

NECESSARY STRUCTURES OF FREEDOM¹

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PART I: THE EXISTENTIALIST PROBLEM

One of the primary themes of contemporary existentialist thought is human freedom. At least one sector of the existentialist movement has claimed an absolute freedom for humans. The human alone is the creator who, in order not to become a slave of his or her creations, must continually transcend them by putting them into question. Many recent movements of thought such as “situational ethics” and “death of God” theology result in great measure from this emphasis on human freedom. If the human is absolutely free, there is no problem of a transcendent God, there is only the problem of the human’s continual movement of self-transcendence. Nor is there any question of the existence of an objective morality. There are no values in themselves; no pre-given human nature, nor human destiny mapped out in advance, all there is are humans and their freedom. The success which this theme has had in captivating many minds lies in the fact that it presents us with a very real difficulty. Is it possible to preserve the undeniable exigencies of freedom, subjectivity and existence within the context of a philosophy which recognizes objective and universal truth and values? Many modern thinkers believe that any effort to construct such a philosophy would necessarily involve a negation of these exigencies. The purpose of this essay is to attempt to show how the “metaphysics of freedom,” which is at the core of Blondel’s philosophy of action, contains one approach to a fruitful solution of this difficulty.

THE PROBLEM OF SUBJECTIVITY

What are the undeniable exigencies of subjectivity, existence and freedom on which many modern thinkers base their rejection of all systematic philosophy? Existentialist philosophers are inclined to understand the entire history of modern philosophy from Descartes to Hegel as a continual movement toward greater subjectivity. Yet they contend that philosophers have not yet become fully aware of the only possible manner to attain the subject as such. There is, they contend, only one possible way to deal in a legitimate

[The primary sources used in this paper are, first of all, the texts of Blondel referred to throughout, especially *L'Action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique*, “Bibliothèque de Philosophie Contemporaine” Paris: Felix Alcan, 1893. This first work of Blondel was reedited under the same title in the series “Les Premiers Ecrits de Maurice Blondel,” Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950. Frequent reference is also made to Blondel’s principal work on methodology, “Le Point de Depart de la Recherche Philosophique” published in the *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne* Tome 151 (January, 195) 337-360, Tome 152 (June, 1906) 225-250.

The most important secondary source used in this paper is that of Albert Cartier, *Existence et Vérité: Philosophie Blondélienne de l'Action et Problematique Existential*, “Nouvelle Recherche” Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955. This work remains, in this writer’s opinion, the best commentary on Blondel’s method and thought. Extensive use has been made of it in this paper.

Apart from the primary sources and Cartier’s commentary, the author has also made extensive use of his own previous publication: *The Blondelian Synthesis: A Study of the Influence of German Philosophical Sources on the Formation of Blondel’s Method and Thought* published in the series “Studies in the History of Christian Thought” by E. J. Brill, Leiden, Holland in 1966.

I would also like to call attention to a new important work on Blondel’s thought soon to be available in English, Fr. James Somerville’s work, *Total Commitment: Blondel’s L'Action*. Corpus, 1968. It is an excellent representation, chapter for chapter, of Blondel’s principal work *L'Action* of 1893.

philosophical manner with the subject; one must renounce the effort to make it a content of consciousness and be content to seize it in its activity as subject.

On this point Blondel was in complete agreement. Kant's insistence on synthetic a priori forms of subjective activity was an essential step in the history of the movement towards subjectivity. However, Kant's subject or ego was a universal subject, recognized as the condition of possibility of universal knowledge. Since such a subject is an abstract generalization, it still remains objective. For this reason Blondel proposed his counter-Copernican revolution toward an even greater degree of subjectivity. Until now it has been proposed that thought determines action (Kant); let us pre-suppose that it is action that determines thought, and see if we can make greater progress in the light of this presupposition.²

In Blondel's opinion there is only one subject which is truly subjective -- the concrete individual subject. As Fichte so well established, this concrete subject resists all efforts to reduce it to a content of consciousness. Because it is the "knowing," it can never be contained totally within the known. The problem is that of the container and the contained. If one pretends to make the subject a part of a system of absolute knowledge, in which the knower becomes identified with the known, one has necessarily destroyed the unique nature of the subject as such.³ Here we find the genetic intuition of all modern philosophies of the subject, an intuition which also lies at the source of Blondel's effort to construct a philosophy of action.

There is nothing in the properly subjective life which is not act. That which is properly subjective is not only that which is conscious and known from within (every phenomenon, if correctly understood, is that); it is that which causes the fact of consciousness to be; it is the internal and ever singular act of thinking. . . .

One cannot penetrate that living reality except by placing oneself, not in the static point of view of the understanding, but at the dynamic point of view of the will. One must not try to imagine action, because it is action itself which creates the symbols and the world of the imagination. The true science of the subject is that which, considering from its point of departure the act of consciousness precisely as act, discovers in that act by a continual process its inevitable expansion.⁴

However, such an intuition would seem necessarily to eliminate the possibility of any objective system in philosophy. Existentialist philosophers in general tend to be realists in the sense that they recognize that no subject can pose itself except in relation to other subjects. But they also recognize that the other subject cannot be reached in itself, but only from its point of view as a unique relation with oneself as a unique subject. As a result Marcel argues that the transcendent cannot be assimilated to a point of view in which the philosopher can place himself in imagination: "No operation seems to me more

²Confer "Blondel's Ultra-Kantian Critique," pp. 59-75, in *The Blondelian Synthesis*.

³"In all scientific truth, as in every human reality, in order that it be known, one must suppose a center of concentration imperceptible to the senses or to the mathematical imagination, an operation immanent to the diversity of its parts, an organic idea, an original action, which escapes positive knowledge at the very moment that it renders that knowledge possible -- that is a *subjectivity*." *L'Action* (1893), p. 87. For a commentary on Fichte's influence on Blondel's thought confer "The Ego as Action, pp. 131-154 in *The Blondelian Synthesis*.

⁴Confer "Action: A Genetic Study of the Synthetic A Priori," pp. 76-105 in *The Blondelian Synthesis*. The text cited can be found on p. 82 of this text. It is a translation from a text in *L'Action* (1893), pp. 99-100.

important metaphysically than that by which I recognize that I am unable without contradiction to take the absolute as a central observation point from which the universe can be observed as a totality.”⁵ Or to put the same insight in Blondel’s terms: “We cannot begin with God (as Spinoza did), where we are not; but we must begin with ourselves, where perhaps God is.”⁶

In Marcel’s opinion this is not just a negative conclusion, as it might be in a purely empirical approach to philosophy. Rather, his point is that all objective philosophical systems, which accept an absolute point of view as their point of departure, are necessarily depersonalized and depersonalizing, precisely in so far as they reduce the existing subject to a content of consciousness; whereas the primary task of philosophy should be, to the contrary, to lead humans to rediscover themselves as originating and creative source. All objectivized systems are a menace to the human’s sense of dignity because of the importance they place on necessity, consistency and totality, which leads them to systematically misunderstand the singularity of the existent person and deliver him or her from the risk of freedom, which is his or her grandeur. This is the same consideration which led Blondel to accept the principle of immanence as his point of departure. His understanding of that principle was that “nothing can impose itself on a human, nothing can demand the assent of his or her intellect or oblige his or her will which does not in some way find its source in humans themselves.”⁷

However, it is important to note with Blondel that what we are dealing with here is the question of a point of departure for philosophy and not its conclusions. Even if it is true that philosophy must be anthropological at its point of departure and immanent in its method, yet it is impossible for it to renounce its aspiration to totality. Every great philosopher had as his project, not to present his particular vision of the world, but to build a system which in its conclusions would contain objective truth not of a given time or person but of all times and all persons. On an equally factual basis history and psychology seem to give all philosophers the lie and lead to the conclusion that every philosophical system was internally conditioned by a group of factors which constitute the “situation” of its author. Despite this seeming factual negation of his project, the philosopher still finds himself necessarily involved in a search for an objective truth whose validity is undeniable. One cannot even say *my* truth without an implicit reference to *the* truth. The very concept *my* point of view encloses a necessary reference of opposition to an absolute point of view. Even the affirmation of the relativity of all knowledge is *ipso facto* an absolute affirmation.

