

INTRODUCTION

Maurice Blondel was above all else an original philosopher. This is the primary fact which one must keep in mind in the very process of searching out and appraising the various historical affinities and ties of his first and most important work, *Action*, published in 1893.¹ The synthesis which he achieved in his philosophy of action is unquestionably the work of a highly independent and creative thinker; it is nonetheless a synthesis—a conscious assimilation of all that was vital and significant in the past into a higher, more comprehensive unity. No major philosopher can be properly and accurately understood without at least some reference to those other philosophers who served as his inspiration. Thus the first logical step towards a just comprehension of Blondel's originality should be that of establishing the various historical sources—those philosophers and their ideas—which factually provided the challenge and the materials for his original synthesis.

The purpose of this work is to serve as an introduction and a beginning for such an understanding of Blondel in terms of his historical sources; it represents for all practical purposes a beginning because until the present no major study has been published which attempts to place Blondel's thought within the context of the major currents of philosophical tradition beginning with the viewpoint of Blondel himself. For the most part, Blondel's commentators have shied away from an investigation of the historical sources which had an influence on his thought in *Action* as if it were the exclusive product of his personal thought without any significant relation to previous philosophical tradition. A few have been satisfied to indicate exterior resemblances and differences. For example, attention has been called in particular to the relation between Blondel's method and Kantian criticism.² One major work has been dedicated to an objective comparative study of the relation of Blondel's *Action* and Hegel's *Phenome-*

¹ Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essai d'une Critique de la Vie et d'une Science de la Pratique* ("Bibliothèque de Philosophie Contemporaine," Paris: Félix Alcan, 1893). This first book of Blondel was reedited under the same title in the series "Les Premiers Ecrits de Maurice Blondel" (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950). The pagination is identical in both editions. This book is always referred to as *Action*.

² The most detailed analysis of the relation between Blondel's and Kant's methodology is to be found in Henry Dumery's recent work, *Raison et Religion*

nology of the Spirit.¹ Another compares Blondel's problematic with that of existentialist thought.² All these works are indeed helpful for an understanding and appreciation of the importance and originality of Blondel's philosophy. But the fact remains that, as yet, no major attempt has been made to render explicit that vision of the history of philosophical thought which is intrinsic to *Action* and which served as the frame of reference interior to the Blondelian system itself.

The exact nature of that interior frame of reference is by no means open to an arbitrary choice. On several occasions in his published works and letters, as we shall see, Blondel explicitly placed his idea of a philosophy of action within the framework of a specific historical tradition. He himself describes that tradition as an evolution of moral philosophy beginning with Spinoza's *Ethics*, passing through Kantian criticism and the idealist efforts at synthesis of Fichte, the early Schelling, Hegel, and ending with the philosophy of religion of the final Schelling. Blondel attributes to each of these philosophers the inspiration for an important element in his own philosophy of action. From Spinoza he claimed that he derived his problem and the essential principle of his methodology; from Kant, the synthetic a priori and his concept of criticism; from Fichte and the early Schelling, the unity and the continuity of the rational and the practical in subjective consciousness; from Hegel, a logic capable of embracing the total phenomenon of subjective life and action; from the final Schelling, the legitimate role of a philosophy of religion. Blondel insists further that without an understanding and appreciation of these major steps in the evolution of modern thought one cannot hope to understand what he tried to accomplish in *Action*.³

Following out this admonition of Blondel, what we propose to do is to retrace the process of evolution represented by these five philosophers as Blondel himself understood it. We cannot hope to achieve an exhaustive study of the inspiration Blondel drew from any one of these philosophers. However, by using Blondel's own published

dans la Philosophie de l'Action (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1963), pp. 441-473. Dumery also gives some brief indications of the influence of Hegel (pp. 473-476) and of Fichte (p. 476, footnote 93).

¹ Peter Henrici, *Hegel und Blondel*, (Pullach, Verlag Berchmanskolleg, 1958).

² Albert Cartier, *Existence et Vérité: Philosophie Blondélienne de l'Action et Problématique Existentielle*, ("Nouvelle Recherche", Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955).

³ Confer below, Chapter I, pp. 5-10, for Blondel's statements concerning the relation of *Action* to this tradition.

writings and, on occasions, his unpublished notes we will try to establish what he saw as the key contribution of each one of these philosophers in that evolution, what he rejected as deficient and why; and how he tried to assimilate all these various contributions into a new synthesis. By this means we hope to arrive at a clearer understanding of *Action* itself and to disengage more precisely what was original and creative in its philosophical synthesis.

Before we embark on this study of the role of philosophical tradition in Blondel's thought, a preliminary caution is in order. Blondel himself was by no means a professional historian of philosophy. What interested him in past philosophical thought was those ideas which he considered as still vital and of contemporary consequence. But he was not personally involved in the specifically historical task of a faithful objective reconstitution of past thought. For his understanding of German thought and, in particular, those works which were not available to him in French translations, he depended on indirect sources. The two most important of these sources were, as we shall see, Emile Boutroux, who as Blondel's professor at the Ecole Normale and as director of his thesis, introduced him to the major ideas of post-Kantian thought, and his friend Victor Delbos, the future historian of modern philosophy at the Sorbonne, with whom Blondel worked in close collaboration under the direction of Boutroux during the years that both of them prepared their doctoral dissertations.¹ Without doubt Boutroux and Delbos represent two of the French philosophers of that period who had the most advanced critical understanding of post-Kantian German thought. Hence Blondel's interpretation of his German sources, derived in great part from these men, was frequently in advance of the ordinary critical understanding of his time.

