

Echoes of the Centennial of Maurice Blondel's *Action*



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ON JUNE 7, 1893, Maurice Blondel defended his doctoral dissertation at the Sorbonne entitled *Action: Essai d'une critique de la vie et d'une science de la pratique*. This apparently innocuous academic event at the margins of world history is now seen as a milestone in the history of ideas, as important as the defense and publication of Henri Bergson's *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* or Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception*. The first centennial anniversary of this philosophical event was the occasion of many celebrations in European institutions of higher learning. The publication of the Acts of these various seminars, colloquia, and symposia, especially in France, can give us an idea of the depth and breadth of Maurice Blondel's abiding impact on contemporary thought. In its own discreet manner, *Action* continues to give direction to certain lines of development in philosophy and theology.¹

Undoubtedly the most important commemoration of the Action centennial was the colloquium of Aix-en-Provence in March 1993.² Held in the very city where Maurice Blondel spent his entire career as a university professor, the international character of this colloquium bears witness to the fact that, though deeply rooted in the French philosophical tradition of the nineteenth century (whose leading lights include

1. Maurice Blondel's *magnum opus* has been reedited constantly since 1950. It was translated into English only in 1984. See Maurice Blondel, *Action*, trans. Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

2. *L'Action: Une Dialectique du Salut*, Colloque du Centenaire Aix-en-Provence. Texts rassemblés par M. J. Coutagne (Paris: Beauchesne, 1994).

forgotten or forgettable thinkers like Maine de Biran, Ravaisson, and Lachelier), the work of Blondel has succeeded in becoming *universal* because it is truly *human*. This universality is also to be understood as *catholic*, not in a parochial or sectarian sense, but as expressing the most fundamental aspirations of the human person and of all human persons which one particular and historical religious tradition pretends to fulfill. It is in this light that the laudatory letter of Pope John Paul II to the Archbishop of Aix on the occasion of the centennial of Action must be read. The double fidelity to the exigencies of reason and to those of Christian faith is a response to the basic unity and integrity of reality itself which brooks no lasting contradiction or division. Philosophical research and religious commitment are not diametrically opposed to each other but are, on the contrary, ordered to each other in an *ordo amoris et sapientis*. As the pontifical letter puts it:

In a world where relativism and scientism are growing, the Blondelian thesis is precious by its search for the unification of being and by its concern for intellectual peace: it is the discourse of a believer addressed to unbelievers, the discourse of a philosopher concerning what surpasses philosophy; it animates the search for the *vinculum* or bond, this "victory" of consciousness through which the unity of human action is made, the consistency of all that exists is revealed, and the connaturality which establishes a bridge between the mystery of God and human action is expressed.

Action begins with a simple question, "Yes or no, does life have a meaning and does man have a destiny?" And it ends with a simple affirmation which the author himself claims to go beyond the domain of human science and the competence of philosophy, "It is." Between the question and the affirmation, Blondel develops a rigorous and complex dialectic which attempts to describe (phenomenologically, we would say today) the totality of human experience from the very refusal of the question and the possibility of a negative solution, through the different realms of sensation, consciousness, subjectivity, embodiment, intersubjectivity, and freedom, all the way up to the reconstructions of metaphysics and morality and the consideration of the possibility of a transcendent Necessary Being discovered in the very immanence of action as One who reveals Himself as the end of human destiny. The comparison with the Hegelian project is inevitable even

though (or because?) the explicit dialogue partners of Blondel are Spinoza, Leibniz, and Kant.

But while the reading of Maurice Blondel in earlier decades has been constantly conditioned by the problematic of modernity (especially vis-à-vis Kant and Hegel), it is the contemporary problematic of so-called postmodernity that characterizes most of Blondelian exegesis today. Thinking with Blondel in 1993 is to take up a hermeneutical wager that is not always evident at first sight, and most of the contributions to this volume are set in that direction. A first group of studies could be considered as "historical." P. Henrici presents the Preliminary Notes which later on became the seedbed, as it were, of the first drafts of *Action*. These fragments, together with the Private Notebooks, are helpful in indicating the hidden subtexts of the doctoral dissertation and invite us to a more careful ontological (and not merely phenomenological) reading of *Action* that would underscore the profound unity of ethics, metaphysics, and religion in the concrete effectuation of human action. The foremost Blondel scholar in France, R. Virgoulay, reviews the methodology which Blondel, in a subsequent provocative essay, called "the method of immanence". It is this strictly *philosophical* method that inevitably leads one to pose the question of the supernatural and to be obliged to give a lived response. A second group of studies can be placed under the heading "comparative philosophy," showing the vitality of the Blondelian dialogue with other currents of thought. P. Livet compares Blondel's philosophy of action with the theory of action in Anglo-American analytic philosophy (Davidson, Anscombe, Taylor, von Wright). J. Parrain-Vial shows how the notion of act in Gabriel Marcel corresponds to Blondel's notion of action and how these two key notions are able to "dissolve" the false problems created by Cartesian dualism—sensation, unity of body and soul, reconciliation of determinism and freedom, synergy of nature and grace. With remarkable clarity, E. Gabellieri confronts the "post-metaphysical" concerns of Heidegger with that of Blondel and concludes that we are in the presence of two ontologies: a monistic one, that of Heidegger, where Being and beings are mere folds in the impersonal One; and a differentiated ontology, that of Blondel, where identity and difference are equally maintained by the *vinculum substantiale* of the act of creation. A third group of studies focuses on the exegesis of specific approaches or sections of *Action*. E. Babolin

