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Believing and Willing Within the Correlation Between the Willing and the Willed in Blondel's Action: A Reinterpretation of Immanentism and Transcendence

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Abstract: The neglected correlation between willing and believing has prevented an understanding of the acting function of consciousness and the meaning of truth in Blondel's philosophy of action, leading to its immanentist interpretation. To the extent that the intimate willing intention is revealed in the work that factually transcends the willed ends, in view of a single necessary end, thinking shows itself in ideas as principles of action that must come to be believed in their own willing and to make every act an act of faith.

Keywords: Blondel; action; will; believe; God

1. Introduction

If action, in its strict acting (*agissante*) character, cannot be confused with the idea of action, as Blondel warns throughout his work, the question "how can there be a science of action?" poses a problem, which is none other than that of reason in its most radical, living sense, of how action becomes conscious of itself, and, therefore, what is the way of thinking and the sense of truth that reflects its original intention, which is always unreflective from the epistemological adequationist point of view.

From the radicality of this approach, the effective scope of Blondel's modernist accusation of immanentism will be tested.¹ Firstly, it will be shown that in the correlation between willing will and willed will, consciousness assumes a strictly acting function, so that the ideas of thought are conceived as principles of action, which implies a rupture of the classical conception of truth as *adaequatio intellectus ad rem* and a variation in the meaning of unreflective consciousness. It will be shown how the intimate willing intention is revealed in the factual work that transcends the desired ends, renewing them in view of an ultimate, necessary end, in which the acting thinking seeks to believe in its own will, making each act, necessarily, a profession of faith. Briefly, in the last section, it will be explained how the work effectively generated, originally creative of man, refers to the Trinitarian generation of the Spirit between Father and Son; hence, Blondel's theology, without dogmas of faith, responds strictly to the spirit of a critical philosophy, that of the living reason of action whose rigorous method, which renews the methodical sense of doubt, arises from the question of believing in its own will. Occasional comparisons with Kant's conception of practical and theoretical understanding as well as that of faith will enable us to establish more precisely the terms and doctrinal intentions of the architectural conception of reason in Blondel's work.

2. Action, Awareness of Freedom and a Critical Sense of Reason

If the conscious determination of will arises from the passivity of the unconscious, it means that the determinism of the so-called impulses, instincts and reflex acts, in short,



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all the unfathomable tendencies of the soul to which are added the most remote and uncontrollable historical, conceptual stratifications of the spirit, as a whole, are conceived as contingent fatality, precisely because they integrate our willed ends and silently strive to compose others that aspire to be conscious. “Consciousness is only born of discrimination; it develops under the dominion of a law of relativity” (Blondel 1937, p. 144).

The emergence of consciousness and its very capacity to conceive determinism is proof in itself, then, of the higher determinism of its reflectivity which discovers the contingent being of the world as a passively acting motive in the tendencies of the deepest and most unfathomable willing desire, for it forces one to discriminate the ends necessarily willed and, at the same time, to want them with respect to an infinite, absolutely regulating idea which continually systematises them one in view of the other according to antagonistic and limiting or concordant and auxiliary degrees (Blondel 1995, p. 163ff).²

The consciousness of a motive does not occur without the presence of other motives; the consciousness of the multiple reasons for acting did not occur without at least a confused view of their opposition and of the system they form. The consciousness of these contrasts in the midst of an organic unity does not occur without the thought of what is inaccessible to relation and to limitation, without the known and possessed presence of an absolute, without the regulative idea of the infinite (Blondel 1995, p. 151).

This does not mean that consciousness is already, in itself, a science of action which has come to possess “the formal specification” of its infinite, regulative idea (Blondel 1937, p. 276), even though it does not cease to spontaneously find it; hence, each man intrinsically entails an idea of his destiny, “a personal metaphysics” as Blondel goes so far as to say (Blondel 1995, p. 327, 1937, p. 311ff.). Firstly, it is that man in general, living, that is to say, acting, subordinates “the whole mechanism of unconscious life” to an ideal without even asking himself the question of its origin, for “He dominates all that goes before without needing to know it distinctly, because it is enough for him to know where he is tending. For in what he knows, he understands and surpasses what he does not know in this way; in what he wills, he ratifies what he had not yet been able to will” (Blondel 1995, p. 157).

Action illuminates its rational appetite, its own acting initiative, without the need for a science of action, for it is its own consciousness that reflectively produces spontaneous knowledge, a prudence that does not merely choose means (Aristotle) but spontaneously generates willed ends as means for the continuous ideal revelation of its ultimate willing end. “Such is the genesis, the efficacy of reflection: it derives from spontaneity and frees itself from it by explaining it” (Blondel 1937, p. 148). Action is the guarantee of an uncontrollable sincerity towards oneself, because it forces one to be more passionate than others and to think not about what one thinks but about what one does. Acting necessarily means “revealing what is strongest in us, or sometimes stronger than us”, which means educating feelings and forging a character (Blondel 1937, pp. 205, 218–19).

