

# Blondel on the Subjectivity of Moral Decision Making

by *John J. McNeill*

Blondel's philosophy of action is undoubtedly the most powerful presentation of the Augustinian tradition in contemporary philosophy and theology.<sup>1</sup> The theme which establishes this spiritual affinity between Blondel's philosophy of action and Augustinian tradition is the spiritual dynamism of the human will. This paper attempts to clarify Blondel's understanding of the dialectic of human moral life with respect to human subjectivity and freedom and the role that moral choice plays in the achievement of human destiny.<sup>2</sup>

The basic problem studied in *L'Action* (1893) was that of human destiny:<sup>3</sup>

Yes or no, has life a meaning and has man a destiny? I act without knowing what action is, without having vision to live, without any precise knowledge of who I am or even whether I am. This appearance of being that is at work in me, these actions fleeting as a shadow, I understand that they carry within them the weight of an eternal responsibility, and that even at the cost of blood I cannot purchase nothingness, because for me it can no longer be. I am condemned to life, condemned to death, condemned to eternity. Why and by what right, since I have neither known nor willed it?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Although Blondel's first work *L'Action* (1892) shows a definite spiritual affinity to Augustine, it is only in the later *Trilogie* that the direct philosophical influence of Augustine on Blondel is apparent. See A. Forest, "L'Augustinisme de Blondel," *Annales de la Faculté des Lettres*, XXXV (1963), 10-35. For Blondel's own reflections on Augustine's philosophy confer "Le quinzièmecentenaire de la mort de S. Augustine; l'unité originale et la vie permanente de sa doctrine philosophique," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, XXXVII (1930), 423-369.

<sup>2</sup>I have developed Blondel's philosophy of freedom and moral life in the *Blondelian Synthesis* (Leiden: Brill, 1966); "Necessary Structures of Freedom," *Proceedings: Jesuit Philosophical Association* (1968); "Freedom of Conscience in Theological Perspective," *Conscience: Its Freedom and Limitations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1971) pp107-124; "Freedom and the Future," *Theological Studies*, XXXII (1972). 503-530; "The Relation Between Philosophy and Religion in Blondel's Philosophy of Action," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, XLIV (1970), 256-263

<sup>3</sup>The primary sources used here are the texts of Blondel: *L'Action* (1893): *Essai d'une critique de la vie et d'une science de la pratiques* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950. Frequent use is also made of Blondel's principle work on methodology: "Le point de départ de la recherche philosophique," *Annales de philosophie chrétienne*, CLI (1905), 337-360 and CLII (1906), 225-250. The most important secondary source used is Albert Cartier's *Existence et vérité: Philosophie Blondélienne de l'action et problématique existentielle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955). James Somerville's work *Total Commitment: Blondel's L'Action* (Washington: Corpus Books, 1968) remains the best English language introduction to Blondel's thought.

<sup>4</sup>Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) p vii.

In responding to this problem. Blondel elaborated Augustine's theme: "Our hearts shall not rest, until they rest in Thee" in terms of a dialectic of will as willing and will as willed. Man cannot find his meaning and destiny unless his moral striving can come to rest in the free and dynamic identity of his will with God's, of the human with the divine life.

Blondel rejected the realist position of the Scholastics as an epistemological starting point because he did not consider it possible adequately to understand and integrate the immanent and subjective within a totally objective concept of being. "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." Nevertheless he maintains that a method of immanence properly understood and employed would lead to a total philosophy embracing in the unity of being essence and existence, the objective and the subjective, the immanent and the transcendent. Quoting Augustine: "Ab exterioribus ad interiore; ab interioribus ad superiora," he comments, "but if of these three terms which Saint Augustine indicates, one suppresses the intermediary (the subjective), the bridge is broken and one has only incommunicable entities present to each other?"<sup>5</sup>

### *Freedom, Subjectivity and the Method of Immanence*

Blondel's method of immanence had its foundation in his insight that freedom; is the very essence of the human subject and the essential condition of possibility for its existence.