The conclusion Blondel drew from this antinomy between the exigencies of the subjective and the objective was that it is necessary to discover the absolute in the relative itself, the universal in the singular. Hence we can no longer begin with an objective method, as for example the Scholastics did in the middle ages with the problem of the universals; rather, by means of a method of immanence, we must search for the transcendent within the immanent, at the root itself of the human’s action and existential subjectivity. Consequently, the problem which Blondel posed at the beginning of his philosophy of action was: Is it possible, without going outside the subject and without being unfaithful to existence, to discover within the subject an opening by means of which

⁵*De Refus ci l’Invocation*, Gallimard, 1940, p. 5.

⁶*L’Action* (1893), p. 344. “From objective knowledge to the reality of the subject, there is no direct route by means of theory or abstract logic. One cannot attain or define the transcendent except by the route of immanence, exteriority except by interiority.” Blondel, “Point de Depart” *op. cit.*, II, 237.

⁷*The Letter on Apologetics*, translated by Alexander Dru and Iltyd Trethowan, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, pp. 156-161. Confer also “The Method of Immanence,” pp. 60-61 in *The Blondelian Synthesis*.

a transcendent can enter, a transcendent which perfects human freedom without in any way negating it?

THE PROBLEM OF COMMITMENT

The second basic genetic intuition which represents a legitimate emphasis of existentialist thought is the concept of *engagement* or commitment. Yet this intuition, like that of subjectivity, necessarily would seem to menace the possibility of human's ever arriving at an understanding of any objective and universal truth or value. This is the intuition that the human is essentially an activity, a freedom. That point of view in which I am situated and which I did not choose becomes *my* situation, that is I make it my own, by the free attitude which I assume in regard to it.

What the philosopher of commitment is implying here is not a temporal succession of two moments: situation-reaction. Rather, these are mutual and simultaneous conditions. As Sartre puts it "There is no freedom except in situation and there is no situation except through freedom."⁸ The free attitude which one assumes is the necessary condition for the perception of one's situation. There can be no perception of a pure passivity except by reference to a correlative activity. Consequently, my vision of the world can never be the result of a pure observation; it is necessarily a *prise de position*, a commitment. Any discovery of meaning or absurdity is necessarily a simultaneous construction of that same meaning or absurdity.

This same intuition led Marcel to the conclusion that all evaluation is beyond proof or refutation. All value judgments are accompanied by a radical option beyond all logic. Ultimate despair, like ultimate hope, is irrefutable.⁹ If such an option is implicated in every ultimate judgment of value and conditions that judgment, then such a judgment necessarily escapes reason. Thus, the only task left the philosopher is to attempt to organize a coherent vision of the world from the point of view of an initial choice. He must grant that there are no rational grounds whatsoever which could validate a selection between radically opposed initial options such as hope or despair.

Despite this conclusion every philosopher necessarily tries to bring his option before judgment. Marcel himself felt obliged to qualify one option as fidelity and the contrary as betrayal. This qualification would seem to imply a necessity on Marcel's part to lift himself to a plane transcendent to either option in order to bring them under judgment. However, how to do so without going outside existence and negating the existential subject and his freedom remains the problem.

THE PROBLEM OF FREEDOM

Both previous intuitions, subjectivity and commitment, are related to a more fundamental intuition which lies at the source of all existentialism, the intuition into the nature of human freedom. The first principle of all existentialist thinking is contained in the proposition: "Man is nothing other than that which he has done."¹⁰ This proposition, we are told, must be constantly recalled to mind as an antidote to the permanent temptation of our intellect to objectify the human. For that objectifying intellect first thrives on the human, and then he or she acts. *Agere sequitur esse*. This Scholastic axiom is frequently misinterpreted as implying that the existence of the subject is reduced to the

⁸*L'Être et le Néant*, Gallimard, 1943, p. 569.

⁹*Être et Avoir*, p. 160.

¹⁰Cartier, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-32

passive being of an object, and human action is reduced to being a function of that object. The only subject acknowledged in such a reduction is the logical subject understood as a center of attribution. Consequently, the statement “I am free” is reduced to the abstract statement “The category human to which I belong has the attribute of freedom.”

The statement “I am free” means something radically different to the existentialist. For a human to be is to act, and in acting to make him or herself. A human’s reality is his or her project; a human does not exist except in so far as he realizes himself. Humans alone among beings are capable of saying “I am,” because in their actions they seize themselves as action. As a result a human is not truly human or subject unless in the depths of his being he is source, *ursprung*, action itself, a constant self-positing. Humans must exist at every moment as the consequence of their freedom. Thus, freedom cannot be understood as a mode of action posterior to being; rather, human’s freedom must be understood beyond all particular actions as the self-positing of human spiritual reality.

The problem which arises from this understanding of the nature of human freedom is the problem of its absolute or relative nature. As Merleau-Ponty formulates it: “Can one give freedom a place without necessarily giving it all?”¹¹ Sartre’s answer is that freedom is necessarily absolute; there is no nature, no destiny, and no value in itself. The only rule is to be free. The essence of a *mauvaise foi* is to pretend that values are imposed on me even though they owe their existence to my own choice. Yet, Sartre feels obliged to make a distinction between authenticity and bad faith. So, once again we find a judgment on modes of freedom which would seem to imply a transcendence of these modes on the part of the one making the judgment.

Blondel also acknowledges an exigency of freedom: “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 indeed, there is nothing.”¹² What is more, there is no easy division of dominion possible between freedom and determinism. Both carry with them an organic drive towards totalization. If human freedom is real, Blondel writes, “it is necessary that one have at present or in the future a knowledge and a will sufficient in order never to suffer any tyranny of any sort whatsoever.”¹³ We are not dealing here with a moral problem; the question is not one of how to increase the power of my will and become master of myself. The conflict is a metaphysical one and manifests itself on the onto-logical level. The conflict manifests itself as an exigency for total freedom without which we would cease to be human. Yet there is a simultaneous experience of determinism which attains to the deepest core of our being. “*Je subis l’etre.*” I perceive myself as given, imposed on myself, incapable of refusing self. Further, I find it impossible to reserve my consent; while at the same time I find a radical incapacity to satisfy myself, to be self-sufficient, and to liberate myself. “I am,” Blondel claims, “condemned to life, condemned to death, condemned to eternity.”¹⁴ The exigencies of determinism and necessity are equally as undeniable as those of freedom. The result is the human antinomy between the fact that I am necessarily that which I am, and the exigency that I should be freely that which I am. “I am nothing which I have not received, and yet it is necessary that all that I am come from me, even the being which I have received and which seems to be imposed on me.”¹⁵

11 *Sens et Non sens*, p. 143.

12 *L’Action (1893)*, p. XXIII.

13 *Ibid.*, p. VII.

14 *Ibid.*, p. VII.

15 *Ibid.*, XXIV.

A solution to the antinomy in humans between freedom and determinism can only be had, in Blondel's opinion, on condition that one could show that in humans the growth of freedom which makes the human what he or she is, that type of continual auto-realization, is not only reconcilable with a radical dependence, but is sustained by it. In exploring the exigencies of freedom we must seek to discover truth within as the very condition of freedom. Only in this way can we establish that freedom is a gift, that the human as source is submitted, without the power to free himself, to a truth which encloses him and a transcendence which he is obliged to affirm, even when he wills to deny it.

Is to make such an assertion necessarily "bad faith?" This would certainly be the case, if there was question here of making my freedom give way before an exterior force and submit itself to a law which would be entirely outside itself. There is only one possible way out of the antinomy. Without denying the fact of determinism one must make it cede before the exigencies of freedom. Determinism must enter into freedom. To "justify" determinism can only mean to show that it is an agreement with the deepest aspirations of human freedom. "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 will; otherwise it will be my destruction."¹⁶ If freedom is factually conditioned from within, if, there is continuity between freedom and determinism, such that that determinism renders the free act of the will possible, then, in submitting oneself to that which imposes itself from within, one would not alienate freedom; rather, one would fulfill and achieve it.