studies the idea of culture while D. Folscheid shows how current problems in bioethics can find their solution in the pages concerning science and morality. A fourth group of studies shows the lasting fruitfulness of the perspectives opened up by *Action* in Catholic theology. P. Poupard gives a personal testimony regarding the role Blondel played in his theological formation and concludes on the Augustinian theme of *gaudium de veritate* or the joy of truth. P. Gilbert surprisingly makes a case for the use of the method of immanence in a theology "from above." C. Izquierdo surveys the undeniable presence of Blondel in present-day fundamental theology, while X. Tilliette explicates the Eucharistic theme underlying the text of *Action*. A fifth group of studies, and definitely not the least, reflects on the spirituality of *Action*. Blondel loved to call philosophy *la sainteté é de la raison* or "the holiness of reason," and this sanctity is to be understood not merely in a Platonic sense but in a specifically Christian sense as a participation in the intimate life of the Triune God. C. Troisfontaines studies the idea of God in *Action* and shows how the "necessary and efficacious thought of God" is eminently original and practical. J. Brun interprets the dialectic of action and prayer in *Action* in the light of the spiritual meditations contained in the Private Notebooks, while M. Malaguti sees the dialectic of salvation as providing the key to the spirituality of *Action*. Two contributions open up perspectives for further reflection. G. Cottier takes up the theme of a "Christian philosophy" in enumerating some of its conditions of realization. J.-L. Marion, on the other hand, proposes a provocative hypothesis: the method of immanence, in order to be developed today, must rely on a method of description of phenomena specific to Christianity—in other words, phenomena which belong absolutely to the world, and therefore immanent in this sense, but which only a gaze enlightened by the revelation of charity can see. These phenomena specific to Christianity, though universal in principle, constitute the basis and the foundations of a Christian hermeneutics of phenomena that are common and accessible without conditions. It is in this way that *Action* may be said to form the contours of a *philosophy of charity*.

The Acts of the Seminars on Maurice Blondel held at the Institut Catholique de Lyon and at the Institut Catholique de Paris in May 1993 do not have the geographical breadth and systematic depth of the Colloquium of Aix-en-Provence, but they provide interesting and helpful

studies which can serve as initiations to the reading of *Action*.³ The Seminar of Lyon can be said to be more hermeneutical, trying to reinterpret Blondel in the light of contemporary issues and concerns. R. Virgoulay speaks of the originality and the relevance of *Action* in 1893 and in 1993. The philosophical and historical climates have changed, but the same rational boldness, the radicality of the questioning and the critical welcome of modernity are as pertinent today as they were a century ago. M. F. Tinel studies the critique of intellectualism in *Action* and indicates its scope, limits, and true center of gravity. *Action* is not a substitute for thought; rather, it is the primordial and substantial bond between knowing, willing, and being. E. Gabellieri develops the unexpected convergences between the thought of Maurice Blondel and that of Simone Weil not only in their metaphysics and ethics but also in the theology and spirituality underlying their philosophical work. Blondelian "mortification" and Weilian "decreation" are human responses to a primordial divine initiative of creation and redemption which is always structured (onto-logically) and effectuated (historically) in the manner of a *kenosis*. It is precisely the kenotic character of an authentic metaphysics of charity that can provide the adequate Christian alternative to Nietzschean nihilism. Drawing largely from the unpublished lecture notes and addresses of Maurice Blondel, M. J. Coutagne draws a credible portrait of the Professor whose life and teaching were devoted not only to the pursuit of truth but, above all, to an apprenticeship of charity.

