

Maurice Blondel: On The Knowledge Of God

I will never forget the joy and excitement I felt the first time I began to read the philosophical and theological thought of Maurice Blondel. I was student of theology at Woodstock College, a Jesuit Theological Seminary in Maryland. The Rev. Father Sponga, the rector of the seminary, offered an optional course in Blondel's thought, having just completed a doctoral study of Blondel at Fordham University. Upon reading Blondel's words, I had what I call a "disciples of Emmaus experience" an experience of "my heart burning within me" and knew that I was dealing with a genius with an extraordinary and original insight into the problems and the needs of our times.

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, insights based in the self-consciousness of the human subject. At the same time, I was intensely aware of the inadequacies of traditional Thomistic philosophy to provide that framework.

In its official teaching the Vatican remains exclusively committed to objective thomistic realism. At the time of the Modernist crisis Church authorities systematically rejected any effort to introduce the human subject into its moral reasoning. This is the deeper reason why the Vatican seems so out of touch whenever it deals with sexual ethics. Paradoxically, the Vatican, which teaches the Christian position that God is love, has no adequate philosophical foundation for dealing with love, human or divine, or with the unique human person and that person's subjective consciousness.

In his encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, published in 1993, Pope John Paul II defended this choice because objective realism makes possible the formulation of absolute, universal laws essential to the power and absolute authority of the Church, whereas to introduce the human subject is necessarily to allow a kind of relativism, which could undermine the absolute authority of the hierarchy. In my understanding to systematically eliminate the human person and that person's subjectivity is effectively to eliminate the role of the Holy Spirit in the development of Christian faith.

For over a hundred years progressive Catholic theologians have urged the hierarchy to develop their philosophical foundation by allowing for the unique human subject, the person, and that person's contribution to theological thinking. Instead of basing its sexual morality, for example, on biology, gender differences and procreation, this would allow theologians to deal with the specific human purposes of sex such as interpersonal love and companionship, but the hierarchy adamantly refused to do so.

As far back as 1893, Maurice Blondel in his book, *L'Action* argued that objective realism, since it could only deal with abstract conceptual reality, was necessarily depersonalized and depersonalizing because the unique individual human person and that person's actions can never be objectified in a concept. He also maintained that love is a human experience that can only be known from within the action of loving.

He believed that a philosophy that included the unique human person would be much more compatible with Christian belief. The ultimate level of truth was not the conformity of human concepts with objective reality but the conformity of will-willing with will-willed. This truth can only be arrived at through human action and commitment and is a truth that is only available subjectively in individual consciousness.

Blondel defined philosophy as “life itself insofar as it attempts to achieve a clear reflexive consciousness of itself and gives direction to its action”. I appreciated immediately the holistic tone of that definition; philosophy has as its objective the whole of human life and not just language or thought in abstraction from life. In his first great work, his doctoral dissertation, *L’Action: Essai d’une Critique de la Vie et d’une Science of la Pratique*, published in 1893, Blondel took his central insight from a verse in Scripture, “but whoever does the truth comes 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” which is 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 essential subjectivity represents a necessary relativism in human knowledge.

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 actions, a knowledge that is not attainable in any other way. The only way that we, who do not share their 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. Dialogue with an open mind is the only approach to ultimate truth. Each of us carries our unique part of divine revelation.

A Philosophy of Freedom

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

Yes or no, has life a meaning and do humans have a destiny? I act with out knowing what action is, without having wished to live..... This appearance of being that is at work in me, these actions fleeting as a shadow, I understand that they carry within them the weight of 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 made the passionate assertion that each of us must be able to choose life, choose death, choose eternity; otherwise the very existence of the human individual 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 in the present or at least in the future knowledge and will never to suffer any tyranny whatsoever.

Blondel's understanding of human freedom differed radically from the classic understanding of scholastic realism. The scholastics taught that humans were substantially determined by their essence and only free on the superficial level of actions. Blondel taught that for a human to be is to act, and in acting to freely mold his or her own reality

Humans are not authentically human unless in the depth of their being and action they seize themselves as 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 that springs from the divine will, a determinism that lies radically outside the sphere of our freewill 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.

The Principle of Immanence

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 our intellect or the consent of our will which does not find its source from within ourselves". "That necessity which appears to me as a tyrannous restraint", Blondel wrote," 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 which 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 human will, yet that revelation, if it is not to destroy our freedom and integrity, must be made in some way 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 human 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.