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## Oliva Blanchette, Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life

### Citation for published version:

Grumett, D 2011, 'Oliva Blanchette, Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life', *Modern Theology*, vol. 27, no. 4, pp. 708-712. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2011.01714.x>

### Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1111/j.1468-0025.2011.01714.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2011.01714.x)

### Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

### Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

### Published In:

Modern Theology

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*Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* by Oliva Blanchette (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), xvi + 820 pp.

A figure more frequently invoked than understood, Maurice Blondel has long been read through the lens of his controversial 1893 thesis *L'Action*. Oliva Blanchette, translator of that thesis, provides in this monumental study the first comprehensive English survey of Blondel's whole oeuvre, the majority of which remains untranslated, including archival material. This will become the standard reference text for anyone wishing to extend their knowledge of Blondel's philosophy.

Born in Dijon in Burgundy in 1861, Blondel excelled as a pupil at the city's state-run *lycée*. Moving then to Paris as a *normalien*, he was immediately identifiable by his determination to preserve his provincial, familial Catholic piety in what was at best a sceptical institution. After gaining his doctorate (following a four-hour public defence), Blondel had difficulty gaining an academic position because of official antipathy to his religiously-tinged views. In 1897, however, a chair came up at Aix-en-Provence, the city which he and his wife Rose would make their lifelong home and where they would raise three children. As a professor, Blondel was charged with teaching philosophy both in the city's university and at Marseilles, as well as overseeing the graduate program for the whole region including Avignon, Toulon, Nice and even the island of Corsica. At times he directed as many as seventy graduate students. Inherited wealth sustained him through bouts of ill health, enabled the family to enrol their children at the local Catholic college,

to the chagrin of the university bureaucracy, and maintained the *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne*.

Blondel has sometimes been seen as allied with modernism and condemned by his immanentism. Yet although strict observance Thomists certainly scorned him, Blondel enjoyed a private audience with Pope Leo XIII early in his career and Pope Pius XI commended his writings to visiting bishops. Blanchette's detailed presentation enables a far more nuanced and accurate understanding of his place in contemporary debates than any source hitherto available. In outline, Blondel can be seen as steering a middle course between Kantian moralism and neo-Thomist supernaturalism via a revived Aristotelian view of action as unifying the person supra-discursively by impelling him to seek a perfection charged with the infinite. Kant, by pursuing a radical subjectivity, had denigrated both the natural and supernatural contexts of action, whereas neo-Thomism, as a result of its inability to develop a synthesis able to withstand modern objections, tended to erase the natural. By refusing to take action seriously, each failed to situate thought in the context of the *real*, of knowledge *in act*, in which speculative abstractions and practical, synthesising intuitions are inalienable conjoined in an integral realism.

Within this realism, the infinite is pictured as erupting into supposedly self-sustaining nature. The will is therefore faced with an alternative in which the infinite must either be affirmed or denied—an option that necessarily presupposes in natural human life the question of ultimate destiny. This integral realism may be considered under the conjoined aspects of action and thought.

Action for Blondel is no mere impulse or product of fate but is conscious and purposeful. Blanchette writes: ‘There is acting only where the agent, even under the influence of some prior motion, gives evidence of an efficiency that is singularized by the originality of its own being, and its own initiative.’ (p. 552) Crucially, this efficiency is realized in the individual agent as the healing of the rupture between the willing will (*volonté voulante*), directed at concrete objects, and the willed will (*volonté voulue*), which is the power of willing in the abstract. Despite obvious echoes of Paul in Romans 7, the rupture is always presented as a strictly philosophical dialectic, not a consequence of sin. But unlike for secular existentialists, the healing or unification of the will can only be effected by participation in an infinite power subsisting beyond the will, with the efficient, natural character of human action thereby not dissolved but intensified. Indeed, drawing images from the parable of the talents, Blondel sees efficient causation as a loan (*prêt*) of power from God that gives freedom to act ‘against God or in step with God’ (p. 586).

