des causes secondes, ce n'est point cela qui dispense d'agir.

[1290] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 283: une doctrine pratiquante.

[1291] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 285–86: même associées dans leur imparfaite union, la théorie et la pratique peuvent résoudre l'énigme philosophique et satisfaire aux exigences de notre destinée.

[1292] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 287: la théorie et la pratique n'ont pas seulement besoin constamment l'une de l'autre dans une sorte de marche cycloïdale, mais qu'elles recourent toujours à des données transcendantes à l'une et à l'autre.

[1293] Jonathan Martin Ciraulo, "From Circle to Cycloid: The Philosophical Value of Religious Cult in Maurice Blondel's *L'Action*," *Religions* 15 (2024): 283.

- Philosophy, especially when it deals with action, and no more than when it studies thinking and being, does not end in concepts, and does not stabilize in a purely speculative theory. ... It intrinsically involves a methodical recourse not only to obvious givens, and to notions summarily *a posteriori*, but to in-depth and progressive work where the *a priori* of science and the *a posteriori* of verification or of inventive experience stimulate, renew, and clarify each other.
- Action requires the assistance of a double study determining, on the one hand, what specifies its original nature, and on the other hand, what constitutes its development and its methodical and instructive exercise. … [1294]

Blondel goes on to say that we should not expect to achieve 'either by theory or by practice a fully enlightened and complete solution to our action'. [1295]

> It is only in God … that the specification and exercise of action are identical. In all secondary causes, practice and theory differ … by deviating more or less from the exact formula of scientific laws. [1296]

[1294] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 288: La philosophie, surtout quand elle traite de l'agir, pas plus d'ailleurs que lorsqu'elle étudie le penser et l'être, ne se termine en concepts et ne se stabilise en théorie purement spéculative. … Elle comporte intrinsèquement un recours méthodique non seulement à des données obvies, à des notions sommairement *a posteriori,* mais à un travail approfondi et progressif où l'*a priori* de la science et l'*a posteriori* de l'expérience vérificatrice ou inventive se stimulent, se renouvellent, se précisent mutuellement.
l'action réclame le concours d'une double étude déterminant, d'une part, ce qui spécifie sa nature originale, d'autre part, ce qui constitue son développe-ment et son exercice méthodique et instructif.

[1295] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 292: soit par la théorie, soit par la pratique, une solution pleinement éclairée et achevée de notre action.

[1296] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 293: Il n'y a qu'en Dieu … que la spécification et l'exercice de l'agir sont identiques. Dans toutes les causes secondes la pratique et la théorie diffèrent … en s'écartant plus ou moins de l'exacte formule des lois scientifiques.

In 1893 Blondel had left to one side the 'problem of secondary causes',[1297] but he has now tackled that problem in the 1936 book that 'considers this mysterious problem of action, not only in human beings and for the purpose of studying our destiny, but in its totality',[1298] including psychological, moral, and religious aspects of our action.[1299] In the thesis, Blondel had avoided the problem of 'the pure Act',[1300] which he has now begun to tackle by elevating the

> conception of action [*agir*] up to the supreme fixity in the eternal fecundity of absolute Being; because it is only there that the perfect definition and reality of the pure act is found.[1301]

The action of secondary causes

> is neither a becoming without norm or fixity of orientation, nor an immediately definable reality, without reference to their own or a united development of beings, even beyond empirical successions and according to the First Cause which alone accounts for their principle, their movement, and their purpose.[1302]

[1297] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 298: problème des causes seconds.

[1298] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 298: envisage, non plus seulement en l'homme et pour l'étude de notre destinée, mais dans sa totalité, ce mystérieux problème de *l'agir*.

[1299] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 299.

[1300] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 299: l'Acte pur.

[1301] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 302: conception de l'agir jusqu'à la suprême fixité dans l'éternelle fécondité de l'Etre absolu; car c'est là seulement que se trouve la parfaite définition et réalité de l'acte pur.

[1302] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 302: n'est ni un devenir sans norme et sans fixité d'orientation, ni une réalité d'emblée définissable, sans référence au développement propre ou solidaire des êtres, au-dessus même des successions empiriques et en fonction de la Cause première qui seule rend compte de leur principe, de leur mouvement et de leur finalité.

'Becoming' [1303] belongs to 'the order of phenomena' [1304] and not to 'the birth of beings', [1305] whereas 'the pure Act' [1306] is neither a becoming nor transitive. Blondel suggests that there is a sense in which a secondary cause 'includes a transition' [1307] to which 'the action of the First Cause and the Supreme End is no stranger'. [1308] The employment of 'fixity' in relation to Being, and the distancing of 'the pure Act' from becoming, suggest that the pure Act is Aristotle's unmoved mover, whereas the relationship between secondary causes and the '*action*' of the First cause suggests a ubiquitously active pure Act. Again we are left in doubt as to whether the pure Act is itself active.

To the relationship between first and secondary causes Blondel adds a relationship between action and being, Action and Being:

> Action [*action*] is something other than a succession of facts, because it contributes to this ontological birth which, in each personal being as in the providential history of the world, confers on action [*l'agir*] an interior unity to each of the agents taken in its total singularity as well as to the universe as it finally realises the desire expressed by the divine *unum sint* [let them be one]. [1309]

[1303] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 317: Le devenir.

[1304] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 317: l'ordre des phénomènes.

[1305] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 317: la genèse des êtres.

[1306] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 303: L'Agir pur.

[1307] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936),303: l'agir de la Cause première et de la Fin suprême n'est point étranger.

[1308] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 303: comporte une transition.

[1309] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 317: L'action est autre chose qu'une succession de faits; car elle contribue à cette parturition ontologique qui, en chaque être personnel comme dans l'histoire providentielle du monde, confère à l'agir une unité intérieure à chacun des agents pris dans sa singularité totale aussi bien qu'à l'univers réalisant finalement le voeu qu'exprime l'*unum sint* divin.

A relationship between thought and action, Thought and Action, follows:[1310] 'Thought'[1311] is 'an act [*acte*]',[1312] and

> if it is true that not to act is not to be, then a true ontology includes an ontogeny; and a science of action [*action*] is like a key that opens to us some of the depths of Being and beings.[1313]

The science of being 'does not reduce to that of action',[1314] but it relies on it and supports it.[1315]

> Action [*action*] is never just a discursive synthesis of givens, analyzable according to the categories of understanding.[1316]

During these excursūs we have seen the boundary between Action and action dissolve, and perhaps a symptom of this is the rather haphazard way in which Blondel is now capitalising or not. In passages such as this the boundary dissolution appears to be complete:

> The doctrine of action [*action*] must … not be a system among other systems, a variant opposing other theories: it is a normal and integral part of rational science, of the complete philosophy in the whole metaphysical, ethical, and religious scheme.[1317]

[1310] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 352–53.

[1311] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 318: la pensée.

[1312] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 318: un acte.

[1313] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 318: s'il est vrai que ne point agir, c'est ne pas être, une véritable ontologie comporte une ontogénie; et une science de l'action est comme une clef qui nous ouvre quelques-unes des profondeurs de l'Etre et des êtres.

[1314] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 318: ne se réduit pas à celle de l'agir.

[1315] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 318.

[1316] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 318: L'action n'est jamais seulement une synthèse discursive de données, analysables selon les catégories de l'entendement.

[1317] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 317: La doctrine de l'action ne doit … pas être un système parmi d'autres systèmes, une variante s'opposant à d'autres théories; elle est une part normale et intégrante de la science rationnelle, de la philosophie complète dans le plan tout ensemble métaphysique, éthique et religieux.

An important cause of this dissolution has to be the relationships that Blondel constantly attempts to build between secondary causes and a First Cause: because secondary causes function on the basis of action, and a First Cause on the basis of Action, so to relate first and secondary causes is to relate action and Action.

> I have sometimes been asked for a specific and once-and-for-all definition of the word action [*action*] limited to *actus humani* [human activity] … To act [*Agir*] always calls into question givens and aspirations that go beyond the logical contours of a notion separately applicable to various degrees or modes of action [*action*]. [1318]

Action is always in a context [1319] and so is always different: so the only common factor between different contingent actions is the first Cause.

> This means that pure action [*l'agir*] is the key to any doctrine of action [*l'action*] and that, starting from transitive reality, we must connect this certain reality to the pure Act [*Acte*], even more certain and the only absolutely definable and perfect reality. [1320]

Because everything else is diverse actions and causes, [1321] what we are looking at here is a complete spectrum along which we can locate contingent actions at one end and pure Action [*Acte*] at the other. Now that 'transitive reality' can be 'connected … to the pure Act', '*Agir*' is no longer off the end of the spectrum, although it is still right at the end: and what holds together the entire spectrum is a 'dynamism'. [1322]

[1318] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 321: On m'a demandé parfois une définition spécifique et fixée une fois pour toutes du mot action limité aux *actus humani.* … Agir en effet met toujours en cause des données et des aspirations dépassant les contours logiques d'une notion séparément applicable aux divers degrés ou modes d'action.

[1319] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 321–22.

[1320] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 322: C'est dire que l'agir pur est la clef de toute doctrine de l'action et qu'il y a lieu en partant de la réalité transitive de rattacher cette réalité certaine à l'Acte pur, plus certain encore et seul absolument définissable et parfait.

[1321] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 322.

[1322] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 405: dynamism.

> Pure Action conceals an infinitely fertile and eternally prolific dynamism, without it having to come out of itself and introduce into itself anything transitive, inadequate, or indefinite.[1323]

And now that Blondel is clear that '*pensée*' ('thought') and '*action*'[1324] should never be understood to be in opposition to each other—for we can now understand thought as a subset of human action—we can understand Thought as at the end of the thought spectrum rather than off the end of it. Blondel has already suggested a relationship between Action and Being,[1325] and we could strengthen that relationship by defining Being in terms of Action and beings in terms of action. This would suggest that Being is at the end of the 'beings' spectrum rather than off the end of it.

> it is from the transcendent that all that we have of reality and thought proceeds, to the point that we would not have any consciousness of our immanence without the idea and the action in us of the transcendent.[1326]

As for the 'concrete', which is always where our philosophy must begin:[1327]

> our idea of the concrete can only be true and appropriate to its complete object if it contains at least implicitly this richness composed of all of these contributions tending to unify, but without them succeeding in forming a stable unity.[1328]

[1323] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 405: Le pur Agir recèle un dynamisme infiniment fécond et éternellement prolifique, sans que pour cela il ait à sortir de soi et à introduire en lui-même quoi que ce soit de transitif, d'inadéquat, d'indéfini.

[1324] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 323–24: la pensée … l'action.

[1325] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 352–53.

[1326] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 429: c'est du transcendant que procède tout ce que nous avons de réalité et de pensée, au point que nous n'aurions pas la conscience de notre immanence sans l'idée et l'action en nous du transcendant.

[1327] Henry Duméry, *La Philosophie de L'Action: Essai sur l'Intellectualisme Blondelien* (Paris: Éditions Montaigne, 1948), 85.

[1328] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 432: notre idée du concret ne peut être véritable et appropriée à son objet complet que si elle contient au moins implicitement, cette richesse composée de tous ces apports tendant à s'unifier, sans qu'ils réussissent pourtant à former une stable unité …

Blondel's method sees no contradiction between ideas and the concrete:

> it is through the vital and invigorating presence, and through the intrinsic dynamism of concrete certainties, that thought remains or becomes lived action, and that action becomes what it must be in us: living and embodied thought. [1329]

Human action is never complete because it 'is defined only by its movement oriented towards infinity': [1330] and that infinity is where action reaches its limit in Action, being in Being, and thought in Thought, that is, where the concrete meets the absolute.

Blondel has pondered

> on Thought, Being, and Action, as a movement from the finite towards the infinite, while recognizing the incommensurability of these two terms which seem to exclude and ignore each other. [1331]

Action is 'a metaphysical reality, a spiritual birth'. [1332]

The second volume of the 1936 *L'Action*, like the 1893 edition, focuses on human action, and among the excursūs of the first volume Blondel begins a discussion of how such action takes place. Action can result either from 'a cause already in action [*en acte*] and which is necessary to trigger the passivity incapable of putting its potentialities into action [*à l'acte*]', [1333] or from

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[1329] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 475: c'est par la présence vitale et vivifiante, par le dynamisme intrinsèque de certitudes concrètes que la pensée reste ou devient action vécue et que l'action devient ce qu'elle doit être en nous, pensée vivante et incarnée.

[1330] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 432: ne se définit que par son mouvement orienté vers l'infini.

[1331] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 470: dans la Pensée, dans l'Etre, dans l'action, comme un mouvement du fini vers l'infini, tout en reconnaissant l'incommensurabilité de ces deux termes qui semblent s'exclure et ne pouvoir que s'ignorer.

[1332] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 476: une réalité métaphysique, une ontogénie spirituelle.

[1333] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 333: la cause déjà en acte et qui est nécessaire pour déclencher la passivité incapable de faire passer à l'acte ses virtualités.

> the potentiality which, previously powerless to determine itself according to its abilities, contributes effectively to the stimulation received *ad modum recipientis* [in the manner of a recipient], that is to say, by contributing to the common activity according to certain intrinsic or acquired dispositions. [1334]

But underlying any such action is the created order that is never independent of God's activity. [1335]

> God does not play the role of a simple power in action [*en acte*], never being a potentiality, and the creature is never able to participate essentially in the absolute transcendence of metaphysically incommunicable pure Action [*Agir*]. [1336]

However, secondary causes can cooperate with God, and there is

> an order of grace in which the creature, freely called to a higher vocation that does not involve any causal reciprocity of the donee on the donor, nevertheless gives back absolute transcendence if engaged in its work of pure and supra-metaphysical love that the sovereign Majesty undergoes by its own condescension. [1337]

Here yet again we are left in some doubt as to whether the pure Act, or Action, is itself active.

[1334] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 333: la potentialité qui, préalablement impuissante à se déterminer selon ses aptitudes, concourt effectivement à la stimulation reçue *ad modum recipientis,* c'est-à-dire en contribuant à l'acte commun d'après certaines dispositions natives ou acquises.

[1335] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 335.

[1336] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 335: Dieu ne joue pas le rôle d'une simple puissance en acte, n'étant jamais une potentialité et jamais non plus la créature ne pouvant participer essentiellement à l'absolue transcendance du pur Agir métaphysiquement incommunicable.

[1337] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 335–36: un ordre de grâce dans lequel la créature, gratuitement appelée à une vocation plus haute et qui ne comporte aucune réciprocité causale du donataire sur le donateur, rend cependant l'absolue transcendance si engagée dans son oeuvre de pur et supra-métaphysique amour que la souveraine Majesté pâtit de sa condescendance même.

Towards the end of the first volume of the 1936 *L'Action* Blondel looks towards the subsequent *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien*[1338] by suggesting that a philosopher cannot ignore 'the Christian fact', or 'the fact of Christianity',[1339] and must treat religion rationally.[1340]

> To safeguard the homogeneity and completeness of philosophy in its method, spirit, and conclusions, it is indeed from the point of view of action [*l'action*] that it is appropriate to develop it: because it is in relation to such a perspective that the most speculative truths and the most positive requirements converge and are confirmed, without us being able to ignore the God of speculation, the God of charity, the destiny of secondary causes, the absolute transcendence of pure action [*agir*], or the secret demands of a vocation that calls us to a more than human end.[1341]

Religion is human action, and so subject to enquiry and related both to contingent action in general and to the pure Act, which is God.