However, since a conscious end is never realised in the action as it was willed, since the final cause overflows the agent cause in its effective occurrence, the dynamic and fecund function of thought arises in the intrinsic reflective consciousness that gestated between the willing and the willed. This consists in an unfinished, “cycloidal” movement, in which ideas are genetically willed ends, principles of action of an a priori possible experience of a work whose realisation, a posteriori, is factually unforeseeable, which supposes their continuous renewal, as well as that of their ultimate, necessary ideal in which they are systematised. Action, then, does not become reflectively conscious only because it integrates the “perceptive or passive knowledge” with the “productive rational” (Blondel 1995, p. 493), but because the whole movement of the human living organism, that of all its parts, consists in a forced and spontaneous “ideation” or “prospension”, that

is, a continuous imaginative anticipation of immanent, willed ideals, which are renewed in the intrinsic realisation of a transcendent work.³ “That which one suffers passively, one becomes and makes it be only by making that passion active and voluntary” (Blondel 1995, p. 493). The tendencies of desire, the impulses and the whole determinism of the flesh can be traced back, in general, to the sensibility of an organism that discovers itself passively acting, intrinsically intelligible in so far as it is willing, because in its movement it already “signifies”, that is, it makes signs that conspire to determine infinitely an end conceptualised in its very generation (*per generationem*) by thought, which, for its part, acts by syncretically seeking a balance between the noetic identity of the ideal and the pneumatic renewal of its realisation.⁴ “In our knowledge, in our action, there remains a constant disproportion between the object itself and the thought, between the work and the will. Without cessation the conceived ideal is surpassed by the real operation, and without cessation the obtained reality is surpassed by an ever-reborn ideal” (Blondel 1995, pp. 378–79). But then, in this renewal between thought and action, the link with that infinite ultimate ideal is also necessarily renewed, which reveals itself as a necessary mediator between the willing and the willed, as well as between the immanent ideal and the transcendent real. A brief comparison with the Kantian conception of pure reason, of which Blondel is particularly critical, especially in the 1893 edition of *L’action*, makes it possible to pinpoint some fundamental features of this approach.

Kant primarily conceives of reason as pure because of its autonomous capacity to exercise a critique of its faculties, of the limits and subjective conditions of the knowledge of its objects. In its most general, discursive faculty, it consists of thought that produces ideas with which it architecturally reflects on the interests of the understanding, discovering regulatory focuses of infinite syntheses so that the latter fulfils, subjectively or transcendently, the realisation of its practical and theoretical object (nature or the supreme good). But, at the same time, this same reflective, architectural thinking becomes dialectically critical when it investigates whether its very ideas exceed the interests and cognitive conditions of the understanding, leading (it) to transcendental illusions. Insofar as Blondel conceives of ideas as immanent principles of action that renew themselves in the transcendent work, continually renewing their ultimate willing ideal, he does not assume only, firstly, like Kant, that the “highest” spontaneity of the understanding is practical and that every theoretical act is, in the end, practical (de Nigris 2022), but that the critical sense of reason is irreducible to an exploration of the theoretical possibilities of the faculties and consists in “a critique of life”, that of a “living reason” with its own “general logic”⁵. This, secondly, leads to a variation in the regulative sense of the idea of freedom as well as, thirdly, of a complementary conception between autonomy and heteronomy in moral consciousness. Lastly, it completely changes the qualitative conception of space and time, as far as the determinism of the reflective consciousness of action cannot be reduced to the quantifiable by the schematism of a speculative understanding in transcendental apperception. Let us briefly outline the first two questions, leaving the others to be incorporated in the next section, where they will find their full thematic function.

If, for Kant, freedom is the fundamental idea of pure practical reason as a principle that proves the existence of the law (*ratio essendi*) because in it the law is known by realising itself (*ratio cognoscendi*), Blondel maintains that freedom is an idea that can be explained by the notion of infinity as that intrinsic power of the reflective consciousness of action to renew indefinitely its original intention. Blondel holds that freedom is an idea that is explained from the notion of infinity as that intrinsic power to which the reflective consciousness of action participates in order to renew indefinitely its original, willing intention in the willed ends, in view of the One ultimate and necessary end which is its endless principle, that is, the cause in which they infinitely systematise their finitude. The voluntary act,

genetically, “transits from the infinite to the infinite, because the infinite is efficient cause and final cause” (Blondel 1995, p. 154). In this way, the *actus humani*, which defines both practical understanding and reason in general, because it defines the whole science of life, acquires a metaphysical, ideal nuance, not merely susceptible to being legislated in its intention and transformed into an unconditioned imperative—which would not explain how it can recognise its conditioned beliefs in view of an ultimate belief that vivifies its own acting—but which goes back to the infinite ideal of its continuous, factual finitude, freeing itself from its dogmatic assimilation and forcing, as we shall see, a conscious choice of faith. This faith, which is the formal object of the critique of life, as the integrating foundation of every habit, will also be the formal object of all scientific beliefs, in so far as, in deference to them, it presupposes a necessary commitment (Blondel 1995, pp. 455, 460).

The infinite spontaneous power of consciousness to renew its finite ideals is none other than the very idea of freedom which, then, is also a consciousness to participate in a sovereign power of determination and, moreover, a creation of ends (Blondel 1995, p. 153, 1936, pp. 264–65). Freedom, far from excluding determinism, being the continuous, factual and unpredictable determination of our ideals in their realisation, “makes use of it and utilises it” just as “determinism, far from excluding freedom, prepares it and produces it”, for it consists in its effective progress (Blondel 1995, p. 154). “In short, in order to act it is necessary to participate in an infinite power; in order to be conscious of acting it is necessary to have the idea of this infinite power. Thus, in the reasonable act there is a synthesis of power and of the idea of the infinite; and this synthesis is called freedom” (Blondel 1995, p. 155).