There is no being where there is only constraint. If I am not that which I will to be, I am not. At the very core of my being there is a will and a love of being or there is nothing. If man's freedom is real, it is necessary that one have at present or at least in the future a knowledge and a will sufficient never to suffer any tyranny whatsoever.<sup>6</sup>

The objectifying intellect conceives human freedom as being limited to a choice of actions consequent upon substantial determination. For Blondel, however, human freedom is something radically different; it implies that to be is to act and that in acting man freely molds his own substantial reality. Thus, human freedom cannot be adequately understood as a mode of action posterior to being; man's freedom is beyond all particular actions as the radical self-positing of his reality. As a consequence of his freedom man is under a moral exigency to exist at every moment as a consequence of his freedom. If man meets with any determinism whatsoever — whether in the depths of his own subjective freedom, e.g., biological, psychological, social

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<sup>5</sup>Blondel, "Le point de départ," p. 237.

<sup>6</sup>*L'Action* (1893) p. vii.

determinisms, or radically outside the sphere of his free ability to determine himself, e.g., a determinism having its origin in the extrinsic will of God — then the existence of the individual human subject would be an illusion.

This insight into human freedom necessitates a radical chance in the method of moral philosophy. All objectivized ethical systems, especially the traditional ethics based on natural law, presuppose that man possesses a static, unchanging substantial nature as source of his actions. Blondel, however, sees the entire development of modern philosophy as a continual movement toward a deeper understanding of the role played by the free subject in human understanding and willing. Its conclusion is that the only legitimate philosophical manner to attain the existing subject in its unique freedom is to grasp it, not as an objective content of consciousness but in one's immediate experiential awareness of self in the deployment of his free activities. To make the subject a part of a system of absolute knowledge in which the knower becomes identified with the known, as Hegel did, is to destroy the unique nature of the human subject.

A radically different understanding of the role that truth and value play in human life follows directly from this understanding of freedom of subjectivity. According to the traditional concept, truth and value are objective norms of action which with their necessity and clarity are imposed upon the judgment. However, from the viewpoint of freedom the human spirit, in order to be true to itself, cannot be simply passive before truth or value and totally determined by its object. Every affirmation, especially if it is closely related to the problem of human destiny, must have its source in man's radical freedom, that is, in that self—positing which is the distinctive feature of a free subject. Hence the problem of moral truth is how to unite free engagement with necessary adhesion in a moral judgment. It is not the conformity of thought with objective reality but (to substitute the equivalent but radically different problem of the adequation of ourselves with ourselves that is here at issue. To be true means to become freely what one ought to be.

Truth is a search for all the necessary conditions of interior self-adequation, a search from within self-consciousness for the meaning and direction of man's freely willed activity. In this context moral self—fulfillment is neither a cognitive nor an affective relation to reality understood as an object set off from the self; rather it is intrinsically connected with one's ontological self—realization. Interior self—adequation thus poses the question of universal reality under the only form in which it can be resolved. From the apparent ego to the integral ego there is an infinity to be opened and filled. To accomplish and possess myself, I must include the universe and God in that need for being, eternity and happiness which constitutes the ego.<sup>7</sup>

It is this insight into the radical nature of human freedom that led Blondel to accept the principle of immanence as the fundamental methodological principle governing his moral philosophy of human action. "Nothing can impose itself on a man, nothing can demand the assent of his

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<sup>7</sup>"Le point de départ," p. 237.

intellect or the consent of his will, which does not in some way find its source in man himself.”<sup>8</sup> “That necessity, which appears to me as a tyrannous constraint, that obligation which at first appears despotic, in the last analysis it is necessary that I understand it as manifesting and activating the most profound reality of my own will; otherwise it will be my destruction.”<sup>9</sup> Blondel did not hesitate to apply this principle to manifestations of the divine will. Although it must manifest itself as distinct from the finite human will, if it is not to destroy man's freedom and integrity it must do so from within one's consciousness of himself and be assimilated into one's free self-positing.