[1338] Maurice Blondel, *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien, Tome I, Autonomie Essentielle et Connexion Indéclinable*, fourth edition (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), originally published in 1944; *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien, Tome II, Conditions de la Symbiose Seule Normale et Salutaire* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1946).

[1339] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 384: le fait chrétien.

[1340] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 384–85.

[1341] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 389: pour sauvegarder l'homogénéité et l'intégralité de la philosophie en sa méthode, en son esprit et en ses conclusions, c'est bien du point de vue de l'action qu'il convient de la développer ; car c'est dans une telle perspective que les vérités les plus spéculatives et les exigences les plus positives convergent et se confirment, sans qu'on puisse faire abstraction ni du Dieu de la spéculation, ni du Dieu de charité, ni du destin des causes secondes, ni de la transcendance absolue du pur agir, ni des secrètes exigences d'une vocation appelant l'homme à une fin plus qu'humaine.

Selection

Much of this volume is about contingent action in general and Action: action itself; so we should expect there to be multiple passages that can be immediately placed in the 'selection' category. An obvious candidate is a passage in which Blondel briefly summarises the agenda of his project:

> We must first strive to safeguard the pure idea of action [*l'action*], without letting it be contaminated by misleading metaphors or hybrid compromises. As far as possible we will try to specify the very notion of pure Action [*Agir*] and the conditions which can make secondary causes, contingent beings, a tentatively expressed freedom, or original initiatives in finite and imperfect agents conceivable. ... We shall then in another volume return to effective practice and action [*action*] actually experienced. Here we shall no longer have to proceed with speculative and specifying research, but will start from our human action [*action*], from an experimentally based reflection. [1342]

Human action is clearly understood as a particular example of contingent action in general which remains the context throughout. The passage is a clear candidate for selection.

[1342] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 29: Il faut d'abord nous attacher à sauvegarder la pure idée de l'action, sans la laisser contaminer par de trompeuses métaphores ou des compromis hybrides. Dans toute la mesure possible nous essaierons de spécifier la notion même du pur Agir et les conditions qui peuvent rendre concevables des causes secondes, des êtres contingents, une liberté ébauchée, des initiatives originales en des agents finis et imparfaits. … C'est alors que, nous retournant vers la pratique effective et l'action réellement vécue, nous devrons, dans un autre tome, non plus procéder à une recherche spéculative et spécificatrice, mais partir de notre action humaine, d'une réflexion expérimentalement nourrie.

> Divine action [*action*] veils and limits itself … and suspends its splendour and its empire to offer itself in the guise of partial truths and occasional and particular goods, in the face of which our conscience and our free will have to bear judgments and to make resolutions.[1343]

Here God's action, which 'limits itself' in contingent action in general, and our human action, affect each other, and all of this action is mutually entangled.[1344] No amendment is required: the passage can be placed in the 'selection' category. By concentrating on action Blondel is here able to express a relationship between God and the created order that it would be impossible to express in terms of being.

Much of the material in the first volume of the 1936 *L'Action* is still restricted to human action, but there is now plenty about contingent action in general, with human action recognised as a particular kind of action with a reconciling function; and because God too is understood in terms of action, the meaning of '*action*' in the 1936 *L'Action* is now significantly broader than it was in the 1893 edition.

Construction

> Neither absolute rest nor pure action [*agir*]: that is what is given to us as the law of all becoming, of all contingent being, and of all positive experience.[1345]

This would have seemed obvious to Blondel because 'becoming' assumes continuity as well as change: but it would now appear that there is no such thing as absolute rest, as at both the micro and macro levels all there is is action in changing patterns. So we can now make a minor but significant amendment:

[1343] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 201–2: L'action divine se voile, se limite … et suspende son éclat et son empire pour s'offrir sous les traits de vérités partielles, de biens occasionnels et particuliers, en face desquels notre conscience et notre libre arbitre ont à porter des jugements et à prendre des résolutions.

[1344] Maurice Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934), 57: intrication.

[1345] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 56: Ni repos absolu, ni pur agir: voilà ce qui nous est donné comme la loi de tout devenir, de tout être contingent, de toute expérience positive.

> action is what is given to us as the law of all becoming, of all contingent being, and of all positive experience.

Blondel is clearly aware of this possibility:

> Underneath the apparent torpor and stagnation, there is always living force, accumulated energy, internal activity, molecular movement, and explosive force, of which our contemporary physicists and chemists study the prodigious condensation even in all of this. [1346]

That is, scientists study the patterns—changing patterns—within the ubiquitous action. Scientists' understanding of the universe had changed substantially since Blondel published his thesis in 1893, so Blondel's understanding of the universe has now shifted towards seeing the whole of it in terms of action.

Sometimes only a very small change to a text is required in order for '*action*' to mean action in general. For example,

> a system of forces already specified, of natures that offer an essential and active constitution, each according to an energy which is its own, in short an activity which awakens, first of all subject not only to the permanent and direct initiative of the First Cause, but also to the organization of other cosmic powers that are concentrated in a virtual focus and capable of singular reactions: activity therefore which is passive in its essence, but nevertheless centralized in reserves of new initiatives, and progressively releasable from material servitudes with a view to spiritual ends to be pursued. [1347]

[1346] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 56: Sous l'apparente torpeur et stagnation, il y a donc toujours force vive, énergie accumulée, activité intestine, mouvement moléculaire, force d'explosion dont nos physiciens et nos chimistes contemporains étudient la prodigieuse condensation en cela même.

[1347] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 222: un système de forces déjà spécifiées, des natures offrant une constitution essentielle et agissante, chacune selon une énergie qui lui est propre, bref une activité qui s'éveille, d'abord soumise non seulement à la permanente et directe initiative de la Cause première, mais encore à l'organisation des autres puissances cosmiques qui se concentrent en un foyer virtuel et capable de

All that we require is that 'activity therefore that is passive in its essence, but nevertheless centralized in reserves of new initiatives …' [1348] should be replaced by 'activity therefore that is always active, and constantly productive of new initiatives … '. [1349]

When Blondel discusses the definition of action he states that Aristotle is an important source and then suggests that

> The agent becomes, in a way, his act [*acte*] and his very work. And so it is not enough to think in terms of a plan: one must carry out what has been designed to realize the way to be, and to possess truth or the good. From a first point of view, action [*action*] with regard to thought and the formally conceived ideal seems to be an accidental addition: but, on the other hand and more truly, action [*action*] belongs to the category of substance and expresses or even realizes and constitutes the truth of being which involves a simultaneity of opposites and a unitive convergence … [1350]

It is no surprise that if Aristotle is an important inspiration then 'substance' will be the controlling category, and action will have to be fitted into that. However, if action were to be the controlling category then we could rewrite Blondel's text as follows:

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réactions singulières: activité par conséquent qui est passive en son fond, mais cependant centralisée en réserves d'initiatives inédites et progressivement libérables des servitudes matérielles en vue de fins spirituelles à poursuivre.

[1348] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 222: activité par conséquent qui est passive en son fond, mais cependant centralisée en réserves d'initiatives inédites …

[1349] activité par conséquent qui est active en son fond, et empêtré en réserves d'initiatives inédites.

[1350] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 324–25: L'agent devient en quelque sorte son acte et son oeuvre même. Et ainsi il ne suffit pas de penser en projet, il faut effectuer ce qui a été conçu pour réaliser la manière d'être et posséder la vérité ou le bien. A un premier point de vue, l'action à l'égard de la pensée et de l'idéal formellement conçu semble un surcroît accidentel ; mais, d'autre part et plus réellement, l'action appartient à la catégorie de la substance et exprime ou même réalise et constitue la vérité de l'être qui comporte une simultanéité des contraires et une convergence unitive ... .

> … action is the primary category and expresses or even realizes and constitutes the truth of being which involves a symphony of diversity and an infinite divergence …

Extension

In the first volume of the 1936 *L'Action* Blondel uses '*action*' both of action in general and of human action in particular. This is not a problem as it is generally clear from the context which he is discussing. Where action in general is being discussed we can employ selection, and where human action is in view we can ask whether what Blondel writes could be applicable to action in general by extension. For instance, there are places where '*action*' means contingent action in general, and other places where only human action is in view. A greater coherence would have been possible if human action had been explicitly understood as a subset of contingent action in general. We can extend the meaning of such passages as this in which Blondel discusses human action:

> It seems that in our previous research we have confused and pursued the examination of the two questions, distinctly posed, on the one hand on pure Action [*Agir*], on the other hand on human action [*action*]. [1351]

To extend the meaning of 'action' from human action to action in general we could simply replace 'human action' with 'contingent action'.

Blondel has already recognised that no clear definition of action in general emerges during the first volume of the 1936 *L'Action* because action is different in every different context. [1352]

> This means that pure action [*l'agir*] is the key to any doctrine of action [*l'action*] and that, starting from transitive reality, we must connect this certain reality to

[1351] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 155: Il semble que dans nos précédentes recherches nous ayons confondu et devancé l'examen des deux questions, distinctement posées, d'un côté sur le pur Agir, de l'autre côté sur l'action humaine.

[1352] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 321–22.

> the pure Act [*Acte*], even more certain and the only absolutely definable and perfect reality.[1353]

Having dismissed the possibility that reconciliation of contingent action with Action can be achieved by starting from contingent action, Blondel is resting his hope for a relationship on the pure Act: but that 'we must connect' is a clear statement that he remains in some doubt as to whether a route has been found between Action and contingent action.

Action, Being, and Thought

> Thinking is already to act [*agir*], an intellectual and intelligent action [*agir*]. But, moreover, action [*agir*] is something else even than thinking. It is a discernment, a confrontation, a rating, a coefficient, an evaluation, a speculatively arbitral sentence, an act of judicature, a restitution of their true truth, of their objective and hierarchical importance to ideas and realities.[1354]

It is the action that enables thought to be itself:

> There is therefore an itinerant work to be continued in the elaboration of a normally active thought to become itself, to discern the multiple figures of truth and error, even before one has to decide on fidelity or resistance to intellectual appreciation and the dictates of conscience.[1355]

[1353] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 322: C'est dire que l'agir pur est la clef de toute doctrine de l'action et qu'il y a lieu en partant de la réalité transitive de rattacher cette réalité certaine à l'Acte pur, plus certain encore et seul absolument définissable et parfait.

[1354] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 352–53: Penser est déjà un agir, un agir intellectuel et intelligent. Mais, de plus, agir est autre chose encore que penser. C'est un discernement, une confrontation, une cote, un coefficient, une évaluation, une sentence spéculativement arbitrale, un acte de judicature, une restitution de leur vérité vraie, de leur importance objective et hiérarchique aux idées et aux réalités.

[1355] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 351: Il y a donc une oeuvre itinérante à poursuivre dans l'élaboration d'une pensée normalement agissante pour devenir elle-même, pour

And Blondel binds together thought, being, and action: 'To act [*Agir*] … is truly to realize thought, to enliven being …' [1356]

> We should not draw too rigid and too exclusive conclusions from these remarks because the line of truth to follow is not exactly the same for everyone. There are various attractions which are legitimate, truly good vocations, despite the abstract classifications which would claim to scale them along a single line. [1357]

However, we shall take Blondel's 'remarks' seriously, as again we have found passages in which '*action*' means action in general; passages that we can amend slightly so as to refer to action in general rather than just to human action; and passages for which we can extend the meaning from human action to action in general: so again we can conclude that Blondel could easily have written a volume in which '*action*' meant action in general rather than human action.

Oliva Blanchette notes that much of the material in *La Pensée* and *L'Être et les Êtres* is about Action, asks why Blondel then felt the need to publish two volumes on Action, and concludes that Blondel wanted to understand 'the *acting* itself in any action'. [1358] But there is more to it than that. Whilst the two volumes of the 1936 *L'Action* are about Action and particular actions, they frequently represent Action as underlying both Thought and Being, and action as underlying thought and being—Action 'has to do with

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discerner les multiples figures de la vérité et de l'erreur, avant même qu'on ait à se prononcer sur la fidélité ou la résistance à l'appréciation intellectuelle et au dictat de la conscience.

[1356] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 272: Agir … c'est vraiment réaliser la pensée, vivifier l'être … .

[1357] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 354: Il ne faudrait pas tirer de ces remarques des conclusions trop rigides et trop exclusives. Car la ligne de la vérité à suivre n'est pas exactement la même pour tous également. Il y a des attraits divers qui sont légitimes, des vocations vraiment bonnes, en dépit des classifications abstraites qui prétendraient les échelonner sur une ligne unique.

[1358] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 547.

a reality that is coextensive to all that is and to all that thinks'[1359]—although this is a stance from which we sometimes find Blondel pulling back. We could perhaps understand the two volumes of the 1936 *L'Action* as an exploration of the question as to whether Action, Being, and Thought are more an Eastern Trinity of equals or a Western hierarchical Trinity with Action at the apex and Thought and Being as subsidiary understandings of reality.

In the first volume of the 1936 *L'Action* we find multiple references to Aristotle, in whose writings Blondel finds

> a normative canon of thoughts and realities most subject to change, because in this very becoming there can be a fixity of orientation, an internal finality, a rigorous judgment.[1360]

Here action only goes so far: and Blondel finds in both Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas—both of whom he references far more frequently in this volume than in previous volumes—'the impossibility of exhausting the ingredients of action',[1361] and

> the use of the word being … torn between contingent realities and the single Substance that too dryly rational thought would want to invest exclusively with this great name of Being.[1362]

The 'unique Substance' appears multiple times in the 1936 *L'Action*: for instance,

> the ideas of cause and action [*action*], while remaining immanent in the totality of the single Substance, seem to transcend the scientific, psychological, or ethical

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[1359] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 10: s'agit d'une réalité coextensive à tout ce qui est, à tout ce qui pense.

[1360] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 276: un canon normatif des pensées et des réalités les plus sujettes au changement, parce que dans ce devenir même il peut y avoir une fixité d'orientation, une finalité interne, un jugement rigoureux.

[1361] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 23: l'impossibilité d'épuiser les ingrédients de l'action.

[1362] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 24: l'emploi du mot être … écartelés entre les réalités contingentes et l'unique Substance qu'une pensée trop sèchement rationnelle voudrait investir exclusivement de ce grand nom d'Etre.