FREEDOM OF TRUTH

The previous antinomy between freedom and determinism can be understood on the epistemological level as an antinomy between freedom and truth. The fundamental premise of existentialism, that freedom lies at the very source of human existence, would seem to render impossible any acknowledgment of objective truth. The traditional concept of truth was that it represented an objective norm of action, which imposed its necessary clarity on the judgment. For the existentialist any truth which would impose itself from without, and would not be humankind's own creation, would necessarily involve a diminution, if not the destruction, of human freedom.

The human spirit in order to be true to itself cannot be totally passive before truth and purely determined by its object. Every affirmation, especially if it is clearly linked with the problem of human destiny, must be an activity which has its source in human radical freedom, in that self-positing which is the proper characteristic of a free being. Thus, all acknowledgment of value must involve an active valorization. To acknowledge truth and value remains a human act only if there is an active construction of that truth or value.

Yet, in the very act by which one freely constitutes truth or value, that truth or value must appear to the subject as "that which is;" in other words, it must appear to the subject as not depending on its affirmation for its being. Truth, in order to be apprehended as truth, must be apprehended as that which cannot be denied, as necessary, as in some sense imposed on the affirmation.

The dilemma, then, is clear. Human freedom cannot suffer to be tied down by an exterior norm of truth or value. Humans to remain free must refuse any external objective norm imposed on their actions. Yet, at the same time, unless one is willing to accept a totally irrational and amoral world, one must admit also that freedom is dependent on a

16 *Ibid* p. XXIII

transcendent truth to which it must conform, that freedom is directed to values which, far from being a human's exclusive creation, serve him as guide, norm and sanction. The two most extreme positions have already been formulated into inadequate philosophical systems. Spinoza constructed a monism of deterministic rationalism in which the human subject and his or her freedom were completely absorbed. Sartre attempted to place truth totally in human hands, and proclaimed a totally irrational world. The problem that remains posed for our reflection is precisely that of understanding how one can maintain the unity in an act of affirmation, whether it is of truth or value, of the two necessary elements of free engagement and necessary adhesion.

EXISTENCE AND TRUTH

At its most profound level the thrust behind all existentialist thought can best be understood as an effort to conciliate existence and truth. Existentialism should be defined, not so much as a reflection on existence, as an effort to existentialize or concretize reflection itself.¹⁷ The existentialist begins, as we have seen, with the fact of the necessary subjectivity of the act of reflection as a concrete act of a situated individual. The primary critique leveled against philosophies of the past has been directed against the depersonalizing effect of an abstract and objectified knowledge. Philosophy for the existentialist ought to be a liberating force. Reflection, then, should not be primarily concerned with the construction of an objective vision as an end in itself. Rather, to reflect philosophically should be understood as an effort to creatively construct experience. This insight leads the existentialists to tend to absorb reflection into autopoiesis or freedom.

The result of an exclusive emphasis on this aspect of reflection is that all philosophical affirmations seem to imply pure gratuity rather than necessity. Obviously these affirmations will not seem gratuitous to the existent person who discovers them in the act by which he assumes them as the only faithful response to an interior appeal. But, as long as reflection presupposes and is founded on an option whose necessary structure and universal application have not been proven, these affirmations must appear to the philosopher as such as gratuitous. In other words what the existentialists appear to be denying are the authentic rights of objective thought. Even if one grant the truth that philosophical reflection is always the singular act of a committed existent, even if it must be understood as somehow included within existence in the concrete order, yet in its own order philosophical reflection must remain a sort of new emergence, a total power in its own right enclosing the totality.

Philosophical reflection fulfills a human need, a demand in the human which obliges him or her to understand everything, even their own proper envelopment by existence. Philosophical reflection represents the human's instinctive return on his or her own existence in order to justify it before reason and establish the ideal goals of its drive. Philosophy, as Blondel defines it, "is life itself in so far as it takes consciousness of itself and gives direction to its action."¹⁸

Consequently, the existentialist's desire to absorb reflection into life, if pushed to its ultimate consequences, would mean to deprive life of its rational consistency and its ideal goals. Yet these goals and that consistency are also an authentic dimension of human life.

¹⁷Cartier, *op. cit.*, pp. 200-210.

¹⁸"Le Point de Départ," *op. cit.*, p. 339.

The terms of the problem are clear: One must clarify the reciprocal inclusion of reflection by commitment and commitment by reflection, showing how one can discover the universality of truth within the singularity of existence. In order to do this we must discover a form of dialectic which is capable of uncovering a series of necessary relations in life without ceasing at the same time to be a free and personal enterprise.

If one grants that the problem posed to philosophical reflection is precisely to uncover the necessary structure within human freedom, then, certain a priori methodological conditions can be established for the validity of any effort to give an answer to this problem:¹⁹

First: Whatever method one undertakes must protect both the distinction and the solidarity in humans of the planes of existence and reflection.

Second: It must succeed in forcing that option, which factually underlies the reflective process from the beginning, to be justified before reason.

Third: Our method must prove capable of discovering a rigorous rational series within a free process.

Fourth: It must be capable of discovering truths which are both created by humans and imposed on them simultaneously.

Fifth: Our method must prove capable of clarifying the necessary structures of subjectivity without reducing the subject to an object.

Sixth, and finally: Our method must enable us to construct a systematic philosophy which gives access to universal and necessary truths without recourse to an absolute viewpoint or a consciousness in general; that is to say, without going outside the existent to a source extrinsic to it for the validation of such truths.

PART II: THE BLONDELIAN SOLUTION

BLONDEL'S METHODOLOGY

In Blondel's opinion only a philosophy of action can fulfill all these conditions. For only a philosophy of action permits one to reflect the totality of existence without in any way refusing to acknowledge the reciprocal transcendence of existence over thought. The genetic intuition which underlies Blondel's method is the distinction he makes between action and the idea of action:

The fundamental principle on which philosophy as a specifically defined science depends is that knowledge, even when it is one with thought and life, neither substitutes nor suffices for the action of thinking and being. On the one hand, that which is immanent in us as action and living thought always remains transcendent to the reflective view or philosophy which one has of it. On the other hand, philosophical

¹⁹Cartier, *op. cit.*, pp. 207-208.

knowledge constitutes a further phenomenon transcendent in its term to that which it represents.²⁰

There is here a distinction between the plane of action or existence and the plane of thought or reflection which must be respected. The distinction which Blondel indicates is not a distinction on the psychological level between theory and external action and practice. Action is understood as also applying to the act of thinking.²¹ Thus, the distinction must be applied at the very core of thought itself.

One must never forget that every thought is at one and the same time action and knowledge. And even if that knowledge is the extract or residue of an entire life which projects itself by concentrating itself, yet the act itself which operates that synthesis flows over and transcends the abstract representation that remains.²²

As act, thought participates in the spontaneity of the subject; it is commitment and freedom. As knowledge, thought reflects the objectively given and ascertains its necessary relations. A necessary truth is, as a consequence, never purely passively acknowledged, but always freely recognized.

On the plane of existence there is a presupposition to Blondel's dialectic which is its moving force. That presupposition for which there is no possible substitution is an attitude of fidelity. Without this continual élan of fidelity of a good will a philosophy of action could not be constituted. Without practical commitment there can be no science of practice. "Before one can discover the exigencies of life, and in order to be able to discern them, one must be already committed."²³ No matter what it costs, one must be prepared never to admit a contradiction within one's will. However, contradiction or a harmony within the will cannot appear before consciousness until the will responds to a call from within. It is in this manner that freedom becomes interior to the very operation of thought itself.

In order to perceive rational necessity at each step in Blondel's dialectic of action thought must make the commitment on its own plane which it then reflects. To arrive at an understanding of a truth one must affirm; but to judge is to commit oneself. One must attempt to realize a harmony between thought as action and thought as knowledge. Thus, the necessary and universal science of action cannot be constructed except by means of a free personal commitment. The inventory is not possible except by means of an invention, in the sense, not of a gratuitous act, but of an actual discovery. One finds that which is, because one searches out that which ought to be; one ascertains, because one consents to that which is. One discovers the truth by a living process of verification. It is fidelity then that moves the dialectic; it is fidelity that keeps one on the right path and

²⁰*The Letter on Apologetics*, p. 180.

