

## MAURICE BLONDEL

### The PHILOSOPHER of FREEDOM

I will never forget the joy and excitement I felt the first time I read the philosophical thought of Maurice Blondel. I was a student of theology at Woodstock College, a Jesuit Seminary in Maryland. I hungered for a philosophical framework which I could use to integrate my religious faith with the deep insights coming from the human sciences, especially psychology. At the same time, I was intensely aware of the inadequacies of traditional Thomistic philosophy to provide that framework. I found in Blondel a kindred spirit whose philosophical thought remains an original and profound response to the problems and the needs of our time.

Blondel defined philosophy as "life itself insofar as it attempts to achieve a clear reflexive consciousness of itself." I appreciated the holistic tone of that definition; philosophy has as its object the whole of human life and not just language or thought in abstraction from life. In his first great work, *L'Action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique*, published in 1893, Blondel took his central insight from a verse in Scripture, "but whoever does the truth comes out into the light" (John 3:21). Blondel saw human life as a continual dialectic between thought and action. He liked to compare the human intellect to the headlights of a car. Those headlights can illuminate our way only as far as the next curve in the road. The car must move forward to that curve before the headlights can illuminate what lies around that curve. In a similar way, each of us must act according to our understanding in order to arrive at the fullness of "light" or wisdom. There is a kind of subjective experiential knowing that comes from human choice and action and cannot be achieved in any other way.

This insight lies at the heart of all modern efforts of human liberation. For example, women derive a unique kind of knowledge of themselves from their subjective experience of themselves as women. Lesbians and gays have a subjective source of knowledge of what it means to be gay or lesbian that comes from their immediate experience of themselves in their lives and actions and which is not obtainable in any other way. The poor have a unique knowledge that comes from their experience of poverty. The only way we who do not share that subjective experience can obtain that knowledge is by listening carefully and respectfully to those who do have that subjective experience and can articulate its meaning.

The question Blondel proposed to explore is the central question: What is the meaning of human life and its common destiny? Blondel contends that humans cannot choose to cease being; we are here, like it or not, for eternity.

*'Yes or no, has life a meaning and do humans have a destiny? I act without knowing what action is, with-out having wished to live. . . . This appearance of the weight of an eternal responsibility, and even at the cost of blood I cannot purchase nothingness, because for me it can no longer be. I find myself condemned to life, condemned to death, condemned to eternity. Why and by what right, since I have neither known nor willed it.'*

**Having posed the question of human destiny, Blondel makes the point that freedom is the very essence of the human subject and the essential condition of possibility for human existence. There can be no human destiny, unless that destiny can be achieved through human freedom. Blondel makes the passionate assertion that each of us must be able to choose life, choose death, choose eternity, otherwise the very existence of the human is an illusion. "There is no being where there is only constraint. If I am not that which I will to be, I am not. At the very core of my being there is a will and a love of being or there is nothing. If human freedom is real, it is necessary that one have at present or at least in the future a knowledge and a will sufficient never to suffer any tyranny whatsoever."**

**Blondel's understanding of human freedom differed radically from the classical understanding of scholastic realism. The scholastics believed that humans were substantially determined by their essence and only free on the superficial level of actions. Blondel believed that for a human to be is to act, and in acting, to freely mold his or her own reality. Humans are not totally nor authentically human unless in the depth of their being and action they seize themselves as a free source, action itself, a constant self-positing. Human freedom is understood as the radical self-positing of our own reality. We must exist at every moment as a consequence of our freedom. If in the depths of our own subjective being we meet with any determinism whatsoever—biological, psychological, social, or even a determinism springing from the divine will, a determinism which lies radically outside the sphere of our free ability to determine ourselves—then we would be forced to accept the conclusion that the existence of the individual human person as such is an illusion.**

**This insight into the radical nature of human freedom led Blondel to accept the principle of immanence as the fundamental methodological principle governing his philosophy. He formulated that principle in these words, "Nothing can impose itself on a human, nothing can demand the assent of her or his intellect or the consent of his or her will which does not find its source from within ourselves." I dealt with the principle of immanence in chapter 10 of my book, *Freedom, Glorious Freedom*, as one of the ways to resolve the differences of masculine and feminine understandings of God in twelve-step spirituality. "That necessity which appears to me as a tyrannous constraint, that obligation which at first appears despotic, in the last analysis, it is necessary that I understand it as manifesting and activating the most profound reality of my own will; otherwise it will be my destruction."**

**Anything that presents itself from without as essential to the achievement of human destiny and happiness must correspond to a need in the dynamic of the human will or, on the psychological level, to a profoundly felt desire in the depths of the human psyche. Blondel did not hesitate to apply this methodological principle of immanence to any manifestation of the divine will. Although the divine will must manifest itself as in some way distinct from our finite will, yet that revelation, if it is not to destroy our freedom and integrity, must be made in some way from within our consciousness of self and prove capable of being assimilated into our free self-positing.**

**The entire movement of modern philosophy has been a continual movement toward a deeper understanding of the role the subject as such plays in human understanding and willing. This movement has led to the conclusion that there is only one possible method to attain the existing subject as such in its unique freedom in a legitimate philosophical manner; we must renounce all attempts**

to make the singular existing subject into an objective content of knowledge, and be content to seize it in our immediate experiential awareness of self in the deployment of our free activity.