Blondel was well aware of the dilemma to which the principle of immanence gives rise. To remain free man must refuse any purely external and objective norm imposed on his actions. However, unless one is willing to accept a totally irrational and amoral world of absurd and meaningless freedom, he must admit that his freedom is dependent on a transcendent truth to which it must conform, and is directed to values which, far from being his own exclusive creation, serve him as guide, norm and sanction. Only a philosophy of action can effectively respond to this dilemma, because by revealing the dialectic of moral life it alone identifies the structures of human freedom which are necessary but not destructive of moral life as a free, personal enterprise.

For Blondel, action has its own a priori structure from which the totality of thought derives its meaning and structure. Contrary to Kant's assumption that thought determines action, he maintains that action determines thought. Accordingly he changed the central perspective of philosophy from thought as analytic to action as synthetic. Blondel proposed a study of ideogenesis from the perspective of the will, that is, a study of the process by which thought is derived from action. The outcome of this study would be an explicit understanding of the a priori structure implicit in the human will. His search for moral principles is therefore an endeavor to discover the all-encompassing dialectical law that immanently governs the evolution of human life. Behind the most aberrant projects and the strangest deviations of the human will, there is always the élan of the will as willing from which it is impossible to deviate. There is a necessary logic of freedom. Human actions, though often illogical, can never be alogical. A man may freely conform to the law within himself or freely oppose it, but he can never escape it.

### *The Genesis of the Idea of Freedom and Moral Obligation*

Blondel's search for the meaning of moral obligation begins with a genetic study of the necessary development of the idea of freedom in consciousness. The very presence of a universal idea in consciousness with its relative transcendence of finitude leads to an awareness of self as in some way

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<sup>8</sup>*The Letter on Apologetics* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, (1964), pp. 60-61.

<sup>9</sup>*L'Action* (1893), p. xxiii.

transcendent and, thus, distinct from the universe. In addition it leads to the idea of self as free, for awareness of being capable of the infinite implies a consciousness of having a creative power of act which transcends all particular determinations, In all acts one is aware that “to that which is insufficient to determine it, (the will) adds from its own sufficiency to determine itself.” Owing therefore to this self-consciousness and power of reflection one has both the negative power to project ideal goals which represent, not that which is or is given from the past, but that which ought to be. Hence human freedom can be understood not as a contradiction but as a new form of determinism. So understood, it consists in substituting flu a purely compulsive and unconscious push one’s free response to the attraction of ideals.

The idea of free moral obligation is both parallel to and consequent upon the dependence of the idea of freedom on the necessary consciousness of universal ideas. Its foundation and sufficient reason lies in the at least implicit concept of a hierarchy of values. Since this concept unfolds itself into a metaphysical system of ideal realities, metaphysics has as its organic function in human life “to place that which one wishes to will as an ideal object before thought.” For Blondel, the metaphysical order is not outside the will as an extraneous end to be attained, but is contained within the will as a means to move beyond. It does not represent a truth already constituted in fact, but presents to thought what one wishes to will, that is, an ideal object. It thus expresses not an absolute and universal reality, but the universal aspiration of a particular will.<sup>10</sup>

The presence of an ideal metaphysical order in consciousness is what moves the will To incorporate that order, necessarily conceived as its transcendent end, into its voluntary action. It is the conscious awareness of the possibility of incorporating transcendent metaphysical ideals into action that leads to an awareness both of that action as properly free and moral and of self as a free and moral agent. In this way “. . . the will is led to place the center of its equilibrium beyond all factual realities, to live as it were on itself, to search in itself alone the purely formal reasons of its act.”<sup>11</sup> Man is thereby freed from all predeterminism.

Every new synthesis of the ideal and the real achieved in free action is irreducible to its elements: In action the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Hence, each new step in the dialectical development of human freedom must be lived before it can be reflected. If moral life and religious faith can be philosophically justified as necessary for the achievement of man’s destiny, then, Blondel believed, in the will of every man there must be an a priori interior need which is somehow open to philosophical investigation. However, the fact that every man does not have an explicit conscious awareness of this need, poses the question whether or not the explicit conscious awareness of a necessary moral and religious dimension in human destiny is dependent on

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<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 293.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*

commitment: Are there moral conditions of possibility for true self-knowledge?

