

MAURICE BLONDEL: PHILOSOPHY, PRAYER AND THE MYSTICAL

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I. Introductory Remarks. Although references to “the mystical” appear frequently in his writings, Maurice Blondel devoted just one essay, “Le problème de la mystique” (1925), formally to the topic. In the essay, he has three goals: 1) to defend the legitimacy of a philosophical consideration of the mystical, 2) to show the relationship of the mystical, considered as a supernatural condition and activity, to basic human conditions and activities, and 3) to reject various approaches to the mystical that deny philosophy its role or distort the relationship between nature and grace in what concerns the mystical.¹ We could profitably consider any one or all three of these aspects of Blondel’s thought on these matters. George Worgul, for instance, makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the second issue in his 1985 article “Blondel and the Problem of Mysticism,” where he connects “Le problème de la mystique” with an earlier work *Le procès de l’intelligence* in order to show the significance of connatural knowledge for understanding the mystical.² For my part, I intend to cover some of the same ground as Worgul, but to do so as part of a somewhat different project, one not within Worgul’s scope nor directly envisaged by Blondel himself in “Le problème de la mystique.” My objective will be to develop Blondel’s thought on philosophy insofar as it is itself a form of prayer, one having its fulfillment for him in the mystical. The project will involve relating “Le problème de la mystique” to his comments on the task of philosophy from his first days as a student of philosophy to his final writings.

II. “Le problème de la mystique.” I need to begin by saying something about the use of *the mystical* (*la mystique*) instead of *mysticism* (*le mysticisme*) in the title. After all, the editorial context of the present essay is a joint meeting of the Nineteenth Century Theology Group and the Seminar on Mysticism for the American Academy of Religion in 2005, and Worgul not only entitles his article “Blondel and the Problem of Mysticism,” but also writes of *mysticism* throughout the article. Blondel himself gave reason for using *mysticism* and *the mystical* interchangeably, albeit with care, in a 1908 note for André Lalande’s *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, a note that would

appear in all editions during Blondel's lifetime.³ However, in "Le problème de la mystique," Blondel insists on a distinction from the outset. Thus in the first footnote: "I will hardly employ this equivocal term [*mysticisme*] which people abuse; for ordinarily words with *ism* indicate not facts or realities but abstractions or tendentious, even exclusive, explanations."⁴ It becomes clear a little further on that the concern is not just with abstractions or tendentiousness, but that *mysticism* had come to imply, in Blondel's studies, features that he would distinguish from the mystical.

... because it evokes thus too easily the image of a sort of mysterious effervescence at the heart of that which Pseudo-Dionysius (he who created nearly the whole vocabulary of the mystical with the orchestration of metaphors that accompany it) called, but by antiphrasis, "the Great Darkness," many persuade themselves to be able to combine indistinctly under this term all that is *pathos* and *Patmos*: smoky ardors of instinct, troubled effusions of sentiment, cloudy sublimities of passion, bad and good romanticism, the ecstasies of the flesh and ravishments of the spirit. There is nothing astonishing thus, if for a number of wise people, suspicion persists, if hostility dominates against these uncontrolled powers that tend to usurp the supreme wisdom. (3-4)

In this excerpt it is a matter of a confused talk of "the mystical," but in the next paragraph Blondel makes his own verbal distinction clear. "... if ordinarily illusions are based on faint resemblances, here it is clear for anyone who can see that the dissemblances are profound, the contradictions are real between 'false mysticism' and "the true and only mystical." (4)

Consequently we are not surprised to find that "Le problème de la mystique" is neither about theories of mysticism nor about the human phenomena captured under the label "faux mysticisme." But what is "la vraie et seule mystique" that Blondel would study? The juxtaposition of "faux mysticisme" and "vraie mystique" in the opening paragraphs would seem to allow for a philosophical consideration of experiences and happenings in many religions and cultures, all qualifying as "vraie mystique" without any prioritizing of the experiences and happenings within one religious community and without a commitment to a particular theological interpretation of them. The consideration would have something of the scope of William James's *Varieties of Religious*

Experience or W. T. Stace's *Mysticism and Philosophy*. But that is not the direction Blondel takes: "la vraie et seule mystique" of "Le Problème de la Mystique" is something specifically Christian with its proper terms of interpretation coming from the Roman Catholic tradition. Although he gives no definition of "la vraie mystique," it becomes clear that he understands "la vraie mystique" to be a matter of a contemplative union with God, coming to human beings as a special infused grace beyond anything achievable by human effort and beyond the expectations grounded by any philosophical analysis. (19, 26, 42 note, 44, 46) Admittedly, late in the essay Blondel refers to the possibility of a genuine mystical experience outside Christianity, making particular reference to Islam, but this experience "cannot be without the soul of the church, with real participation in the graces of Christ, which have nothing in common with the exaltation of blind forces." (59) The question then of "Le problème de la mystique" is about the bearing of philosophy on an area of life that Blondel considers formally supernatural according to the common nature-supernature distinction of Roman Catholic theology. He wants to work as a philosopher at the interface of faith and reason, theology and philosophy.