The Seminar of Paris, on the other hand, can be said to be more historical. P. Colin simply enumerates the main actors of the doctoral defense other than Blondel and the main directions of their questioning. Though it is interesting to note that only the name of Maurice Blondel has been retained by the judgment of history (for who now remember Emile Boutroux, Paul Janet, Henri Marion, Victor Brochard, or Gabriel Séailles?), Colin prefers to underscore the anthropological implications of the debate between Blondel and his jury. F. Marty studies the Kantian milieu familiar to Blondel (Ollé-Laprune, Boutroux, Renouvier, and Lachelier) and against which he was also reacting. The principal grief

3. The papers read at Lyon have been published in the *Bulletin de l'Institut Catholique de Lyon* (October–December 1994): 17–84. Those read at Paris have been published in *Revue de l'Institut Catholique de Paris* (September–October 1993): 61–93.

of Blondel against Kant was the latter's penchant for separating speculatively what is united practically—thus, sensibility and thought, action and reason, being and phenomena, metaphysics and ethics, etc. C. Theobald talks about the “theological handicap” of *Action*. In transposing a particular theological perspective in a philosophical discourse, Blondel seems to have failed to take seriously into account the possibility of a plurality of axial convictions which cannot simply enter into the asymmetry established between the death and the life of action. In other words, the logic of action may not be as rigorously determined as Blondel pictures it to be.

The Acts of the Colloquium of Dijon held on the very day of the anniversary of the doctoral defense of *Action*, June 7, 1993, betray a decidedly multifaceted approach.⁴ A first group of contributions can be characterized as historical and comparative. Jean Ferrari develops the historical circumstances and the philosophical significance of June 7, 1893; he retains the theme of freedom as the key to reading *Action*. It is action which reveals the antecedent and consequent conditions of human freedom. The necessary postulation of the supernatural itself is demanded by the very movement of a freedom, whose accomplishment cannot be realized in itself, toward a divine transcendence which is its true end. X. Tilliette explores the relations between Blondel and some Jesuit thinkers like Auguste Valensin, Pierre Rousselot, Yves de Montcheuil, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Henri Bouillard, and, especially, Henri de Lubac. He concludes that the true posterity of Blondel is above all theological and that the quiet canonization of his key positions can be found in the documents of Vatican II. J. Kopper briefly compares the notion of religious faith in *Action* (1893) and Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793). The coincidence of the two centennials is made all the more striking. C. Troisfontaines studies Blondel's critique of Schopenhauer in *Action* and shows how the refusal of pessimism does not lead to a naïve optimism but to a fearful hope only too aware of the infinite risks of human choices. A second group of contributions is more hermeneutical. J. Reiter studies the notion of “mortification” while M. Malaguti shows how this apparently negative element in the discourse of Blondel is but the desert leading to the promised

4. The papers have been collected in *Recherches Blondéliennes*, ed. Jean Ferrari (Dijon: Centre Gaston Bachelard, 1993).

land of God's pure actuality. M. Patrao-Neves redefines the meaning of anthropology in the dialectic of *Action*. For Blondel, an anthropology that is centered on the merely human is without any speculative or practical consistency, deprived as it is of any basis or meaning; but it acquires a foundation, a structure, and a dynamism insofar as it becomes centered on the progression of the human toward its full realization beyond the merely human, in the welcoming of the supernatural which is its meaning and perfection. The meditation of J. Brun which closes this volume is an example of a philosophical reflection which *edifies* in the best and most noble sense of the word. It underscores the role of action as *vinculum substantiale*, but still a mere figure of the one substantial bond at the root of all being. "Synthesis of thought and of life, synthesis of the human and God, *Action* speaks of the living God and of the incarnate Word."

Dijon, Paris, Lyon, and Aix-en-Provence define not only a particularly French trajectory but the universal itinerary of the human spirit in action. The studies gathered in these various Acts are necessarily brief and succinct, perhaps more suggestive than resolute at times. They often indicate the unfinished character of the Blondelian dialectic of action which is ultimately suspended on an Option which each reader must personally effectuate for himself and which, in turn, is also suspended on a prior divine initiative of sheer Grace. Action is a mysterious synthesis of two incommensurable freedoms, one finite but capable of infinity, the other infinite but condescending to finitude. But the mystery is not opaque to philosophical reflection; on the contrary, it reveals itself as an inexhaustible given (more precisely, gift), or rather, as a super-saturated horizon within which all phenomena acquire their eternal solidity: *in quo omnia constant*. One could always wish for a more critical perspective occasionally, but perhaps the hour is still for a continued rediscovery of the potential of *Action* rather than its limitations and shortcomings.