²¹"Action . . . indicates principally that human composite, that synthesis "of body and soul," that unity half ideal and half real, which makes action an incomparable center of perspective, a meeting place between the determinism of thought and the determinism of nature, the point of *repère* and departure for a double investigation, which tends to render thought one with action and action one with thought." *Lettres Philosophiques*, p. 82. Confer also the entry "Action," in *Vocabulaires Techniques et Critiques de la Philosophie*, 1926, p. 17; 1947, pp. 20-21. Also "The Meaning of Action" in *The Blondelian Synthesis*, pp. 69-72.

²²*L'Action* (1893), p. 15.

²³*Ibid.*, p. XI.

prevents one's advance from being gratuitous, by guarantying that reason answer to the immanent call of truth.

Granting that fidelity has the first and last word on the existential plane, unlike Marcel's position, it cannot be the ultimate foundation of thought on the reflective plane. There can be no a priori solution here. Yet such would be the case, if existential commitment were operative on this level. Consequently, it is necessary to put into operation the transcendental distinction between affirmation and reflection, maintaining affirmation on the existential plane and at the same time excluding it from the level of reflection until it has been completely justified before reason.

In contradiction to the plane of existence, on the plane of reflection nothing whatsoever can be presupposed. On this plane Blondel makes use of a method of total doubt. "If the problem of action is to be posed scientifically, it is necessary that neither a moral postulate nor an intellectual given be accepted."²⁴ Blondel's philosophy of action is distinct from traditional metaphysics by the fact that the problem of being as such is reserved to last.²⁵ One begins with anthropology; one ends with a metaphysics. One starts only with the problem of human action: What must humans think and do in order to achieve their self-fulfillment? One attempts to show by a rigorous dialectical process how action cannot be placed or maintained without the entire transcendent rational order appearing step by step as the interior law of human action in search of its completion. In this way Blondel tries to overcome the apparent opposition between arbitrary freedom and exterior, despotic truth.

It is extremely important that there be no vicious circle here; one must not grant that which one intends to justify on the same plane. On the plane of reflection, then, we must put into question all laws, all obligations, all truths. At this point Blondel makes use of a method of residues. He systematically searches out all possible escapes from meaning or structure of freedom on the plane of reflection, with the methodological assumption that the only means of proving necessity is to prove impossibility. If, in the process, one discovers a necessity which governs all human's free actions from within, one has succeeded in discovering an aspect of the intelligible law and rational regulation which governs that free activity.²⁶ However, one must never conceive the rational structures of freedom as given a priori at the point of departure of one's philosophical quest. In order to be the truth of free action, rational structures, without ceasing to be necessary, must be engendered by that spontaneous source which is the reality of a free subject., because, for such a subject, both free and rational, to be is to will to be.²⁷

These considerations led Blondel to believe that a form of phenomenological reduction or *epoché* was necessary on the level of reflection. This reduction does not, however, represent a real separation of thought from the act of thinking, reducing philosophy exclusively to the reflective level. Rather, what we are dealing with here is a

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. XXI.

²⁵Confer "The Point of Departure," *The Blondelian Synthesis*, pp. 64-69.

²⁶"If this indeterminate power (of our will) is defined by the fact *that* it wills, and not by that *which* it wills, further, if in the very activity itself of the will is revealed the end to which it necessarily tends and the series of means which it must use, then, that rigorous continuity contains a scientific determination; there is a necessary logic of freedom." *L'Action* (1893), p. 127.

²⁷"The metaphysical order is certainly not something which is outside the will as an extraneous end to be attained; it is contained within the will as a means to move beyond. It does not represent a truth already constituted in fact, but it places that which one wishes to will as an ideal object before thought. It does not express an absolute and universal reality, rather, it expresses the universal aspiration of a particular will." *L'Action* (1893) p. 293.

method of abstraction which presupposes a concrete correlation. The reduction consists in eliminating provisionally from the field of reflection the synthetic activity of the subject and in considering only the series of necessary affirmations, refusing to interrupt the series until reflection itself rejoins the action from which it set out at the point Blondel called “final option.”

An option in the face of transcendence reveals itself in Blondel’s system as the final necessary condition for the fulfillment of free human action. At this point in the dialectic it is necessary to open the phenomenological *epoché*, because free affirmation reappears legitimately within the field of reflection. The option, then, represents the necessary juncture in thought between the two planes of affirmation and reflection. From this point on, the free assent, which until now supported the dialectic from without, is reflected from within in its turn. Reflective thought necessarily returns on its own existential reality. By demonstrating that in every free human action there is necessarily a commitment for or against transcendence and, consequently, in the order of obligation, one must, if one wishes to be faithful to the end to the immanent call of truth, choose for the transcendent; further, by demonstrating that this option, which his method has clarified, was already concretely required on the existential plane in every act of fidelity to the immanent call of truth, Blondel’s dialectic recovers on the reflective plane, and justifies from its own point of view, that continual commitment which was its precondition on the existential plane. Thus, the reciprocal correlation of reflection and commitment, which is lived out in every human action, is put to work in the very dialectic which reflects it.²⁸

In this manner Blondel succeeds in reflecting on existence without parting from it. A system with universal value is constructed without recourse to consciousness in general. The primary critique which Blondel leveled against the existentialists in general was that they seemed more interested in the witness value of their work than in its rational foundations. In his opinion in the same measure as it is legitimate to find access to being by means of existential experience, it is insufficient to found ontology on the reflective plane on contingent attitudes. One must go beyond these attitudes and reach the level of necessity. At the same time the role of the subject in the affirmation of truth is an important reality which is part of the truth itself. Here as everywhere else, reflection has the task of clarifying the universal role of the subject. Rationalists in general failed to pay attention to the subjective conditions necessary for understanding truth. In Hegel’s case this omission became positive, in the sense that he denied in practice that which his method obliged him to omit. Whereas the existentialists tended to absorb thought into existence, and the rationalists tended to absorb existence into thought, Blondel sought to distinguish thought and existence without separating them and to unite them without confusing them. In so doing he sought to develop a method capable of determining the necessary structures of human’s existential freedom.

The challenge to which Blondel responded was to attempt to justify commitment without ceasing to be committed. No philosophical system can be produced except within the context of its author’s situation. But in Blondel’s situation, Christian faith constituted an essential fact. Blondel’s faith was operative in his system on the existential plane; it was a concrete condition of possibility which permitted his dialectic to deploy itself to the end, even to the understanding that it is reasonable to transcend reason by means of faith. However, no a priori of faith intervened on the level of reflection.

²⁸“It is necessary, in order to possess the real in ourselves in the very knowledge we have of it, to pass by means of the option, which confers on our speculative idea of things the fullness of its meaning and content.” *Lettres Philosophiques*, p. 165.

THE DIALECTIC OF THE HUMAN WILL

The fundamental distinction between thought as action and thought as knowledge finds its expression on the level of will-act in the distinction between will-willing and will-willed. Just as all consciousness of anything contains within itself as a condition of its possibility a self-consciousness, so every act by which we will something contains within itself a will to will. This will to will is not a complete will act but a type of *ens quo subjectivum*, a metaphysical principle constitutive of all dynamic will activity. We are dealing here with two distinct but inseparable aspects of one and the same will act.²⁹

This metaphysical composition of all will activity is revealed on the reflective plane as the first necessary condition of all free human action. Blondel uncovers this condition in the internal necessary contradiction in the will of any human who attempts to espouse a negative answer to the problem of life such as nihilism. Analyzing such a position Blondel attempts to demonstrate that it conceals within itself a contradiction between the fact that one wills and what one wills. Every will to non-being is necessarily and simultaneously a will to being.