Now, this reflective consciousness of freedom derived from participating in the infinite power of renewing the ideals -the ends willed in the continuous factual transcendence of the work accomplished, which forces us to will all of them in view of a necessarily mediating ultimate ideal end in which the original willing intention by which we will our destiny is revealed; that consciousness, which is the sensibility of thinking and the thinking of sensibility, consists for Blondel in reason itself in its most radical, living, critical sense, which defines the properly human act (*actus humani*), or “the intelligibility of the intelligence” of each act (Blondel 1934b, p. 383ff, 1936, pp. 252, 386). In short, it is the organic sensibility in which it is embodied. Blondel summarises the meaning and the critical task of reason, which is none other than that which founds the science of action, in three fundamental and inseparable questions: “What does one want when one really wants what one wants, how does one discover an end adequate to the integrity of the primitive movement, how, in spite of the partiality to which the will seems condemned, does it preserve its total sincerity” (Blondel 1995, p. 166).

The science of action is the very awakening of reason in human consciousness when it formally specifies, by founding its authentic general logic, the ultimate desired ideal, which is the formal object of our destiny. Hence, it demands that we undertake “that hesitant march in search of that which is the life of our life, the soul of our soul, the reason of our reason, which comes to light only by a slow advance, like the child emerging from the mother’s womb” (Blondel 1937, p. 15). In this creative image of generation, the effective solution to the problem of action, of its meaning, is anticipated, as well as, definitively, the ultimate scope of transcendence in immanence in which the willed is brought into equation with the willing.

3. Being in Agere

From the ontological point of view of adequationist theories, consciousness is the intrinsic pre-reflective knowledge of the identity of being that is reflectively discovered before that which is not itself, the multiplicity of entities as essentiated things, which

raises—according to Descartes—the problem of the communication of substances or—from Leibniz—of a substantial bond as a mediating Being that unites and at the same time differentiates the thinking being and the thought entity so that the transcendence of the latter is preserved in the immanence of the former.⁶

The inadequacy between the willing and the willed, the *antibolie* of action (Blondel 1995, p. 357, n. 1), forces thinking to detach itself from its essentialising, adequationist, apophantic pretension, to realise its acting character, which is none other than that of action which cannot be reduced to an idea of it, because any “data” with which one tries to define it entail a representative inadequacy in their epistemic and metaphysical possibility of being given ‘in itself or in my ideas’, as variably affirmed from the “phenomenism” of descriptive consciousness (Blondel 1934a, p. 231ff, 1937, pp. 95–103). Incomprehensible from the classical *adaequatio speculativa rei et intellectus*, action necessarily postulates an *adaequatio realis mentis et vitae* (PDRP, Blondel 1997b, p. 556ff). The psyche or, more generally, the whole organic movement of the body, in short, the sense of being (whether of the contingent being of the second causes or of the being-in-itself of the pure Act, according to the dominant terminology in *L’action*, 1937), is always *in agere*, that is, acting in the action in which everything becomes phenomenally in the integral system of its immanent reflective determinism of a priori willed ends, which are continually renewed in the a posteriori realisation of a transcendent work.⁷ Thus, in the correlation between the willing and the willed, action mediates between the real and the ideal, linking the substantial unity of being in an ontogenetic dynamic, since the real continually reveals, in its unpredictable transcendence, the ideal power of its realisation, that is, a willed ideal of its reality that continually escapes its definitive abstract idealisation, since it consists precisely in its forced renewal. “One after the other, thought overflows practice, and practice overflows thought; the real and the ideal, therefore, must coincide, since this identity is given in fact; but it is given to us only to escape us no sooner than it is given.” (Blondel 1995, p. 379).

In the action, at whatever degree of its reflective consciousness, we spontaneously attribute an ideal of reality to what we want to be realised in itself as we will it, so that in the correlation between the willing and the willed, thinking is believing, as we shall see (Section 4), in ‘an objective reality’, because it believes in view of an ultimate ideal of realisation. This is basically the sense of “realism” that Blondel introduced in *L’action* in 1893 and which he would defend throughout the trilogy of the 1930s.

In thinking and in acting, we quite spontaneously posit before us a system of conditions and objects which remain independent of our reflective intervention and which take on a character of objective reality in our eyes. What thus seems to escape our action, what we cannot dispense with thinking and affirming, is, in appearance, what is most real and most certain outside ourselves. But do not be fooled: the idea of objective existence and an inevitable belief in the objects of representation still express only an internal necessity [...]. The real truth of objects, their being, does not reside then in the inevitable representation we have of them; it consists in what it depends on us to will or not to will in them. For them to be in us, we must will them to be for us what they are in themselves (Blondel 1995, pp. 470–71).

The reflectivity of consciousness, the representative intelligibility of sensibility and of constructive thinking, in short, the reason for the inexhaustible ideal virtuality in which everything is originally realised as a work of the world, are founded on the Unique necessary deal of the ideal renewal of being in its very realisation; that is, they are founded on an idea of God as a principle of willing ideation in which all ideals are made systematically intelligible in order to will that things “be for us what they are in themselves”. Everything depends, then, on the attitude we take towards the Unique necessary, because he is the principle of the whole series, and because the sequence of total determinism has the effect

of leading us undoubtedly to him. Without being, no other beings are in us; with it, all beings will be present (Blondel 1995, p. 471).