Ever the philosopher, Blondel is thus at greater pains than de Lubac to affirm the integrity of the natural. As Adam English has recently shown, Blondel does not regard pure nature as a concept grounded in a refusal of the supernatural, but as in itself a negation or ‘inachievement’ that is nonetheless attracted by and adheres to that which is greater, reaching beyond itself only in order to complete itself. (See Adam C. English, *The Possibility of Christian Philosophy: Maurice Blondel at the Intersection of Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 43–45.) This is why the supernatural

gift (in contrast with the gift of nature) is obligatory for the one to whom it is offered: this gift accords with its recipient's 'natural aspiration for a completion that is necessary for human nature and yet beyond the capacity of human nature to attain by itself' (p. 140). The language of surpassing, overreaching or striving therefore fails to account for the otherness of the divine gift. Required, instead, is a 'radical reversal of perspective that can no longer be reduced to a merely subjective disposition' (p. 82). Humans can only want God in the way he wills to give himself to them, not in the way he already appears to them. Only via radical self-dispossession, self-abnegation and suffering may humans be raised above themselves. Blondel illustrates this using the imagery of a gothic vault: the capstone can be installed only from above, not inserted from below.

Despite the radical otherness of the gift, it is nevertheless received progressively through continuous development. Indeed, we might add that such a gift can *only* be received gradually. The supernatural is, for Blondel, pre-eminently in history as dogma and a living continuity of practice, in contrast with what ideologues of both liberal and Maurrassian stripes might suppose. It is no coincidence that ceremony—whether in family, public or ecclesial life—is key in the historical transmission of the supernatural, because it elevates acts to a 'higher degree of transcendence ... grounded in the very dynamism of our will in search of an object that will equal the power of willing' (p. 635). This passage beyond the merely discursive can even be regarded as an assumption, a higher motion due to a directly divine grace. Within the individual human life, Blondel portrays this progression as a transition from loan to barter in which self-sufficiency is renounced and the supernatural is first used and possessed. Subsequently, however,

following full renunciation even of that which has been loaned, the supernatural may be attained and owned.

As a result of excessive focus on *L'Action*, Blondel has sometimes been accused of anti-intellectualism. It is therefore opportune that Blanchette devotes a full half of his study to Blondel's later work: the 1934–7 trilogy *La Pensée, L'Être et les êtres* and (revised and expanded) *L'Action*, and his incomplete 1944–6 triptych *La Philosophie et l'Esprit chrétien*. In these works, Blondel draws on Aristotelian and Spinozistic motifs to develop his understanding of thought's function as unitive—even at the subconscious, animal and sub-sentient levels of being, which already imply a 'certain degree of thought in that a plurality of otherwise thoughtless elements is unified and interconnected into a whole' (p. 426). This pneumatic aspect of thought is likened to a 'breathing exchange', requiring reception and interiorization. Sustaining thought's noetic aspect, this pneumatic exchange is alluded to in metaphors like aspiration, inspiration and expiration, all expansions of the spirit in *logos*. In religious activity, the end of union is 'actually present in the labour toward the end' in a real communion bonding finite and infinite natures (p. 487). Thought appears to itself only in order to go out of itself and be born in the Spirit in a process of conversion. This later emphasis on the reality of spirit corrects the negation and phenomenalism of *L'Action*, in which, as Blondel came to see, he had conceded too much to his detractors. His practicing philosophy (or philosophy of practice) was by now clearly rooted in an *élan spirituel*, not a Bergsonian *élan vital*.

Yet if thought is to avoid ensnarement between an equivocal realism and unstable idealism, it requires objects. Indeed, thought knows itself only in the turn to the object, in thinking the objects that impose themselves on it. Hence when discussing the classic proofs for God's existence, Blondel sees ontological arguments as founded on cosmological and teleological proofs, which are prior because they commence with the visible world and its organic character. He thereby returns to the roots of thought in action, which he now describes as contemplative action (*theorein*) and 'agnition', that is, action in which cognition has an interest, but which cannot be reduced to cognition. Action is thus supremely dependent on contemplation, which makes present to the subject the ideas of the infinite, the universal and the transcendent good, which is the condition for consciousness of being a cause.

Blondel received communion frequently, which was then uncommon for laity. This practice stretched back to his student days, prompting him to excavate the concept of the bond of substance (*vinculum substantiale*) in the ecumenical correspondence between Gottfried Leibniz, a Lutheran, and the Jesuit Bartholomew des Bosses. This concept, Blondel argues, provided Leibniz's way out of the idealism that he had been left with after dismantling the mechanistic Cartesian theory of substance as extension. Blondel's frequent use of eucharistic imagery to portray divine action on and in nature was therefore impelled by a eucharistic sensibility at once both devotional and intellectual, grounded in a deep conviction that sacramental life was profoundly realist. This sacramental realism extended beyond the visible church: just as Blondel, a layperson, shared in the daily eucharistic life typically restricted to the priesthood, so the

whole of humankind could be viewed as implicitly partaking in that mystery in their daily acts of production and transformation. Blondel presents an extra-eucharistic transubstantiation, ontological consolidation and conversion culminating in a transnatural state neither purely natural nor entirely supernatural but in a state of tension between the two. The character of this relationship is presented in different places by means of a range of Christological and related images including double assimilation (p. 87), compenetration (p. 236), intussusception (p. 293), circumincession (p. 394) and endosmosis (p. 761).