It is important to note that in Blondel's opinion such a contradiction cannot be discovered by a process of purely psychological introspection. Blondel's analysis does not represent a movement on the psychological plane from the explicit to the implicit. Such a psychological process would remain within the context of the will-willed, and would not escape the limits of empirical consciousness. What we are dealing with here is a transcendental reflection which begins with the empirically given and searches out its conditions of possibility.

Metaphysical analysis differs from all other scientific procedures because it is not content to describe the given; rather, it attempts to determine the necessary a priori conditions of the given. One does not affirm that which is; rather, one attempts to affirm that which must be in order for that which is to be. Thus, Blondel's analysis moves from the objective will (positional will, free will, empirical will, will-willed) to the necessary subjective condition of will-act (will-condition, non-positional will, necessary will, will-willing). What is obtained by such a process is not a thing, but a principle of being; not an *ens quod*, but an *ens quo*. What Blondel was searching for was the metaphysical structure of freedom; but this structure has no reality apart from the real activity of the actual subject. This metaphysical structure cannot be recognized without in some way being objectified. However, this process of objectification cannot be exclusively the work of the understanding. The will itself must come into play in the process of objectifying its subjective structure. Consequently, Blondel insists, as we have seen, that the intervention of a free consent is a necessary condition in order that the study of successive steps of the will's self-objectification can be undertaken.

It is the initiative a priori of a free activity which, by its expansion, ought to reconstruct the necessity to which it is submitted, so to speak, a posteriori. Thus, the heteronomy of its law corresponds to its interior autonomy. . . . This is the uniqueness of practical experimentation; the voluntary act provokes, as it were, a response and an instruction from without; and these instructions which impose themselves on the will are actually enclosed within that will itself.³⁰

²⁹Confer Cartier, "Le Principe de la Solution Blondélienne: volonté voulante-et volonté voulue," op. cit., pp. 54-62. For the historical roots of this distinction in the philosophies of Spinoza, Fichte and Schelling confer *The Blondelian Syn-thesis*, pp. 30-31, 88-90, 142-144, and 269-270.

³⁰*L'Action* (1893), p. 127.

In his initial analysis of the dialectic of the will Blondel attempted, as we have seen, to establish the most fundamental necessary condition of possibility for free human action, namely the existence in every free will-act of a will-willing as one of its metaphysical principles. This necessity reveals itself not as an exterior limit, but as a constitutive principle of the very being of a free action. This first necessity which we have discovered at the core of every free human act reveals itself as the first of an interconnected chain of necessary conditions which humans must acknowledge if the dialectic of human action is to achieve its goal. Before the final necessary condition can appear, which humans must will in order to realize their self-liberation from all necessity, we must unravel all the necessary connected conditions of action up to and including the final term by means of a reflective analysis.³¹

At each stage of reflection there arises a temptation to stop, to be contended, to entrench oneself in the position already acquired. At each step we are not constrained but sincerely obliged to pass beyond.³²

Blondel's objective was to show how humans, by means of a series of free choices, choices which must necessarily be made if a human is to achieve his or her fulfillment, can free him or herself completely only by willing freely that final condition of human liberation which he or she necessarily poses, the final option of self-transcendence.

THE LOGIC OF ACTION

Blondel believed that his previous phenomenological development of human action provided him with the basis and evidence for a genetic study of the logic which governs that development.³³ In the course of that development he continually returned to the theme that all our thoughts derive from will-activity and find their ultimate meaning and value in the organic relation they have to the action from which they derive and to which they lead.

It is the relation of the will-willing and the will-willed which we must determine, rectify and lead back to its identity. And knowledge is nothing more than the

³¹Blondel undertakes this phenomenological analysis of all the conditions of human will-activity in search of its fulfillment in the long third part of *L'Action* (1893). The best we can do here is outline the conditions he examines, while remarking that in general Blondel follows the same steps that Hegel did in his parallel work, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. The phenomenology of the will in *L'Action* comprises five "steps," each carrying the investigation further up the ladder of means and conditions for the expansion of the will. The first step moves from sensation, through the sciences, to the unconscious and subjective sources of human action. The second step moves from consciousness to voluntary operations. The third step moves from intentional effort to the first exterior expansion of action. The fourth step moves from individual to social action. The fifth step moves from communal action in its three main forms: family, country and humanity, through morality, to superstitious action. Following these five steps in the fourth part of *L'Action* Blondel takes up the problem of option.

³²*L'Action* (1936), Part II, p. 131.

³³There is in our wills, considered in their generality and their depth, a logic whose actual exigencies (implied in what we actually think and established by what we actually do) have only to be discerned by us to be able to uncover the all-embracing laws of thought and action and to rediscover, beneath the fragmentary appearances of life in the process of development, that which it ought to be, thanks to a clear understanding of what it cannot fail to be. *The Letter on Apologetics*, p. 183.

middle term; the fruit of action and the seed of action, which has as its function to lead action to that immediation of identity with self.³⁴

This is not only true of spontaneous ideas but of the whole field of scientific knowledge.

These sciences rise up from the very foundation of our activity and are spontaneously organized under the rule of that same interior law which governs all our life. Thus, even mathematics will be seen as a form of the development of the will; it will enter into the series of means which we employ to resolve the problem of action; by means of the enlightened knowledge we will have of our acts mathematics will become that which it is in the living reality of our operations, one element in the solution.³⁵

Consequently, every science that humankind develops has its final explanation in that human activity from which it derives and which it serves. For all knowledge is a means which humans employ to fulfill their destiny.

In his study of the logic of action Blondel extends this insight to the logical laws which govern thought and life. Just as any science must be understood as derived from and ultimately subordinated to human action, so too the logical laws which govern the development of the various sciences must be seen as derived from and subordinated to the basic all-embracing dialectical law which governs human action immanently.

It is no less important to study the *fieri* than the *esse* of the sciences . . . the object of philosophy is not purely science already constituted, it is the genesis of the sciences, the process of the mind which spontaneously produces scientific ideas. . . . Consider the effort of science as an infinitely enlarged, enriched and precise expression of the initial activity of the mind.³⁶

As we have seen, according to the phenomenological method Blondel used on the plane of reflection, nothing whatsoever must be presupposed, not even the basic principles of reason. The identity of the human will with itself is not a passive identity. We are concerned here with an active identity in the process of creating itself; not something which is realized, but something which is to be realized. The human's necessary will to be represents an "ought to be". Any rational structure that we might uncover simultaneously represents an immanent obligation to become that which one is. Therefore, in logic of action we are not dealing with a case of the application of previously formed logical principles derived from some other source. On the contrary, we are dealing here with the vital origin or genesis in consciousness of the logical principles which immanently govern human life and action.

Classical philosophy conceived of its task as a search for abstract truth, an *adequatio speculativa rei et intellectus*. Truth in the context of a philosophy of human action must be considered, rather, as a search for an *adequatio realis mentis et vitae*.

It is necessary to substitute, in the place of the problem of the harmony between thought and reality or that of the objective value of the subjective, the

³⁴*Lettres Philosophiques*, p. 84.

³⁵*L'Action* (1893), p. 55, footnote 1.

³⁶*Lettres Philosophiques*, p. 185.

equivalent but absolutely different problem of an immanent adequation of ourselves with ourselves.³⁷

To be true means to become that which one really is. The search for truth on the reflective level becomes, then, a search for what one must will, when one truly wills all that one wills. This search has as its object all the necessary conditions of interior self-adequation, that is, the truth immanent in human action. Blondel's search is for the meaning and direction of human will activity; a search for the necessary logic of freedom.

One of the major themes of modern dialectical thought is that there is an immanent reason which guides the development of human action and history. In Hegel's terminology thought determines itself in terms of events; the Spirit is of its very essence historical. This theme represented a legitimate basic rejection of all thought-action dualism, a dualism of static rationality and arbitrary dynamism. This theme, however, led to the monism of dialectical thought which characterized Hegel's subjective idealism. That position was taken in reaction to Kant's exaggerated dualism which placed being beyond thought. In Blondel's opinion both positions contain the same fundamental error. Both accepted the fact of thought separated from the act itself of thinking, as if thought were a being apart. To escape that error one must go behind thought to its source in action.