The truth or sense of being in the substantial link of action between the willing and the willed, in its very acting movement, which is none other than that of human reason (*actus humani*), far from being reducible to that of classical truth as the discovery of the eternal essence of being latent in the phenomenal forms patent to thought—which supposes the ultimate identity between the cosmic *eidos* and the *idea* of the spirit—consists in the revelation of “the infinite virtuality” of the original willing intention in the original work in which the contingent being of the world is born and defined; the whole system of the determinism of action, as it comes to be known in the reflective consciousness of thinking, reflects “an actual infinity” in the inexhaustible finitude of the ends which are, then, “degrees of infinity”, powers of synthesis, ideal determination of the real (Blondel 1995, pp. 153–55, 472–75). But this confirms that the infinite power of which we are conscious of possession and—as Blondel enigmatically put it—“participation”, is, strictly speaking, “a kind of creative sovereignty” (Blondel 1995, p. 153, 1936, p. 156) in which the ontological sense of truth as *aletheia* is definitively transformed into that of revelation, and the chronology of objective time is explained, phenomenally, in the mediating creation of action between the contingent real world and another, transcendent, ideal world; that which, finally, will allow for a deeper understanding of the ultimate root of the consciousness of freedom in action.

4. The Unique Necessary Mediator Between Wanting and Being in the Eternity of the Instant

If the original intention of the will in its volitional and willed disproportion, that is to say, the ultimate reason for its substantial link, for its bringing into the equation, is to be deciphered in the inexhaustible originality of the human work, action demands to will this infinitely in each instant as if it were eternal. The effective temporalisation of the time of the world, that of the instant as a mysteriously continuous present, without definitive presence, then, does not refer immediately to a defined ideal—whether scientific, mathematical or its spatialisation—but to the inexhaustible realisation and renewal of every willed ideal by action in the factual transcendence of the unpredictable created work, and, therefore, to the time of the creation of the sovereign power to which it participates as an infinite ideal of finite realisation.

Action does not fall under the law of duration [. . .]. What one wills deliberately, what one does for its own sake, one wills and does not because time passes, but because time seems to pass. Eternity is everything in every instant. Just as intention has a universal scope, it has an intratemporal ambition (Blondel 1995, p. 400).

Since each act is willed insofar as it continues to be systematically willed in relation to others, the chronological order that constitutes time is nothing but the way in which the subject is intrinsically aware as an agent in the willing unity of his action, in the factual event of his willed ends, whose real objective dimension, as we have seen, is derived from the immanent necessity of their linkage with a transcendent purpose that refers to the Unique necessary in which they are all necessarily renewed or, more rigorously, recreated. (Blondel 1995, p. 154). “Voluntary action appears as a creation in creation” (Blondel 1995, p. 157). However, this means that in Blondel’s method of immanence, far from suffering epistemically from solipsism by referring the correlation between the willing and the willed to the transcendent facticity of the worldly work, the latter is not a supernatural substitute with which man builds himself a way of salvation, for its inexhaustible reality lies, in its gestation, in its turn, in the ideal transcendence into which this finite world of ends is systematically transfigured in view of another infinite unique, which he calls the Unique

necessary, which is precisely what explains, according to Blondel, the transmundane root of the hope of action and the intrinsic capacity of commitment in his acts (Blondel 1937, p. 143); in short, this refers to all the sensitive, mystical depth of the reflective continuity of his consciousness (A., O.C., p. 154).

The Unique necessary, the supernatural transcendence of the transcendent natural, is posited as the eternal immanent, ideal power of the factual real of human action, as the mediating spring in which it renews in the future the finite ideals, infinitely transfixed by their realisation in the continually present work of the contingent world. In this way, the present is the inexhaustible instant in which time seems to pass because it passes provisionally in a history in which the individual enjoys and uses the eternal.

The human person seems to pass, but his acts are beyond what passes. And so, without ceasing to touch the shores of time, man uses and enjoys eternity as well as the perpetual renewal of duration: at the point where he seems limited to remain a distinct individual, he uses and enjoys the universality as well as the singularity of his personal life (Blondel 1995, p. 498).

If, from the theoretical speculation of Kantian transcendental aesthetics, time and space become qualitatively quantitative, schematisable for the construction of the natural object (Blondel 1995, pp. 485–87), in the practical speculation of action the contingent temporality and spatiality of being in the a posteriori work carried out in the world reveals the supernatural order of space and time in which the immanent original intention is gestated.

We act only in view of what is not yet, since the principle of conscious action, in order to be efficient, presupposes a final cause which is both interior and transcendent to it. For man lives humanly only for that which is not yet, for the future, for progress; but, more imperatively he places, under this prolongation in duration, under this widening of his hoped-for conquests, an aspiration of another order; hence, without realising it, he transports his impulse towards a plan superior to space and time (Blondel 1937, p. 143).

We would have no consciousness of the future and of progress, Blondel goes on to say, if we did not have that forced need for “liberation and infinity” in which the past is creatively clarified in the future as a continuous, present transformation of the world.

We do not act in this world and on this world but go beyond it in order to transform it, discounting it, so to speak, into another world, regulating our actions in ideal conceptions and using a will that is free of the determinism of nature. Therefore, to conceive of human action is not only to consider it as conscious, but to imply that it has an inventive power which gives rise to multiple models of initiative, which produces ideas which are yet to be realised and between which a decision can intervene (Blondel 1937, pp. 143, 144).