Even if the reader knew nothing of the controversies of the day, he would recognize from comments made at many junctures in "Le problème de la mystique" that Blondel makes his arguments against real opponents, quoted in places but never identified by name. Some of these opponents had denied the legitimacy of any philosophical approach to the mystical, at times under the guise of protecting philosophy by keeping it in its own domain, at times under the guise of maintaining the transcendence and gratuity of the properly mystical. Blondel's most immediate response to both sets of critics follows Aristotle in the *Metaphysics*: "If it is necessary to philosophize, then philosophize; if it is necessary not to philosophize, it is necessary to philosophize if only to make precise the reasons for not doing so." To which Blondel adds "In sum, there are no facts outside of reason, against reason: one can speak of the illogical, not of the alogical." (8) It should, however, be noted in passing that he himself had been accused from the defense of *L'Action*, his 1893 doctoral dissertation, forward of developing a type of methodological mysticism in the name of philosophy. Although he responded to that charge many times over the years, he doesn't avert to it in "Le problème de la mystique." Obviously, I shall be saying more about his sense of himself as a philosopher in the sections below. To the second line of criticism, that he compromises the supernatural character of "la vraie et seule mystique" both by his philosophical method and by

the content of his analysis, Blondel replies that the critics, by barring philosophical analysis, run the risk of envisaging the mystical as irrational in the sense of “faux mysticisme” and of making it something accidental, extrinsic and artificial (the word *postiche* recurs throughout the essay) in life.(11, 18, 38)

“Le problème de la mystique” does more than defend the role of philosophy. It also proposes a particular way of connecting infused contemplative union with ordinary experience. This highest level of knowledge involves a type of connaturality, that is, a knowledge in which the knower apprehends reality in a way beyond anything conveyed in concepts. This knowing will be cognitive as well as affective, intellectual as well as practical. In the case of the mystical, “the actual conditions of exercise for our intelligence prevents all direct perception of spiritual and divine realities” and must remain “a sort of obscure knowledge...blind and stumbling and nonetheless becoming, as it were, a type of view.” It is a knowledge that “permits us constant experience of the Godhead, rendering us connatural with God.” (28) Blondel’s task is to show that this mystical knowledge “actualizes certain virtualities, certain very profound and excellent obediencial potencies” on the natural level. (7) If the “true and only mystical” involves a type of connaturality, then it would make sense that we could find these virtualities in ordinary experience.

I am then going to maintain: that there is normally a real knowledge by connaturality; that it is truly a knowledge; that it has a normal function in the natural order, a value at the same time practical and contemplative, an objective import; that there is a solidarity and a heterogeneity between its role in the natural order and its role, indispensable in effect, in the supernatural order and more yet in the order properly mystical to which it contributes by clearing the path and permitting exact specification. (30)

This “real knowledge by connaturality” will be something a-conceptual not in the sense that it will be apart from abstract knowledge, but that it will not be the same as abstract knowledge. At the same time, it will not be purely affective or purely practical. It will, in the terms stated above, be really cognitive and really intellectual.

Do we have such connatural knowledge? Blondel’s approach in the essay is largely a priori, that is, he proceeds mainly from a theory of

knowing rather than from examples. Knowledge is primarily of the real, of the concrete, and of the universal as the union of concrete realities. Abstractions enable us to clarify what we have already reached in a more primordial way: neither they nor things known through them are the beginning or the final point of knowing.

Abstract and discursive science can to be in us only a partial extract, an abstract of this concrete thought, in original and constant communion with integral reality, if it nourishes itself there, if it readjusts without cease, not passing it by, not ever exhausting it, keeping it in view without cease. That in effect this notional knowledge marks an awakening and a progress of the spirit under a motion and toward the superior goals of nature, a victory over the mountain in sand of sensations, a means of traversing the infinite dust of facts, yes, assuredly. But is only the drilling of the tunnel permitting the passage through the semi-obscure to the full and free light of a wisdom which does not live uniquely from facts and from abstractions, of generalities and of theory. (30)

Blondel does give examples of knowledge by connaturality when he discusses its patterns in response to critics who see it as being something acquired once and for all “in an immobile and impenetrable block” and as having no rapport with the experiences of life and with the analyses of reflection. This knowledge has its own methods, always in development and imperfect, but methods nonetheless. So a musical genius like Mozart is able to hear the whole of a symphony in a sovereign idea, and a mathematician like Descartes comes to simple intuitions embracing a chain of demonstrations as the result of prolonged reviews of the whole and of entirely free enumerations of the parts (32-33)