> meaning that a superficial view attributes to the influences of nature, the alleged initiatives of conscious agents, and the dialectical determinations of an anthropomorphic philosophy. [1363]

In this Spinozistic Aristotelian Substance—that is, in a single Substance that encompasses all reality—there is only an illusion of 'initiative and effective action'. [1364] Blondel suggests that we are no longer satisfied by a disinterested 'love … of the divine Substance' [1365]

> in which everything is necessity and freedom indivisibly, nor, on the contrary, to project the absolute into the relative and into the indefinite birth of becoming: but we pretend to make sense, taste, and the very reality of action [*agir*], disappear. [1366]

Blondel can align being with action by proposing a 'conciliatory dynamism': [1367]

> From a first point of view, action with regard to thought and the formally conceived ideal seems additionally accidental: but, on the other hand and more truly, action belongs to the category of substance and expresses or even realizes and constitutes the truth of being which involves a simultaneity of opposites and a unitive convergence, while the other categories, because of their abstract and relative character, exclude this conciliatory dynamism. [1368]

[1363] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 99: les idées de cause et d'action, tout en restant immanentes à la totalité de l'unique Substance, semblent bien transcender la signification scientifique, psychologique ou éthique qu'une vue superficielle attribue aux influences de la nature, aux prétendues initiatives des agents conscients, aux déterminations dialectiques d'une philosophie anthropomorphique.

[1364] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 106: d'initiative et d'agir effectif.

[1365] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 111: amour … de la divine Substance.

[1366] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 111: en laquelle tout est nécessité et liberté indivisément, ni, au contraire, à projeter l'absolu dans le relatif et dans l'indéfinie parturition du devenir; mais on prétend faire évanouir le sens, le goût, la réalité même de l'agir.

[1367] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 325: dynamisme conciliator.

[1368] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 325: A un premier point de vue, l'action à l'égard de la pensée et de l'idéal formellement conçu semble un surcroît accidentel ; mais, d'autre part et plus réellement, l'action appartient à la catégorie de la substance et exprime ou

So there is more to thought than action, and being is somewhat other than action: and for Thomas Aquinas, frequently quoted by Blondel in this volume, action is always towards some end, and that end 'contains an infinitude that the discursive analysis of reason cannot exhaust': [1369] clearly true, but with the consequence that drawing philosophical conclusions becomes problematic. This is particularly true of the created order as a whole:

> It is … by pure and gratuitous liberality without necessity that creative action [*action*] was exercised in order to confer existence on what was not, in order to organize a universal order where everything conspires towards a supreme end. [1370]

Blondel quotes Aquinas: 'to detract from actions proper to things is to derogate from divine goodness ... this position detracts from divine virtue': [1371] and, as Blondel puts it, 'there is no better way to assimilate to God than to participate in creative generosity'. [1372] So there is always action, and action constitutes our relationship with God: but action is always anchored in 'things' or 'Substance', or attracted by a final end. It is a

même réalise et constitue la vérité de l'être qui comporte une simultanéité des contraires et une convergence unitive, alors que les autres catégories, en raison de leur caractère abstractif et relatif, excluent ce dynamisme conciliator.

[1369] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 136–37: contient une infinitude que l'analyse discursive de la raison ne peut épuiser.

[1370] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 196: C'est … par pure et gratuite libéralité sans nécessité que l'action créatrice s'est exercée afin de conférer l'existence à ce qui n'était pas, afin d'organiser un ordre universel où tout conspire vers une fin suprême.

[1371] Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Gentiles*, translated into English by Vernon J. Bourke (New York: Hanover House, 1955–1957), III, 69, quoted in Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 328: "*detrahere actiones proprias rebus est divinae bonitati derogare ... detrahit haec positio divinae virtuti... .*"

[1372] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 327: il n'y a pas de meilleure manière de s'assimiler à Dieu que de participer à la générosité créatrice.

> metaphysical truth which relates both to the necessary conditions of thought and to the ontological solidity of beings forming a coherent whole, as S. Thomas profoundly taught.[1373]

And for Aquinas it is via Being rather than via action that God's existence is affirmed:

> And it is in this sense that St. Thomas was able to say that every thought and every distinct knowledge implies a secret affirmation of God: hence this definition of intelligence and its purpose: it is *capax Entis, capax Dei* [capable of Being, capable of God].[1374]

For both Aristotle and Aquinas, reality is more substance that changes than action in patterns. We could rewrite

> the use of the word being … torn between contingent realities and the single Substance that too dryly rational thought would want to invest exclusively with this great name of Being[1375]

as

> the use of the word action … torn between contingent changing patterns of action and the source of all action that we call Action.

A little construction could have generated a more robust and coherent philosophy: but in the meantime we can see how Blondel's adherence to the 'substance' or 'essence' aspects of both Aristotle's and Aquinas's philosophies has led him to compromise the possibility of a coherent understanding of reality focused on action as underlying both thought and being.

[1373] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 372: vérité métaphysique qui porte à la fois sur les conditions nécessaires de la pensée et sur la solidité ontologique des êtres formant un ensemble cohérent, comme l'a profondément enseigné S. Thomas.

[1374] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 368: Et c'est en ce sens que S. Thomas a pu dire que toute pensée et toute connaissance distincte implique une secrète affirmation de Dieu; d'où cette définition de l'intelligence et de sa finalité: elle est *capax Entis, capax Dei.*

[1375] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 24: l'emploi du mot être … écartelés entre les réalités contingentes et l'unique Substance qu'une pensée trop sèchement rationnelle voudrait investir exclusivement de ce grand nom d'Etre.

In the first volume of the 1936 *L'Action*, action is always 'activity of contingent beings'; [1376] and the two streams of practical life and of theory converge on 'being'. [1377] It is beings that act and think, so by the end of the first volume of the 1936 *L'Action* it is being that is the fundamental category, not action. Blondel writes this about the relationship between the 1936 *L'Action* and the 1893 thesis:

> it will appear more and more clearly that action [*agir*], founded in being, also implies, in what is essential, intelligibility, under the law of a sovereign intelligence and will. [1378]

Whilst the relationship between the subjective and the objective is a matter of action and not of static ideas and objects—'there is solidarity or even initial, functional, and terminal interpenetration' [1379]—the fundamental priority here lies with Being.

The 1893 thesis [1380] is clearly focused on human action, and so on a subset of action, but there was no trajectory towards a more substance-based approach. *La Pensée* [1381] was similarly focused on a subset of the human action subset. But then *L'Être et les Êtres* [1382] refocused Blondel's project onto Being and beings, although it did not give up on the importance of Thought, thought, Action, and action, and sought dynamic bonds between

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[1376] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 278: l'activité des êtres contingents.

[1377] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 283: l'être.

[1378] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 298: il apparaîtra de plus en plus clairement que l'agir, fondé dans l'être, implique aussi, en ce qu'il a d'essentiel, l'intelligibilité, sous la loi d'une intelligence et d'une volonté souveraines.

[1379] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 349: il y a solidarité ou même compénétration initiale, fonctionnelle et terminale.

[1380] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), first published in 1893.

[1381] Maurice Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome I, La Genèse de la Pensée et les Paliers de son Ascension Spontanée* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934); *La Pensée, Tome II, Les Responsabilités de la Pensée et la Possibilité de son Achèvement* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934).

[1382] Maurice Blondel, *L'Être et les Êtres* (Paris: Librairie Felix Alcan, 1935).

all of those and Being and beings. The first volume of the 1936 *L'Action* [1383] extends the boundary of '*action*' beyond the human and is more aware of the action at the heart of all reality: so why did Blondel take a lead from Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas and continue to focus on Being and beings to the extent that action is frequently the action of beings, and Being is often the fundamental category into which Action and Thought have to fit? We have shown how selection, construction, and extension indicate how both the 1936 *L'Action* and the trilogy as a whole could have been quite different in an action-focused direction if a relatively small number of minor amendments had been incorporated: so why did Blondel not choose to retain action as the primary concept? The obvious answer to that question is the same as the reason for the increasingly theological ethos as the trilogy emerged. Blondel had been criticised by ecclesiastics who were concerned that his philosophy was not sufficiently coherent with Roman Catholic Christian doctrine. Blondel had no wish to fall out with the Church's hierarchy, so he took great care to follow Aquinas, recognised as *the* Doctor of the Church, and that meant that Substance and Being had to be more foundational than Action, and that even the Pure Act was not in fact active. [1384] But none of that meant that Blondel was going to give up his conviction that only a philosophy of action could reconcile philosophy and theology while maintaining their distinction, and that only such a philosophy could enable philosophy to tackle the supernatural. [1385]

> To safeguard the homogeneity and completeness of philosophy in its method, spirit, and conclusions, it is clearly from the point of view of action [*l'action*] that we must develop it, because it is from such a perspective that the most speculative truths and the most empirical requirements converge and are confirmed, without our being able to disregard the God of speculation, the God of charity, the destiny of secondary causes, the absolute transcendence of pure

[1383] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936); *L'Action, Tome II, L'Action Humaine et les Conditions de son Aboutissement* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1936).

[1384] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 408.

[1385] Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, "Préface: La Philosophie ou la Sainteté de la Raison. Pourquoi ce Colloque?" in *Maurice Blondel: La Sainteté de la Raison*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 9–18. (Paris: Hermann, 2022), 11–12.

> action [*pur agir*], or of the secret demands of a vocation that calls us to a more than human end. [1386]

We can draw this speculative conclusion: By prioritising Being over Action, and by regularly referencing Thomas Aquinas, Blondel was insulating himself against ecclesiastical criticism, and the downgrading of Action from its former priority gave him the ability to extend the meaning of '*action*' from human action to action in general as this could now be regarded as a subsidiary issue of little importance and in particular as an extension of the meaning of '*action*' effectively insulated against interfering with theological questions about the nature of God.

[1386] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 389: pour sauvegarder l'homogénéité et l'intégralité de la philosophie en sa méthode, en son esprit et en ses conclusions, c'est bien du point de vue de l'action qu'il convient de la développer ; car c'est dans une telle perspective que les vérités les plus spéculatives et les exigences les plus positives convergent et se confirment, sans qu'on puisse faire abstraction ni du Dieu de la spéculation, ni du Dieu de charité, ni du destin des causes secondes, ni de la transcendance absolue du pur agir, ni des secrètes exigences d'une vocation appelant l'homme à une fin plus qu'humaine.

Chapter 7

The second volume of the 1936 *L'Action*

Introduction

The first volume of the 1936 *L'Action* was a new book, but the second volume is a revision of the 1893 *L'Action*. The purpose of this chapter is to study Blondel's revisions, many of which made the text more explicitly theological. Blondel is here expressing his own conservative Roman Catholic faith prior to a more systematic expression of it in the subsequent *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien*.[1387] Whether during this period of his philosophical career we should call him a catholic philosopher or a philosophical catholic is a matter for debate. We shall also notice some additional new trends, and in particular the contribution of recent scientific developments, and more of a tendency to study action in general rather than just human action. Now 'the entire movement of the universe'[1388] is in view.

Space constraints mean that a comprehensive study of the changes that Blondel made to his 1893 *L'Action*[1389] would not be possible, so I shall choose what I hope will be a fairly representative sample of additions and amendments.

As the second volume of the 1936 *L'Action*[1390] is a revision of the original thesis for which 'action readings' have already been given, no new categorisation of passages will be offered here. The reader will find a general trend in the additional text that Blondel provided as he revised the thesis: that action is now more often action in general.

[1387] Maurice Blondel, *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien, Tome I, Autonomie Essentielle et Connexion Indéclinable*, fourth edition (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1950. Originally published in 1944); *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien, Tome II, Conditions de la Symbiose Seule Normale et Salutaire* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1946).

[1388] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 297: tout le mouvement de l'univers.

[1389] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893).

[1390] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II, L'Action Humaine et les Conditions de son Aboutissement* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1936).

The second volume of the 1936 L'Action

The second volume of the 1936 *L'Action* [1391] is a revision of *L'Action* [1392] published in 1893. Some of the revision is rearrangement, and some is clarification, but most of it is the addition of theological material or the rewriting of passages in a more theological direction. Not all of the revision results in a coherent composition, largely because Blondel was by now effectively blind and so could not review for himself the way in which his assistant Nathalie Panis was completing the manuscripts of the trilogy. [1393]

The introduction to the second volume remains largely within the philosophical agenda that informed the 1893 *L'Action*: that human action, and the gap between the willing and willed wills, imply an immanent transcendence. Thus Blondel asks for a philosophy that draws from 'all of the sources of thought, being, and action, intimately united but distinct for us in the interest of our spiritual birth'. [1394] What is required is a unity of 'all of the riches of spiritual being', [1395] including intuition and aspirations, uncertainties and clarifications. The introduction then reiterates the conclusion of the first volume: [1396] that the study of action is relatively autonomous research useful to those not versed in technical philosophy but who want to clarify their human destiny; and that such a study completes an integration of the philosophical tradition. [1397] Thus human life and philosophy can be integrated with each other.

[1391] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936),

[1392] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893).

[1393] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 658–59.

[1394] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 8–9: toutes les sources de la pensée, de l'être et de l'action, intimement solidaires mais distinctes pour nous dans l'intérêt même de notre genèse spirituelle.

[1395] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 9: toutes les richesses de l'être spirituel.

[1396] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action, Tome I, Le Problème des Causes Secondes et le Pur Agir* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1936).

[1397] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 10–11.

> It is legitimate and normal to approach in this direct way the dynamic study of human action as an essential aspect of philosophy. [1398]

Blondel then claims that his study of Being, Thought, and Action, has laid the foundations for a 'practical philosophy' [1399] which can lead all of us to 'the solution to the problem of life', [1400] and which can contribute a 'discipline of human action' [1401] to 'the coherent unity of philosophy'. [1402] As always, action provides the connection 'between the real and the ideal, between practice and speculation'. [1403] As we have come to expect, 'an infinity' [1404] is always present.

The original introduction is then printed with minor amendments, such as this one in which Action

> calls for the assistance of natural, human, and even divine forces … inscribes itself, with all that follows, in an irrevocable reality … determines our spiritual state in a moment that could be our last and that could fix our immortal state. [1405]

A subsequent addition asks about 'a fundamental inclination, an infused aspiration, and a willing will', [1406] that can only seek 'its ultimate end' [1407] through the transitory and

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[1398] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 11: Il est légitime, il est normal d'aborder sous cet aspect direct l'étude dynamique de l'action humaine comme une part insuppléable du philosopher.

[1399] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 12: philosophie pratiquante.

[1400] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 12: la solution du problème de la vie.

[1401] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 12: discipline de l'action humaine.

[1402] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 12: l'unité cohérente de la philosophie.

[1403] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 14: entre le réel et l'idéal, entre la pratique et la spéculation.

[1404] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 14: un infini.

[1405] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 26: réclame le concours des forces naturelles, humaines et même divines, … s'inscrit avec toutes ses suites dans une réalité irrévocable, … détermine notre état spirituel en un moment qui pourrait être le dernier de notre vie et fixer notre sort immortel.

[1406] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 32: une inclination fondamentale, une aspiration infuse, une volonté voulante.

[1407] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 32: sa fin suprême.

finite; and about 'a willed will, an elicited and explicit will',[1408] that conflicts with the willing will and 'begins to want infinitely the finite'.[1409]

Blondel has replaced the original first chapter of the first part of *L'Action* with a new one that asks that every form of action must be studied,[1410] and among the few additions to the existing chapter 2 of the first part is this:

> We need to go still further. Universal relativity, always in motion, is only perceptible, conceivable, and real in relation to an absolute and transcendent frame of reference.[1411]

So there is 'another world'[1412] alongside 'transitory things',[1413] now in relation to an understanding of reality as motion and relativity.