### *The Genesis of the Idea of God as Man's Destiny*

Blondel believed that he could discover all the a priori aspirations implicit in the human will by means of his dialectic. Most fundamental is the drive out of isolation and alienation into unity with ourselves, the world, our fellow man and God. This is the central message of Christian revelation concerning human destiny: "May they be one, Father, even as you and I are one." Accepting this word not merely as revealed but as revealing, Blondel traces the stages in the dialectical process by which man searches for that oneness.

The appearance of human self-consciousness in the evolutionary process marks man's awareness of moral consciousness as a thrust toward unity: man is morally obliged from within to act as if humanity were one. Unlike Kant who was tempted to see moral truth as an end-in-itself and the other person as a means to that end. Blondel maintains that, like all truth, moral truth does not exist for its own sake. It is only by acting in accordance with the principles and values of moral truth that man can achieve the unity of humanity in a human community.

Beyond the felt unity with man in the concept of humanity and the moral unity in the order of intention, the will strives for a unity with all humanity on the level of existence itself. The will as willing cannot be one with the will as willed until this existential unity is a reality. For Blondel, the ideal of existential unity among all mankind is the primary example of the category of human commitments that remain simultaneously necessary and impossible. In so far as these commitments are necessary, they represent a possible immanent dimension of man's existential reality: in so far as they are impossible for man to achieve by his unaided freedom, they indicate the presence within man of a power that transcends him. This is the key experience that leads man to form an idea of God as the immanent transcendent. Having its genetic origin in the experience of the necessary and the impossible, it is a "projecting out of the unused and unusable potentialities of the human will" In order to find the perfect identity of himself with himself in his voluntary action, man must look within himself until he reaches the point where that which is of himself ceases, yet something remains.

What man can know of God is precisely "that surplus of interior life which demands its employment."<sup>12</sup> Blondel is well aware that the possibility of existential unity among mankind, to which the human will necessarily aspires, would remain forever an abstraction unless man could realize an existential unity with God, Man's knowledge of God consists fundamentally in an immanent awareness that "at the root of his ego there is an ego which is no

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<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 354.

longer his.” Yet it is only in the act of freely consenting to such an intimate presence that the actual consciousness of it as an immanent dimension of man’s existential reality is achieved: Only by free consent does that presence pass from abstract possibility into experienced actuality. According to Blondel, this transformation is the ultimate meaning of man’s freedom and the ultimate dimension of his moral life; it is grounded in the power to make God exist or not exist in our lives by reason of our own freely chosen existence.

Although the idea of union with God is a necessary idea, it is seldom brought to the degree of clarity and precision that it achieves at the end of a dialectical presentation. No matter under what form it is presented in consciousness, the thought of God as absolute is produced in us by a determinism which imposes that idea from within as a necessary result of the dynamism of our interior life. In turn, it produces a necessary influence on the organization of our conduct.

What emerges necessarily in consciousness and is inevitably efficacious in practice is not the concept of a speculative truth to be defined, but the perhaps vague yet certain, and imperious conviction of a destiny and ulterior end to be attained. The vital source of this sense of destiny is the presence within us of the absolute person. No matter under what form this presence reveals itself to consciousness, be it clear or confused, accepted or hidden, admitted or unnamed, the living truth of that presence has an inevitable efficacy. For this reason Blondel calls human action a sort of *théergie*: We cannot posit a free human action without cooperating with the absolute subject within us thereby causing him to cooperate with us. To inset the character of transcendence into our lives it is not necessary to perceive its presence or directly recognize the action of the absolute in us and on us. Indeed, even our denial of its presence and action displaces only the object of affirmation; the reality of human action is not affected by this superficial play of words.