Blondel’s fullest treatment of the knowledge by connaturality was in his 1921 *Le procès de l’intelligence*. Here too he wrote in the context of an ongoing controversy, this time responding to the priority given to intelligence over intuition by Charles Maurras and other writers of l’Action française. Blondel’s long essay was the lead piece in a book edited by his friend Paul Archambault. In the essay, he takes Archambault’s lead in seeing intelligence as the faculty, or the act, of “linking the rapports ideas and things to other ideas and things, rapports which also link the diverse elements of both ideas and things themselves.”⁵ Blondel argues that intelligence cannot be solely or even primarily a matter of forming concepts and reasoning abstractly.

Although he defends the realism of abstract intelligence against Bergson, he maintains that this realism depends on another type of intelligence, variously called intuition in contrast to discourse, real knowledge in contrast to notional knowledge in the terms of John Henry Newman, the spirit of finesse in contrast to the spirit of geometry in the terms of Blaise Pascal, and the knowledge by connaturality, or affinity, as against the knowledge by notions in the terms of Thomas Aquinas. (249-269) The two forms of intelligence or knowledge are, in fact, inseparable, having their roots in action and their fulfillment in a union beyond human possibilities. Clearly “Le problème de la mystique” draws on the ideas of this earlier essay, a connection that Worgul makes admirably in the article noted in the opening paragraph. Blondel would return to them in the two volume *La Pensée* of 1934, where the distinctions are between thought thought and thought thinking (*la pensée pensée* and *la pensée pensante*) and between the noetic and pneumatic dimensions of thought. Both distinctions stress the dynamic character of *la pensée pensante* and the pneumatic and the relatively static character of *la pensée pensée* and the noetic, but all the qualifications about the realism and importance of the latter made in the earlier works apply here.

In the final paragraphs of “Le problème de la mystique,” Blondel returns to the relationship of reason and philosophy to the mystical. It is not only that philosophy has for its realm all of human life and that it serves to locate the mystical itself with this life, but that the mystical has an essential relationship to the work of philosophy. The mystical may be beyond philosophical possibilities and the mystic may have no essential need of philosophy, but the mystical is what the philosopher has been pursuing without being able to achieve it on his or her own. Thus he closes the essay with this passage.

In all these traits and in a thousand other even stronger than a life that men have lived, and lived in a sustained manner and even more than Aristotle depicted as a divine illumination by which the sage is able to irradiate himself for an instant, the philosopher, who is not able of himself to discover it, to procure it, to experience it, does he not find it in himself nonetheless to ratify, to admire the perfection of spirit according to the most essential idea, the most concrete possible that the spirit can have? And ought we not to conclude that in truth, according to the doctrine of St. John of the Cross, the mystic is the most reasonable of men? (62-63)

For the remainder of my essay, I would like to develop this connection between philosophy and the mystical and in the process to explore Blondel's suggestive remarks in *L'Action* of 1893 and in *La Pensée* about philosophy and prayer. First I turn to his most powerful consideration of the nature of philosophy, the 1906 articles on "Le point de départ de la recherche philosophique."

3. "Le point de départ de la recherche philosophique." "Le point de départ" appeared in the *Annales de philosophie chrétienne* over two issues: January 1906 and June 1906. Blondel begins the first part with three questions.

Where does philosophy begin? Is it from one's earliest reflection on the facts of the senses or of knowledge, from one's earliest criticism of the immediate clues of consciousness and the spontaneous hypotheses of reason? Or does it amount to a technical discipline to which access is denied, unless paid for by a precise method, starting from a clearly demarcated line so as to adopt a clearly defined standpoint, from where it can deal with the whole collection of questions it raises?⁶

The history of philosophy suggests that we might justifiably take either direction, but the direction we take will largely determine how we understand the enterprise. Will philosophy be mainly science or will it be a less formal dimension of life? Will it be technical or popular? Or will it, as Blondel clearly thinks, be both? His answer is that "philosophical knowledge is specifically distinct from any other from any other...that it has a formal character, which sharply determines the beginning of its inquiry and the task it has to fulfill." Thus it has "technical demands" that must be taken into account if it is to "fit itself into the common effort of humanity to create a work of life at the same time as one of science." (115-116) To understand the relationship between these two dimensions of philosophy is to understand something more fundamental, the two basic types of knowledge in general, direct knowledge in action and the reflection on this action.