All too often we are tempted to conceive of freedom and determinism as contradictories; either we humans are determined or we are free. In an attempt to resolve that dilemma, many philosophers have embraced a form of dualism which views the human as flesh and spirit, given over to total determinism in the flesh, but free only in the spirit. Such an understanding leads to a dichotomy between freedom of intention and determinism of actions.

The very concept "freedom" expresses not an absolute but a relative capacity. From what are we as humans freed and for what are we freed? Because of our self-consciousness and power of reflection, we humans have the negative power to suspend the automatic operation of all determinisms, whether they be biological, psychological, or social. We also have the positive power to project ideal goals, which represent not that which is, meaning that which is given from the past, but also that which ought to be. Since what ought to be does not yet exist, it cannot be understood as exercising a mechanistic style of determinism on the human action it influences. Rather than understanding human freedom as a contradiction of determinism, that freedom can be better understood as a new form of determinism, the substitution of the pull of ideals from ahead for the purely compulsive and unconscious *vis a tergo*, a push from the rear.

Human freedom, then, represents our power to transcend what is factually given from the past, precisely by projecting what ought to be as an ideal goal in the future. The possibility of incorporating those transcendental ideals into our actions by a free choice leads to an awareness of that action as a properly free moral action, and of self as a free moral agent. Humans are, thus, freed from all predeterminism: "... the will is led to place the center of its equilibrium beyond all factual realities, to live as it were on itself, to search in itself alone the purely formal reasons of its acts."

The creative power of the moral act is to be found in the power of the will to synthesize a given set of ideals into the factual reality of its activity by free choice. Humans on the moral level are characterized by self-development. We perceive every choice as a choice between authentic and inauthentic humanity. We see our lives as having a meaning only we can give it through our free choice.

### *The Religious Dimension of Blondel's Dialectic of Will*

Blondel understood the moral development of human life as a dialectic we experience between will-willing and will-willed, where will-willing refers to the capacity or potentiality of the will for perfect fulfillment and the will-willed represents that part of that potentiality that each of us has actualized through our free choices. A key concept for Blondel is the concept of "privation." Privation is a third category between pure actuality and nothingness; it is defined as "the absence of that which ought to be." Like the missing piece in a jigsaw puzzle, one can define what is missing. What is missing, then, has a definable *negative* presence in the will. What is privative in life can be experienced on the psychological level as absence and longing. It is precisely what is experienced as privative in human life that we project out as an ideal goal of our striving. I dealt with Blondel's concept of privation in chapter 6 of *Freedom, Glorious Freedom*. Blondel maintained that

" . . . in the very activity itself of our will is revealed the end to which it necessarily tends and the series of means which it must use. There is a necessary logic of freedom. Human actions can be illogical; they can never be alogical. Either one conforms freely to the law which one carries within oneself, or one opposes it freely, one can never escape it."

This understanding of the dialectic of will led Blondel to a new understanding of truth. Traditionally within objective realism truth was defined as the conformity of our ideas with objective reality. Blondel understood the truth of free human action as the conformity of our free choices with the necessary dynamic of the human will. Accepting the Kantian critique of objective realism, that there is never any way to be sure that the ideas in our mind correspond exactly to objective reality, Blondel replied:

*As long as we see the X to be discovered in the relation of thought and object . . . there is no solution and no real progress is conceivable. But it is altogether different once the unknown is within us, in ourselves. Once, in a word, the truth to be conquered is not an external abstraction, but an internal concrete reality. For if the X of objective thought is inaccessible and indeterminable, the X of our own proper equation with ourselves can be obtained and determined step by step. . . . The solution is already within us, already provisionally determined by each of our moments which could be our last."*

To be true means to become that which one ought to be. The search for truth on the reflective level becomes, then, a search for what one must will to become authentically one with all the potentiality in the self. On the psychological level this becomes a search for the mature authentic self. Blondel agreed with Aristotle's definition of happiness as "using all our potentialities at a certain degree of excellence."

### *Final Option*

Blondel began his study of human freedom with the famous quote: "I find myself condemned to life, condemned to death, condemned to eternity. If my freedom does not give final meaning to my life, I am not; as a human person I have no meaning or identity. I must be free to choose life, to choose death, to choose eternity, or I am nothing." Consequently, my freedom, if it is real and not an illusion, must be able to enter into the very process of dying.

The option for or against transcendence reveals itself in Blondel's understanding of the dialectic of action as the final necessary condition of human freedom." Every free human agent is necessarily faced with the decision to accept or refuse the present of the transcendent within his or her will. The two extreme and contradictory responses to that interior appeal can be either total openness, *disponibilité* without condition, or a will to self-sufficiency, a pretension to dispose of oneself as master of one's own destiny, what Marcel calls *refus de l'invocation*. Blondel maintained that an option is necessarily implied implicitly in every free human commitment. Depending on the alternative, the option resolves itself in either possession or privation of self, the world and God. In other words, the human will ultimately resolves itself in the identity of truth or the real contradiction of error.