Since the idea of the absolute is necessarily projected as our destiny, it is equally necessary to sense the need actually to achieve it through the combined forces of our thought and action. Human action has the inevitable ambition to realize in itself the idea of perfection: “We cannot know God without willing in some way to become God.”<sup>13</sup> Just as the idea of God represents a paradoxical reality, at once immanent in us and yet transcendent, so too the choice and the action which necessarily follow upon this idea exhibit their paradoxical nature. Our ground for affirming God as absolute subject is the fact that He is conceived as that which we can neither be by ourselves nor accomplish solely by the force of our free action. Yet we have neither being, will nor action except on condition of freely willing and somehow becoming one with Him who is the source and being of our own will and action. Hence, the only way to become one with ourselves is to admit another being within us by substituting another will for our own: “May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

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<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

**It is impossible to enter really into contact with another being, in fact, it is impossible to enter into contact with oneself without passing through the Uniquely Necessary who must become our unique will.<sup>14</sup>**

**Rejection of the absolute by man is nothing more than an attempt at avaricious self-possession which isolates man in a false subjectivity and inferiority. This results in a world of solitude and hostility, of rejection and discontinuity, without meeting or true presence, namely the modern world. Release from the prison of selfhood comes by communicating with the transcendent who as immanent in oneself is bridge to the other. “One cannot be for oneself or for another without being for Him first of all.” One cannot communicate with anyone unless it be with and by God.**

**Blondel sees in the act whereby man achieves living communication with God an active dialectical resolution of the metaphysical problem of the one and many. It is love’s death to self and sacrifice of self that resolves this problem existentially: “Sacrifice is the solution to the metaphysical problem by an experimental method.”<sup>15</sup> The act by which man chooses to supplant his will by the will of God is a negation both of ego and of the false appearances of being in it: “... it is the destruction of that self-will that holds me in isolation from all the rest.” Implicit in this “death” to self, which is the most perfect act of sacrifice, is the most perfect revelation of being, for one no longer sets the absolute source of being from without, but begins to possess it within oneself.**

**At the very root of being, in the common practice of life in the secret logic of consciousness, without God there is no fellow man for man. In order to be *one*, in order to exist, it is necessary that I do not rest *alone*; I have need of all the others. What is necessary, then, is to capture within myself the source of all unity (the divine will) and transmit the truth of its intimate action.<sup>16</sup>**

**It is important to understand that a metaphysical priority of communion with absolute being does not imply a temporal or psychological priority of divine love over human love. Blondel repeatedly insists that the true nature of the option need not be explicit, but is necessarily implicit in the living reality of every free human action. Hence, to live “metaphysically” is not contingent upon the prior conceptual resolution of any metaphysical problem. To resolve the problem of unity by love in any one of its three possible aspects: love of God, of self, or of neighbor, involves a vital solution of that problem for all three.**

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<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 442

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

Yet, the problem and its resolution are ordinarily posed within the context of love of neighbor. “Without that love which is active within the members of humanity there is no God for man; he who does not love his neighbor has no life in him.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, in any human encounter where a genuine interpersonal bond of mutual love is factually established, there is necessarily an implicit resolution of the option in favor of the divine will: “If any man loves he knows God, because God is love.” Without an implicit commitment to God there is merely a semblance of true love, which will prove to be ultimately unfounded and deceiving. A true act of love involves death to self, which in fact is a positive opening of the spirit to the action of the absolute. It thus goes well beyond an attitude of strict justice, which considers only the impersonal character of the other in his abstract dignity as a member of human society. An act of love, in order to be truly such, must be directed to the other as unique and as end in him or herself. “Charity is always universal and always attached to what is unique.”

### *Conclusion*

In Blondel’s dialectic of life, existence and truth continually draw closer together without ever becoming entirely the same. The dialectic in life of the singular existence and universal truth is thus posited as a constant movement towards realizing in man the immanent and necessary connection between essence and existence, nature and liberty, constructive project and transcendent end. Yet throughout the course of their dialectical development, existence always remains to some extent inward and solitary, while truth remains to some extent abstract and exterior.

In the Hegelian dialectic the mediation of singular existence and universal truth could take place only in the abstract dimension of absolute spirit. It occurs independently of the existential freedom and moral commitment of man as a person. The individual is merely a means that reason uses to obtain its objectives. In contrast, it is Blondel’s conviction that such a mediation of existence with truth can be only the result of man’s free moral commitment and that its ultimate condition of possibility may depend on union with one man, Christ, who is “the way, the truth and the life.”

*Woodstock College*  
*New York, New York*

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<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 446.