To convey what he means by these two types of knowledge, Blondel proposes that we consider his activity at the very moment of writing, one that we ourselves engage in frequently and that we can consider along with him. Writing an essay like "Le point de départ" involves many past experiences, themselves the fruit of many previous ideas and projects, but at the moment of writing the writer is wholly

given over to the activity of writing. He knows what he is doing: he knows what he is trying to accomplish and he knows how to accomplish it without dwelling on the causes or elements of the activity. Sometimes, though, he changes his focus to think about these causes and elements as Blondel has done at some stage of writing “Le point de départ.” Now he no longer engages in writing in any ordinary sense. He is studying writing in abstraction “from the precise conditions and the true ends to which this action should be directed.” Studying writing has the advantage not only of helping us to comprehend the process of writing, but also of enabling us to reorient ourselves so that we might write differently and perhaps even better. Nonetheless, after he has studied writing and after he has absorbed the results of his study, he must return to writing itself with all the directness that characterized it before he broke away from it for his formal study. Although *réflexion* would suggest itself easily as the right term for formal study, there is no such ready term for the elementary, unselfconscious activity out of which it comes and to which it will at some stage revert. What term shall we use? To make a rhyme on *réflexion* and to stress the always future oriented character of direct knowledge, Blondel proposes the term *prospéction*. This distinction and terminology, although never so central as here, would remain part of his thought and vocabulary throughout his work.

The large middle part of “Le point de départ” for January 1906 focuses on the ways in which philosophers have distorted their work by over-valuing one or the other types of knowing in both their ways of philosophizing and in their ways of explaining what they have been doing. As often in his writing, Blondel attaches few names to the approaches he criticizes, and, in any event, I am bypassing these discussions to take up the presentation of his own philosophy of philosophy at the end of the first essay and throughout the second essay. Although the most frequent mistake is to exaggerate the reflective character of philosophy, the remedy is not to downplay reflection. It may be an artifice, but it is “a natural and even an indispensable artifice.” Reflection must be seen as an essential moment in life, in the movement forward toward the goal of action, toward destiny. Blondel returns to the consideration of the activity he is engaged in at this moment, that of writing.

Thus, at first sight, the existence of this page which blackens under my pen is in some way linked to the plan I follow in composing these pages, a plan which is itself subordinated to the conception I have of life and of the effort I am making to resolve

the problem of my destiny. Yet it is true, even if its truth is sketchy and superficial; for if I think of the invention or the fabrication of paper, if I ask myself why after so many others I learned to write, why I bought these ream of paper, why I chose the subject of this article, is it not the case that everywhere from the nearest to the farthest of my actual intentions, I see two immense series of intertwined, stimulating “prospections” and inventive “reflections”? To rely on one of these series alone in philosophical research is to want to weave a cloth without texture, using thread pointing in one direction only. (127)

We might think then that the task of philosophy will be to define this relation between prospection and reflection. Even then, it would be itself a false move since it would suppose that they could be separated and then rejoined whereas they are inseparable, although distinguishable, from one another. The point of the second article is to consider prospection and reflection in such a way as not to set them up as separate from each other. If we can avoid doing so, we will be able to grasp the proper starting point of philosophy.

The first article had drawn us back from false paths and had revealed to us that “knowledge in act always operates simultaneously through fragmentary reflections and total prospection.” (129) We need now to see how these two inseparable and irreducible aspects of knowledge must prove no less complementary in philosophy. To make his point, Blondel outlines two challenges and two harmonics of reflection and prospection. The challenge from the standpoint of reflection is to recognize that philosophy cannot begin with “independent problems regarding distinct objects as if they were separately resolvable...” On the contrary, it subordinates all of these partial perspectives to “the single inevitable problem raised in us by the relations between awareness and action,” that is, when it sets “its task to clarify the integral synthesis of prospection.” 130) The challenge from the standpoint of prospection is to understand and practice “the duty of spelling out, letter by letter, the book of life written in us, of separating its governing ideas, of reaching, of assimilating its composite realities, of foreseeing and preparing their unfolding.” If it meets the challenge, philosophy will have “reintegrated into itself all the fragmentary achievements of reflection.” (130) It is important to note that philosophy must renounce any premature moral or religious satisfaction. Rather it must proceed “methodically and progressively singillatim et per gradus

debitos” through the whole inventory of experience and against all doubts that confront it.