Blondel believed that this option, implicit in every human choice, necessarily becomes explicit in the process of dying. For judgment to make human sense, our moment of death must, with the help of God's grace, be a moment of free choice into which the whole history of our lives and all the free choices we have made in our lifetime enter as vector forces. We must be free to make our final choice in the presence of God. All the good, loving, unselfish choices of our life will lead us to choose to enter into union with incarnate love. All our bad, unloving, selfish choices will exert pressure on us to separate ourselves from a presence we experience as painful. And yet our final moment will be one in which we choose and decide what final meaning we will give our lives." If God truly created us free, then He/She must allow us this final option. We must be able to freely choose the nature of our eternity. This is why all religious traditions have always considered the moment of death as so critical: "Pray for us now and at the moment of our death. Amen!"

The most beautiful and accurate image of final judgment that I know, one in total conformity with Blondel's understanding of "final option," occurs in C. S. Lewis's book *The Last Battle*, the seventh volume in his *Chronicles of Narnia*. In this book, Asian, a lion who is the Christ-figure and savior of his world, stands in the doorway of his stable, the same stable in which he was born. One by one, the sun, moon, and stars are extinguished until there is only one source of light left; that which issues from the entrance to the stable. All the creatures of that world rush toward that source of light and come face to face with Asian. Those who hated him in their lifetime and refused his rule of love are filled with loathing and dread when they see him and choose freely to run off into the darkness on his left. But those who loved him and kept his rule of love are filled with joy and run up to hug him and enter into the light on his right.

In this scene, Asian, the God-figure, does nothing; God is what God is. It is the creatures who judge themselves according to how they choose to relate to him. Both Blondel's philosophy of freedom and Lewis's retelling of the last judgment make clear the ultimate dimension of our moral freedom: whether we put God into our lives or exclude Her/His loving presence depends completely on our own choice. We should, therefore, conceive of our death as the opportunity for a decisive and definitive act of free commitment in love, a giving ourselves once and for all into the hands of God: "Into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

Don Pedro Arrupé, the General of the Society of Jesus, shortly before he lapsed into his final coma, was asked to share his understanding of death:

*In reality, death, which is sometimes feared so much, is for me one of the most anticipated events, an event that will give meaning to my life. Death can be considered as an end to life and as a threshold to eternity; in both of these aspects I find consolation. As the end to life, it is still the end of a life that is nothing else than a path crossing a desert to approach eternity. . . . In as much as death is also the threshold of eternity, it involves the entrance into eternity that is at the same time unknown and longed for: it involves meeting the Lord and an eternal intimacy with him. What will heaven be like? It is impossible to imagine. Eternity, immortality, beatific vision, perfect happiness—it's all new, nothing is known. Is death, then, a leap into the void? No, of course not! It is to throw yourself into the arms of the Lord; it is to hear the invitation, unmerited. But*

***given in all sincerity: "Well done. good and faithful servant ... come and enter into the joy of your master (Matt. 25:21); it is to come to the end of faith and hope in order to live in eternal and infinite love (1 Cor. 2:9). I hope my death will be a "consummation est," all is finished, the final amen of my life, and the first alleluia of my eternity. "***

*These are obviously the words of a human who has nothing to fear in making the final option.*

*It took enormous courage for the young Blondel to publish his Philosophy of Action with its passionate defense of human freedom. The Church resented his attack on the synthesis of theology with Thomism. There was a serious threat in Rome to condemn his work. Cardinal Montini (who later became Pope Paul VI) was his defender and won for him the compromise that, if he promised never to publish anything further, his work would not be put on the index of forbidden books. As a result Blondel never published another major work in his lifetime. He became progressively blind in later life, and his subsequent work was published only after his death. He was the first of a long line of prophetic thinkers in the Roman Catholic Church who became victims of that Church's anti-intellectualism. Posthumously, Blondel's reputation as a philosopher of religion was acknowledged at the Second Vatican Council. Many of his disciples, among them Karl Rahner, Yves Conger, Henri De Lubec, and Teilhard de Chardin, were the principal theologians whose thought led to the Vatican II Council, and his name was mentioned in the debates on the council floor over sixty times.*

*At the same time because of his public affirmation of his religious belief, despite his brilliance and originality, Blondel was denied any teaching position in the French university system by the atheist **minister of education**. After several years, he was finally assigned a teaching position at the University of Aix/Marseille, the French university furthest removed from the intellectual center in Paris. This punishment was occasioned by the courageous final statement Blondel made in defense of his thesis: "However, if I can be permitted to add one word, one final word that goes beyond the proper domain of the human sciences and the competence of philosophy, that unique word which is capable, as a result of Christian revelation, to express the best part of that certitude which cannot be had unless it rises up from the intimacy of a personal action, a word which is in itself an action, then, I must pronounce it: God exists ("C'est")"*