What we must do, then, is place ourselves at the point of intersection (because for us, finally, to live is to realize the unity of thought and action), and derive the elementary principles which preside over the development of both idea and action within the integral unity of a dialectic which dominates these two aspects of the moral life without sacrificing the one to the other.³⁸

The logic of action is in one sense unpredictable, since it is tied to the free movement of the human will. In that sense it is an a posteriori science. Reason has its source in the will both as originating spontaneity and also as necessary norm. Because of the element of spontaneity the logic of action cannot be known from without or ahead of time, nor can it be deduced. The law which governs human action can only be discovered with certitude by one who acts and commits himself. On the other hand, free human action is not absolute spontaneity. If a pure will were to pose itself spontaneously in a unique act, it would necessarily comprehend itself totally together with all the real, since it would create the real in the very act of knowing it.

Human action, however, finds itself conditioned; humans advance by supporting themselves on obstacles which oppose their will and, paradoxically, by means of which their will enriches itself. Every new synthesis humans achieve by means of free action is irreducible to its elements. In the realm of human action the whole is always necessarily more than the sum of its parts.³⁹

³⁷"L'illusion Idéaliste," *Les Premiers Écrits de Maurice Blondel*, "Bibliothèque de Philosophie Contemporaine," Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956, p. 110. "As long as we see the X to be discovered in the relation of thought and object, as long as one pretends to penetrate into the subject by means of a dialectical analysis which effectively treats the subject once again as an 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. That solution is produced and enriched by the very effort we make to clarify it." *L'illusion Idéaliste*" op. cit., p. 111.

³⁸*L'Action* p. 213.

³⁹"Now, I have held, as founded on evidence, that the whole is distinct from the sum of its parts everywhere where there is a synthesis properly speaking; the unity of the whole is something extra, something other than the totality of the elements. There is, then, in opposition to the analytical sciences of positive conditions and subordinated elements, another science to be constituted which deals with the successive syntheses, the ideal realities, the intelligible forms; a

Consequently, each new step in the dialectical development of human freedom demands to be lived before it can be reflected. We really do not know anything well, except that which we have done. The reason is that we bring light to bear there where we act. That clarity is not in us alone, nor is it in objects alone. *Qui facit veritatem venit ad lucem.*

Blondel's search for the logic of action began only after he had developed fully the phenomenological evidence for that logic on the reflective plane by a complete analysis of all the necessary conditions for the evolution of human action towards its goal of self-fulfillment. Of its very nature logic is an analytic discipline. If one begins the study of free human action with an a priori logical system, one necessarily obscures and even falsifies the evidence, because one is obliged to disintegrate the real synthesis contained in action in order to render it apt for a logical analysis. Consequently, the only way to go about constructing a valid philosophy of action is to derive the logical theory implicit in such a philosophy post factum from the evidence contained in practice.

Yet, despite the fact that the logic of human action must be freely constituted on the existential plane, it presents an aspect of necessity. Underneath the most aberrant projects, beneath the strangest deviations of the human will and making possible their free choice, there always remains the necessary élan of the will-willing from which it is impossible to deviate. Willing not to commit himself, the dilettante necessarily commits himself; willing nothing, the nihilist necessarily wills being. Human action can be illogical; it can never be alogical.⁴⁰ Either one conforms freely to that law, which one carries within oneself, or one opposes it freely; but one never escapes it. There is, then, a double character of logic of free human action. It is at one and the same time a series of concrete attitudes by means of which a human searches out his or her self-adequation; and, consequent to these concrete attitudes, it reveals a necessary series of conditions of possibility, which has been constituted step by step by free action itself. Reason, it is true, immanently guides the development of action, but reflection cannot discover that reason a priori apart from the development of action.

THE REAL EQUIVALENT OF THE LAWS OF CONTRADICTION AND IDENTITY

Blondel was convinced that a true total logic of living action, a logic which accounted systematically for all the evidence of the phenomena of human activity, was yet to be constructed. The failure, in his opinion, was traceable to the synthetic nature of action as a synthesis between the ideal and the real, the formal and the material, thought and act. Various logics, which have been developed to clarify particular aspects of this synthesis, seem to contradict one another in their essential postulates; and a valid means of reconciling these postulates has yet to be found.

The key problem has to do with the role of traditional logic based on the principles of contradiction and identity within the context of a dialectical logic which is apparently based on a denial of these principles. Whereas the abstract sciences of thought, utilizing the traditional formal logic of analysis, isolate ideas and proceed by a process of total inclusion or exclusion; the concrete reality of life perpetually conciliates the contraries.

If at times determinism and freedom seem to be in contradiction to each other, the reason is that we treat positive facts and states of consciousness

science which is equally positive and more real than the others." Translated from Blondel's unpublished manuscript *Project de Thèse*, p. 192. Confer *The Blondelian Synthesis*, p. 78.

⁴⁰"How does this contradiction present itself to our knowledge, where it would seem nothing can rise up which is not the expression of a hidden will, and an extract of the interior initiative of our spontaneous actions?" *L'Action*, p. 326.

as if they were absolute beings to which the principle of contradiction applies.⁴¹

The notion of real existence and objective being is a synthetic idea. “Objective existence does not consist in the absolute affirmation of an apparent reality, but in the relation which its diverse, heterogeneous and even contrary or contradictory aspects maintain among themselves.”⁴² Being, then, is relation; when we say that a thing exists, we necessarily affirm implicitly that there is an organic interrelation of heterogeneous elements.

It follows, then, that to establish the reality of that synthetic bond is at the same time to establish the existential reality of the being in question. If this insight is true and the ultimate substantial and existential reality of being is to be found in synthesis and relation as such, then it follows that in so far as one wishes to consider things *in concerto*, one is necessarily led to conceive of them as submitted to a law other than that of the principles of contradiction or identity. A being whose substantial reality is a real relation must be understood as composed of elements which are simultaneously opposed and complementary, as a unity of opposites.

Hegel was right when he brought to our attention that, the moment when reality is a question of relativity and liaison and not a question of things considered in isolation, the affirmation of one of the terms demands as its complement the contrasting term.⁴³

What is incompatible and formally contradictory from a purely static and analytic point of view, is from a dynamic point of view associated factually in such a manner as to constitute a synthesis distinct from its elements.

In Blondel’s judgment the Hegelian dialectic, while it did achieve a formalization of the dynamic movement of life in its material aspect, did so at the expense of losing an equally important truth concerning that dialectic and by overlooking an important phenomenological aspect of free human action. “It seems to me that (Hegel) has pretended to formalize what is necessarily material without at the same time materializing what is necessarily formal in that concrete dialectic.”⁴⁴ What Hegel overlooked, in Blondel’s opinion, is the possibility that what was originally a formal contradiction in thought can become a real contradiction in action. It is precisely here that Blondel both joins the existentialists in attempting to “existentialize reflection” and goes beyond the existentialists in that program.

Underneath the diversely compatible forms of action there is revealed a principle of contradiction which maintains its rule and decides absolutely the value of being in the real fact itself. This simultaneous compatibility and exclusion is the ultimate sense of the principle of contradiction which must be clarified. It establishes the reign of truth amid error without abolishing error; it introduces the absolute of being into the phenomena without suppressing the relativity of the phenomena.⁴⁵

41 *Ibid.*, p. 120.

42 Blondel, “Ébauche de Logique Générale,” reprinted in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, Tome 65, No. I (January-March, 1960), pp. 15-16.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

44 *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

45 *L’Action*, 6. 470.

Although at first sight it might appear that we are dealing here with a purely abstract logical question, Blondel understood that on the solution to this problem depended the all-important question of the basis and value of absolute moral judgments. If a true moral science of right and wrong free human actions is possible, it is necessary that real concrete facts be capable of receiving an absolute qualification. One must be able to establish an absolute difference between the true and the false, the good and the bad. Whereas the proponents of a traditional formal logic tended to limit absolute moral judgment to an abstract formal sphere divorced from the material reality of life (e.g. Kant), the proponents of a dialectical logic tended to deny any basis in reality itself for an absolute distinction between good and evil (e.g. Hegel).⁴⁶

As Hegel's criticism had apparently established, although the law of contradiction is a spontaneous law of formal thought, that law has no immediate application to the dynamic, synthetic process of material becoming of human action. Blondel's study of the logic of action is based on the premise that whatever is spontaneously and necessarily present in abstract human thought has its foundation in the will-activity which produced it and its ultimate justification in the will-action which follows from it.