Transposing such theological concepts into a philosophic key is fine, but how far was Blondel willing to move into theology? While insisting that his reasoning remained always strictly philosophical, he nevertheless deployed philosophy to clear terrain fertile for theological colonization. His concept of the infinite or Absolute could be identified with the Christian God, while it is hard to regard his Mediator non-Christologically. God in Christ was, for Blondel, a hypothetical necessity, with the role of the philosopher in relation to belief being to ‘demonstrate an internal need and a sort of demanding appetite within us’ at the stage ‘before the fact can be received interiorly’ (p. 126). Awareness of Blondel’s view of philosophy’s purpose helps show why he objected to the idea of ‘Christian philosophy’ at least as understood in the 1890s. Philosophy remained as such formally neutral, in contrast with the specific methods employed in apologetics, which he termed ‘philosophoidal’ to avoid conflation. There could, however, be a ‘Catholic philosophy’, that is, a philosophy systematically open to questions of ultimate human

destiny and vocation as posited by Catholic teaching, which is predicated on belief in the supernatural.

Much of what has been said implies that Blondel contributed to the reinterpretation of Aquinas associated with *nouvelle théologie*. He was certainly interested in Aquinas but, as Blanchette shows, it was not until 1899 that Blondel undertook any detailed reading of the Angelic Doctor. Despite the teleology of part three of the *Summa contra Gentiles*, which appealed to him, Blondel felt that Aquinas depended too heavily on citing authorities and failed to develop a philosophical form of argumentation that would have allowed him to enter more fully into the minds of sceptics and unbelievers. It would therefore be more accurate to say that Blondel followed a path comparable with the Aquinas of *nouvelle théologie* to some similar conclusions but was not himself part of that movement. More significant for shaping Blondel's philosophy was Augustine—his appropriation of the Pauline divided will; recognition of the conflict in admixture between the earthly and heavenly cities, both sometimes anonymous; and acknowledgment of philosophy's insufficiency when faced with a Christian order incommensurable with it.

Blondel frequently worked through others. From early in his career, his use of pseudonyms encouraged readers to engage with his writings rather than prejudge their content. Pseudonyms also reduced the likelihood of censure by university bureaucrats. Moreover, by 1926 Blondel's hearing and sight were both severely impaired (the latter due to retinal haemorrhage and macular degeneration), which combined with existing

neuritis and general poor health made him unable to work without secretaries. Several younger women assisted him, including doctoral students, until another former student, Nathalie Panis, moved down from Paris to become his lifelong assistant, continuing to care for his archive after his death in 1949 until its transfer to Louvain in 1971.

Blanchette's work can be seen as a continuation of this method of working, albeit at a step further removed from Blondel himself. It is careful and thorough and makes available in English summary all of Blondel's significant texts. The resulting study might feel slow and repetitive for the reader who seeks to absorb everything.

Fortunately, however, a good analytical index will facilitate its more likely use as a reference work to be consulted for illumination of particular points.

Despite its grounding in deep reading of primary texts and contemporary debates, evidenced in an informative chronological bibliography, the study unusually does not engage or cite any recent secondary literature on Blondel in any language. This seems a missed opportunity to point readers to the best sources available for addressing the critical issues that Blanchette chooses to ignore. Moreover, it is difficult to believe that his appraisal of Blondel is a product of primary texts alone. Furthermore, it would be fruitful to explore more systematically Blondel's debts to key thinkers such as Aristotle, Leibniz and Hegel, and their wider implications. The philosopher of Aix's overtly intellectualist, substantialist and teleological reading of Aristotle has the potential to remedy simplistic communitarian interpretations. The bond of substance concept that he draws from Leibniz offers a suggestive middle way between a materialist fetishization of pure nature and an equally unsatisfactory deracinated idealism. His assessment of Hegel

as a logician who promotes a philosophical religion in preference to Christianity, which Blanchette reports neutrally, requires closer examination in light of the importance Hegel attaches to idea and spirit, their manifestation in specific historical religious forms, and the abiding role he envisions for philosophy. But let us end by recapitulating what has already been stated: this work is a major scholarly achievement that performs its chosen task extraordinarily well. It should be hoped that it will greatly expand understanding of Blondel across the English-speaking world.

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