The first chapter of the second part of the book is a lightly revised version of the original, with minor additions that speculate on how science and 'critical philosophy'[1414] can dissolve our appreciation of 'transcendent value'.[1415] In the second chapter an addition adds explicit theology in which 'the Spirit', or 'the Holy Spirit',[1416] 'unites thought and the will in an essential activity'.[1417]

[1408] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 32: une volonté voulue, une volonté élicite et explicite.

[1409] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 32: se mettre … vouloir infiniment le fini.

[1410] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 43–44.

[1411] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 50: il faut encore aller plus loin. L'universelle relativité toujours en mouvement n'est perceptible, n'est concevable, n'est réelle qu'en fonction d'un terme absolu et transcendant de référence.

[1412] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 50: autre monde.

[1413] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 50: des choses transitoires.

[1414] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 67: la philosophie critique.

[1415] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 67: valeur transcendante.

[1416] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 73: l'Esprit.

[1417] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 74: unit dans son activité essentielle le penser et le vouloir …

An interlude addresses the particularities of an industrial society,[1418] and then relates human action to the action of the cosmos:

> Our actions, even from a materialist point of view, do not entirely perish, attached as they are to the continuity of universal becoming. And if in relation to the very fact that they are organic and ideal their repercussions are indefinite, is it not necessary to follow their trajectory, their proliferation, and their history, with the responses that perhaps constitute their responsibility?[1419]

A new conclusion of the interlude asks whether action should be subordinated to science—he's thinking of an industrialised society; or whether science should be at the service of 'the moral ascent of persons and humanity's spiritual progress'.[1420]

In the third part of the book what was the first stage is now the first chapter, and substantial amounts of text have been added that shift attention from human action to action in general.

> Movement, to the extent that it is original and irreducible, is the common driver of the entire cosmic order. But we will only see in movement ... the expressive symbol or phenomenon of what we shall have to study under the name of action, whereas, freed from impotent hopes in the purely objective order, we shall study the truly dynamic and substantial reality of action.[1421]

[1418] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 84.

[1419] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 84: Nos actes, fût-ce d'un point de vue même matérialiste, ne périssent pas tout entiers, attachés qu'ils sont à la continuité du devenir universel. Et si en cela même qu'ils ont d'organique et d'idéal leurs répercussions sont indéfinies, n'est-il pas nécessaire de suivre leur filière, leur prolifération, leur histoire avec les réponses qui constituent peut-être leur responsabilité?

[1420] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 88: une ascension morale des personnes et d'un progrès spirituel de l'humanité.

[1421] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 100–101: le mouvement, en ce qu'il a d'original et d'irréductible, est le commun réalisateur de l'ordre cosmique tout entier. Mais nous ne verrons dans le mouvement … que le symbole expressif ou le phénomène de ce que nous aurons à étudier sous le nom d'action, alors que, dégagés des espoirs impuissants

In chapter 2 much of the original text has been deleted or repurposed elsewhere and new text has been added to emphasise coherence between science and philosophy;[1422] and chapter 3 has been substantially rewritten to describe scientific discoveries since 1893, including Einstein's general relativity.[1423] Blondel puzzles over the apparent contradiction between a general relativity and a fixed speed of light, which he understands as implying 'a transcendent initiative of a thought dominating all series and every conceivable relationship'.[1424] He concludes that

> there is a transcendence already immanent in experience and reason. And if the order of action does not happen without the data that the positive sciences study, it goes beyond them, and it is they that suppose it because this order goes beyond them on all sides: below, within, and above.[1425]

Not only are philosophy and science compatible, but a transcendence understood by philosophy both underlies science and exceeds it, so that

> the philosopher finds himself no more disconcerted than he was in the face of the problems he constantly had to pose and resolve: relativity and yet the reality of becoming and of sensible knowledge, the original existence of movement in duration and extent necessarily joint and heterogeneous, the problem of transcendence without which the idea and the very reality of immanence would be inconceivable, and especially perhaps this question of action, of the consciousness that we have of it, and of its conditions and its purpose. But at the same time the positive sciences ignore what they presuppose of these problems which, in the Pascalian sense of the word, are 'of another order', an infinite and

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dans l'ordre purement objectif, nous étudierons la réalité vraiment dynamique et substantielle de l'agir.

[1422] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 105.

[1423] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 114.

[1424] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 114: une initiative transcendante d'une pensée dominant toute série et toute relation concevable.

[1425] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 116: Il y a une transcendance déjà immanente à l'expérience et à la raison. Et si l'ordre de l'action ne se passe point des données qu'étudient les sciences positives, il les dépasse, et ce sont elles qui le supposent parce que cet ordre les déborde de toutes parts, en bas, au dedans, en haut.

> incommensurable order in relation to the entire domain of mathematical and experimental sciences. [1426]

As in the original thesis, the fourth part of the book is a close study of human action, now studied 'under a dynamic aspect', [1427] and now in a broader context:

> is not the idea [of human action] in fact the result of a spontaneous and complex dynamism, the origins of which take us back not only to the springing source of conscious thought, but to the underground infiltrations that flow from the whole of nature, that come together in the obscure channels of life and sensibility, and that are already organized in this bodily activity, infused everywhere within us, and informed by a reason immanent in the entire human being? [1428]

[1426] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 119: le philosophe ne se trouve pas plus déconcerté qu'il ne l'était devant les problèmes qu'il a eu constamment à poser et à résoudre : relativité et pourtant réalité du devenir et de la connaissance sensible, existence originale du mouvement dans la durée et l'étendue forcément conjointes et hétérogènes, problème de la transcendance sans laquelle l'idée et la réalité même de l'immanence seraient inconcevables, surtout peut-être cette question de l'agir, de la conscience que nous en avons, de ses conditions et de sa finalité. Or les sciences positives ignorent en même temps qu'elles supposent ces problèmes qui, au sens pascalien du mot, sont "d'un autre ordre", un ordre infini et incommensurable par rapport à tout le domaine des sciences mathématiques et expérimentales.

[1427] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 129: sous un aspect dynamique.

[1428] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 132: L'idée [de l'action humaine] n'est-elle pas en effet issue d'un dynamisme spontané et complexe dont les origines nous font remonter non seulement à la source jaillissante de la pensée consciente, mais jusqu'aux infiltrations souterraines qui découlent de la nature entière, qui se réunissent dans les obscurs canaux de la vie et de la sensibilité, qui s'organisent déjà dans cette activité corporelle, en nous partout pénétrée, informée par une raison immanente à tout l'être humain?

This immanent reason is a 'spiritual spring gushing action until it reaches the purpose for which it is made'.[1429] Here we see a more explicit expression of a tendency already present in the original thesis but now explicit: human action's role in unifying the material, the ideal, and the spiritual. However important science now is to understanding human action and everything else, human action remains 'the point on which converge all of the forces of nature, thought, and will',[1430] and it is still true that

> congenital motion of rational nature energised by an infinite aspiration is nourished by the still confused presence of truths and realities transcendent to the entire empirical order. … the principle of conscious action, to be efficient, supposes a final cause which is both interior and transcendent to it,[1431]

with reason understood here as uniting 'the transcendent and absolute with the contingent',[1432] and the transcendent understood as 'a transcendence that implies at the same time all notions of action and all truly causal efficiency'[1433] and that 'remains incommensurable with all contingent reality'.[1434] Reason, which is human action, unites the transcendent and the contingent, and causes the transcendent, the contingent, and knowledge, to converge.[1435] A 'drama'[1436] plays itself out in each of us, leading us 'from

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[1429] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 133: ressort spirituel élevant l'action jusqu'à la fin pour laquelle elle est faite.

[1430] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 149: le point où convergent toutes les forces de la nature, de la pensée et de la volonté.

[1431] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 142–43: motion congénitale de la nature raisonnable aimantée par une aspiration infinie est nourrie par la présence encore confuse de vérités et de réalités transcendantes à tout l'ordre empirique. … le principe de l'action consciente, pour être efficient, suppose une cause finale qui lui est à la fois intérieure et transcendante.

[1432] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 153: le transcendant et l'absolu au contingent.

[1433] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 157: transcendant qu'impliquent à la fois tout sentiment d'agir et toute efficience vraiment causale.

[1434] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 157: reste incommensurable avec toute réalité contingente.

[1435] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 159–60.

[1436] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 160: drame.

infinity to infinity',[1437] and preparing us 'to distinguish and connect reason and freedom in the reciprocal causality of human action'.[1438] Contemporary cosmology tended to assume a closed universe, but Blondel's commitment to 'spiritual agents'[1439] suggested otherwise.

All of these revisions of the original thesis, along with the replacement of 'positive science'[1440] with 'metaphysical or scientific thought',[1441] represent a rebalancing in favour of spiritual realities and a generally broader action-based metaphysic than we find in the 1893 *L'Action*. Blondel rejects the idea 'that acting is posterior and accidental to being, without making an essential contribution to the very determination of *esse*'.[1442] In particular, Blondel is clear that human action is *human* action: that is, the action of our bodies, which are also where reason happens,[1443] and by which human action is 'constrained to the laborious succession of an effort inserted into the historical framework, not only of our own existence, but of the entire universe'.[1444] So human action belongs among the action that constitutes the universe, inviting an extension of our understanding of action to the universe as a whole, with human action understood as more or less boundaried aspects of that action.

An interesting change is that some of the material is divided into 'waves' rather than into the 'stages' of the 1893 *L'Action*, because Blondel wants each wave to continue to

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[1437] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 161: de l'infini à l'infini.

[1438] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 161: à distinguer et à relier la raison et la liberté dans la causalité réciproque de l'agir humain.

[1439] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 165: agents spirituels.

[1440] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 151: science positive.

[1441] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 165: pensée métaphysique ou scientifique.

[1442] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 172: que l'agir est postérieur et accidentel à l'être, sans apporter de contribution essentielle à la détermination même de l'*esse*.

[1443] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 175.

[1444] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 176: astreints à la succession laborieuse d'un effort inséré dans la trame historique non seulement de notre propre existence, mais de l'univers entière.

influence subsequent text, with all of the waves moving in concentric circles, rather than the text being divided into stages that we leave behind as we move through them.

> Before traveling wave by wave through these moving circles where human action spreads … we will compare action to the shaking of the elastic medium where an initial shock generates moving waves unfolding indefinitely in concentric circles. [1445]

The first wave is 'The emergent initiative of action': [1446] and again human action belongs in a universe where the individual

> can therefore finally enrich and perfect their action, their very substance, only by assimilating themselves to the universal order and by assimilating it to themselves. [1447]

And so the waves spread out into the environment and are reflected back to ourselves: an aspect of the situation that was less prominent in the 1893 *L'Action* but is now more easily expressed by the 'waves' terminology.

> All the signs that manifest my intimate states are constructive acts of a new environment and reciprocally serve to signify myself to myself, before becoming, if necessary, expressive signs for others: but anyway, they are already physical creatures, humanized matter, and instrumental projections of an action finding a means to spread its influence and extend its nascent empire. [1448]

[1445] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 130–31, 138: Avant de parcourir onde par onde ces cercles mouvants où se répand l'action humaine … Nous comparerons l'action à l'ébranlement du milieu élastique où un choc initial détermine des ondes mouvantes se déployant indéfiniment en cercles concentriques.

[1446] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 179: L'initiative émergente de l'action.

[1447] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 181: ne peut donc enfin enrichir et perfectionner son action, sa substance même qu'en s'assimilant à l'ordre universel et qu'en se l'assimilant à lui-même.

[1448] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 185–86: Tous les signes qui manifestent mes états intimes sont des actes constructifs d'un milieu nouveau et qui par réciprocité me servent à me signifier à moi-même, avant de devenir au besoin des signes expressifs pour d'autres; mais, en tout cas, ils sont déjà des créatures physiques, de la matière

However, at the same time as action belongs in amongst the contingent realities of the universe, it is also beyond that: 'the order of action reveals itself to us as undoubtedly integrated, but also as transcendent to all empirical data to which it is nowhere reducible'. [1449] So we now need 'an expressly metaphysical conception of action, of its mode of propagation, of its growth and proliferation, and of its total and final integration'. [1450]

The 'second wave', [1451] in which Blondel moves 'from the individual to the person', [1452] understands the dilemma, discussed in the 1893 *L'Action*, that any exercise of the will's freedom results in action that entangles with surrounding contingent reality, thus annulling the will's freedom. [1453] The 'third wave' [1454] employs the waves terminology to introduce interpersonal action into the situation.

> ... human acts insert into the world what would not be there without them: embodied intentions, ideal values which have become sensitive and active, beneficial or scandalous influences: in short, a collective consciousness, a community tradition, and an order or disorder from which all can benefit or suffer. [1455]

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humanisée, des projections instrumentales d'un agir trouvant un moyen de faire rayonner son influence et d'étendre son empire naissant.

[1449] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 184: l'ordre de l'action se révèle à nous comme lié sans doute, mais aussi comme transcendant à toutes les données empiriques auxquelles il n'est nulle part réductible.

[1450] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 187: une conception expressément métaphysique de l'action, de son mode de propagation, de sa croissance et de sa prolifération, de son intégration totale et finale.

[1451] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 191: onde deuxième.

[1452] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 191: de l'individu à la personne.

[1453] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 197–98; Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), first published in 1893: 195.

[1454] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 232: onde troisième.

[1455] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 237: … les actes humains insèrent dans le monde ce qui n'y serait pas sans eux, des intentions incarnées, des valeurs idéales qui sont

The 'original initiative' [1456] has now suffered a 'decentring', [1457] but the concentric waves still aim at 'the final cause', [1458] which is 'more or less distinctively glimpsed and always secretly active'. [1459] Blondel adds a new moral consequence:

> But also what a terrible responsibility is that of the master if he abuses his prestige and authority to inculcate in the minds entrusted to him, and thus to spread throughout the social organism affirmations or negations of which he is not sufficiently certain that they are founded in reason and are salutary in effect. [1460]

And then new text emphasises society's influence on us:

> This is the problem that the very movement of the wave produced by the initial shaking of my activity gives rise to. How can we reconcile this centrifugal impulse with what seems to come from an aspiration which at first may seem essentially centripetal? [1461]

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devenues sensibles et actives, des influences bienfaisantes ou scandaleuses, bref une conscience collective, une tradition communautaire, un ordre ou un désordre dont tous peuvent avoir à profiter ou à pâtir.

[1456] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 232: initiative originelle.

[1457] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 232: décentrement.

[1458] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 232: la cause finale.

[1459] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 232: plus ou moins distinctement entrevue et toujours secrètement agissante.

[1460] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 249–50: Mais aussi quelle terrible responsabilité que celle du maître, s'il abuse de son prestige et de son autorité pour inculquer aux esprits qui lui sont confiés et pour répandre ainsi dans l'organisme social des affirmations ou des négations dont il ne s'est pas assez assuré qu'elles soient fondées en raison et salutaires en effets.

