

Maurice Blondel on the Practice of Supernatural Religion

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Introduction

Maurice Blondel attended daily Mass to the very end of his life.¹ This essay is, in a way, a meditation on this fact. But it is more nearly a confrontation with Blondel's philosophical argument in defense of human action's capacity for affirming the infinite, for "containing" the infinite in its affirmation of the infinite, an affirmation achieved in action's finitude. That is, this is an essay on Blondel's argument for a supernatural religion that can be literally practiced. Much like Blondel's larger philosophical works, this essay spends its time exploring the coordinating ground of supernatural religion, which is the natural world split open in two directions: in its very existence, which is a supposition of what absolutely outstrips its power; in its very action, which in ecstasy takes the shape of a desire for a reversal that it cannot offer itself. So the natural world presupposes the supernatural and desires the supernatural while remaining, of its own power, natural. Blondel makes a theoretical distinction in the universe that, concretely, is a natural–supernatural one committed to a single destiny. This theory and this concreteness cohere in order to make the literal practice of religion both possible and necessary, terms that this essay explains.

¹ Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 36–37, 416–17, 760–61.

Action: The Problem of Theory and Practice

Blondel's later writing in the 1930s expands on an important paradox that appears in the very early *L'Action* (1893). That paradox has to do with a distinction between theory—that is, the world of ideas and reflection—and practice, by which Blondel means the concrete world of human action, a world that for Blondel is an expansive range or “body” of action. It is true, after all, that an idea is not a deed. And yet no deed is without its idea, without the mediatory power of the act of consciousness, nor without the mediation of this consciousness's rationality—a further synthesizing act within consciousness—even when the deed contradicts reason. “Hence,” says Blondel, “it is because we find in our acts a kind of creative sovereignty that we have a consciousness of ourselves and reason; it is because we are reasonable and conscious of ourselves that we judge ourselves capable of voluntary initiative.”² The paradox, at one angle, is this leap or gap, this difference nevertheless sustained by a mediation, where ideas and deeds are non-identical yet inseparable. At another angle, it is a paradox that a “science of practice” has to straddle, since it studies (as science) what it is not: concrete action (practice). Blondel, whether young or of his latter days, is after the possibility of such a science. He is also after the bond between reasoning and acting. In this section, I also seek that bond, and I make use of Blondel's early and later works together to give a sense not of Blondel's development, but of the *Gestalt* of his life's work with respect to the bond between thought and action.³

The bond first requires the rejection of monism. Though Blondel's stance toward theologies of his day tends to be more well-known among theologians, and therefore filtered through questions of nature and grace and carried through to a rejection of a two-tiered conception of the universe, still, his nearer interlocutors are often monists: modern philosophers and the modern sciences, and their strange compatriots in history, the spiritual movements of the *fin de siècle*, involving spiritualisms of various kinds, recollected in our popular imagination today in visions of crystal balls and séance tables. The positivism of the modern sciences and of modern (French) philosophy poses a totally self-contained “nature” that can be explained

² Maurice Blondel, *Action* (1893): *Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, trans. Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 101.

³ For Blondel's later works, I have used the digitized versions available through Bibliothèque Paul-Émile-Boulet de l'Université du Québec à Chicoutimi at classiques.uqac.ca/. These versions contain notation that reference the original pagination of the texts, which I have used in this essay.

without religion, in a form of what English speakers might call “secularism,” but which is more accurately filtered through French Republican desires for *laïcité*.⁴ While Blondel was writing, there were not only these political and scientific and philosophical trends, but also the semi-panteistic, variously agnostic religious movements that dominated privileged circles in Europe at the time. These are a kind of monism in their desire to perceive a wholeness in the world, effervescent of experience, in an inversion of secularism, where what religion seeks is discoverable in the proportionate world, which is again or still all that there is.⁵

Blondel defies these monisms through reflection on the concrete universe, the universe in which they are situated and which they claim to study or to transcend from within. His most basic claim is that all forms of monism fail to notice that our universe is heterogeneous; it contains not a single horizon, but many horizons. The failure here is not only theoretical. It is a failure to honestly confront the world in its concreteness. “The study of true immanence,” Blondel says to these monistic self-sufficiencies, “does not lead to affirming an interior plenitude; . . . it consists on the contrary in giving evidence of our incurable spiritual indigence and misery. Far from any pretense of filling an emptiness through the deployment of our nature, it deepens the emptiness that only the supernatural can fill.”⁶ “Immanence,” here, should sound to Catholic ears with the warning against the immanentism of modernism in Pius X’s famous 1907 encyclical, *Pascendi Domini Gregis*. Notice that Blondel agrees with Pius, and that Blondel reveals the insufficiency of immanentism on its own grounds, for immanence immanently reveals its needfulness for what it is not.⁷

The heterogeneity of the universe is implicit already in the very notion of *several* (modern) sciences, and of several human sciences. In his critique of historicism, for example, Blondel points out that the field of history is not omni-competent: “Inevitably it relies upon ulterior problems, upon sciences superior to it, which it can neither supplant nor replace . . . by falsely

⁴ See Ann Margaret Doyle, “Catholic Church and State Relations in French Education in the Nineteenth Century: The Struggle between *Laïcité* and Religion,” *International Studies in Catholic Education* 9, no. 1 (2017): 108–22.

⁵ See Maurice Blondel, *L’Être et les êtres* (Paris: Alcan, 1935), 321–22. I cite other relevant passages in other works below.

⁶ Maurice Blondel, *The Philosophical Exigencies of Christian Religion*, trans. Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021), 50.