If the ideal revelation of the real and the real of the ideal that occurs in the correlation between the willing and the willed is, in turn, a continuous revelation of the transcendent will of our will, because we systematically will our ends insofar as we will the unique end in which we will them all infinitely, it means that this ideal ultimate end is, necessarily and definitively, the universal mediating link in which action finds its “transcendent immanence” (Blondel 1936, pp. 139, 187, 1937, p. 276). By Him and in Him fecundity or “actual infinitude” is bred, in which the willing is creatively revealed in the willed, just as the ideal world in the work of the real world, immanent time in the transcendent chronology of the factual present. Thus, the whole system of the determinism of action, from the point of view of being and thinking, leads to the natural, worldly revelation of the supernatural, transmundane, necessary Unique. “The relative necessity of the contingent reveals to us the absolute necessity of the necessary” (Blondel 1995, p. 378).

Now, if the ideal original intention of action is revealed in the originality of the real work, if the contingent being of the world is revealed insofar as it acts in an ideal of

its inexhaustible transcendence in another world, so that every being is a universally transcended singularity, a finitude infinitely determined in the systematic determination it acquires in action, then one understands definitively that the idea of freedom for Blondel arises as the intrinsic knowledge that human consciousness has of participating in and, indeed, “cooperating” with a sovereign creative power which is the ultimate universal mediating link to an originally transcendent work, because it really acts in action by founding it (Blondel 1995, p. 495, 1936, pp. 256–57, 1937, p. 508). It is, as we anticipated, “life of our life, soul of our soul”. And in this consciousness of inhabitation and cooperation with a creative power, the agent is not only finding himself, but is primarily found before seeking, reflectively, himself and, as a condition of his own search, says Blondel, tacitly inspired by Saint Bernard (Blondel 1995, p. 386); hence, this power, “does not escape us in what is foreign to us but in what is more interior than our own interiority”, which he also affirms with evident reference to Saint Augustine (Blondel 1995, p. 383). It is “a living truth” (Blondel 1995, pp. 374, 412), which effectively acts as a mediating founder of the real and the ideal, of the eternal and the factual, for it is the ultimate willing spring of our will, that of a moral conscience whose autonomy is radically heteronomous (Blondel 1937, p. 316), and which, also contrary to Kant, as we shall see in the next section, entails an intrinsically practical religious faith.

The problem of action, the problem of its reason—which has been broken down into the inseparable questions of what we want when we want something, of what end is adequate to the primitive impulse of action and, finally, of how sincerely and faithfully we adhere to it in the face of the threatening disproportion between the willing and the willed—presupposes, in turn, further questions that must clarify the nature of the primordial option in which the breadth of the human will and ideal creativity in the realisation of its ends are decided. In the first place, to that of the effective knowledge that action needs in order to make use of the mediating infinity between the ideal of its thinking and the real of its work, “The real idea does not become ideal, that is, reflected, but by this mediation; for the infinite is present to every subject, every subject is not present to the infinite and does not know how to use it” (Blondel 1995, p. 154). Secondly, to the previous problem, which aims to clarify the deepest nature of the option that founds the human moral conscience, the responsibility of its unconsciousness, and, therefore, the scope of its intrinsic idea of freedom, of how to believe or not to believe that we participate in a sovereign mediating and creative power that calls us from the fecundity of immanence to reveal an original transcendent work, “No one thinks to act, if he does not attribute to himself the principle of his action; and if he does not believe himself to be someone or something, like an empire in the empire” (Blondel 1995, p. 152). Once these two questions are combined, we must then ask the following: how can man believe in his own will so that God’s will is done in him, and how, therefore, can he use this power so that he does not act against itself? This is the root, according to Blondel, as we shall see, of all immorality.

Finally, these two problems are inseparable, as Blondel will make quite clear in the second edition of *Action*, when he asks what the original work of action is, which must definitively make explicit the sense of the fecundity and, therefore, inadequacy between the willing and willed will. To discover how action believes its own will means to take hold of the freedom in which its original work is constructed, to become aware of its science; in short, it means to find the guiding thread from which it understands the creative expansion, by no way deductive, of its original intention (Blondel 1937, p. 302).

5. Believing in One's Own Will. The Act of Faith in the Faith of the Act and the Literal Practice

Action, as we have seen, does not formally postulate a science of itself, although it always implicitly entails one, for its acting character consists in the drama of the personalisation of an agent who reveals his willing will by tracing back spontaneously and genetically to a fecund, ultimate ideal of intimate transcendence, which forces him to renew or recreate the ideality of immanent ends desired in the transcendent realisation of a work, thus making them systematically intelligible as principles of action. Whether he wants to or not, confessedly or not, man must attribute to himself a principle of action (Blondel 1995, p. 152); he must believe in a willing ideal as the ultimate criterion of intelligibility of the production of his willed ideas without explaining them deductively, but by realising them and acting on them. But this means that between the infinite revelation of the volitional intention in the production of willed ends, that is to say, in the problem of action, in the problem of its destiny, is inserted that of faith.