If, then, the principle of contradiction is spontaneously and necessarily present in formal thought, it is there because it has a real function to play in the development of human life. Hegel's mistake, in Blondel's judgment was to identify the abstract rational synthesis of thought with the living synthesis effected by action. Hegel was led to deny any real function to the principle of contradiction, because his methodological premises had led him to deny any real synthetic initiative to individual human action.

Traditional logic, on the other hand, was thought to be a purely formal and analytical process. For that reason it ignored both the formal synthetic role of thought as well as the real synthetic function of action. In Blondel's opinion there can be no purely formal logic of analysis applicable to human action, because there is no idea which is not act, no thought without thinking, no analysis which is not founded on a mental synthesis. This synthetic act, from which both previous forms of logic prescind at the very moment they depend on it, is the foundation on which Blondel based his explanation of how the laws of contradiction and identity can and do enter into the material reality of our actions. Humans by their power of free choice can introduce being into phenomena, and where there is no being there can be no ultimate contradiction or identity.⁴⁷

Action, serving as the source of unity between the opposed forms of thought and life, insinuates the law of contradiction into the heart of the fact, while at the same time perpetually operating an experimental synthesis of the contraries. If, then, the law of contradiction applies to the past, it does so because the *act*, which is contained within the apparent fact, has introduced into the phenomena something other than the possible itself. All the movement of life ends up with the necessary affirmation of being, because that movement is founded on the necessity of being itself.⁴⁸

⁴⁶“In place of believing that to understand everything is to include everything in the absolute or in the relative, one begins to see that to understand is precisely to be able to distinguish an absolute difference in the relative itself.” “Une de Sources de la Pensée Moderne: L'Evolution du Spinozisme.” *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne*, Tome 64 (July, 1894) p. 335.

⁴⁷“The knowledge of being implies a necessity of option. The being which is within our knowledge is not before but after the freedom of choice.” *L'Action* 1893) p. 436.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 472.

In order to clarify the function of this synthetic act of the human will Blondel, as we have seen, had recourse to a genetic study of the spontaneous origins of the law of contradiction in thought. ‘As a result of this genetic study he found the source of that law in the human’s power of free choice.’⁴⁹

To have consciousness that a thing could have been otherwise, it is necessary that we have consciousness of our action. . . . To know our action it is necessary that, implicitly conscious of our tendencies and the exigencies of our destiny, we find ourselves obliged to make an option which involves our entire being. In a word we possess the idea of being and of contradiction only because we find ourselves faced with the problem of resolving the alternatives on which the orientation of our life and our entrance into being depends.⁵⁰

By their choices humans have the power to insert the absolute of being into the relativity of phenomena. Thus, human free will activity serves as the foundation and source of reconciliation for both the logic of the dialectic and the logic of contradiction. Action serves as the source of unity between the opposed forms of thought and life; it “insinuates the law of contradiction into phenomena while at the same time operating an experimental synthesis of the contraries.” The ultimate meaning of the principle of contradiction is to grant humans the power to make an absolute judgment within the order of the relative and, thereby, consciously and freely choose their destiny. A logic of action demonstrates a perpetual conciliation of the contraries in the order of phenomena up to the final possibility of total self-identity or self-contradiction which imposes a final necessary option on the will.

This genetic study of the principle of contradiction led Blondel to envisage a new idea of the real dialectic of human life which would correct the inadequacies of the Hegelian dialectic. The total structure of this real dialectic would include within an integrated system the combined functions of thought and action. The human agent must be considered as an infinite potentiality which passes from potency to act by means of free choices guided by reason. At any given moment in the dynamic process of life the will’s infinite potentiality is constituted by a synthesis of act and privation. Since the potential within the human will is infinite, nothing escapes either that actuality or that privation. Thus, the real dialectic which rules human life and action is the law which immanently governs the process whereby humans evolves towards their actual self-adequation.

Since this necessary logic of action represents at each stage of its development a synthesis of the generic with the individual, in its material detail it depends on the unique existential situation of the individual, which is, in part at least, the result of his past free choices. Therefore, it is not the function of philosophy as such to establish the concrete rules which apply univocally to each individual. However it is possible to determine the general framework within which the human will acts and to establish in general the diverse possibilities of negative and positive solutions to the problem of human destiny.

It is not the function of logic as such to follow in concrete detail the application of the rules which govern the active development of our

⁴⁹The original and the real meaning of the principle of contradiction, Blondel concluded, is to establish that “that which could have been and could have been incorporated into what we do and are is forever excluded.” “Principe Elémentaire d’une Logique de la Vie Morale,” *La Première Ecrits de Maurice Blondel*, pp. 132-133.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 132.

destiny; but it is the function to discuss, so to speak, algebraically the diverse possibilities of negative and positive solutions and to describe the rigid framework which supports and within which is deployed the free play of human action.⁵¹

Further, it is possible and, indeed, obligatory for each individual to determine clearly how these generic rules apply in the context of the concrete reality of his or her own conscious lived experience.

FINAL OPTION

The option for or against transcendence reveals itself in Blondel's understanding of the dialectic of human life and action as the final necessary condition of human freedom. Every free human agent is necessarily faced with the decision to accept or refuse the presence of the transcendent within his 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 d'invocation*. Blondel maintains that such an option is necessarily implied implicitly in every free human commitment. His purpose in clarifying the meaning of this option is to show how it resolves the conflict between freedom and truth. By means of the option immanent truth becomes transcendent and phenomena take on being. Depending on the alternative chosen, the option resolves itself in either possession or privation of self, the world, and God. In other words, the human will resolves itself either in the identity of truth or the real contradiction of error.

Within the immanent context of the dialectic of human action the source of the necessary ideal of God is to be understood "as a human's projecting out of all the unused and unusable potentialities of the human spirit." Thus, God represents that which is necessary for the human, if he or she is to achieve a state of self-adequation, and at the same time that which humans find impossible to achieve by their own powers alone.⁵² Thus, the necessary idea of God represents a necessary call to humans, which comes from within their own will, a call to self-transcendence.⁵³

The problem the existentialist poses concerning the act of faith is this: If this recognition of God as humanities transcendent end is a free choice, how is it possible to understand it as a rational process? Why not make of it a gratuitous "leap in the dark?" But if it is a rational act, how can we maintain freedom at its source? Camus' critique of Kierkegaard's understanding of faith as a leap in the dark was that it represented a form of rational suicide; it represents a movement in which thought denies itself and tends to go beyond itself to that which constitutes its own negation. This passage without any mediation from the failure of reason to an affirmation of the transcendent would necessarily imply a total discontinuity between faith and reason.

Blondel agrees with the existentialists that on the plane of existence the act of faith is a free option. However, on the plane of reflection it is necessary to have a good reason to bypass reason. Because of the attitudes which have been freely assumed, but beyond them, one must attain the solid ground of metaphysics where necessity reigns. If the good option

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁵²"What we know of God is the surplus of interior life which demands its employment; we cannot, then, know God without willing in some way to become God." *L'Action*, p. 354.

⁵³"Humans can never succeed by their own powers alone to place in their willed action all that which is at the origin of their voluntary activity." *L'Action*, p. 321.

is the point of departure of the level of existence independent of all logical proofs, and if one does not have the right to put it into question on that plane, yet on the level of reflection it is necessary that the option enter into the dialectic and be justified by it. Some principle of continuity must remain and that principle of continuity can be found in the will-willing. For it is impossible to still the necessary élan of the will. While it is true that at this point in the dialectic we are beyond all mediation and all objective reason, yet what reflection makes clear is the immanent command from within the will.