⁷ Maurice Blondel, “The Letter on Apologetics,” in *The Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma*, trans. Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 151–53.

proclaiming itself a sort of total metaphysics.”⁸ But historians seem to forget this immediately, when they deny—based in a total competency they could not have in the method of history—things like miracles. The unitive power at work is not the world (with its many objects) and not the sciences (whose methods are many), but is minds asking about these many objects using many methods. “There is,” says Blondel, “continuity and solidarity in the work of the mind; there is heterogeneity in the points of view and in the bearing of scientific affirmation.”⁹

Monism, in its desire to mount great heights, does more than forget that the continuity of the mind’s work is not evidence of continuity in the world. Monism’s more devastating act is the denial of any radical entitative disproportion that we might call the absolutely supernatural. Instead, monism collapses the Supreme One (*l’Un suprême*), or the absolutely *non*-contingent, into becoming, change, contingency—in other words, the “whole” (*tout*) that is the universe. The Supreme One and the (contingent) whole become one. Monism then contents itself with contradictions. “Fallacious” is, Blondel argues,

the name of monism; for the two sides that we are forced to attribute to nature and thought are never identifiable: neither the whole [*tout*] is one, nor the one merges with the whole. Fallacious, the theosophical systems which profess both the cult of luminous or even dazzling images and which claim to initiate us into that which has neither form nor consciousness nor knowability of any kind; to be agnostic, pantheist, [or] theosophist is therefore supposedly to know that one does not know, while knowing that there is an unknowable and that this unknown is known as unformulable, formless, and transcendent to the relative and the absolute with which we use it in turn to certify, define, or sublimate it.¹⁰

⁸ Maurice Blondel, “History and Dogma,” in Dru and Trethowan (trans.), *Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma*, 234.

⁹ Blondel, “History and Dogma,” 236.

¹⁰ Maurice Blondel, *L’Action* (1936), 2 vols. (*Le problème des causes secondes et le pur agir* and *L’action humaine et les conditions de son aboutissement*) (Paris: Alcan, 1936), 358: “Fallacieux, le nom de monisme; car les deux faces qu’on est forcé d’attribuer à la nature et à la pensée ne sont jamais identifiables: ni le tout n’est un, ni l’un ne se confond avec le tout. Fallacieux, les systèmes théosophiques qui professent à la fois le culte des images lumineuses ou même éblouissantes et qui prétendent nous initier à ce qui n’a ni forme ni conscience, ni connaissabilité d’aucune sorte; être agnostique, panthéiste, théosophe, c’est donc prétendument connaître qu’on ne connaît pas, tout en sachant qu’il y a un inconnaissable et que cet inconnu est connu comme informulable, informe

What monism excises from existence is an incommensurability (*incommensurabilité*) of two orders, of God as Pure Act and of creation as contingent act. It is this incommensurability that, Blondel insists, in fact makes possible the coherent unity of “certainty and mystery, discursive life and contemplative life.”¹¹

I discuss this incommensurability more below. For now, it is important to note Blondel’s rejection of monism in favor of heterogeneity. And this rejection is not an excursus in the problem of theory and practice. It treats the problem of theory and practice first of all by framing the universe in which the two are distinguished and also bonded, and second of all by suggesting that the unity of theory and practice need not be found in the world of contingency at all, though this unity will be affirmed by a contingent, supernaturalized act—in an action in which God also acts.

On the one hand, Blondel does in fact straightforwardly deny that theory and practice can be resolved in such a way that the one is the solution to the other. Here Blondel has in mind both a reduction of theory to the “practical,” a flattening of principles into practice or a rejection of the notion that there *can* be notions applied to more than one moment in time, and he has in mind the reduction or reversion of practice into theory, as if the theory understands “already” what practice will bring about in theory’s being-practiced.¹² He is as suspicious of “moral dogmatism” as he is of theory’s domination of the real.¹³ These suspicions are important because theory and practice, their distinction and their relationship, set the stage for the conceptuality that will fund Blondel’s idea that dogma can remain absolutely true (that is, dogmatic) and that it can nevertheless be practiced, in what he calls the “literal practice” of (supernatural) religion. But it is also important to see underneath the suspicions a desire to really unite dogmatic, supernatural religion and its practice.

And so, on the other hand, Blondel supports a mutual enrichment in the dialectic between theory and practice, which is a first way of suggesting that it is possible to bring together what he distinguishes. “If it is possible, true and salutary to accord the intransigence of principles with the flexible

et transcendant au relatif et à l’absolu dont nous usons tour à tour pour le certifier, le définir ou le sublimer.” (This is the 1936 two-volume French version in which Blondel substantially expanded and adapted the 1893 dissertation from which Blanchette did his English translation, and so I include here the 1936 French from which I have translated, as it differs from the 1893 version translated in whole by Blanchette.)

¹¹ Blondel, *L’Action* (1936), 1:358–59.

¹² Maurice Blondel, *L’Action* (1936), 2:411–14.

¹³ Blondel, *L’Action* (1936), 2:409–10.

diversity of contingent solutions—it is because a theory never exhausts in advance the practice which it serves to arouse, to guide, to control;—and because human action never does without a speculative view, without retrospective support, without anticipatory prospecting.”¹⁴ The trouble, in a way, is to falsely demand that either theory or action be the other. This will separate them irrevocably, and result in perceiving principles as oppressors, or in splintering moral principles into a pure situationalism. For Blondel, the fact that theory and action require one another without being one another opens a heterogeneous universe into a radical furtherance of its heterogeneity, and it confronts human beings with the question of their ultimate destiny.