In the disproportion between the will willed and the effective work, the action transcends itself intimately in its volitional intention and discovers that the reflexivity of its thinking is genetically "believing" (Blondel 1995, p. 434). The fact that we do not do what we want and that we do not want what we do is due to the fact that we always, necessarily, believe in our wanting, that is to say, we think by producing ideas in confession and conversion with respect to an idea of God as the ultimate principle of ideation of the real and, therefore, of action. In each act, man gestates his "inner conversion" and finds "the realm of belief" (Blondel 1995, p. 442); in short, he makes a forced profession of faith and stakes his destiny. In its believing nature, thought, then, discovers its true cycloidal dynamism, its apical pneumatic aspiration which noetically poses and, if possible, imposes on action the last transcendent commitment of the whole system of its reflexive determinism. The nature of thinking "is to introduce into the unfolding of life a progressive dynamism. It is the fruit of life only to become a seed of new life. This is why the thought of the transcendent inevitably imposes on action a transcendent character" (Blondel 1995, p. 386).

But this, in turn, means that if practice forces thinking to confess itself and become its believing, every act of thinking, in its ultimate thinking responsibility, which reflectively orients the practical transcendence of action, is always an act of faith, at the same time as "faith inspires us in every act" (Blondel 1995, p. 442). Thus, inevitably, "faith is not only an act or the effect of an act; by natural necessity it is, in turn, a principle of action" (Blondel 1995, p. 445).

The result can be none other than that of reason flowing into and sublimating itself in faith as a revelation of the authentic substantial bond of action, of its commitment which confessedly or unconfessedly links the willing and the willed, the real and the ideal, the factual and the eternal, for it refers directly to the principle of action of God in us and of us in God (Blondel 1995, p. 455). And thought, which confesses itself in its willing principle, which recognises itself as essentially believing, discovers itself, Blondel ends by affirming, as a "natural prayer" (Blondel 1995, pp. 441–42, 447).

The pursuit of sincere adherence to the original willing intention, through the factual realisation of a work that is to reveal it, depends on the self-sacrifice and fidelity in which we believe in God, in his will, to believe in our will, to make the work of our action, in its transcendence, his providential work and thus that of our destiny. The intrinsically religious act, the act of faith, then, is the principle of eminent action, since in the renewal of the ends in God as the renewal of the believing of our will, there is the acting reason for the action itself. Faith is the act of faith within every act which calls us to recognise the gift of "an alliance" in action as an entry "into a new world into which no philosophical speculation can lead or follow" (Blondel 1995, pp. 436, 437, 1937, pp. 130, 375). "The act

is like the toll and passage of faith: it supposes the total abdication of one's own sense; it means the humble waiting for a truth which does not come from thinking alone; it brings into us another spirit than our own. *Fac et videbis*" (Blondel 1995, p. 437).

If thinking is intrinsically believing, a natural prayer in which we spontaneously renew the faith of our will, in which we set out on the path of its sincerity, Blondel then goes so far as to affirm that "whoever has felt the need of faith must, without having it, act as if he already had it, so that it arises in his consciousness from the depths of that heroic action which submits every man to the generosity of his impulse" (Blondel 1995, p. 437).

Now, if the willed ends go back to God as the fecund ideal of their realisation and renewal, it means that "thinking about God is an action" whose prayerful character enlightens faith as the intrinsic gift of action that "widens thought" (Blondel 1995, pp. 386, 444) and founds "the intelligibility of its intelligence", in short, as that "reason of reason", "life of life" which consists in believing in one's own will, in the sincerity which tests all the beliefs of thinking, that is to say, which makes it possible to doubt and authentically renew ideas insofar as they are principles of action.⁸ The willing sincerity of each willed act, which must believe in its own will, is the religious faith as the foundation of all practical faith of action because it renews the dogmatic faith of thinking, because it renews the letter pronounced in its inexhaustible willing spirit, while at the same time it does not cease to demand a last word, a willed commitment, a written formula.⁹

Now, any letter, any sign, signifies (*signum facere*) that is becomes a sign by realising the representative willed ideation in the original intention, believing in the divine principle, spiritualising itself, just as, on the other hand, the acting practice is embodied in the letter by overflowing it semantically, always revealing in it the ultimate commitment of ideation that makes it a sign, in short, the reason for its intelligibility. The idea of God, therefore, forces thinking to practice its letter, to spiritualise it and to doubt its dogma, widening its willing horizon according to its spontaneous "desire for the infinite" (A. O.C. I, p. 429), while thinking, in its willed reflexivity, forces action to affirm the spirit, to formally profess the divine (A. O.C. I, p. 451), so that the moral responsibility of the agent—which is none other than that which Blondel recognises for the philosopher (A. O.C. I, p. 441)—is to convert to the literal practice far from any mystical spiritualism which rejects the commitment of the letter (intrinsicism) or the dogmatic intellectualism which defines the spirit with a letter which is never in doubt (extrinsicism).¹⁰

Far from being a mere doctrine of apologetic scope, literal practice, as an authentic spiritualisation of the letter and literalness of the spirit in the act of faith as the principle of action of every act, constitutes a metaphysical semiotics which lies in the formation of the moral personality of the agent, who has to see it in every act, in his spontaneous organic, psychophysical movement, with the acting reason of his action. "Faith, which could be called the divine experience in us, is the origin of an activity which concerns the whole man and makes him produce in all his members the belief in which he lives [...] It is a total assimilation of the whole organism to this higher principle of life" (Blondel 1995, p. 445). In the reflective spontaneity of action, faith clarifies ideas, forces its believing to want them as much as we want God and therefore believe in Him, which inevitably leads to a conversion of thinking or to a transubstantiation of the flesh, which are the same since the latter believes intrinsically in its movement, in its feeling, in its passive action.