The special issue, however, of a Jesuit journal of religious thought entirely devoted to the study of *Action* seems to show that a rigorous critique of Blondel's work can only lead to a deeper and more systematic appreciation of its lasting contribution to contemporary thought.⁵ P. Olivier studies the philosophical intention of Maurice Blondel in three

5. *Recherches des sciences religieuses* 81, no. 3 (July–September 1993).

important stages. First of all, the Blondelian methodology as it relates to the phenomenology of Husserl is seen from a new angle (actually, Blondel's original point of view): that of the Leibnizian hypothesis of a *vinculum substantiale* as the ultimate guarantor of the solidity of all phenomena. The dialogue with Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel (made possible by the historical studies of Blondel's classmate and friend, Victor Delbos) opened up a manner of thinking, hitherto banished from the French university tradition, that did not hesitate to include religion within its field of investigation and as intrinsic to a properly philosophical research. The ambiguity of this inclusion can be defined in terms of the distinction between a *philosophy of religion* and a *religious philosophy*. Secondly, the development of a phenomenology of action into a metaphysics can be understood in the manner of a Heideggerian *Kehre*: being (*das Sein*) is no longer pursued as an Object-prey but welcomed as Presence and Event. Still, this parallelism is fraught with an even more perilous ambiguity concerning the convergence of the idea of Being and the idea of God. The comparisons made with Heidegger and Levinas allow one to appreciate certain prolongations of the thought of Blondel in such present-day French phenomenologists as Jean-Luc Marion and Michel Henry. Finally, the confrontation of Blondel with the problematic of the end of modernity is attempted through a debate with Gianni Vattimo's *pensiero debole* or "weak thinking." The results of this debate are more provocative than conclusive, as the last sentences of the study show.

In fact, in a general manner, it is the permanence and the depth of the influence of Leibniz that we wish to underline. The ontological sketch of *Action* is a constant commentary on the monadology up to its very details. . . . Blondel? A Catholic Leibniz who opens the system and every system from above in recognizing that the most perfect form of achievement is the gracious gift, that the source of order and of harmony is freedom, that the law of life is movement and transcendence, and that the reason of reason is Love.

In his contribution, R. Virgoulay shows the originality, relevance and fruitfulness of the Blondelian conception of philosophy in its relation to Christianity. The paradox of Blondel for the modern mentality consists in the fact that he attempts to philosophically verify certain fundamental truths of Christianity. But for Blondel himself, the apologetical project does not in any way diminish the philosophical

research which remains strictly rational and "scientific," that is to say, grounded in an undeniable chain of reasons. The symbiosis between reason and faith has proven to be not only beneficial to reason in providing it with ultimate guarantees and foundations; it has also benefited the life of faith in clarifying and grounding some of its key notions like faith, the supernatural, tradition, etc. It is in this way that Blondel's work has determined the twentieth-century shift from apologetics to fundamental theology.

C. Theobald tackles head-on one of the most ambiguous and problematic aspects of *Action* and indeed of the whole of Blondel's thought: its so-called *panchristism*. Although the figure of Christ appears explicitly only at the end of the speculative itinerary of *Action* (in the added third chapter of Part V entitled "The Bond of Knowledge and Action in Being") as the ultimate guarantor of the reality of sensible phenomena, it has always been present implicitly throughout the entire dialectic as the necessary mediation between all phenomena. More than once, the Leibnizian hypothesis of the *vinculum substantiale* is developed and exploited in an onto-theo-logical direction. Blondel's christological "gesture" should not be seen as a mere ideological appendix or footnote; rather, it grounds his discourse within a horizon of finality. In this regard, he is simply heir to the whole modern philosophical tradition from Spinoza, Malebranche, and Leibniz all the way up to Schelling and Hegel. The discursive content of Blondel's "Christic metaphysics" will often be an embarrassment to his disciples and interpreters, but its central intuition and methodology will serve as the basis or inspiration of what has come to be called a "transcendental christology," the best example of which can be found in the work of Karl Rahner. It is the very modernity of Blondel that makes him so foreign in a postmodern context, and to the extent that the "transcendental method" (extremely centered on the subjective conditions of possibility) has outlived its usefulness in theology, it would seem that this aspect of his work is doomed to be forgotten. But the history of ideas does not progress in linear fashion; it is constituted both by *Vergessenheit* and *Wiederholung*. And it is not exactly sure if we know what the "post" in "postmodern" really stands for.

All these echoes from France concerning the recent centennial of Maurice Blondel's *Action* can be heard as a reminder of the perennial questions of philosophy and as an invitation to *think with* a great,

though perhaps not so well-known, philosopher who dared to *think out* the questions posed by the human spirit and the exigencies posed by Christian faith. But the task of thinking is not ultimate even in philosophy. Only one thing matters and remains in the end because only one thing recapitulates and perfects everything. As Maurice Blondel puts it:

Being is love; hence we know nothing if we do not love. And that is why charity is the organ of perfect knowledge. . . . Only charity, by placing itself at the heart of all, lives above appearances, communicates itself even to the interior of substances, and completely resolves the problem of knowledge and being. ~