This furtherance and this confrontation are not yet entirely clear, though we have a hint of it in the notion of the incommensurability of God and the world. We have seen something of its mechanism, too, in Blondel’s mysterious claim about the “solidarity” of the human mind that does the work of asking various questions. For now I want to leave us with the idea that an opportunity is at hand, and next I will fill out its shape. “The advantage,” says Blondel, “of having demonstrated at the same time the limits of theory and those of practice, their imperfect but undeniable connection, their very real scope but not reaching the desired and required point of convergence—it is there: an infinitely precious opening, both for the speculative effort and for the unstoppable and unsatisfied demands of humanity.”¹⁵

Action: A Body Literal and Transcending

If, for Blondel, dogma not only can but also must be “literally practiced,” his claim stands or falls on his science of action. It is this science that offers a definition of action, therefore of practice, and therefore of the literal practice of (dogmatic) religion. In this section, I explain the most important vertexes in Blondel’s notion of action as they lift into the practice of religion. I emphasize his earliest work, his dissertation *L’Action* (1893), and the sections that follow trace salutary aspects of the development of his theory of literal practice over the course of his career, bringing them together into a unitive position.

In the first version of *L’Action*, Blondel traces the pathway of human

¹⁴ Blondel, *L’Action* (1936), 2:409–10.

¹⁵ Blondel, *L’Action* (1936), 2:415: “L’avantage d’avoir avéré en même temps les limites de la théorie et celles de la pratique, leur connexion imparfaite mais indéniable, leur portée très réelle mais n’aboutissant pas jusqu’au point de convergence désirée et requise, c’est là, pour l’effort spéculatif et pour là, pour les exigences incoercibles et insatisfaites de l’humanité, une ouverture infiniment précieuse.”

action, which is first of all an *élan* or an *ekstasis*, a continual and complex surpassing of original conditions into new conditions. One of Blondel's most important examples is human consciousness. It is not mere emergence, not the result of blood, heart, neurons, nerves, though its whence is these various powers in their collaborative action. "That is how the fact of consciousness is built up little by little. The relation of the subject to the elementary conditions by which he is nourished is manifest, but he can contain and sum up his antecedents only by dominating them."¹⁶ Human consciousness is an action that organizes what precedes it, and in reorganizing these powers it transcends them with a new order, an order that is not its origin, articulating a new facility with its originating actions, a facility that it also is: consciousness. This consciousness is experience, the being of a body that experiences its being. "What we thus call 'interior,'" Blondel explains, "is the presence of the whole to its part and of the part to its whole."¹⁷

So Blondel's singular noun "action" refers to many actions, and to the *élan* that at every point is these actions and the transcendence of them. Blondel calls action a "body." It is a composite body of actions, and it is a composing of the actions. Its character as perpetually self-transcending power or *élan* lends to it an aspect of infinity, or of a disproportion whose very power to summarize its preceding horizons cannot be had by "adding-up" those horizons. Frankenstein's monster lays on the table with all the necessary parts of a human being, but the lightning that would or could light it up as subject, as subjectivity, requires an infinite *more* than lighting up every nerve and cell. Even if thus alive, the monster of sense is not yet the monster that is conscious. The good doctor looming over the body does not realize the infinity his own body inexorably supplies to him, with his gaze that not only sees but also looks, that not only sees but also experiences its seeing. But what for Mary Shelley is the horror of a scientific god and his misbegotten creation is for Blondel the wonder that a human being wakes and is present to himself in his waking.

The body of human action proceeds by an interior law that bears, in Blondel's speech, a "determinism." It proceeds by an order that it cannot but follow. "Determinism," here, means an immanent intending heuristic, which Aristotle names the principle of motion that defines each nature, and here the question is of the nature of human action. Determinism does not mean inevitability. Freedom can halt or refuse action's movement outward, cutting off the path of transcendence in what Blondel terms "superstition."

¹⁶ Blondel, *Action* (1893), 101.

¹⁷ Blondel, *Action* (1893), 99.

Freedom can also cooperate with its own *élan* by being that further, reorganizing horizon that extends individual human action into transcending horizons: discrete actions, interpersonal communion, larger communities, and so on, even unto cooperation with the universe. At every horizon that it greets, freedom can close the hatch, denying its own expansion into, for example, community, or it can follow the law of human action in its *élan* with that *élan's* free procession.

It is in the context of an *élan* determined to be as wide as the universe that Blondel makes his major distinction within the human will, between the “willing will” (*volonté voulante*) and the “willed will” (*volonté voulue*).¹⁸ Blondel observes that a single act of the will does not exhaust the will, which continues in other (willed) actions, in actions with further ranges, in elaborations of actions. This concrete fact not only implies a distinction in the human will itself; it also poses a question, which is the question of whether at any point the human will can reach a terminus that completes it. For Blondel, it is a question of whether the willing will and the willed will can “equal” one another, of whether the will can equal itself by willing in a way that results in the total rest of human action.¹⁹

But even at the limit-point of nature, in its surrender to the universe that is coming into being, human action does not rest. The interiority of human being in its being remains unequal with itself, evinced of an infinity that it always supposes and is not. “Blondel,” says Jonathan Heaps, “shows how even the most sincere and sophisticated effort to explain human action does not just fail in its highest aspiration to explain human destiny *per se*. *A fortiori*, he shows that it fails at any and every level of analysis.”²⁰ Much more than this supposition of infinity, however, which helps Blondel to articulate our failure to explain human action, the internal disproportion of human willing speaks to an interior impracticability that is also a necessity, since *the will wills to will itself entirely and cannot*. “As I come up against the supreme necessity of the will, therefore,” explains Blondel,

I have to determine what I will so that I may be able, in all fullness, to will to will [*vouloir vouloir*]. Yes, I have to will myself; but it is impossible for me to reach myself directly; from myself to myself, there is an

¹⁸ See. Blondel, *Action* (1893), 53 and throughout; Henri Bouillard, “The Thought of Maurice Blondel: A Synoptic Vision,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 3 (1963): 393.