Blondel’s first harmonic is that, “before any research, before any affirmation about the reality or our being and the reality of the objects that we think, we must first realize what we are really conscious of being and of what we actually think.” (132) What we shall see is that our thought and its objects form “a string of states which are never isolated, unless by abstraction.” The result is that the question of “what is” leads us by a type of necessity from one element in the string to another, to “more and more concrete knowledge,” making “explicit the implicit contents of perception.” Both strategies, that of bracketing and that of explication, will have significance for the next section on “Philosophy, Prayer and the Mystical.” The second harmonic is that there is no end to the process of filling in and drawing out, “that reflection never exhausts prospection or exhausts itself, that, neither in us nor outside us...can one reach atoms of consciousness or substance by a distinct and irreducible speculative path.” (133) Of greatest importance is not this or that moment of knowledge, this or that atom of reality, but the law of development, the overall orientation of thought in its encounter with its world. Philosophy must integrate “everything spontaneous in life” into reflection and science and “everything which manifests the truths of consciousness and science” into life. The consequence will be a reconsideration of the very notion of truth: “Substituted in place of the abstract and chimerical *adaequatio speculativa rei et intellectus* is the methodological research of the *adaequatio realis mentis et vitae*.” (135) Some pages later, Blondel remarks that we shall achieve the *adaequatio realis* only by “an appeal to action and by harvesting action’s response.” (142) This reconsideration of the notion of truth was to lead to decades of controversy with scholastic philosophers and theologians like Joseph de Tonquédec and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange.⁷

In the final paragraph, Blondel gathers together the thoughts of the essay. Philosophy “imposes technical discipline on itself only in order to respect the same complexities of life, to remain faithful to popular instinct that is always against the knowledge which is not convertible to action.” (143) But it will also uphold the importance of abstract thought inasmuch as it signals the elements of experience and of reality and leads us to affirm the connectedness and open-endedness of thinking, doing and being. We have then a definition of philosophy and an answer to the question about “the starting point of philosophy.”

To the initial question it is therefore valid to reply that philosophy is the integration, special and technical in its form, universal and popular in its subject matter, of the ordered efforts of human life to produce our being by producing being and beings within us, that is to say, by knowing them, by adapting ourselves to them, by assimilating them into ourselves. (144)

Taken in these terms, philosophy is an unceasing and necessarily cooperative endeavor requiring the whole of life and all of our lives. And so we might interpret the saying that “philosophy is the apprenticeship of death” as meaning that “it is the anticipation of true life which for us is indivisibly knowledge and action.” (144)

4. Philosophy, Prayer and the Mystical. The discussion of philosophy in “Le point de départ” proceeds at a high level of abstraction, but we know that Blondel is writing in the essay in part about himself as a philosopher and about philosophy as he would practice it. He is, in fact, writing about his personal vocation and about the vocational ideal of philosophy. We recognize his sense of personal vocation best in the “Mémoire envoyée à Monsieur R. Prêtre de Saint-Sulpice” of September 9, 1893, that is, a little more than three months after his defense of *L'Action*. The memoir was published in 1961 as an addendum to *Carnets intimes (1883-1894)*, selections from his personal notebooks from the years leading up to and just beyond *L'Action*. Blondel describes how the idea of the priesthood as a calling had been with him from childhood and how also he had come increasingly to see himself as called to the work of philosophy, not just as a type of study that gave him satisfaction, but as an apostolate among “misled souls or sincere unbelievers of which my dream from adolescence had been to dissipate their prejudices in speaking their own language.”⁸ In the midst of all his hesitations he had come to see a clear and complete design.

I wish to act, in the name of reason even and in the supernatural interest of souls, on the thinkers who reflect and who want to govern themselves by ideas. My ambition is to show that, fully consequent to his resolve of independence, man comes to submit himself to God, that the supreme effort of his nature is to avow the need he has to surpass it and that his own will prevents him from arriving at his true will. (550)

Finally he chooses the life of philosopher as more suitable to his gifts and not unrelated to the ends of the priesthood that had drawn him so

powerfully. He would, in pursuit of his vocation, “keep with regard to himself and with regard to others the restlessness of the seeker under the serenity of the believer.” Obtaining an appropriate university assignment was not to be easy. The responsible government education official initially recommended denying him such a post on the ground that his Christian commitments and philosophical orientations were incompatible with university teaching. Only the intervention of Raymond Poincaré, the minister of education and a family connection of Émile Boutroux, the principal reader of *L'Action*, gained him a professorship at Aix-En-Provence, a position he would hold for the rest of his active career.