[1461] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 250: Voilà le problème que suscite le mouvement même de l'onde produite par l'ébranlement initial de mon activité. Comment concilier cet élan centrifuge avec ce qui semble procéder d'une aspiration qui d'abord peut paraître essentiellement centripète?

The 'fourth wave' [1462] moves from interpersonal action to the unity of the family from which emerges 'a new creature, a child, a family, and an already more perfect type of fusion within the multiplicity, and of plurality in a communion of lives, thoughts, and hearts'. [1463] We find little revision of text about the family and friendship, nor of text about society and nation that is now placed in the 'fifth wave'; [1464] and the 'sixth wave' [1465] promises 'extension of action to the universe', [1466] but does not deliver that. However, when we get to the 'seventh wave', [1467] human action's relationship with the universe does come into view:

> It is no longer a question here of the simple empirical details of our existence in the sequence or collision of phenomena: it is about the emergence that locates us above the entire universe in order to know it, to tend to dominate it, and to discern the requirements or the hopes that we need to be human beings, wills, freedoms, and masters. [1468]

The influence that we have on the universe then becomes the basis for the moral character of our action [1469], and finally the 'waves' really do encompass everything:

> the entire movement of the universe seems arranged with a view to allowing the advent of spirits [or minds] capable of directing their destiny and of making the world the theatre of morality and the vestibule of the temple of spiritual life.

[1462] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 253: onde quatrième.

[1463] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 253: une créature nouvelle, un enfant, une famille, type déjà plus parfait d'une fusion dans la multiplicité même, d'une pluralité dans la circumincession des vies, des pensées et des cœurs.

[1464] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 269: onde cinquième.

[1465] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 286: onde sixième.

[1466] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 290: extension de l'action à l'univers.

[1467] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 293: onde septième.

[1468] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 293: Il ne s'agit plus ici des simples détails empiriques de notre existence dans la suite ou l'entrechoquement des phénomènes; il s'agit de l'émergence qui nous met au-dessus de l'univers entier pour le connaître, pour tendre à le dominer, pour discerner les exigences ou les espérances dont nous avons besoin pour être des hommes, des volontés, des libertés, des maîtres.

[1469] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 296.

> Apparently independent or even antagonistic, the physical world and the ideal world are nevertheless mutually coherent in a way that permits a harmony in which the contrasts serve the beauty and the solidity of the symphonic whole. Action is the organ through which the complementary parts agree and are sublimated, as in counterpoint. [1470]

As the seventh wave progresses, the viewpoint turns to the future, to 'the 'essential end', [1471] which is also the 'primitive impulse', [1472] or the 'primordial push', [1473] that has given rise to the successive waves: an idea that looks as if it has been inspired by Teilhard de Chardin's idea that the Omega Point draws the evolutionary process towards itself. [1474] Both action in general and human action have been propelled by this original impulse, so human action 'cannot fail finally to suspend itself from a transcendent reality that goes beyond the universe and human nature itself', [1475] in which context

> the role of the metaphysician is precisely to scrutinize, behind the superficial coverings, the truths and duties on the basis of which our action is inspired by this eternal life which unites in a perpetual possession everything which, in our

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[1470] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 297: tout le mouvement de l'univers semble disposé en vue de permettre l'avènement des esprits capables d'orienter leur destinée et de faire du monde le théâtre de la moralité et le vestibule du temple de la vie spirituelle. En apparence indépendants ou même antagonistes, le monde physique, le monde idéal sont cependant concertés de manière à permettre une harmonie où les contrastes servent à la beauté, à la solidité de l'ensemble symphonique. L'action est l'organe par lequel s'accordent et se subliment, comme dans un contre-point, les partitions complémentaires l'une de l'autre.

[1471] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 304: fin essentielle.

[1472] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 304: l'élan primitive.

[1473] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 304: poussée primordial.

[1474] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Phénomène Humain* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1955), 160, 170–71, 256–65.

[1475] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 304: ne peut pas ne pas se suspendre terminalement à une réalité transcendante qui déborde l'univers et la nature humaine elle-même.

> itinerant state, is past, present, and future, under the law of an intention entirely oriented towards the single transcendent end.[1476]

Transcendence is grounded in 'reality',[1477] and the human being introduces 'an ideal meaning, a metaphysical aim, a transcendent scope',[1478] so metaphysics must now be 'dynamic',[1479]

> a principle of action, a positive reality itself, a presence in us of a superior truth and efficiency, and access to a supra-cosmic and metempiric order.[1480]

The 'eighth wave'[1481] asks how religion relates to other human action, and how to avoid superstition.

> In short, it is a question of knowing whether we want to use this transcendence for our benefit and for our human ends, or to serve it by finding in this disinterestedness the supreme fidelity to what is most generous in our nature, and in particular what conforms to our deepest desire.[1482]

[1476] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 305–6: le rôle du métaphysicien est précisément de scruter, derrière les enveloppes superficielles, les vérités et les devoirs dont notre action doit s'inspirer pour cette vie éternelle qui unit en une perpétuelle possession tout ce qui, dans notre état itinérant, est passé, présent et futur, sous la loi d'une intention toute orientée vers l'unique fin transcendante.

[1477] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 310: le réel.

[1478] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 306: un sens idéal, une visée métaphysique, un transcendante portée' (A2

[1479] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 306.

[1480] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 309: un principe de l'action, une réalité positive elle-même, une présence en nous d'une vérité et d'une efficience supérieures, un accès dans un ordre supra-cosmique et métempirique.

[1481] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 319: onde huitième.

[1482] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 331–32: Il s'agit en somme de savoir si nous voulons nous servir de cette transcendance à notre profit et pour nos fins humaines ou bien la servir elle-même en trouvant dans ce désintéressement la suprême fidélité à ce qu'il y a de plus généreux dans notre nature et de plus conforme à notre plus profond vouloir.

Additional new text identifies science as a potential superstition.[1483]

The 'ninth wave'[1484] finds that our human action never reaches the transcendent that still draws us:[1485] a transcendence that results in experience of something 'obscurely religious':[1486] so Blondel believes that there are no atheists[1487] and that we are 'religious beings'.[1488] The 1893 *L'Action* valued and reformulated the traditional arguments for God's existence, but now these are regarded as 'inertly speculative',[1489] and the sole route to the transcendent is now human action:[1490] human action that constantly turns in on itself and fails to seek 'a transcendence where true self-love will coincide with what has rightly been called a theocentrism of truth and charity'.[1491] The new text then becomes purely theological:

> Let us therefore not object to the inevitable inadequacy between human beings and God in order to remove from action the duty of fulfilling a mission of exploration, submission, and adoration, in relation to the almighty and supremely good majesty.[1492]

[1483] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 334.

[1484] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 340: onde neuvième.

[1485] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 340.

[1486] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 344: obscurément religieux.

[1487] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 344.

[1488] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 344: L'homme … est un être religieux.

[1489] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 345: inertement spéculative.

[1490] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 346.

[1491] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 351: une transcendance où le véritable amour de soi coïncidera avec ce qu'on a justement appelé un théocentrisme de vérité et de charité.

[1492] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 359–60: Qu'on ne tire donc pas objection de l'inévitable inadéquation entre l'homme et Dieu pour retirer à l'action le devoir de remplir une mission d'exploration, de soumission, d'adoration à l'égard de la toute-puissante et toute bonne majesté.

A final additional 'exotic and supreme wave' [1493] is propelled by a 'gratuitous addition granted to rational nature'. [1494] The 'two gifts' [1495] of human rationality and divine grace come together in 'a symbiosis … without compromising by that the incommensurability or the essential and absolute distinction between the creature and the Creator'. [1496] The symbiosis is founded on human reason coming from the same divine source as the gratuitous gift. [1497] More new text follows about the 'order of grace'. [1498]

Blondel is still convinced that in spite of the theological character of many of his amendments to the 1893 *L'Action*, the second volume of the 1936 *L'Action* is entirely based on a 'hypothesis of the supernatural', [1499] and that such a hypothesis 'has its normal location in the most autonomous philosophy'. [1500] This claim runs somewhat counter to such increasingly theological concepts as creation and divine grace.

An 'Expected conclusion' [1501] related to the whole of the trilogy then follows. Blondel discusses such cul de sacs as Descartes' separation of the spiritual and the material and therefore of philosophy and science, [1502] and reiterates the finding that thought, knowledge, the spiritual, and 'universal order', [1503] are implied by the study of thought.

> This intimately emerging and regulated action is to enrich and consolidate [beings'] reality by connecting it and making it participate in the absolute Being,

[1493] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), onde exotique et suprême …

[1494] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 376: surcroît gratuitement accordé à la nature raisonnable.

[1495] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), deux dons.

[1496] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 382: une symbiose … sans compromettre pour cela l'incommensurabilité, l'essentielle et absolue distinction de la créature et du Créateur.

[1497] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 385:

[1498] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 386: ordre de grâce.

[1499] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 386: ordre de grâce.

[1500] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 387: a sa place normale dans la philosophie la plus autonome.

[1501] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 389: Conclusion Expectante.

[1502] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 391.

[1503] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 394: l'ordre universel.

the only one in which essence and existence are eternally one in a pure and perfect action.[1504]

And as before, the study of being, thought, and action invites reference to a transcendence still related to contingency, and we find human action mediating between being, thought, and the universe.[1505] A final section of Blondel's conclusion asks 'How action can become a receptacle for contributions superior to our own nature and thought, thus offering stimulating nourishment for philosophical reflection and spiritual activity'.[1506]

Conclusion

The second volume of the 1936 *L'Action*[1507] is a substantial revision of the 1893 *L'Action* in which much of the original text has been deleted, lots of it has been reused in different places, and lots of new text has been added. We have been able to identify some significant trends in the revisions.

Blondel is now more willing

- to explore action beyond human action and to see human action as one element of the action of nature and of the cosmos as a whole;
- to emphasise action's role in unifying the material, the ideal, and the spiritual; and
- to discuss the explicitly theological and to regard it as a proper subject for the philosopher.

[1504] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 395: Considérer et promouvoir … cette action intimement suscitée et réglée, c'est enrichir et consolider … [la] réalité [des êtres] en la rattachant et en la faisant participer à l'Etre absolu en qui seul essence et existence sont éternellement une dans un pur et parfait agir.

[1505] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), 396–98.

[1506] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936), Comment l'action peut devenir un réceptacle pour des apports supérieurs à notre nature et à notre pensée propres, en offrant ainsi des aliments stimulateurs pour la réflexion philosophique et l'activité spirituelle.

[1507] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome II* (1936),

Additional differences between the 1936 second volume and the 1893 *L'Action* are that Blondel now offers more quotations from other philosophers, and, following a period during which he has taken a generally more positive attitude to science,[1508] he has taken note of scientific change. A certain tension is in evidence: there is more about modern science, and about action in general rather than just human action, and there is also more about Roman Catholic doctrine. This encourages us to reiterate a conclusion that we drew at the end of the previous chapter: that a clear and evidenced statement of faithful Roman Catholic commitment had given Blondel the freedom to extend the meaning of '*action*' from human action to action in general: a move that he could support with scientific evidence and that he could successfully insulate from theological questions about the nature of God.[1509]

For the purposes of this thesis, the most relevant difference between the second volume of the 1936 *L'Action* and the 1893 edition is that Blondel's attention is now more focused on action in general as well as on human action, suggesting that human action is increasingly regarded as a subset of action understood more generally. Blondel's thesis has become both more about action in general and more theological. It is easy enough to conclude that the increasing recognition that the universe is constituted by action was at least partly based on changes to the ways in which scientists were understanding the universe, and this could be a major reason for the concept of action being more about action in general than in previous volumes. We can only speculate that the increase in theological content was driven by Blondel's own Roman Catholic Christian faith which he felt more able to express in his writings now that he was no longer tied to a secular academy. And particularly speculative is the possibility that the more theologically orthodox character of Blondel's work made it easier for him to insulate an extension of the concept of action from human action to the action of the universe from any suspicion that God might be regarded as subject to change. Following the trilogy, Blondel

[1508] Fiachra Long, "Blondel on the Origin of Philosophy," *Philosophy Today* 33, no. 1 (1989): 21–27, 24.

[1509] Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 656.

published two volumes of the projected three volume *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien* [1510], the agenda of which is almost entirely theological.

We thus find two trajectories in Blondel's work: from action understood as human action to action understood as the action of the universe within which human action is one particular kind of action; and from secular philosophy with careful theological implications to theology philosophically expressed.

[1510] Maurice Blondel, *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien, Tome II, Conditions de la Symbiose Seule Normale et Salutaire* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1946).

Conclusions

> *Thought* joins *being* through the mediation of *action* open to the *Christian spirit*. [1511]

Evolution of the meaning of 'action'

The aim of this thesis was to contribute to our understanding of Blondel's philosophical works by showing that he initially restricted his treatment of action to human action but later began to extend it to other kinds of action; by finding that the treatment of action could easily have been about action in general throughout, which suggests that the initial restriction to human action was a choice; and by asking why Blondel chose an initial restricted treatment of action and then broadened it: although because it is always difficult to ascribe motives, in relation to this element of the purpose of the thesis we shall be obliged to speculate. A further purpose was to ask whether Blondel was operating with an actological rather than an ontological understanding of reality: that is, with Action rather than Being as the fundamental concept.

As we have surveyed Blondel's writings we have shown that in the 1893 *L'Action* Blondel's focus was on human action, and that as time went by, although human action remained at the centre of his attention, he was more willing to understand action as action in general. The trajectory has been from regarding as primary the subordinate dictionary definition of '*action*'—'It is particularly used of human actions, both physical and intellectual'—to regarding as primary the primary dictionary definition—'The operation of any agent, physical, chemical, mechanical, or immaterial'. [1512]

[1511] Henry Duméry, *La Philosophie de L'Action: Essai sur l'Intellectualisme Blondelien* (Paris: Éditions Montaigne, 1948), 173: La *pensée* rejoint l'*être* par la médiation de l'action ouverte à l'*esprit chrétien*.

[1512] Académie Française, *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr: Il s'emploie souvent par rapport à la morale, et se dit généralement de Tout ce qu'on fait. … L'opération d'un agent quelconque, physique, chimique, mécanique, immatériel.

By reading the introduction to the 1893 *L'Action* we have developed a categorization: We have placed in a 'selection' category texts in which '*action*' means action in general; into a 'construction' category texts that can be easily and minimally rewritten so as to understand '*action*' as action in general; and into an 'extension' category texts that in their contexts have to be read as about particular kinds of action but that without rewriting can have their meanings extended so as to understand '*action*' to mean action in general. We have then employed these categories as we have read most of Blondel's major works—the 1893 *L'Action*, and the trilogy—*La Pensée*, *L'Être et les Êtres*, and the 1936 *L'Action*. By employing this categorization we have discovered that in the 1893 *L'Action* '*action*' means human action, whereas as Blondel's philosophical career progressed it came to mean action in general, with human action understood as a particular kind of action.[1513] We have also discovered throughout Blondel's oeuvre passages in which minor amendments can change the meaning of '*action*' from human action to action in general, and passages in which in their contexts '*action*' means human action but that out of those contexts it could mean action in general. This suggests that throughout his career Blondel could easily have understood action as action in general.