¹⁹ Blondel, *Action* (1893), 135–35; cf. 12–14.

²⁰ Jonathan Heaps, “The Ambiguity of Being: Medieval and Modern Cooperation on the Problem of the Supernatural” (PhD diss., Marquette University, 2019), 149.

abyss that nothing yet has been able to fill. There is no escape route for me to run away by, no passage for me to take forward by myself: what will come of this crisis?²¹

For Blondel, the answer to the crisis is to posit the supernatural. In Blondel's terms, the supernatural is "necessary" to the natural, but "impracticable" to it.²² So the supernatural is an absolute disproportion that proportionate action cannot bring to itself, cannot make its own by its own power. Such a definition of the supernatural is quite broad, and Heaps offers a clarification here: in Blondel, the "supernatural" refers to the entirety of God's *ad extra* activity, which would mean both creation and redemption. Heaps explains: "Because Blondel's philosophy is separated from the Christian doctrinal context, his 'supernatural' cannot be read as synonymous with, for example, Lonergan's *ens supernaturale* or de Lubac's *supernaturel*. . . . The supernatural is, even as unknown, that 'one thing necessary.' This one thing necessary is produced in every action."²³ The natural, thus, is always sustained in its proportion by the disproportionate, and any further encounter with the supernatural on nature's part, which nature in a sense wills by willing to will itself, would require the supernatural, since nature cannot in all fullness will to will.²⁴

The apparent monolith of the universe erected by Blondel's secular colleagues at the École normale supérieure, one where philosophy could be content to treat religion as beyond its purview, receives a fracture at the very heart of the human being, splitting open the *ens* of the universe in its *esse*, yet without rendering a supernatural religion natural. Blondel's point, instead, is that the natural supposes the supernatural; it speaks to an entitative source not within its own power, and it "speaks" this source by the operation of its own proportionate power. "It is because in acting we find an infinite disproportion in ourselves," explains Blondel, "that we are constrained to look to infinity."²⁵ If the content of the supernatural is beyond philosophy to know as a known, its supposition is not. "To deny it or to ignore it, that is what is contrary to the philosophical spirit."²⁶ Our reality is not thereby dominated by a supernature towering over-against nature, but evinced of

²¹ Blondel, *Action* (1893), 313.

²² Blondel, *Action* (1893), 297; cf. Blondel, "Letter on Apologetics," 159–62.

²³ Heaps, "Ambiguity of Being," 151–52.

²⁴ Blondel, "The One Thing Necessary," in *Action* (1893), 314–29, esp. 325–29.

²⁵ Blondel, *Action* (1893), 324.

²⁶ Blondel, *Action* (1893), 358.

an intimate unity of proportion and disproportion, which Blondel calls an “integral reality.”²⁷

For Blondel, the integral reality that is the universe has what he calls a “single destiny.”²⁸ This destiny is contingent on the one thing necessary to its existence: God. Here I touch upon one of the controversies surrounding Blondel, often framed around Henri de Lubac and the natural desire to see God. But I want to emphasize, with Heaps and with Oliva Blanchette, Blondel’s philosophical rather than theological placement. It is, in other words, not quite *grace* of which Blondel speaks when he speaks of the one destiny of the integral universe, and therefore the one destiny of human action. Instead, Blondel’s discussion is of the dilemma or crisis that human action faces, which is that it cannot equal itself. The dilemma itself necessarily implies not grace, but God. “A thought and a will,” explains Blondel, “without which there would be no thought and will in me and yet which neither my thought nor my will can comprehend, these are the solidary terms of the mystery that imposes itself on my consciousness.”²⁹ Grace would be that by which such action could emerge out of its dilemma. But philosophy can only anticipate that supernatural religion would answer a need that nature cannot answer.³⁰

It is helpful to see Blondel’s dilemma through the eyes of Bernard Lonergan for a moment, as Lonergan approaches the problem of the natural desire to see God explicitly, and from out of a different range of resources, but he arrives at a solution that resonates with and illuminates Blondel’s. For Lonergan, the question is what the natural desire to know—expressed in our asking *quid sit* and *an sit*—desires to know. And it might seem that proper fulfillment of this desire is to be had in the proportionate, since it is naturally fulfilled only by proportionate objects. “The facts,” says Lonergan, “are otherwise. We are not content to ask *quid sit* solely with regard to material things, and we are not content with merely analogical knowledge of immaterial things.”³¹ “*Quid sit Deus?*” is a question that arises naturally

²⁷ Among other places, see Maurice Blondel: *Une alliance contre nature: Catholicisme et intégrisme: La Semaine sociale de Bordeaux 1910* (Brussels: Lessius, 2000), 7; *Action* (1893), 445–46; “Letter on Apologetics,” 159–61.

²⁸ He uses this phrase often. Here I will only note that a single destiny is not the same as metaphysical monism.

²⁹ Blondel, *Action* (1893), 321.

³⁰ See Heaps, “Ambiguity of Being,” 151.

³¹ Bernard Lonergan, “The Natural Desire to See God,” in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 4, *Collection* (Toronto: University of Toronto of Press, 1988), 83. Lonergan’s discussion of the necessary presuppositions for his position receive brief explanation on 84–85.

in the desire to know. This *quid sit* is factual evidence of intelligence's basic desire for the transcendental *ens*, which Lonergan insists is the adequate object of the intellect.³² But this desire, though natural, cannot be fulfilled naturally. Thus Lonergan argues that "the desire of our intellects is natural in origin and transcendental in its object."³³ It is fulfilled in the beatific vision, which is only had supernaturally.