Carnets intimes tells us much about Blondel’s thought on philosophy itself. On January 24, 1887, he writes, “Philosophy ought to be the sanctity of reason. One is not competent at it because one is intelligent or meditative. It is necessary to be a man, to be Christian, to be a saint: it is the necessary experience.” (104) However, nothing in the notebooks suggests that only Christians, only saints can be philosophers. Rather the explorations of philosophers have their beginning answers in Christianity, in the life of the saints. So he can say in an 1889 entry that “all complete truth is Catholic. Every Catholic has in himself the complete truth. But there are difficulties to explain, to be poured out, to be given to oneself and to others.” (210) Working out those difficulties for oneself and for others will involve following freely all the false paths of “liberated thought.” It will mean not thinking with those who think as he does, but with those who think against him, a demand is not purely strategic, but an issue of the very nature of philosophy. (518) It is a rational enterprise that involves confronting every doubt, every intellectual problem, and not being satisfied with any preliminary, unearned satisfaction. Generally in these notebooks we have the sense that the doubt at issue is methodological and not real, but one entry, a year after the defense of the dissertation, leads us to think there is something more at stake. “You leave me the vivid and painful sentiment of the obscurity of your ways, of the difficulty of your faith, and, if I dare say, the uncertainty of your existence and revelation. Blessed be you in that uncertainty.”(519) But we should leave the intimate elements of *Carnets intimes* aside for a consideration of *L'Action*, the dissertation that was to remain Blondel’s most creative and influential achievement, whatever his own judgments in later years.

The opening paragraph of *L'Action* gives the tenor of the whole book.

Yes or no, does human life make sense, and does man have a destiny? I act, but without even knowing what action is, without having wished to live, without knowing exactly who I am or even if I am. This appearance of being which flutters about within me, these light and evanescent actions of a shadow, bear in them, I am told, an eternally weighty responsibility, and that, even at the price of blood, I cannot buy nothingness because for me it is no longer. Supposedly, then, I am condemned to life, condemned to death, condemned to eternity! Why and by what right, if I did not know it and did not will it?⁹

Through 446 pages of the English translation, with very few citations and without bibliography, Blondel attempts his personal “essay on a critique of life and a science of practice.” He tries to understand what goes on in action and to draw from it a philosophically grounded answer to the questions of the first sentence quoted just above. Starting with the most minimal sense of action, he moves alternately from the analysis of action to the discussion of the meaning of life. He shows the ways in which we move forward in semi-light by acts of natural faith through wider and wider circles of social involvement to form ourselves and our world. When we make any of these circles a final stopping point, we find ourselves pushed forward by the necessary logic of our situation and our analysis. It is a movement that can logically stop only with the alternative of affirming the possibility of “one thing necessary” beyond all human creations, imaginings, and conceptions. Throughout the book, he insists on taking up the challenges of the nihilist, the dilettante, the positivist, the naturalist, the ethicist, the deist, before he allows himself to move on.

What do we learn about philosophy from *L'Action*? Certainly that a philosophical dissertation is not to be merely an exercise for launching a career—however much its author may have hoped for such a career from it. This dissertation would do no less than answer the riddle of life and of action. It would also be a piece of rigorous reasoning: the author would take on all comers and would allow himself no easy victories. There is audacity—even a bit of hubris—in the way Blondel takes on adversaries, almost always without name, in the text, and as he would do face to face in the defense. Peter Henrici has fruitfully compared the dialectical method of *L'Action* with that of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: Blondel and Hegel both step as far back from their goal as possible and use resistance as a means of moving forward.¹⁰

Blondel himself is more conscious of Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* as a model.

Like Descartes, who had feigned new reasons for doubting, we had to make some strange moral attitudes enter into the domain of philosophical doctrines, and to start from further back in order to go further forward than others had gone, from the frame of mind of the aesthete to the devotion of the Grey Nun. But the Methodical Doubt was the singular disposition of a single mind; we have to accept all the diversity of human consciousness and to make even those who feign not to set out at all go forward. From the Methodical Doubt one emerged as from a fiction; we have to remain in action as in reality. Thus, what was only the problem of the understanding, becomes the problem of the will; it is no longer only the Cartesian question, but the Kantian question which we had to resolve anew by defining the relation knowing, doing and being.... (444)

In *L'Action*, as in "Le problème de la mystique," philosophy poses questions it cannot answer and solutions it cannot verify. The answer and the verification can come only in action, actually in the affirmation of and surrender to "the one thing necessary" in literal practice.

It is for philosophy to show the necessity of posing the alternative: "Is it or is it not?"... But philosophy can go no further, nor can it say, in its own name alone, whether it be or not. But if it is permitted to add one word, only one, which goes beyond the domain of human science and the competence of philosophy, the only word able, in the face of Christianity, to express that part of certitude, the best part, which cannot be communicated because it arises only from the intimacy of totally personal action, one word which would itself be an action, it must be said: "It is." (446)

My sense is that, if philosophy is to be the sanctity of reason, a designation Blondel makes here as in *Carnets intimes*, it is both because it leads to "It is," and also because it assumes all the demands of reason. (404)