However, Blondel's primary interest was his own creative effort to find a new synthesis; he consciously used ideas from others systems only in so far as they served his project. He defined philosophy as life itself insofar as it achieves a clear reflexive consciousness of itself. Hence he could truthfully claim that life itself, insofar as it revealed its meaning from within consciousness, was his one and only true source. If he made use of a particular historical tradition, he did so because he wished to enter into communication with his contemporaries in terms of their problems and idioms, and because he judged that particular tradition to be the most advanced and most fruitful.

¹ Confer below, Chapter I, pp. 5-10, for a discussion of the influence of Emile Boutroux and Victor Delbos on Blondel.

Hence what is of primary importance in Blondel's thought is not his interpretation of other philosophers but his own project. If one wishes to judge Blondel as a philosopher one must confront his finished work with that project in order to examine how well he realized it. Did he remain faithful to his point of departure and to his method? Is his system of reference coherent, and his technical vocabulary rigorous? Are his hypotheses confirmed by his analysis? From this point of view, which is the point of view of this study, what is of importance is not so much the objective validity of the expression Blondel gives to the history of philosophy as an attempt to understand that expression as the interior frame of reference of his own thought.

Thus when Blondel speaks of Spinoza, for example, as a "realist" or of Kant as an "idealist" or of both as "rationalists", even granting that these designations are unjust as concerns the objective reality of the thought of these philosophers, yet nonetheless they represent a certain definition of philosophy which Blondel wished to make for his own purpose. And we must try to understand what Blondel meant by this "realism", "idealism" or "rationalism" if we wish to understand how and by what means he intended to transcend these viewpoints. This is the only means by which one can hope to formulate a just verdict on the result of his creative effort and appreciate whether he succeeded or not in fulfilling his original project.

For this reason we have limited our objective primarily to an exposé of Blondel's interpretation of his sources without attempting a thorough objective criticism of that interpretation. However, there are moments when Blondel seems to accept as objective historical fact his own interpretation of previous philosophers. These moments could lead a hasty reader to the conclusion that Blondel did not realize his objective because he misunderstood Spinoza, or Kant, or Hegel, etc. But these two questions remain independent. Even if we grant that Blondel did not fully understand the historical sources that he used, yet he did nevertheless create a true philosophical work which represents a genuine contribution to the history of thought and an original and profound response to the problems of our times. Further, even these faulty historical judgments can help the judicious reader to a better appreciation of Blondel's genius as an original philosopher; for in many instances where his judgment of past thought could be judged deficient, the understanding he manifests of the resulting difficulty and the means he proposes to overcome it correspond remarkably

with the deeper meaning presented in more recent critical appraisals of the philosopher himself whom Blondel criticizes.¹

A second and final caution to the reader is also in order. As we have noted, the five philosophers dealt with in this study represent, according to Blondel himself, the five major steps in the evolution of that tradition in which he places his *Action*. However, in dealing with the influence of these particular philosophers we have no intention of denying or limiting in any way the influence of other thinkers and other traditions. Before he wrote the final version of *Action*, Blondel had acquired a profound and thorough philosophical culture; he had passed fifteen years almost exclusively in philosophical studies and reading, under the direction of some of the outstanding professors of philosophy of that day. His own notes and publications manifest an interest in and an understanding of nearly every major philosophical current in the Occident.

Consequently for a complete understanding of the historical influences which helped to form Blondel's thought another fundamental question can and should be posed. From precisely what sources did Blondel draw those elements in his thought and method which distinguish him from the specific historical tradition to which he relates himself? In order to answer this question one must study the influence of at least two other currents of thought which had a profound impact on Blondel's thought. The first is Leibnitz, whose theory of the *Vinculum Substantiale* served as the subject of Blondel's latin thesis which, he claimed, contained a "key" to the understanding of *Action*. The second is Maine de Biran, whose writings Blondel studied intensively; and with Maine de Biran the entire influence of specifically French philosophical tradition and thought, passing through Ravaisson, Lachelier, Boutroux and Ollé-Leprune. However, within the limited context of this study we have been obliged to limit the recognition of these influences to some passing references.

One final introductory point, the title of this study speaks of the influence of "German" philosophical sources on the formation of Blondel's method and thought. But the first philosopher whose in-

¹ If, for example, Blondel can be said to have exaggerated the dualism of Kant's distinction of pure and practical reason, and not to have taken sufficient account of the *Critique of Judgment*, yet the solution he searched for in *Action* as a means of overcoming that dualism is remarkably close to the solution Eric Weil maintains Kant himself sought in his final Critique. The interpretation that Weil gives of Kant's thought in his recent work *Problèmes Kantians*, (Paris: Vrin, 1963) bears a remarkable resemblance to Blondel's concept of a philosophy of action.

fluence we deal with is Spinoza who was by no means a German. Despite this fact, we have retained the title because, although Blondel understood Spinoza's *Ethics* as the point of departure of the tradition to which his *Action* belongs, yet every major step in the evolution of that tradition was the work of a German philosopher.