Lonergan's solution mirrors the basic shape of Blondel's, but since Lonergan's solution uses Thomistic terminology, it offers clarity about what that basic shape is. So, Blondel speaks of a "determinism" of human action, a determinism which traces the dynamic *ratio* of a body of human operations should its interior law of self-transcendence be followed. In other words, Blondel examines what it is that human nature does and desires to do in its doing. He argues that this proportionate action has not only proportionate objects, but also a radically disproportionate object. Thus "action" is in Lonergan's terms natural, but its desire is transcendental. In Blondel's terms, the action necessarily supposes the supernatural, but finds it impracticable to nature. Notice, then, the interlocking categories here in *L'Action*: "The 'one thing necessary,' then, is not the obscure side of my thought. . . . I am necessarily brought to conceive it only because I am necessarily brought to acknowledge what is lacking to me in the very thing that I do."³⁴ And again Lonergan can comment: "The best that natural reason can attain is the discovery of the paradox that the desire to understand arises naturally, and that its object is the transcendental, *ens*, and that the proper fulfillment that naturally is attainable is restricted to the proportionate object of finite intellect."³⁵

Blondel himself does not frame the problem in terms of the natural desire to see God, but in terms of "destiny." Nevertheless, this destiny contains a double meaning. By this double meaning, Blondel differentiates God's *ad extra* action as much as he makes a distinction in methodical analysis. "This equivocal word," Blondel explains in his conclusion to 1893's *L'Action*, "designates the necessary development of life, independent of man's intervention, . . . and at the same time it designates the personal way through which we arrive at our last ends according to our use of life."³⁶ The first use

³² Lonergan, "Natural Desire," 4:82.

³³ Lonergan, "Natural Desire," 4:83. Cf. the explanation of *ens*, not as transcendental in Kant's sense, but in a Thomistic metaphysical sense, discussed on 4:82–83; also helpful is the discussion of objections on 4:86–91.

³⁴ Blondel, *Action* (1893), 321.

³⁵ Lonergan, "Natural Desire," 4:84.

³⁶ Blondel, *Action* (1893), 427.

of “destiny” posits for human action a participation in God regardless of what, exactly, human freedom does with this participation. The second posits action’s cooperation with its own reversal, where God supernaturally acts in human action as its principle, acknowledged explicitly as such, and practiced explicitly as such—in supernatural religion, in the realm of grace. Blondel’s singular destiny for integral reality thus does not collapse into an identity what remains integral: a proportionate universe whose very being relies on the being of the God that it is not, a proportionate universe that heads toward supernatural redemption.

Action: On Nature and Dogma

Into this integral reality enters the literal practice of religion. Literal practice is the effect, the *effecting*, of Blondel’s divine reversal, where human action either changes unto the perfect “sincerity” of equaling itself supernaturally, or else it refuses the supernatural invitation to change, thereby remaining the same. To change is to be redeemed; to remain the same is to be condemned.³⁷ “The strength and light we have,” says Blondel, “cannot legitimately belong to us unless we first refer them back to their principle.”³⁸ But *how* this is to be done—this reference that the will necessarily desires, this reference that the will cannot fulfill in an affirmation achieved by its own power—is something of a problem. And Blondel says that the problem is solved through action. In other words, for Blondel, Lonergan’s “paradox” of a natural desire transcendently fulfilled cannot be overcome except through a “mortification” where self-transcendence becomes absolute trust.

Blondel’s *ascesis* can appear, at first, vague. He is saying that the “resolution” of human action is, in a sense, more action. The body of action retains its elemental structure; the deliberative *ekstasis* of human action maintains its cooperative extension into the universe; the operations remain identical. But all is also changed. All is radically changed, for the animating principle of the body, the ecstasy, the operation, is different. Blondel describes the birth of what, in the realm of theology, are called the theological virtues: the participatory elevation of human faculties in a divine revelation whose content is expressible in thought and deed. “Even supposing that this *theandric* action is founded entirely on the divine will, the human will remains coextensive to it. It is a gift, but a gift we acquire as if it were an earning.”³⁹

³⁷ Blondel, *Action* (1893), 333.

³⁸ Blondel, *Action* (1893), 354.

³⁹ Blondel, *Action* (1893), 371.

So literal practice is more than a supernatural reversal. The will sacrifices its supposedly self-contained self-coherence and enters a new horizon whose first fruit is faith. And it is important to understand, here, how the “reversal” is sustained by an act of the will that nourishes the mind, how, in a sense, the agreement, the mortification, anticipates a richness the mind cannot conceive until first conceived in this mortification. “God acts in this action,” explains Blondel, “and that is why the thought that follows the act is richer by an infinity than that which precedes it.”⁴⁰ Now faith becomes “the principle of acts embodied in sensible nature.”⁴¹ Religion is literally practiced.

Blondel rejects the notion that the infinite cannot be “contained” in contingent acts—that a supernatural religion cannot be practiced. In the first place, he has already demonstrated that the infinite is, already, the disproportion present in every proportionate act, that the efficacy by which the will is efficacious is an infinite efficacy, a perfect efficacy. But the question of proportionate action’s perfection is, precisely, one of further action, and Blondel describes a kind of elaboration, a “living commentary” where the surpassing knowledge of faith is surpassed by the concreteness of action.⁴² “For,” Blondel argues, “if ideas are forces, it is not just by what is already clear about them, but especially [by] what remains obscure about them . . . [that] we find, in the clarity of practice, something to illumine the obscurities of thought.”⁴³ Blondel calls it a “practical dogmatism,” by which he means the opposite of reducing dogma to common-sense practicality.⁴⁴ But how that can be is the question for the rest of this essay.