We have, in our little world, to cooperate in a kind of creation, by obtaining from all our powers that they believe, even to the intimate depths of our organs [...]. Literal practice must be like a ferment which, by imperceptible progress, lifts little by little all the heaviness of the limbs. As soon as we retain this life-giving force within us, a slow work of transubstantiation and conversion takes place in our fleshly mass, in our desires and

appetites. Every act inspired by a thought of faith begins to give birth to a new man, for it engenders God in man (Blondel 1995, p. 446).

The responsibility of the philosopher, that of the science of action, then, will consist in opening the way to the literal practice in which our secret vision consists, that of the same moral conscience that forges the personality, that which transpires in that continuous “natural prayer” in which the supernatural transcending all our immanent principles is engendered, as it forces, in its unpredictable realisation, to think and feel the continuous and providential renewal of this world in the other.

6. The Original Meaning of the Work and of the Willful Intention. Generation and Trinitarian Spirit

What is the contradiction of freedom and what is the risk of happiness if human action is a prisoner of itself, not having been genetically given the option to choose itself, to will that “native will” which commits it to always want more than it wills, renewing its original willing intention in a work never entirely willed, transcending its ends, which forces them to be renewed in view of an ultimate Ideal of transcendence of the real which seems to be conspicuous by its absence, like “an anonymous absolute” (Blondel 1995, p. 505) in the inexpressible silence of a spirit without a letter?

The primordial indigence of action, which has not been given the native option of wanting to will, introduces into life “a seed of suffering, oppression and death” (Blondel 1995, p. 362) which plunges it, Blondel will say in the second edition of *Action*, into “a crisis of conscience” which defines “all spiritual beings obliged to choose their destiny” (Blondel 1937, p. 355).

We have seen, in fact, that the ultimate problem of action, of bringing into equation the willing with the willed, in short, that of its reason and destiny, has been traced back to how man comes to will in his own will, to believe in it and, therefore, in Whom he believes in order to commit himself to it, and to make his every act an act of faith.

The problem of action has led, then, to the Unique necessary, who is not an idea in which one chooses to believe, but the practical revelation of the believing that unavoidably involves the will of the man to want his own will, for He is the Being who mediates between what he wants and what he does, between the intimate ideal being of the willing will and the transcendent factual being of the world in which the willed will is realised; hence, He is, in short, the foundation of faith as the intelligibility of the intelligence of human action, as the reason for which sensibility awakens is consciousness incarnate, since in Him and through Him its intrinsically moral and religious personality is biographically configured.

Now, if Blondel will not fail to underline that acting means “entrusting oneself to the universe” (Blondel 1937, p. 295), that the willing will is “confident in its autonomy” (Blondel 1937, p. 316), that action in its reflective spontaneity entails the “happy simplicity of a trusting initiative”, that initiative, that original believing intention can be distorted when one replaces its necessary and mediating link, the divine source of the believing of its will, that of its authentic literal practice, with an idol as a false infinity calculated to dogmatically deduce ends, to control the works of the world by utopically limiting its transcendence.

The trusting spirit of action and its spontaneous foundation of faith, then, as we have seen, is distorted by a letter that seeks to impose it (extrinsicism typical of intellectualism) or that varies indefinitely, losing the threshold of its expressive intelligibility, so that one ends up professing the one that suits each case (intrinsicism). Both positions are convergent because they have, ultimately, a pragmatic bias. They correspond to a general type of man, the hedonist, which Blondel denounces from the beginning of his work because he profanes action insofar as he uses his sovereign, creative, infinite power, his

anonymous absoluteness—which corresponds only to the freedom to choose the belief of his will—to deny this same infinitude (Blondel 1995, p. 403, 1937, p. 76), believing to be able to will nothing in order to will anything (*nolonté*): idols which hide, in the hypocritical effort of submission involved in raising them, to control the authentically divine in order to divinise oneself (autolatry) (Blondel 1995, p. 426–30, 1937, p. 199). This is a contradictory and ineffective path, for the hedonist, in order to a priori compose his work, to limit its transcendence, will end up, a posteriori, surrendering himself, in the face of its unpredictable event, to any heteronomous power, or he will rebel in the capricious and aggressive defence of his equally alienating autonomy.

The greatest temptation of the hedonist, the contradiction of a life that renounces its believing condition in order to want everything and nothing, in order to achieve sufficient comfort to alienate itself from its destiny, places definitively at the centre of reason, that is, of faith, the question of the original work of action and, therefore, of that of the creative power in which it participates.

It will then be necessary to ask, as Blondel does in the second edition of *L'action*, and following his terminology, how does one discern in the order of second causes the transitivity of human action towards a work that comes to participate in the creative power of the first cause? What kind of creative power, of an ideal of transcendent creation that is fully immanent, without collateral passivities, will be that of the first cause in which the action discovers its work, as we have seen, as “creation of a creation”?