The published version of *L'Action* includes a chapter entitled "The Bond of Knowledge and Action in Being," a chapter missing from the version presented to the examining committee. If the committee had

seen the chapter, the members might have given Blondel even more trouble than they did. In any event, it was to prove the most controversial part of *L'Action* and to expose the author to the accusation of both fideism and idealism. Blondel maintains in this last chapter before the conclusion that everything preceding in *L'Action* is at the phenomenal level and that only the final decision before “the one thing necessary” confers existential status on the elements of the chain taken singly or collectively. Blondel was to defend himself and the argument against his opponents, most notably in his response to M-Benoit Schwalm, “L’illusion Idéaliste,” and he would omit the chapter in the second volume of the 1936-1937 *L'Action*, where he presents the greater part of the dissertation without revision.¹¹ We might then bypass the additional chapter here, but it is in fact important for Blondel’s whole project and for the present paper. I take it, with Henri Bouillard, that the main point of the chapter is not epistemological, but metaphysical. Blondel wants to establish a “metaphysics of the second power,” an account where

...appearances, themselves, duration, all the inconsistent forms of individual life, far from being abolished, participate in the absolute truth of the divine knowledge of the Mediator.... Called to see all things in the unity of the divine plan, though the eyes of the Mediator, called to see himself in the permanent act of liberality and to love himself in loving the perpetual charity from which he has his being, he is this very act of his author, and he produces it in himself as it is in him. (423)

If the concluding “it is” has this metaphysical import, then the infused contemplative union, the “true and only mystique” of “Le problème de la mystique,” will be the earthly fulfillment of the philosophical quest for the union of knowledge, action and being. It will be a human fulfillment and yet a fulfillment beyond all powers of human intelligence and will.

The position of the preceding paragraph is consistent with all of Blondel’s work from the Latin thesis, *De Vinculo substantiale et de substantia composita apud Leibitium*, presented prior to *L'Action* at the Sorbonne, to the final writings of the tetralogy. Here I want to invoke just one more text, *La Pensée* of 1934, the initial work of the tetralogy. Blondel devotes a good part of the second volume to a theory of philosophy. Thought, the act of unifying diversity in life, takes two human forms, the pneumatic, that is, the act of thought by which we thrust forward toward goals that we cannot foresee, and the noetic, that is, the act of thought by which we congeal the discoveries of the moment

in concepts, principles, theories. Consistent with “Le point de départ,” Blondel makes philosophy the bringing together of these two forms of thought. More than an academic discipline, more than an intellectual exercise, it is an act of prayer.

It is not only the man who lives in all philosophy, it is philosophy itself that is and will be always naturally, normally, a figure at prayer [*une orante*]. And all this seventh part of our study has been in sum, under the pressure of a consented dialectic as much as an imperative, the exposé of the philosophical prayer, that which, to usurp a term from another provenance, one might call the baptism of desire, of sincerity and of courage. There is, in the thought already alive in us, more than philosophical science is able to exhaust and to systematize; it is then philosophical to recognize and to inscribe on our intellectual maps that terra that we have not the right to name incognita since the view is certain and, in the night even, it is near to us, it is already in us.¹²

And for what do we pray? What would answer our prayers? A few pages earlier Blondel had written about the mystical.

... the depth of our intelligence implies always a state which, because of its indistinctly known and of the access that it opens to touches where the divine grasp, merits the name of “mystical.” That this word that people abuse so often would not allow us to miss the reasonable and even rationally justified character of a knowledge which, though it may seem nocturnal, is no less an extension of thought all the way to its subterranean source from which overflows its inexhaustible tide. Mystical knowledge, these two words that one accuses sometimes of being incompatible, ought on the contrary to mark a superior degree of truth, of certitude and of propulsive force.¹³

The sentences that follow repeat almost verbatim material from the final pages of “Le problème de la mystique”: Charles Delbos on the superior realism of the true mystic and John of the Cross on his reasonableness. We have then come full circle while, I would hope, having enlarged the circle.

5. Concluding Reflections. My initial agreement to do a project on Blondel and mysticism involved considerable misgivings. The main

misgiving was that I have had the common sense philosopher's skepticism about "mystical experiences," about experiences transcending the realm of ordinary life and that I have had relatively little interest in literature on such experiences. Nonetheless, I've been studying Blondel off and on for over forty years and I thought I might turn the project toward something of greater personal interest, the spirituality of philosophy. A common sense philosopher skeptical about mysticism can still, by my lights, have a concern about spirituality, even prayer, and I knew that Blondel would give me much material on the subject. As I re-read "Le problème de la mystique" and the other literature discussed here, I realized that for him the problem of the mystical is, in fact, part of the problem of philosophy. Or better that the properly oriented spirituality of philosophy will, on his terms, mean an openness not just to faith, but also to the "true and only mystical" of the essay. In the 1893 *L'Action*, philosophy is prayer from beginning to end although the prayer becomes increasingly richer, deeper and broader, and the mystical is the highest level of prayer and the answer to the philosophical questions arising from the imperative of and to action. Anyone who shares, or has shared, Blondel's passion for philosophy and his faith as a Roman Catholic, and perhaps those who do not share them, can appreciate the coherence, indeed the beauty, of this way of bringing philosophy to completion in the fullness of life. But there remain problems in the approach.