Blondel’s notion of literal practice relies on a notion of dogma such that dogma commands not only intellectual assent but also the assent that is all of human action enlivened by a supernatural principle. It is a problem different from the question of faith and works, though they are cousins in certain respects. It is much more a problem of trying to assemble and describe the exigencies of supernatural religion in a way that preserves its status as supernatural while rejecting the claim that its being supernatural makes it unnecessary or superfluous to nature. If nature cannot in some way *need* religion, if religion is not in some way in concourse with the natural, then the secular universe is the only one truly necessary for understanding the world and, most importantly, for understanding human beings in the

⁴⁰ Blondel, *Action* (1893), 371.

⁴¹ Blondel, *Action* (1893), 378.

⁴² Blondel, *Action* (1893), 377.

⁴³ Blondel, *Action* (1893), 379.

⁴⁴ Blondel, *Action* (1893), 383.

world. I referenced this trouble in a previous section ("Action: The Problem of Theory and Practice"). Now it returns for elaboration.

"The Letter on Apologetics" establishes some of Blondel's concerns in this regard. Topically, he is dealing with how immanent explanations of Christianity's usefulness fail in their description of Christianity. This would be something like the argument that Christianity is helpful to people, that it has good morals, gives good discipline. "It is true," he says,

that one can explain why Christianity both satisfies and mortifies a man. But then either our natural resistance to the demands of the Gospel is accounted for like that which we oppose to the claims of everyday duty—and in that case we are still on the human level; or else it must be recognized that the supernatural troubles us because it is supernatural—and then we are faced with the whole question of why this superhuman trouble should be imposed on us as an obligation.⁴⁵

The fruit of Christianity is not merely natural; its call to human beings is, however familiar its means, not a call to the familiar; and that which makes its bequest to us in Christianity is not another human thing among human things. "For what we find in ourselves is precisely *not* what we have to receive."⁴⁶

But if Christianity is pure exteriority, if its supernaturality is not only supernatural to nature but also alien to it, then not only is Christianity not required by the world or by human beings, but also requiring it of nature becomes intolerable domination, since nature feels no needfulness in itself for the supernaturally Christian. Blondel calls this problem "not the problem of believing in certain truths but the problem of faith in its formal and integral aspect."⁴⁷

Faith is not nature's excess, which nature can then slough off as so much winter fur. But faith *is* excess in the sense that it is in excess of nature's power. How to resolve these apparent contraries is the problem. As I have intimated, the resolution is *not* grace, which is supernatural—but it also is not *not* grace, which is supernatural. I would again invoke Heaps: "The aggregation of explanatory failures in which [Blondel's] phenomenology of human action results provides the warrant for a negative, but heuristic conclusion: there remains 'one thing necessary' to explain human action and it cannot be

⁴⁵ Blondel, "Letter on Apologetics," 138.

⁴⁶ Blondel, "Letter on Apologetics," 152–53.

⁴⁷ Blondel, "Letter on Apologetics," 155.

produced by human thinking or willing.”⁴⁸ In his “Letter,” Blondel calls this negative heuristic a “necessity,” that is, the necessary conception, in human action’s self-conception, of a concomitant “possible heteronomy,” an “inevitable idea of a dependence of human reason and will.”⁴⁹ It is the dependence of human reason and human willing upon the supernatural. But philosophy itself “cannot attach to the supernatural the sort of certainty which it confers on all that it affirms.” At its maximum, philosophy can only anticipate the interior, immanent preparations for what the supernatural alone could affirm, in affirming itself.⁵⁰

Supernatural revelation, and therefore supernatural religion, do, however, become necessary for nature to ask about, and the reply that revelation poses to such a nature is not spoken in such a way that nature recognizes in itself no answering need, in its very questioning. Blondel explains:

What is necessary is that, in some form which cannot be defined to cover particular cases, the thoughts and actions of each one of us together make up a drama which cannot reach its conclusion unless the decisive question arises, sooner or later, in the consciousness. Each one of us, simply by using that light which enlightens every man coming into this world, and by the use of his own resources, finds himself called upon to pronounce upon the problem of his destiny.⁵¹

Supernatural religion can at last appear as more than an intolerable burden, more than a tyranny of commands from a suddenly appearing divinity; for, what revelation commands of the nature it transfigures, this can nature *receive*, can it *desire*, can it “recognize” in the taste of its reception of what is supernatural to it. Grace, though *not* nature, nevertheless has nature as its object and instrument, and, in the “determinism” of its *élan* spanning always an infinite that it is not, nature does not greet grace as a foreign invader. “Thus we discover man’s natural incapacity not only to reach his supernatural end but also enclose to himself in his own natural order.”⁵²

Supernatural revelation enters the universe by way of the universe’s basic heteronomy: the negation on the side of nature—that it requires what it is not—becomes, in grace, positive gift. “Our action,” says Blondel, “contains of

⁴⁸ Blondel, “Letter on Apologetics,” 150.

⁴⁹ Blondel, “Letter on Apologetics,” 159.

⁵⁰ Blondel, “Letter on Apologetics,” 134.

⁵¹ Blondel, “Letter on Apologetics,” 162.

⁵² Blondel, “Letter on Apologetics,” 201.

its nature a point of insertion.”⁵³ In *L’Action* (1893), Blondel gives to revelation various qualities such as exterior, sensible sign, mediated by a mediator.⁵⁴ In “History and Dogma,” it is historical, it regards historical facts but is more than the facts, and mediated by tradition. In the *Testis* essays, revelation is an *afférence* “from above”; it is ecclesial, and supernatural. The later works (here especially *Pensée, Action, Être et les êtres*) borrow all of this earlier terminology. Through all of his writing, Blondel insists that he remains speaking in a philosophical mode, and so he stresses those conditions and transfigurations that would be on the side of nature, and thus, since concrete, since natural in their aspect as effective *in nature*, are phenomena that philosophy can study. But revelation itself remains the realm of theology alone, and strictly so.⁵⁵ Since, however, philosophy can study the exigencies of a nature that cannot close itself off at the supernatural, it can also make a study of supernatural religion’s literal practice.