When we combine our two conclusions—that Blondel's understanding of action evolved from a clear focus on human action in the 1893 thesis to a broader understanding as his career developed; and that throughout that career he could easily have written works in which '*action*' meant action in general—we have to conclude that the initial restriction of the meaning of *action* to human action was a choice: which leads to the question as to why that choice was made. Three possibilities have emerged. The evidence gathered in chapter 2 suggests that Blondel was working within a philosophical tradition focused on human action; evidence to be found in chapter 3 suggests that Blondel's own Christian faith was a significant factor; and we can also suggest that what Blondel wrote was significantly influenced by what he had to defend himself against.

The 1893 thesis had to be defended before a laicized philosophical establishment and so had to eschew explicitly theological material (the final more theological section of the

[1513] Henri Bouillard, "Philosophie et Christianisme dans la pensée de Maurice Blondel," in *Le Centenaire de Maurice Blondel 1861–1961 en sa Faculté des Lettres d'Aix-Marseille*. *Publications des Annales de la Faculté des Lettres Aix-en-Provence* ns 35 (1963), 61–81, 80: agir en général.

published version was added after the examination). However, the thesis had clear theological implications, and we can speculate that in order to defend himself against ecclesiastical critique in the absence of explicitly orthodox theological material in the thesis, Blondel had to write a thesis about human action, because to write about action in general would have laid him open to the criticism that he was implying that change was ubiquitous, with the implication that Christian doctrine and the Church's structure were subject to change, and that God might have been as well.

Following the thesis, Blondel wrote explicitly apologetic works in which theological considerations were to the fore, and discussion of action played a less significant role: but we have discovered that in these publications the argument would often lead towards a discussion of action in general as a means of crossing abysses between thought and being, between history and Christian doctrine, between philosophy and theology, and so on, and that although the treatment was largely restricted to human action, the meaning of '*action*' increasingly broadened to encompass action in general.

Then came the trilogy, by which time Blondel had shifted from the 'phenomenism', or 'phenomenology', of *L'Action* [1514] to 'the metaphysic of the Tetralogy'. [1515] By choosing to write first about Thought and then about Being, Blondel was able to give a lower priority to discussion of action, and was able to be somewhat ambiguous about the relationships between Action, Thought, and Being, and between action, thought, and being. We can speculate that by slowly increasing the extent of orthodox Christian theological content Blondel was insulating himself against ecclesiastical critique, as well as expressing his own religious commitment, and that this gave him the freedom to extend the meaning of action to action in general, with human action understood as a particular type of action. He then included substantial quantities of theological material in the two volumes of the 1936 *L'Action*, and particularly references to Thomas Aquinas, which enabled him to extend the meaning of '*action*' to action in general, and in places to

[1514] Michael A. Conway, "A Positive Phenomenology: The Structure of Maurice Blondel's Early Philosophy," *The Heythrop Journal* 47 (2006): 579–600, 585–86.

[1515] Paul Favraux, *Une Philosophie du Médiateur: Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Éditions Lethielleux, and Namur: Presses Universitaires de Namur, 1986), 32, 59: le "phénoménisme" apparent de *L'Action* … la métaphysique de la Tétralogie.

suggest Action's logical priority in relation to Being and Thought, and action's priority to being and thought.

The ways in which we have been able to place text in our 'selection', 'construction' and 'extension' categories have shown that Blondel could easily have written his entire oeuvre on the basis that action was first of all action in general, with human action and thought as subsets of that, and on the basis that both Being and Thought were fundamentally Action; and we have speculatively concluded that there were initially reasons for Blondel restricting his attention to human action, and that because in later works he was free to include explicitly theological material he was then able to insulate himself against the potential criticism that to understand action as action in general could have had unorthodox theological implications. Our initial conclusions—that the understanding of action in Blondel's publications evolved from human action towards a broader understanding,[1516] and that he could have understood action as action in general throughout—are evidenced from his publications. The conclusion that Blondel was working within a tradition that focused on human action is based on our reading of Blondel and of philosophers whom we can justifiably believe to have influenced him. Our conclusion that the initial restriction and the later broadening were choices for which there were reasons relating to Blondel's own religious commitment and to his need to defend his publications against criticism from both a laicized academy and ecclesiastical authorities is somewhat more speculative.

Blondel was always both a philosopher and a committed Roman Catholic Christian, and so in a laicized France he was always going to experience tension between those two vocations. Before 1905, the year of the official separation of Church and State, the situation was fairly fluid, so Blondel could successfully defend his 1893 thesis in spite of its clearly theological implications. Following the publication of the thesis and the Church/State separation, Blondel wrote apologetic works: explicitly theological works in which philosophy was the servant of the theology—a strategy that served his own religious agenda and at the same time enabled him to retain the confidence of a Roman

[1516] René Virgoulay, "De *L'Action* à la Tétralogie: Continuité ou Rupture?" in *Maurice Blondel: Une Dramatique de la Modernité*, 112–24 (Paris : Éditions Universitaires, 1990), 114, 119, 122.

Catholic hierarchy under pressure from laicization and therefore defensive of Roman Catholic dogma of an often quite extreme character. By that stage, secure in his university appointment, Blondel no longer felt the need to avoid theological content in his publications, and so could think in order to believe and believe in order to think.[1517] He then planned and wrote the trilogy, the content of which became increasingly theological: The first two parts of it steered largely clear of the concept of action by focusing on thought and being, both of which Blondel was able to steer in a theological direction. The third part of the trilogy then needed to be written, and in order to match the strategy of the first two parts Blondel wrote a new first volume of *L'Action* that aligned a treatment of action with Roman Catholic Christian doctrine, and as the second volume a new edition of the 1893 thesis heavily revised in a theological direction. The almost entirely theological *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien* then followed. The trajectory was theological, and the philosophy largely served that agenda as precursor and servant of the theology. And now, in the context of conservative Christian doctrine, Blondel was free to extend the meaning of '*action*' to action in general, and could ascribe action to God—the pure Act that might no longer have been entirely immobile—in the context of an ecclesiastically acceptable Thomist understanding of God. As Jacques Paliard summarises Blondel's major works:

> A philosophy of the transcendent finds … only in God the gushing source, the pure action, and the perfect union of intelligence and the intelligible. It would therefore be going beyond the line of spiritual dynamism as envisaged by Mr. Blondel to seek in an absolutely separate, sufficient, and completed act, the secret of what can only be in human beings an apprehension, a flowering of truth, ultimately, a second creation, a distant imitation of pure divine action from which human intelligence draws light as if from a subjectivity so intimate that it immediately finds itself surpassed by such depth and is soon obliged to see in this subject the object that it cannot produce.[1518]

[1517] Michel Faye, "Maurice Blondel, Disciple de Saint Augustin: Une Métaphysique de l'Incarnation," in *Maurice Blondel: La Sainteté de la Raison*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 153–64 (Paris: Hermann, 2022), 163.

[1518] Jacques Paliard, *Maurice Blondel ou le Dépassement Chrétien* (Paris: Editions Julliard, 1950), 295–96: Une philosophie du transcendant ne trouve … qu'en Dieu la source jaillissante, le pur agir et la parfaite union de l'intelligence et de l'intelligible. Ce serait

A particular detail of the history that we outlined in Chapters 2 and 3 is relevant to an understanding of why the 1893 thesis, and much that followed it, largely restricted the treatment of contingent action to human action. First of all, it was Thomas Aquinas's theophilosophy that largely determined Roman Catholic doctrine, and whilst earlier in his career Blondel resisted neo-Thomism, largely because that over-rational appropriation of Thomas Aquinas's philosophical theology was so intimately connected with *L'Action Française*, later on he explicitly referenced both Aquinas and the Aristotelian philosophy that had significantly shaped Aquinas's conceptual framework. As we recognized in chapter 2, whilst for both Aristotle and Aquinas there were intimate connections between Being and Action, and between beings and action, of which Blondel would have been well aware from his reading of Ravaisson, a fundamental reality for Aquinas was Aristotle's 'substance': a concept at the heart of Eucharistic doctrine in particular. To have treated the whole of reality in terms of action, rather than as changeable substance, could have attracted the attention of influential ecclesiastics whose confidence Blondel needed to retain; and to have treated the entire created order in terms of action would have raised the question as to whether revelation had to be understood in those terms. Newman's *The Development of Christian Doctrine* [1519] had already raised that question and had argued that development was always of a permanent original core, which was of course entirely acceptable. If Blondel had understood the whole of reality in terms of action then he would have brought that compromise into question: and if revelation were to be ubiquitously changeable, then there was a risk that God was changeable, and, perhaps even more importantly, that the Church's structure was. We can understand why Blondel might have wished to steer well clear of raising such questions: hence the restriction of the 1893 *L'Action* to human

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donc sortir de la ligne du dynamisme spirituel tel que l'envisage M. Blondel que de chercher dans un acte absolument à part, suffisant et achevé, le secret de ce qui ne peut être en l'homme qu'une appréhension, une fructification du vrai, en définitive, une création seconde, une lointaine imitation du pur agir divin auquel l'intelligence humaine puise la lumière comme à une subjectivité si intime qu'elle se trouve aussitôt dépassée par une telle profondeur, aussitôt obligée à voir en ce sujet l'objet qu'elle ne saurait produire.

[1519] John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1974).

action, and the first two books of the trilogy being about thought and being in their relationships with action, leaving a new treatment of action itself to the final part of the trilogy. And we can now understand the character of the 1936 *L'Action*: first of all it is heavily revised in an explicitly theological direction in order to express Blondel's own conservative Christian faith and to retain the confidence of the Church; and within that clearly theological context, and because he constantly emphasizes the difference between philosophy and theology, Blondel is able to follow contemporary science into understanding the whole of the created order in terms of action because he can locate a definition of '*action*' as action in general in the science and philosophy categories and a more substance-based Christian doctrine in the theology category.

A counterargument to this conclusion runs as follows: When Blondel described his philosophical journey in *L'Itinéraire Philosophique*, he was clear that he had always planned to structure his philosophy around Being, Thought, and Action, and that the choice of Action as the subject of his 1893 publication was simply related to the necessity of finding a tightly constrained subject for a thesis:

> Without the career requirement that forced me to write *L'Action* and to make of this rough fragment an academic exercise, I certainly believe that that book, or perhaps better that chapter, would not have seen the light of day.[1520]

However, this is not how Blondel saw it at the time. He fought hard to be permitted to write his thesis about Action, when he could so easily have obtained permission to write about either Thought or Being. We can only conclude that the divergence from a complete focus on human action into a trinity of Thought, Being, and Action,[1521] was a strategy developed later because Blondel had become as interested in Thought and Being as he had originally been fascinated by Action; because both Thought and Being were easier to tackle in the context of the kind of Christian philosophy that Blondel

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[1520] Maurice Blondel, *L'Itinéraire Philosophique de Maurice Blondel: Propos Recueillis par Frédéric Lefèvre* (Éditions Spes, 1928), 196: Sans la nécessité de carrière qui m'a forcé à éditer *L'Action* et à faire de ce fragment ébauché un exercice scolaire, je crois bien que ce livre, ou plutôt ce chapitre, n'aurait pas encore vu le jour.

[1521] René Virgoulay, "De *L'Action* à la Tétralogie: Continuité ou Rupture?" in *Maurice Blondel: Une Dramatique de la Modernité*, 112–24 (Paris : Éditions Universitaires, 1990), 114.

wanted to write than Action could ever be; and that an analogy could be drawn between the trinity of Thought, Being, and Action, and the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[1522]

The diversity of approach across Blondel's writings means that Blondel can be interpreted as writing an ontology with Being at its heart,[1523] or as writing an actology with Action at its heart. We have concluded that if he had wished to then Blondel could easily have written the whole of his philosophy in terms of action in general, but that for reasons of ecclesiastical acceptability and of his own convictions he decided not to do so. His initial intention really was a philosophy of Action, and in different circumstances he might have written about Thought and Being in those terms.

So what kind of philosophy was Blondel doing? Illtyd Trethowan labels it 'philosophy of religion',[1524] but it is more complex than that. On the basis of the evidence presented here I would suggest that what began as philosophy with tentative theological consequences gave way to theology in the publications between the 1893 *L'Action* and the trilogy, then in the trilogy to more theologically amenable philosophy, and finally in *La Philosophie et L'Esprit Chrétien* to Christian theology expressed philosophically in the first volume and expressed theologically in the second. Blondel had initially thought that there was no such thing as 'Christian philosophy',[1525] but later on he gave a more

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[1522] Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, Coutagne, "Préface: La Philosophie ou la Sainteté de la Raison. Pourquoi ce Colloque?" in *Maurice Blondel: La Sainteté de la Raison*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 9–18 (Paris: Hermann, 2022), 13.

[1523] Favraux, *Une Philosophie du Médiateur*, 67.

[1524] Illtyd Trethowan, "Introduction: Philosophical and theological," in *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, by Maurice Blondel, translated by Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan, 80–116 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 80.

[1525] Maurice Blondel, *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en Matière d'Apologétique et sur la Méthode de la Philosophie dans l'Étude du Problème Religieux*, in *Les Premiers Écrits de Maurice Blondel*: *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en matière d'Apologétique (1896) Histoire et Dogme*, by Maurice Blondel, 5–95 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956), first published in 1896, 47; *The Letter on Apologetics*, in *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, by Maurice

positive meaning to the term,[1526] and whilst his philosophy was not philosophy of religion, in the sense of studying religions as cultural objects, it was certainly religious philosophy[1527] that sought a Christian theology fully coherent with philosophical method.[1528] Throughout that journey Blondel had achieved his aim: to build bridges between thought and being, between the transcendent and the immanent, between theory and practice, between philosophy and theology, and between universals and the contingent:[1529] and in relation to this last bridge, Blondel was particularly clear that thought had to begin with contingent human action, and so it was human action in its immanence that is open to the transcendent:[1530] which is why there is little sense of completion in his philosophy.[1531] Such bridges were required then, and they are required still, and because of the contingency of things they must be continually rebuilt. For this reader, Blondel is an inspiration: not to stay where he ended up, with human action as the bridges, but to recast his theophilosophy actologically so that an understanding of the whole of reality as action in changing patterns might be able to build the many bridges that we need today: a development that Blondel could have achieved himself had he not been so restricted by his own conservative Christian theology and his

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Blondel, with an introduction and translated by Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan, 125–208 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 165.

[1526] Maurice Blondel, "Y-a-t-il une Philosophie Chrétienne?" *La Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 38, no. 4 (1931): 599–606, 605, 606.

[1527] Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron, "Philosophie Apologétique et Philosophie de la Religio,." in *Maurice Blondel et la Quête du Sens*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 11–20 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1998), 12.

[1528] Trethowan, "Introduction: Philosophical and theological," 109.

[1529] Claude Troisfontaines, "L'Approche Phénomologique de l'Être selon Maurice Blondel," in *Maurice Blondel: Une Dramatique de la Modernité*, 69–80 (Paris : Éditions Universitaires, 1990), 78; René Virgoulay, *Philosophie et Théologie chez Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 189–91.