It is at this point in his dialectic, as we have seen, that Blondel recovers on the reflective plane that continual commitment which was its precondition on the existential plane. Since the option is at the very source of rationality, it does not fall under the principles of reason; rather, it is the option which founds both the value and the transcendent import of the principles. Consequently, this founding is not imposed necessarily but leaves room for freedom. Thus, all rational necessity is to be found ultimately enclosed within a free option. Frequently those apologists who undertake a rational defense of faith presuppose that one can separate the purely intellectual elements of human actions from the purely voluntary aspects. Since the intellect is constrained by its object, there can be no intervention of freedom in reason. On the other hand, since the will represents a purely arbitrary power, it can become rational in its activities only by submitting to an already constituted rule with which reason supplies it from without. Apart from the fact that this understanding contradicts the reality of the psychological unity of the human, such an approach to the problem of faith necessarily leads to a negation of either freedom or reason in that act. Once again we find the fact of thinking separated from the act of thinking. Once again, now in the context of the act of faith, we must seize the reciprocal conditioning of reason and freedom in the concrete unity of action.

As we have seen, there is no purely passive awareness of his or her situation possible for humans. It is only in relation to the necessary infinite élan of the human spirit thinking and willing that the universe can appear finite and contingent to a human. Since this necessary dynamism of the will is not an objective psychological reality, it is not open to psychological introspection. Rather, it represents a condition of possibility from the side of the subject which does not fall immediately under objective consciousness. Because it is subjective, the transcendent implications of this necessary dynamism cannot be known explicitly except on condition that the will objectify it by ratifying it, that is to say, by making the necessary élan of the will-willing an end freely chosen. As a result, far from freedom being strangled by a necessary judgment, it is by means of a free option that the judgment appears before reason. "What could a judgment on God's existence mean," Blondel asks, "totally independent of any acknowledgment of God as my end or any commitment?"⁵⁴

To affirm the existence of God implies a total engagement and not just a passive acknowledgment. However, if freedom conditions reason in the act of faith, it depends on reason at the same time. A positive option for transcendence remains the only rational response to the invitation immanent in the will.

BEYOND OPTION

⁵⁴"We wish to suffice for ourselves and we cannot. . . . We are forced to recognize determinism in our will preceding, enclosing, and outreaching our personal action; a determinism which is within us as the principle of our will." *L'Action*, pp. 325--326.

It is very important to note that the dialectic of action does not come to an end with the justification of the option for the transcendent on the level of reflection. As a matter of fact philosophy always carries within itself a permanent and constitutional temptation to self-sufficiency. This does not, however, specify philosophy as Hegel seemed to believe. On the contrary, philosophy is necessarily false to its own élan precisely when it tries to enclose life within reflection. Blondel understood his dialectic as capable of showing the necessity of an option as implied in every free human commitment and of clarifying its terms. But it cannot supply for the option itself. The option which reason reveals and justifies on the reflective plane remains transcendent to reflection. Here, as everywhere else, reflection never gives itself that which it studies. Rather, it receives it from another source, namely concrete action. For that reason Blondel continually insists that we must renounce the rationalist's faith in the self-sufficiency of philosophy:

Philosophy (as reflection) has as its function to determine the content of thought and the postulates of action without ever trying to furnish the reality which it studies or enclosing the life whose ultimate conditions it determines, or attempting to realize that which it necessarily understands as real. It is necessary that philosophy go all the way in order to indicate under what necessary conditions it subordinates all those realities which it affirms. However, even if it itself is a living force which develops itself efficaciously as an integral element of the real and inserts its proper dynamism into reality, yet it must restrain itself before that which is required of it and by it without ever forgetting that at no point does it ever satisfy its own requirements.⁵⁵

Marcel's opinion that there is a choice which lies beyond all possibility of justification is true in the sense that the work of thought, which choice conditions and which thought reflects, can never replace choice itself. In Blondel's words, "the perfection of reason, although identical in one sense with the perfection of life, can never be substituted for it. . . . That which life carries in itself, although totally penetrable by thought, is infinitely more than thought."⁵⁶ Yet the option is not so radical a choice that it is absolutely incapable of rational justification. If, as Marcel claims, a good option bears the mark of fidelity as contrasted with betrayal, reason must have the power to justify it. In this sense the option must enter into the dialectic. The human who responds faithfully to the call immanent in his or her will is not reduced to the exclusive position of rendering witness to his or her existential experience. Not only can humans themselves judge objectivity concerning the truth and value of their choice; they can also recognize and refute the contrary choice as betrayal of that call, even if those who choose betrayal cannot, by reason of that very betrayal itself, ever recognize it as such. For to acknowledge betrayal is already to have transcended it in an act of fidelity to the call of truth immanent in the will.

The conclusion that Blondel drew from these considerations is that it is possible to arrive at a universal and necessary truth without going outside the existent and adopting the viewpoint of a consciousness in general: this truth, however, is a *de jure* truth and not a *de facto* one. "Metaphysics is controverted in fact but it is not controvertible in right. It is controverted because the science of that which is, while not dependent, is nonetheless

⁵⁵*Lettres Philosophiques*, pp. 126-127.

⁵⁶*L'Action*, p. 479.

coexistent with the will of that which is.”⁵⁷ Universal and necessary truth derived from a philosophy of action is denied in fact because the world vision of each individual is conditioned by his existential choices. However, they are not so de jure, for all humans ought to reunite in the unique truth, and will do so if they remain faithful to the élan towards truth immanent in their will. Qui facit veritatem venit ad lucem. One does not see the truth except by doing it; but in doing the truth one does not create that which one does.

Because it is founded on that which is in us and does not depend on us, on that which is the most intimate aspect of our subjectivity and yet common to the entire community of subjects, truth-in-us depends on the existential attitude which we adopt in its regard. More properly, it is existence itself which depends on the reception we give to truth. “Depending upon whether we receive or we refuse the action of truth in ourselves, our being is totally changed by it.”⁵⁸ A refusal of transcendence carries with it a necessary alienation of freedom and a necessary contradiction at the heart of our being. As Sartre puts it:

The existentialist thinks that it is quite annoying that God does not exist. For with him disappears all possibility to find values in an intelligible heaven. If God does not exist everything is permitted, and, as a consequence, man is abandoned. We are alone without excuse.⁵⁹

To refuse to acknowledge the transcendent carries with it the necessary consequence of the total isolation and alienation of the individual existent. Whereas to open to the transcendent, to recognize a truth or a value which imposes itself from within the human and is valid for all, is an absolutely necessary condition in order that the human escape the isolated self and achieve unity in a community of others.

In the dialectic of life existence and truth draw closer and closer without cease, yet without ever entirely joining. The dialectic in life between existence and truth represents a constant movement towards the realization of the immanent and necessary connection in humans of essence and existence, nature and liberty, constructive project and transcendent end. As that dialectic evolves, existence always remains to some extent solitude; and truth always remains to some extent abstract and exterior.⁶⁰ Hegelian rationalism consists precisely in the belief that the fusion of existence and truth can occur in the human spirit only at the level of absolute spirit. Such a fusion would operate independently of the existential freedom and moral life of the individual. Blondel’s conviction was, however, that such a fusion can only be the result of a human’s free moral commitment and that its ultimate condition of possibility depends on union with one person, Christ, who is “the way, the truth, the life.”⁶¹

⁵⁷*L’Action*, p. 487.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 429.

⁵⁹Sartre, *L’Existentialisme est un Humanisme*, pp. 35-37.

⁶⁰“What disconcerts us in ourselves is the fact that we cannot be one with ourselves; what disconcerts us in it (the absolute) is the absolute union of being, knowing and acting. it is a subject in which everything is subject.” *L’Action*, p. 349.

⁶¹“Perhaps because he is destined to receive divine life in himself, humans are capable of playing the role of the universal bond and suffices for this creative mediation, because this immanence of God in us will serve as a magnetic center which will reunite all things. . . . But, also, in order that, despite everything, that mediation could be total, permanent, voluntary, such in a word that it would assure the reality of all that which without doubt does not necessarily exist, but which, granting that it is, needs a divine witness, perhaps there is needed one mediator who renders himself passive to that integral reality and becomes as the Amen to the universe.” *L’Action*, p. 461.