I focus more on this literal practice in a moment. For now, I want to pause to pull forward the intelligibility of literal practice, which Blondel associates with dogma and even our *need* for dogma. It is helpful first to note the kinds of dogmatisms that Blondel distinguishes from “dogma” in what we might call a “Catholic” sense. There is, for example, a problem I already mentioned: the negative moral dogmatism that, in attempting to counter the pure determination of a situation by the human will, leaves out the will that must creatively affirm dogma in a situation.⁵⁶ Similarly, there is the sort of dogmatism that treats human thought as a “raw datum, a ready-made fragment.”⁵⁷ Both of these dogmatisms secure themselves by a refusal to consider empirical reality: either the reality that, though situations differ and beings become, nevertheless they bear an intelligible *élan* that renders them coherent (which is to say, intelligible) even in their mutability; or the reality that thought is not first of all an object, but the action of a subject, nor first of all a whole that the finite reaches only ever partially, but a principle of intelligence in act. Even if dogma, as intelligible, is supra-intelligible with respect to finite intelligence, nevertheless it is intelligible and for intelligence. It is intelligible and intelligent first of all as a divine initiative and a divine intention for the world, where we understand the self-revelation of the Trinity to be a claim, among other things, that the divinity is intelligent, that God is in some sense

⁵³ Blondel, “Letter on Apologetics,” 163.

⁵⁴ Blondel, *Action* (1893), 366–67.

⁵⁵ Even very late in his life, Blondel is concerned to protect theology in this way; see *Philosophical Exigencies*, 10–13.

⁵⁶ Blondel, *L’Action* (1936), 2:335.

⁵⁷ Blondel, *L’Action* (1936), 2:438.

Intelligence itself. But dogma is also intelligible and intelligent as the gift of the divine Logos to humanity, making for a faith that, as Augustine would have it, is not only obedient but also intelligent, able to be an understanding and able to seek understanding. So the operation of human intelligence, the operation of a subject in act, is sustained in the life of faith, even as it must embrace the ascetic mysticism of analogy in order to embrace the divine mystery. "Our being in the process of becoming," says Blondel,

tends analogously to imitate by its genesis the living and intelligent action of the divine Spirit . . . by participating in some small way in a Thought that is always in act, far from being in God a nature undergone or in the universe an obscurely totalized reality, supposes a comprehensive and generous initiative whose principle is not all or all done in particular things or in universal immanence, but subsists eminently in the unique, absolute, intelligible and charitable transcendence of the divine mystery and of its creative design.⁵⁸

Dogma is also historical, and in at least two senses: it is a claim about what God is doing in history in the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ himself is subject to history, and so is his Church. At one level, Blondel sets out to defend history, and therefore the historicity of dogma, as empirical in a richer sense than the material empiricism of the historical sciences of his time. History itself is not only its own material facticity. "History is not just phenomena that can be recorded on a film or on disc," Blondel argues. "What is most historical is spiritual significance, the invisible reality, the concrete unity that takes shape underneath the superficial play of appearances. That is where lies the truth of Catholicism."⁵⁹ This spiritual significance is attributable to historical fact because historical facts are made, or come to be, through human action, and human action—as we have seen in the preceding argument of this paper—is not mere epiphenomenal exteriority, but an *élan* that bears the gravity of its own freedom.

⁵⁸ Blondel, *L'Action* (1936), 2:527: "Et c'est pour cela que notre être en devenir tend analogiquement à imiter par sa genèse la vivante et intelligente action de l'Esprit divin en ne subissant pas la pensée comme une donnée brute, comme une parcelle toute faite d'une réalité diffuse ou incluse dans l'univers, mais en participant si peu que ce soit à une Pensée toujours en acte qui, loin d'être en Dieu une nature subie ou dans l'univers une réalité obscurément totalisée, suppose une initiative compréhensive et généreuse dont le principe n'est pas tout entier ni tout fait dans les choses particulières ou dans l'immanence universelle, mais subsiste éminemment dans la transcendance unique, absolue, intelligible et charitable, du mystère divin et de son dessein créateur."

⁵⁹ Blondel, *Philosophical Exigencies*, 28.

Because human history is not only fact but is also human action, or because human history is fact by way of human action, Blondel's careful and elaborate exegesis of human action makes it possible for dogma to be historical in its two essential senses as the intelligibility of what God is doing in history and as sustained in and across history. For, human action already relies on the supernatural for its efficacy, and is already capable of a renunciation that allows God to supernaturally act in its action. Blondel's "dogma" is something like John Henry Newman's "Christian idea" in that respect. Similarly, because human action is not only intelligent but also free, not only an intelligence in act but also the transcendence of that action into the world, and not only fact but also faced with the decision of its destiny—because of this, dogma can and must be *practiced*.