If the necessary Unique is the ultimate mediating idea or principle of action in which future ideals pass because they are transcended by being forcibly recreated in the present work, it means that this Power, this purely intimate transcendence in whom we find ourselves in the very ontogenesis of the world, as its co-creators, can be none other than “the generation” of a Spirit of fecundity which links the Father to the Son, that is, in that primordial “agnition” (Blondel 1936, pp. 77, 350–53, 365–66) in which, far from there being an impossible principle of adequacy between the ideal being and the real, the ideal of paternity is continually recognised in the reality of the Son, and the reality of filiation in the ideal of the Father (Blondel 1935, p. 332ff, 1936, pp. 173–88).¹¹

The Christian trinitarian revelation helps man historically and philosophically in the face of the mystery of the divine (Blondel 1950, pp. 14–15) because, in the trinitarian procession, human action becomes intelligible; its immanent transcendence, the spontaneous believing in its own will as creating paternity in filiation and filiation in paternity, the foundation of the brotherhood of man and of the selfless openness of our will to all the wills, far from depersonalising us, makes our moral personality possible (Blondel 1995, p. 380ff). Only in this way is the “creative goodness” of creation revealed, that is to say, that charity which is entirely altruistic, detached because of unlimitedly fecundity, which is the true reason for the work of man, the intelligibility of his intelligence (Blondel 1936, pp. 195, 199, 356, 1937, pp. 491, 508, 512) without which there would be no consciousness such as freedom, but merely the mechanical development of tasks programmed by a will which can be neither human nor divine (Blondel 1936, pp. 195–97).

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Notes

- ¹ For a detailed summary, see (English 2007).
- ² The canonical edition is cited with the abbreviation of the reference text. Due to the interruption of the Complete Works project, texts excluded from the Complete Works are cited according to the year of publication.
- ³ For the cycloidal movement between thinking and action, see (Blondel 1937, pp. 130, 402); for ideation and prospection, see (Blondel 1934a, pp. 338–41, 1936, p. 341, 1937, pp. 130–32, 315) and, above all, as a whole, PDRP; for the rationality of organic movement and its signification, see (Blondel 1995, pp. 126ff, 207–14, 1937, pp. 139–42, 184ff).
- ⁴ For the difference between noetic and pneumatic thought, see (Blondel 1934a, pp. 240, 272–76, 1936, p. 455) (also English 2007, pp. 33–37; de Jaer and Chapelle 1961, pp. 609–30); for the concept of conceptuar actuante *per generationem et exercitium*, see (Blondel 1936, pp. 208, 278, 322).
- ⁵ (Blondel 1995, pp. 505–12, 514–15; PDRP, Blondel 1997b, pp. 540–41, 1935, pp. 253ff). For the concept of “*raison vivante*”, see (LVM, Blondel 1997c, p. 386).
- ⁶ Let us recall here that Blondel in his Latin thesis identifies in the substantial bond a creative force that sustains Leibniz’s entire monadic doctrine, since it acts as the mediating being that renews the link between all contingent beings that come to life as immanent parts in view of a necessary, transcendent whole, irreducible to a sum of them. Blondel finds in Leibniz a pristine inspiration to separate himself from the Kantian division of the faculties in view of a critical unity of reason that descends from consciousness to action founded on a necessary, originally practical ideal of the phenomenal revelation of real being.
- ⁷ Blondel rejects any kind of descriptivist method that claims to interpret, according to different formulas, the acting of action as the pre-reflective passivity of an essentializing consciousness (this critique, with nuances, covers a whole trajectory from Maine de Biran to Husserl Blondel 1995, pp. 182–83, 187, 1936, pp. 455–56), and applicable, *ante literam*, to almost all of Merleau-Ponty’s work, up to at least his posthumous *Le visible et le invisible*, in which he posits, with the *enerelacs* between the phenomenal and objective body, that mediating third party which could approach, without theological pretensions, Blondel’s necessary One. On the other hand, the hypertrophy of the acting over the willed, cognisable only by a mediating intuition, leads Blondel to criticise Bergson (Blondel 1936, p. 455; PDRP, 1997b, p. 542). For a speculation especially inspired by Blondel on the substantial link as *méthexis*, and open to other philosophical horizons, see Gabellieri (2019).
- ⁸ It has been rightly underlined how Blondel, while discarding Cartesian dualism, preserves methodical doubt (English 2007, p. 11, note 106–7) which, we now see, finds its root in living faith; it is the only one capable of fecundating the spirit with the letter and overcoming the intrinsicist dogmatism of historicism and intellectualist extrinsicism.
- ⁹ Kant’s conception of religious faith, which arises from a firm belief in law, is for Blondel a form of extrinsicism which prevents us from recognising ourselves spontaneously as God’s co-operators, as lawgivers (Blondel 1937, pp. 335–36). On the other hand, for Kant, faith is not a knowledge, nor does it found a knowledge, if it allows one to hold as true (*Fürwahrhalten*) subjectively what can attain an objective certainty (this is the case of practical and doctrinal faith); hence, it tends, only in this sense, to move to action (see “Croyance” in the *Vocabulaire de Lalande*, O.C.II, pp. 363–64).
- ¹⁰ See (Blondel 1936, pp. 396, 400) and especially HD (Blondel 1997a, pp. 391–99), in which he enters into a debate on the relationship between Tradition and living faith.
- ¹¹ In Blondel’s conception of the *philosophia perennis*, says Gabellieri following the homonymous article of 1947, Blondel does not only establish the search for the metaphysical Mediator between Being and beings, nor the ontological one, between essence and existence, or the anthropological one, between thinking and action, but a principle of transcendence whose ultimate logic is trinitarian (Gabellieri 2016, p. 107).

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