One set of problems centers on philosophy, an activity understood almost universally as a matter of discourse, embracing questions formulated through discourse and of answers given through discourse. Blondel himself is surely a writer given to long, intricate and fairly technical discourses. Doesn't then the talk about action, about prayer, about the mystical, make the discourse secondary to something non-discursive at the beginning (action) and the end (the mystical) with the whole process at heart something non-discursive (prayer)? Perhaps, though, Blondel is making a statement fairly common throughout the history of philosophy, that is, that argument is secondary to understanding, that discourse is secondary to life. Maintaining this much is perfectly compatible with recognizing the full validity of abstract thought and argument. The other set of problems involves the dependence of Blondel's spirituality of philosophy on his faith as a Roman Catholic and on the possibility of a culmination of action, of thought, of life, in something superhuman: the grace dependent mystical for some of us philosophers in this world and for all of us hereafter. What if his faith comes to seem delusional or improbable or if the

mystical culmination comes to seem unlikely? Although we surely won't be Blondelians in any strong sense under these conditions, we may still share something of his spirit in the doggedness, the fairness and the honesty with which we pursue the questions that we share with him. There will be a type of prayer in our attitude toward the world, ourselves, our projects, and possibly in our very uncertainties about all three. As Martin Heidegger once said, admittedly in an enterprise much different from Blondel's, "questioning is the piety of thought."¹⁴

¹ Blondel, "Le problème de la mystique," in *Qu'est-ce que la mystique? Cahiers de la nouvelle Journée*, n.3, (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1925), pp. 1-63.

² Worgul, "Maurice Blondel and the Problem of Mysticism," *Ephemerides theologiae Lovanienses*, 61, 1985, pp. 100-122.

³ Lalande, *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1926), pp. 497-498.

⁴ Le problème de la mystique," pp. 2-3, note 1.

⁵ Blondel, "Le procès de l'intelligence" in Archambault, *Le procès de l'intelligence* (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1922). The essay first appeared in an edition of *La Nouvelle Journée*, n. 19, for June 1921, July 1921, and August-September 1921.

⁶ Blondel, "Le point de départ de la recherche philosophique," *Annales de philosophie chrétienne*, v. 151, January 1906, p. 36. See Fiacre Long's English translation, "The Starting Point of Philosophical Research," in *The Idealist Illusion and Other Essays* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), p. 115. All the citations in the text are from Long's translation.

⁷ Long translates *chimérique* in the section quoted above as *nebulous*. I have departed from his translation here by using *chimerical*. For a survey of Blondel's disputes on the problem of truth, see my "Blondel and Pragmatism: Truth as the Real Adequation of Mind and Life," in *Papers of the Nineteenth Century Theology Group at the Twentieth Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion*, Edited by Andrew J. Burgess, David D. Schultenover, Daniel W. Hardy and Theodore Vial (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), pp. 90-108, and Bertoldi, Francesco, "Il dibattito sulla verità tra Blondel e Garrigou-Lagrange," *Sapienza*, 1900, pp. 293-310.

⁸ Blondel, *Carnets intimes (1883-1894)*. (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1961), p. 546.

⁹ Blondel, *L'Action (1893): Essai d'une critique de la vie et d'une science de la pratique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), vii. See Oliva Blanchette's translation in *Action (1893): Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, translated by Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 3. All the citations in the text are from Blanchette's translation.

¹⁰ Henrici, *Hegel und Blondel* (Pullach: Verlag Berchmanskolleg, 1958).

¹¹ Schwalm, "Les illusions de l'idéalisme et leurs dangers pour la foi," *Revue Thomiste*, 4, September 1896, pp. 413-414, Blondel, "L'illusion idéaliste" *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 6, November 1898, pp. 726-745, Blondel, *L'Action I-II* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1947), and Bouillard, *Blondel and Christianity*, translated by James M. Somerville, (Washington: Corpus Books, 1969), p. 104.

¹² Blondel, *La Pensée II: Les Responsabilités de La Pensée et la Possibilité de son Achèvement* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954), p. 270.

¹³ *La Pensée II*, p. 266.

¹⁴ Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings*, Edited by David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), p. 341.