[1530] Bertrand Saint-Sernin, *Blondel: Un Univers Chrétien* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2009), 11.

[1531] Pierre de Cointet, "Maurice Blondel. L'Exigence du Concret," Preface to *Maurice Blondel: Un Réalisme Spirituel*, by Pierre de Cointet, 7–11 (Saint-Maur: Éditions du Carmel, 2000).

understandable desire to retain the confidence, or at least the acquiescence, of the ecclesiastical authorities of his day.

It is not insignificant that a more recent French Roman Catholic philosopher, Jean-Luc Marion, developed another action-based theophilosophy.[1532] Whether there is something intrinsically action-based about a modern Catholic Christian theophilosophy would be an interesting question to study further: but what we can say on the basis of our discussion of Blondel's philosophy is that the theological turn in French philosophy that Dominic Janicaud dated to the 1970s in fact occurred eighty years earlier.[1533] What we can also say is that our methodology has enabled us to conclude that Blondel's early restriction of his study of action to human action could have been a choice and that later on he felt more able to study action more generally as long as he could maintain a clear boundary between a philosophy of action and a theology largely inoculated against it. The result was not quite an 'integrated realism'[1534]—'a realism demanding to be completed in *L'Action*,' and 'the centre of the metaphysic to be deployed in the work announced in the Tetralogy'—nor was it an 'integrated philosophy',[1535] although if the foundation of Blondel's philosophy had been action in general rather than human action then a deeper integration might have been possible.

Evolutions

Blondel's thought was anything but static. In much the same way as Raymond Jahae has discovered an evolution across Blondel's works from an initially negative attitude to the positive sciences to a more nuanced view that although the sciences were not of positive

[1532] Malcolm Torry, *An Actology of the Given* (Eugene, OR: Resource/Wipf and Stock, 2023).

[1533] Dominic Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

[1534] Favraux, Paul. *Une Philosophie du Médiateur: Maurice Blondel*. Paris: Éditions Lethielleux, and Namur: Presses Universitaires de Namur, 1986, 97.

[1535] René Virgoulay, *L'Action de Maurice Blondel, 1893: Relecture pour un Centenaire* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1992), 124–27: philosophie intégrale.

metaphysical value they nevertheless contributed to the development of human thought,[1536] we have discovered a similar evolution from '*action*' understood as human action to '*action*' more often understood as action in general. Another evolution that we have frequently noted is one from philosophy with theological implications to theology understood philosophically. Each of these evolutions happened for their own reasons. The evolution of the meaning of '*action*' from human action to a broader understanding of it was positively inspired by recent scientific developments and by such new philosophical influences as Teilhard de Chardin's, and was made possible by the explicitly theological works and revisions reducing the need to avoid unwanted theological conclusions being drawn from a broader understanding of '*action*'. The increasingly theological character of Blondel's publications was made possible by the security of a university post far from Paris, and then of retirement, meaning that he no longer had to please a secular academic establishment and was free to write the explicitly theological philosophy that had always been his intention. Whilst the reasons for each of the two evolutions were different, there is one connection between them: The increasing theological content of Blondel's published work made possible the extension of the meaning of '*action*' from human action to action in general, with human action as a special case.

The '*action*' and theological evolutions that we have identified across Blondel's oeuvre are by no means the only ones. For instance, he gives a brief mention to an impersonal 'mediator' in the 1893 *L'Action*; a divine mediator is discussed in *La Pensée*; and then in *La Philosophie et L'Esprit Chrétien*, the entirely theological work published after the trilogy, the mediator is Jesus, fully a member of the Trinity:[1537] although as René Virgoulay has pointed out, and as becomes clear following a reading of Blondel's works, whilst the doctrine of the incarnate divine mediator is central to Blondel's faith, he

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[1536] Raymond Jahae, "The Concept of Positive Science in the Main Works of Maurice Blondel," *Gregorianum*, 85, no. 3 (2004): 539–58.

[1537] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), 461; Maurice Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934), 276; Maurice Blondel, *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien, Tome I* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), xiv ; Paul Favraux, "Blondel: Une Philosophe du Médiateur," in *Maurice Blondel: Une Dramatique de la Modernité*, 169–79 (Paris : Éditions Universitaires, 1990), 178.

appears to be supremely uninterested in the human action of the human Jesus:[1538] something of a surprise given his interest in human action.

A further evolution alongside that of the meaning of '*action*', and that from philosophy with theological implications to theology understood philosophically, is a noticeable shift in Blondel's treatment of the 'pure Act'. Towards the beginning of his career Blondel treated the pure Act in Artistotelian fashion as itself unchanging and unmoving, but later on we find him oscillating between the pure Act as unchanging and not intimately related to secondary causes and the pure Act as absolutely dynamic and related to secondary causes. The reasons for this loosening of the concept of the pure Act will be much the same as those that enabled Blondel to evolve the meaning that he gave to '*action*': the explicitly theological publications that cohered with Catholic doctrine enabled him to understand the pure Act as somehow dynamic without too many doctrinal questions being asked, and he was able to retain a God who remained unchanging by treating the pure Act as a characteristic of God rather than as a definition of God.[1539]

Blondel's continuing influence

Countless theologians have been influenced by Blondel's theophilosophy, and some of those have gone on to further promote Blondel's works.[1540] Particularly important in this respect was Paul Archambault who as a student studied Blondel's 1893 *L'Action*,[1541]

[1538] René Virgoulay, "La Christologie Philosophique de Maurice Blondel," in *Maurice Blondel: Une Dramatique de la Modernité*, 201–9 (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1990), 207.

[1539] Blondel, *L'Action, Tome 1* (1936), 213.

[1540] Pierre de Cointet, "Introduction: Maurice Blondel, Philosophe," in *Maurice Blondel et la Philosophie Française*, edited by Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet, 11–19 (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007), 16–19; René Virgoulay, *Philosophie et Théologie chez Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 183–88.

[1541] Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), first published in 1893.

conducted a long correspondence with Blondel, and in 1928 and 1941 wrote full-length books about Blondel's philosophy. Blondel regarded Archambault as an accurate interpreter of his writings.[1542]

Lucien Laberthonnière, who had read Blondel's 1893 *L'Action* three times within six months of its publication,[1543] was appointed by Blondel as editor of the journal *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne* that he had purchased when its previous owner had died.[1544] Both Laberthonnière and Blondel were opposed to both Modernism and the nationalism and neo-Thomism of *L'Action Française*, and it was typical of the *Annales* that it introduced John Henry Newman's ideas on the development of Christian doctrine to a French readership. Both the method and content of Laberthonnière's writings sometimes followed Blondel's: for instance, the careful demolition of positions followed by arguments supporting a preferred position; relationships between thought, action, and the will similar to those proposed by Blondel; the influence of Pascal; and all of this in the cause of apologetics.[1545] Laberthonnière closes his *Essais de Philosophie Religieuse*, written between 1891 and 1901 and published in 1903, with a full page of

[1542] Paul Archambault, *L'Oeuvre Philosophique de Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Librairie Bloud & Gay, 1928); *Initiation à la Philosophie Blondélienne en Forme de Court Traité de Métaphysique* (Paris: Librairie Bloud & Gay, 1941); Jean Leclercq, "Maurice Blondel et Paul Archambault en Correspondence: Ou l'art d'être un bon interprète," in *Blondel entre* L'Action *et la Trilogie*, edited by Marc Leclerc (Bruxelles: Éditions Lessius, 2003), 96–109.

[1543] Maurice Blondel et Lucien Laberthonnière, *Correspondance Philosophique* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1961), 66.

[1544] Alexander Dru, "Introduction: Historical and biographical," in *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, by Maurice Blondel, translated by Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan, 1–79 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 59; Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 226–27.

[1545] Lucien Laberthonnière, *Essais de Philosophie Religieuse* (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1903), 19–101, 121–26, 193–229.

panegyric on Maurice Blondel and his theophilosophy: 'There is only one Master of whom we are all equally disciples …'.[1546]

Eventually disagreements emerged. For Blondel, God's second gift, a redemption to which our response was required, became as significant as God's first gift, creation, but not for Laberthonnière;[1547] Blondel experienced a deepening appreciation of Thomas Aquinas's theology, whereas Laberthonnière did not;[1548] and eventually Laberthonnière's more conflictual style caused his books to be placed on the Roman Catholic Church's Index of condemned writings in 1913[1549] and drove Blondel and Laberthonnière apart.[1550]

In 1934 Yves De Montcheuil coedited a collection of extracts from Blondel's *L'Action*[1551] that clearly represented the tome's development from the moral problem to action as the only legitimate response to social problems, to God as intimately involved in our action, and to the social bonds created by human action at various levels.[1552] The volume contributed significantly to the diffusion of Blondel's philosophy, and in particular to the dissemination of the idea that theology could free itself from the rigid conceptual

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[1546] Laberthonnière, *Essais de Philosophie Religieuse*, 324–25: il n'y a qu'un Maître dont nous sommes tous également les disciples.

[1547] Julien Lambinet, "Une Amitié Sacrifiée: La mortification dans la correspondance entre Blondel et Laberthonnière," in *Blondel entre* L'Action *et la Trilogie*, edited by Marc Leclerc, 66–79 (Bruxelles: Éditions Lessius, 2003), 79.

[1548] Mario Zani, "'Continuité Évolutive' ou 'Reniement' de l'Inspiration Originaire? Éléments de réflexion à partir de la correspondence Blondel–Laberthonnière," in *Blondel entre* L'Action *et la Trilogie*, edited by Marc Leclerc, 80–95 (Bruxelles: Éditions Lessius, 2003).

[1549] Blondel et Laberthonnière, *Correspondance Philosophique*, 221.

[1550] Dru, "Introduction: Historical and biographical," 61; Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 229–30.

[1551] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893).

[1552] David Grumett, "Blondel, the Philosophy of Action and Liberation Theology," *Political Theology*, 11, no. 4 (2010): 507–529, 518–19.

structures of neo-Thomism.[1553] A further edited collection drew from a wider selection of Blondel's works and emphasised the obligation to act: an approach that Blondel subsequently commended.

De Montcheuil's compilations of extracts from Blondel are credited with contributing to French Catholics' ability to resist collaboration with the Nazi occupation.[1554] A theologian directly involved in the French Resistance was Henri de Lubac, whose theology of Christians actively engaging in political affairs influenced the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium*. He credited Blondel with focusing his mind on the supernatural, and on the divine influence on human action that demolishes any distinction between nature and grace.[1555] De Lubac published and annotated a significant proportion of Blondel's correspondence.[1556]

Emmanuel Gabellieri has identified multiple other influences that Blondel's philosophy has exerted: the *Semaines Sociales*, discussed in Chapter 3, continued to be inspired by Blondel's social philosophy; and many of the twentieth-century philosophers whose works can be found in the bibliography of this thesis were influenced by Blondel, although Gabellieri's view is that Emmanuel Falque had treated the transcendent as a heuristic rather than as a reality alongside the finite and contingent.[1557] Blondel's influence has been particularly fertile in relation to *theo*philosophy: in philosophical Christology, trinitarian theology, the study of mysticism, and ecclesiology. Gabellieri lists seven popes whose ecclesiologies, philosophies, and theologies, have been significantly

[1553] Russo, Antonio. 'Yves de Montcheuil et Maurice Blondel'. In Leclerc, Marc. *Blondel entre* L'Action *et la Trilogie*. Bruxelles: Éditions Lessius, 2003, 125–39.

[1554] Grumett, "Blondel, Philosophy of Action and Liberation Theology," 518.

[1555] Grumett, "Blondel, Philosophy of Action and Liberation Theology," 520–21; Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 68.

[1556] Marie-Gabrielle Lemaire, "Henri de Lubac et Maurice Blondel—Henri de Lubac and Maurice Blondel," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 76, no. 4 (2020): 1593–1616, 1593.

[1557] Emmanuel Gabellieri, "Phénomène de *L'Action* et Métaphysique du Don. Les Multiples Fécondités de Maurice Blondel," in *Maurice Blondel: La Sainteté de la Raison*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 130–52 (Paris: Hermann, 2022), 142.

and positively influenced by Blondel;[1558] and Alexis Leproux shows how Blondel's *Histoire et Dogme*[1559] has influenced Roman Catholic biblical studies and in particular Vatican Council and papal documents on the subject.[1560]

Blondel's influence has not been restricted to Europe. David Grumett shows that such liberation theologians as Gustavo Gutiérrez,[1561] Leonardo Boff, and Juan Lui Segundo, appropriated Blondel's theology of action, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. For these theologians, it was as much Blondel's method as his content that was significant, and particularly his demand for critical reflection on human action, with action being the primary factor that gives rise to thought, and the will being the crucial driver of human action.[1562]

One modern theological movement that has been significantly influenced by Maurice Blondel's theophilosophy is Radical Orthodoxy,[1563] the first significant expression of which was John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*[1564] which bemoaned theology's

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[1558] Gabellieri, "Phénomène de l'Action et Métaphysique du Don;" and see on Pope Francis: Andreas Lind, "Maurice Blondel et le Pape François: Le Refus des Intégrismes Religieux et des Nationalismes d'Exclusion," in *Maurice Blondel: La Sainteté de la Raison*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 179–99 (Paris: Hermann, 2022).

[1559] Maurice Blondel, *Histoire et Dogme: Les Lacunes Philosophiques de l'Exégèse Moderne*, in *Les Premiers Écrits de Maurice Blondel*: *Lettre sur les Exigences de la Pensée Contemporaine en matière d'Apologétique (1896) Histoire et Dogme*, 149–228 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956).

[1560] Alexis Leproux, "De Blondel à *Verbum Domini*: Le Fait de la Tradition," in *Maurice Blondel: La Sainteté de la Raison*, edited by Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 165–77 (Paris: Hermann, 2022).

[1561] Juan-Carlos Scannone, "La Philosophie Sociale de Blondel et la Théologie de la Libération selon Gustavo Gutiérrez: Convergences, divergences, apports," in *Blondel entre* L'Action *et la Trilogie*, edited by Marc Leclerc (Bruxelles: Éditions Lessius, 2003), 392–98.

[1562] Grumett, "Blondel, Philosophy of Action and Liberation Theology," 522–23.

[1563] John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (editors), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

[1564] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, second edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

frequent entrapment by secular agendas and demanded that it be clearer about its own validity. As Adam English puts it, Blondel was

> a committed Christian philosopher caught in the cross-fires of ecclesiastic authoritarianism and philosophical nihilism at the turn of the twentieth century who not only survives but rises above the fray to produce works that are thoroughly Christian and uncompromisingly philosophical.[1565]

On this basis he argues that Blondel's works constitute Christian philosophy and that it is on that basis that they have inspired Radical Orthodox thinkers.[1566] However, the questions remain: How significant has that influence been, which Radical Orthodox thinkers have in fact been influenced directly by Blondel, and which have been influenced by Blondel's influence on other Radical Orthodox thinkers? There is something postmodern about the way in which Radical Orthodox theologians understand theology to be a language game with rules not subject to evaluation from within other disciplines: and the postmodern character of some of Blondel's philosophy—for instance, the dynamic self[1567]—might be one reason for Radical Orthodoxy's positive relationship with Blondel's philosophy. If Blondel had continued to extend the meaning of '*action*' from human action to action in general then the whole of reality would have become fluid and a somewhat inconsistent consistent postmodernity would have emerged.