Action: The Literal Practice of Religion

I have left aside the problem of theory and practice with which I began this essay. In this last section, I can return to the problem with some sense of its Blondelian resolution. Or, I should not say "resolution." Nor is it "synthesis." It is something more like "body" as Blondel uses it in "body of action": a *many* held together by the action of its *élan*. In such a body, neither theory nor practice wins the day. Instead, the two remain distinct but entwined in a dialectic of mutual enrichment. "A theory," he writes, "never exhausts in advance the practice which it serves to arouse, to guide, to control; and human action never does without a speculative view, retrospective support, anticipatory prospection."⁶⁰ The concreteness of their dynamic irresolution and dependence anticipates, and in a certain sense is, the openness of the natural to the supernatural:

Recognizing this flaw is to pave the way, the only possible [way], the only beneficial way to a genuine solution. And the advantage of having demonstrated at the same time the limits of theory and those of practice, their imperfect but undeniable connection, their very real scope but [their] not reaching the desired and required point of convergence, is there [in its solution], an infinitely precious opening for speculative effort and for the unstoppable and unsatisfied demands of humanity.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Blondel, *L'Action* (1936), 2:413: "Jamais une théorie n'épuise d'avance la pratique qu'elle sert à susciter, à guider, à contrôler ; —et jamais non plus l'action humaine ne se passe de vue spéculative, d'appui rétrospectif, de prospection anticipatrice."

⁶¹ Blondel, *L'Action* (1936), 2:415: "Reconnaître cette faille, c'est ouvrir la voie, la seule

After this study in the pages above, it is easier to “see” in Blondel’s expression here what is less a total aporia, and still less a nature without an integrity that we might call its “own,” but rather what is a nature whose reality is “integral” in Blondel’s specified sense, where reality is natural *and* supernatural.

Recall that, for Blondel, a purely immanent explanation of human action fails, not just at its ultimate, but also at every single successive integrative level expressed by its *élan*. Recall as well that Blondel insists that dogma, which mediates an intelligibility that is “infinite” or radically disproportionate to contingent nature, can be affirmed by human action even before it receives its most developed expression by human intelligence. As we saw in both of these positions, Blondel does not reject intelligibility or even propositional truths. That is the mistake that his secular colleagues in philosophy make. Rather, he secures intelligence and truth by conceiving of them not so much as *practical*—which refutes truth apart from a concrete instance of practice—but as *practicable*, as affirmed not only by the assent of the mind but also by the freedom of the will, which enriches the action of intelligence with the concreteness of further action, the concreteness of practice. In other words, practice is *also* intelligent. (Or else it is sin.) And since it is also free, practice by its very contingency affirms truth in or by way of a concrete instance. If “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb 13:8), then Christian practice contributes to this temporal “same” in its affirmations across concrete instances, which vary as concrete, but which do not vary as intelligible.

In an integral universe, a non-competitive relationship between dogmatic truth and practical contingency is possible. This is not because dogma sits “above” the contingent, throwing the shadows of a single object on the water of time as it passes. Rather, divine revelation is itself historical; what it communicates is divine, and in this sense its very principle of communication is divine; its secondary or proximate principle of communication is the principle of human history, which is human action. In his very last work, *Philosophical Exigencies of the Christian Religion*, Blondel explains: “We will be able to call ourselves Christians only on this twofold condition: that we accept as historical certitudes certain facts that we can call dogmatic, . . . that never remain in the state of speculative mysteries, but that must pass into us as principles of spiritual vivification and of transformative union.”⁶² Dogma

possible, la seule salutaire à une solution authentique. Et l’avantage d’avoir avéré en même temps les limites de la théorie et celles de la pratique, leur connexion imparfaite mais indéniable, leur portée très réelle mais n’aboutissant pas jusqu’au point de convergence désirée et requise, c’est là, pour l’effort spéculatif et pour les exigences incoercibles et insatisfaites de l’humanité, une ouverture infiniment précieuse.”

⁶² Blondel, *Philosophical Exigencies*, 11.

“can” vivify in one sense because contingent reality already relies on the supernatural for its efficacy; in another sense, dogma “can” vivify because contingent freedom is able to accept and cooperate with a further reliance, or a specified type of reliance, on the supernatural, and this we call grace. “There remains in us a place accessible and destined only for God,” says Blondel. “If God is not admitted by us to occupy this center and to make unity in us, then we have damnation, with disunion of parts, the intestinal discord that divides being like fire disintegrates bodies.”⁶³

So the literal practice of religion is, for Blondel, a type of affirmation and a type of elaboration. It is an affirmation in the sense that an infinite thought for the world, God’s own, receives a contingent agreement; and of course this infinite thought is prior to all contingency, but affirmed as real in the contingent universe in this agreement. It is an elaboration in the precise sense that everything that is contingent is *not* God, and so the alterity of contingent existence can receive what it itself is not. Therefore Christianity, says Blondel, is “a permanent simplicity, a directive idea, an action ever identical to itself and nevertheless constantly creative.”⁶⁴ Or again: “There is only one Christian spirit quite simple and quite straightforward; and yet there is infinite diversity, each soul having, as it is said in the Apocalypse, its single name, proper to it and secret.”⁶⁵

By way of conclusion, we might say that one of Blondel’s great labors, in rendering a more complicated portrait of human action, is to allow this action its immense spiritual gravity, the seriousness of life. But he also breaks open action so that its significance is everywhere rather than reserved to the most grandiose gestures. It is our every gesture that is almost unbearably real, committing us whether we would like it or not. Similarly, the dialectic of dependence and difference that persists between theory and practice is, instead of a failure, an opportunity for the enrichment of theory and practice with the gravity of being human. Supernatural religion, Blondel insists, can be literally practiced. On this we in fact depend. “The question of freedom and of action,” he says, “places us inevitably before the dilemma: participate in the divine initiative by identifying our willing with the very willing of the first cause, or else try in an egoistic autonomy to constitute ourselves. . . . This convergence, about which there is nothing accidental, arbitrary, or avoidable, manifests the profoundly realistic character of Christian religion.”⁶⁶ N&V

⁶³ Blondel, *Philosophical Exigencies*, 22.

⁶⁴ Blondel, *Philosophical Exigencies*, 29.

⁶⁵ Blondel, *Philosophical Exigencies*, 43.

⁶⁶ Blondel, *Philosophical Exigencies*, 86.