Actology

I developed an actological understanding of reality twenty years ago in a series of articles in the journal *Theology*, and more recently have developed it further in conversation with a variety of philosophers through a series of books published by Wipf and Stock.

[1565] Adam C. English, *The Possibility of Christian Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2007), 3.

[1566] Milbank, Pickstock and Ward (editors), *Radical Orthodoxy*.

[1567] Fiachra Long, "The Postmodern Flavor of Blondel's Method," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 31, no.1 (1991): 15–22.

Actology: Action, Change and Diversity in the Western Philosophical Tradition[1568] finds that two streams run through Western philosophy—one characterized by Being, beings, the unchanging, the unitary, and the generally static, and the other by Action, actions, change, diversity, and the generally dynamic—and this second stream encourages us to see ourselves, the universe, and God, as action in changing patterns rather than as beings that change. *Mark's Gospel: An Actological Reading*[1569] reads Mark's Gospel in the light of an actological understanding of reality, and so understands God, Jesus, and ourselves, as action, change, and diversity; *Actological Readings in Continental Philosophy*[1570] and *An Actology of the Given*[1571] further develop an actology in conversation with a number of continental philosophers; *An Actological Metaphysic*[1572] studies a wide variety of metaphysical and cosmological concepts, such as causality, time, and space, in the light of reality understood as action in changing patterns; a sixth book, *An Actological Theology*,[1573] asks what Christian theology might look like if God, the universe, ourselves, and everything else, were to be understood as action in changing patterns; and the seventh, *A Multidisciplinary Actology*,[1574] fills some gaps by asking what a variety of sciences and humanities might look like in an actological context.

Actology is complementary to ontology. Ontology is the study of being, and so in the course of attempting to understand the nature and characteristics of reality a particular exercise in ontology might generate a conceptual structure that we might call *an*

[1568] Malcolm Torry, *Actology: Action, Change and Diversity in the Western Philosophical Tradition* (Eugene, OR: Resource/Wipf and Stock, 2020).

[1569] Malcolm Torry, *Mark's Gospel: An Actological Reading* (Eugene, OR: Resource/Wipf and Stock, 2022).

[1570] Malcolm Torry, *Actological Readings in Continental Philosophy* (Eugene, OR: Resource/Wipf and Stock, 2023).

[1571] Malcolm Torry, *An Actology of the Given* (Eugene, OR: Resource/Wipf and Stock, 2023).

[1572] Malcolm Torry, *An Actological Metaphysic* (Eugene, OR: Resource/Wipf and Stock, 2023).

[1573] Malcolm Torry, *An Actological Theology* (Eugene, OR: Resource/Wipf and Stock, 2024).

[1574] Malcolm Torry, *A Multidisciplinary Actology* (Eugene, OR: Resource/Wipf and Stock, 2025).

ontology. A classic ontology is Plato's in which reality is divided in two: the unchanging Forms of the One, the Good, Beauty, Justice, and so on as the foundation of reality, and the contingent beings that participate in those Forms as a subsidiary kind of reality.[1575] Just as ontology is the study of being, so actology—a Latin/Greek hybrid term that means 'words about action'—is the study of action, and so, in the course of attempting to understand the nature and characteristics of reality, actology will generate conceptual structures that we might call actologies. For instance, we can replicate the structure of Plato's ontology by developing an actology that understands the foundation of reality as Action, somehow understood, and experienced contingent reality as action in changing patterns, or changing patterns of action, that somehow participate in Action.

An actology is far from easy to conceptualise because our world is constituted by objects. One way of grasping an actological understanding of the universe, ourselves, and everything else, is to begin at the extremes. We now know that fundamental particles are patterned action rather than isolated objects.[1576] The same was true at the origin of the universe: an explosion of action that quickly fell into changing patterns. And the same is true of the universe as a whole, and of ourselves: at every level nothing is static, there are no unchanging beings: there is action, the dynamic, the diverse, movement, and change.

Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy provides us with a useful comparison. Important concepts for him are 'event particle', 'actual entity', 'concrescence', 'nexus', and 'object', with objects understood to be 'without passage'.[1577] There is some debate

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[1575] Plato, *Phaedo*, in *Platonis Opera*, edited by John Burnet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903), 78d–79a10; Plato, *Republic*, in *Platonis Opera*, edited by John Burnet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903), VI, 507b1–c1; VII, 514a1–521b10; David J. Melling, *Understanding Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 94–99.

[1576] Paul A.M. Dirac, *The Principles of Quantum Mechanics*, fourth edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 2–3, 9–10, 15; Malcolm Torry, *An Actological Metaphysic* (Eugene, OR: Resource/Wipf and Stock, 2023), 87–90.

[1577] Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964, first published in 1920), 143; *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 30, 32; *Process and Reality: Corrected edition*, edited by Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 20, 21.

as to whether Whitehead's concepts imply action rather than unchanging objects,[1578] but the fact that his process theology insists on two poles in God—a primordial pole not affected by a changing world, and a consequent pole that is[1579]—suggests that his conceptual framework is constructed on the basis of both Being and Action.[1580] For an actology, Action is the fundamental concept, reality is radically dynamic, there is no 'concrescence', and there are no 'objects' or 'particles'. We experience stabilities in the action, so contingent reality is action in patterns, but those patterns change, so reality is action in changing patterns.

At the beginning of this thesis we asked whether Blondel was working with an actology rather than with an ontology. What we can already be clear about is that in the 1893 *L'Action* Blondel was not working within an actological conceptual framework.

In the introduction to the 1893 thesis the 'being' of the human being is understood separately from human action, which sets up a disjunction within the human being itself. Blondel writes this: '*Je suis et j'agis, même malgré moi; et je me vois tenu, semble-t-il, de répondre pour tout ce que je suis et ce que je fais.*'[1581] Oliva Blanchette translates the sentence like this: 'I am and I act, even in spite of myself; and it seems that I find myself bound to answer for all that I am and do.'[1582] However, at the end of Blondel's text the '*Je suis*' and the '*j'agis*' are in separate phrases, so we should translate as follows: 'for all that which I am and that which I do': so the being and the action of the human being are separate issues and we are separately answerable for '*tout ce que je suis*' and '*ce que je fais*'. Blondel has carefully kept separate the being and the action, so the translation

[1578] Nicholas Rescher, *Process Metaphysics: An Introduction to Process Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York, 1996), 20–25, 55.

[1579] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 524; Whitehead, *Process and Reality: Corrected edition*, 345.

[1580] Malcolm Torry, *Actology: Action, Change and Diversity in the Western Philosophical Tradition* (Eugene, OR: Resource/Wipf and Stock, 2020), 150–75.

[1581] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xi.

[1582] Maurice Blondel, *Action: Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, translated by Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 6/xi.

should do the same. 'I find myself bound, it seems, to answer for all that I am and for all that I do'. There is no actology here.

There are places in which Blondel forms a strong bond between the being of the human being and human action, as here:

> It is into action that we shall have to bring the centre of philosophy, because that is where we find the centre of life.
>
> If I am not what I will to be—what I will, not with my lips, not in desire or in intention, but with all my heart, with all my strength, and in all my acts—then I am not.[1583]

There is an inconsistency here, which we can resolve to some extent by suggesting that the being and the action are separate and that they relate to each other rather than the one constituting the other. The human being can therefore be understood in relation to its being as much as in relation to its action. So this too means that Blondel is not working with an actological understanding of reality.

Did Blondel later on understand reality as a whole as action in changing patterns? We have concluded that '*action*' increasingly meant action in general, but further evidence would be required to determine the extent to which Blondel was working with an actology rather than with an ontology. For instance, we might find multiple passages relating to the cosmos in which '*action*' means action in general, but we might find no passages in which God is understood in terms of action. A positive result—that Blondel was working with an actology—would then be difficult to achieve.

Some of Blondel's more theological passages look as if they are moving in an actological direction:

> There must be within Being which thinks itself, and within Thought that constitutes itself in a substantial perfection, an initiative by which the one who is already fundamentally Being, Spirit, and Charity, generates another himself: this Word, also Being, Spirit, and Love, must be restored as by a filial immolation,

[1583] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xxiii: C'est dans l'action qu'il va falloir transporter le centre de la philosophie, parce que là se trouve aussi le centre de la vie. Si je ne suis pas ce que je veux être, ce que je veux, non des lèvres, non en désir ou en projet, mais de tout mon coeur, par toutes mes forces, dans mes actes, je ne suis pas.

> mediator, and eternal sovereignty to the Father who has given his whole self to him and to whom he gives himself entirely and eternally … [1584]

As it progresses, this passage is increasingly framed in terms of action—'initiative', 'generates', 'given', 'gives'—so we are invited to understand '*l'Être*', 'Being', in terms of action. Other theological passages can equally well be understood entirely in terms of action. For instance, God's relationship with us is framed in terms of a 'preventive or assisting motion'. [1585] However, there remains plenty of terminology that understands reality in terms of being rather than in terms of action. For instance: 'it is impossible for God to deny … his own Substance'. [1586]

In the concluding chapter of *La Pensée*, 'the Word … absolutely expresses the fullness of Being in itself and by itself.' [1587] If Blondel had broadened this conception to encompass an understanding of 'the Word' [1588] as action in changing patterns, then the Being expressed by the Word would also have been constituted by action in changing patterns: so to have recognised this theological relationship, and to have generalised it, would have dissolved Being into Action, and beings into action in changing patterns. This suggests that the logic of the theological aspects of Blondel's philosophy makes possible an actological reading of the whole of the 1930s trilogy in which '*action*' would mean action in general and in which the whole of reality, God included, would be understood as action in changing patterns; and because Blondel understands the theological and the philosophical as closely related, this *Verbe*/*Être*, Word/Being, relationship is indeed the

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[1584] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 276: il y ait au sein de l'Etre qui se pense et de la Pensée qui se constitue en une perfection substantielle une initiative par laquelle celui qui est déjà foncièrement Être, Esprit et Charité engendre un autre lui-même ; il faut que ce Verbe, lui aussi Être, Esprit et Amour, se restitue comme par une immolation filiale, médiateur et pontife éternel, au Père qui s'est donné tout à lui et à qui il se donne entièrement et éternellement lui-même ...

[1585] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 288: motion prévenante ou adjuvante.

[1586] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 303–4: il est impossible à Dieu de renier sa propre félicité, son propre Verbe, sa propre Substance.

[1587] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 395: le Verbe … exprime absolument la plénitude de l'Etre en soi et par soi.

[1588] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 395: le Verbe.

required reconciliation not only of thinking thought and thought thought, but of the whole of reality in a single conception. As Blondel puts it,

> all of our study of thought therefore results in posing in more precise terms the problems of being and acting in their relationship with that of the thinking mind and the thought mind, no longer in so far as we would take thought as the focus of attention for an ontology and a deontology, but, conversely, by seeking in being and action what they have that is specific, original, enlightening, and relevant for a more complete and more normative science of thought itself. [1589]

Whilst we can find hints in Blondel's writings that it would not have been difficult for him to understand the whole of reality, including God, as action in changing patterns, we can find no clear statement to that effect. If that option had been put to Blondel then he might have understood it as a logical extension of the direction in which his understanding of '*action*' was going, but he would probably have wanted to retain at least an unchanging aspect of God, as Whitehead did. [1590] In the 1893 *L'Action*, Blondel asks for 'a science of action' that is 'total', [1591] but as he writes this in a context in which '*action*' means human action, we have to place the text in an 'extension' category and recognise that whilst we might understand a 'total' 'science of action' as an actology, Blondel would not have done so.

A final question is this: If throughout his oeuvre Blondel's use of '*action*', '*agir*', and '*acte*' had conformed to the primary contemporary dictionary definition of '*action*'—'The

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[1589] Blondel, *La Pensée, Tome II*, 396–97: toute notre étude de la pensée aboutit donc à poser en termes plus précis les problèmes de l'être et de l'agir dans leur relation avec celui de l'esprit pensant et pensé, non plus en tant que nous prendrions la pensée comme centre de vision pour une ontologie et une déontologie, mais, inversement, en cherchant dans l'être et l'agir ce qu'ils ont de spécifique, d'original, d'éclairant et d'afférent pour une science plus complète et plus normative de la pensée elle-même.

[1590] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 524; Whitehead, *Process and Reality: Corrected edition*, 345.

[1591] Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) xvii: une science de l'action … totale.

operation of any agent, physical, chemical, mechanical, or immaterial' [1592]—then would his philosophy have been in any sense a better philosophy? We have to say 'no', because as it stands his philosophy is one in which '*action*' and related words change their meaning. The meanings are dynamic, and the philosophy evolves, it changes, it acts. The use of '*action*' is human action; the ways in which '*action*' changes its meaning are human action; and the philosophy is action in changing patterns in a cosmos that is action in changing patterns.

Conclusion

For us today

> Blondel will inspire us to accept and exploit critically the requirements of contemporary thoughtforms in our new context. Blondel's modernity consists first of all in the rational audacity of his thought … [1593]

We shall learn from that audacity by taking Blondel's ideas further than he did as we seek the kind of comprehensive philosophy that Blondel was aiming at:

> We thus glimpse how important it is to integrate into philosophy what is truly contained and irreducibly effective in our consciousness, action, and inevitable destiny, an inevitable destiny in fact irreducible by reason of everything that we carry within us through our connection with the whole universe, through our freedom and actions, through the planting in us of an advance of divine

[1592] Académie Française, *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr: L'opération d'un agent quelconque, physique, chimique, mécanique, immatériel.

[1593] Virgoulay, *L'Action de Maurice Blondel, 1893*, 129: L'inspiration blondélienne consistera donc à accepter et à exploiter de manière critique les exigences de la pensée d'aujourd'hui dans ce nouveau contexte. La modernité de Blondel consiste d'abord dans l'audace rationnelle de sa pensée …

> inheritance pregnant with possibilities, freedom, and responsibility, even if it remains anonymous. [1594]

Perhaps this is what Blondel had always been hoping to achieve: 'a philosophy integrating within itself all of the resources of thought, action, and our living destiny'. [1595]

[1594] Maurice Blondel, *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien, Tome II* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1946), 238: On entrevoit par là combien il importe d'intégrer dans la philosophie ce qui est réellement contenu et indéclinablement effectif dans notre conscience, dans notre action, dans notre destinée inévitable, destinée inévitable en effet, indéclinable, en raison même de tout ce que nous portons en nous par notre liaison avec tout l'univers, par notre liberté et nos actes, par l'inviscération en nous d'une avance d'hoirie divine, fût-elle restée anonyme, prégnante néanmoins de possibilités, de liberté et de responsabilité.

[1595] Blondel, *La Philosophie et l'Esprit Chrétien, Tome II*, 247: une philosophie intégrant en elle toutes les ressources de la pensée, de l'action et de notre vivante destinée.

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