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The Meaning of "Objective Knowledge" in Maurice Blondel's L'Action (1893)

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THE MEANING OF "OBJECTIVE KNOWLEDGE"

IN MAURICE BLONDEL'S

L'ACTION (1893)

by

Thomas J. Marsh, S.J.

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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LIFE

Thomas J. Marsh, S.J. was born in Detroit, Michigan on September 2, 1937. He graduated from De La Salle High School, Detroit in June, 1955. After attending the University of Detroit for one year, he entered the Society of Jesus at Milford, Ohio in August, 1956. In August, 1959 he was transferred to Columbiere College, Clarkston, Michigan. Majoring in Latin, he received the Bachelor of Arts degree in June, 1960. He was then transferred to West Baden College, West Baden Springs, Indiana. He enrolled in the graduate school in the Department of Philosophy in April, 1963.

From September, 1963 until June, 1966, he taught English and Latin at the University of Detroit High School. He began his theological studies in September, 1966 at Bellarmine School of Theology, North Aurora, Illinois. He is currently completing his studies for a degree of Master of Arts in philosophy at this institution.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

There are signs of a growing interest in the philosophy of Maurice Blondel among American Catholic thinkers and an indication that his work may prove to be of interest to non-Catholic thinkers as well. Blondel has had an influence on Catholic thought which for the most part has not been recognized. According to Infirmations catholiques internationales, Blondel influenced the thought of Reusslet and Marechal.¹ And according to Henri Bouillard this influence extended to Le Senne, Lavelle, M. Gabriel Marcel, Jean La Creix, Etienne Berne, Pere Gaston Fessard, and Pere Henri de Lubac.² Dru and Trethowan see a possibility of interest in Blondel among English-speaking philosophers as more attention is given by them to an elaboration of a philosophy of religion. The general pattern to date has been for English-speaking philosophers to concentrate on linguistic analysis, and for American theologians in particular not to look to philosophy to give a rational foundation for truths of faith. But Dru sees a growing awareness of the profit of relating the truths of faith to elements of experience

¹"Blondel and Our Times," Philosophy Today, VI, (Winter, 1962), p. 276.

²Henri Bouillard, Blondel et le Christianisme (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1961), pp. 41-42.

which give support to them. In this enterprise Blendel has much to contribute.³

L'Action, the first major work of Blendel, is the version, published in 1893, of the thesis defended in the Sorbonne by Blendel on June 7, 1892.⁴ The published version differs from the thesis defended in the Sorbonne in that it contains a chapter, "Le lien de la connaissance et de l'action dans l'être," not found in the original version but which figures prominently in the discussions of L'Action. L'Action is considered by many to be Blendel's chief work. It contains the central themes of Blendel's thought. These themes are expanded in the Trilogy, which was published from 1934 to 1937 and which comprises La Pensée I, II, L'Être et les êtres, and L'Action I, II. It has been observed that these themes are stated with more vigour and certainly more concisely in L'Action. The Trilogy, dictated by Blendel after he had gone blind, tends to be repetitious. And, familiarity with L'Action is necessary if one is to know first hand the source of the major disagreements concerning Blendel's thought.⁵

³Alexander Dru and Illyd Trethewan, (eds., trans.), Maurice Blendel: The Letter on Apologetics and History of Dogma (London: Harvill Press, 1964), p. 14.

⁴L'Action: Essai d'une critique de la vie et d'une science de la pratique (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950).

⁵Bouillard, pp. 57-59.

The problem Blondel confronts in L'Action is that the conditions of action which man finds himself under seem to be at odds with his desire for freedom and autonomy. Formulating this problem in the Introduction to L'Action, Blondel observes that action itself is imposed upon man. He cannot escape it except by suicide, which is itself an action. This action, forced upon man, is often disagreeable to him. As Blondel observes: "It is necessary that action be realized through me, even when it requires of me an unpleasant choice, a sacrifice, a death."⁶

Blondel attempts to solve this problem by an analysis of action which reveals that implicit in his acts of choice man has a fundamental desire that his action be structured by a necessary principle; in other words, that the conflict between his desire for freedom and autonomy and the element of necessity that he finds in his action is only apparent. Thus the purpose of L'Action is to make manifest that the objective elements of action, the elements which are given and beyond man's power to eliminate, are found to be upon analysis in conformity with his most fundamental desires and are thus subjective as well as objective.

L'Action starts with the necessity of acting, of disposing one's life through choices. However a man tries, he finds that he cannot escape a basic structure: he is always willing something. An analysis of willing reveals that there are always two elements involved in it: the volonté veulante and the volonté voulu. The former is the basic dynamism of subject

⁶L'Action, p. vii.

manifested in the necessity of the subject's always willing something. The latter is the concrete choice by which the subject seeks to fulfill its basic dynamism.

L'Action proceeds from the willing of sensible objects. The question of to what extent these objects are the products of the subject himself and to what extent they exist independently of him is prescinded from. It is established that they are subjective, not in the sense of being produced by the subject alone, but in the sense that they are in conformity with the basic dynamism of the will, the volente veulante. For it is the purpose of l'Action to manifest that the objective elements of action are also subjective in this sense. The analysis of the willing of sensible objects reveals not only that this willing is in conformity with the basic dynamism of the will, but also that it does not succeed in completely fulfilling this dynamism. In an effort to fulfill this basic dynamism other dimensions of action are progressively introduced: science, society, a moral order, a metaphysical order, and ultimately a "uniquely necessary being," or God. In conformity with the purpose of l'Action the objectivity of these dimensions of action in the basic epistemological sense of the word is prescinded from, and they are incorporated into the science of action in virtue of their having been shown to be subjective; i.e. in conformity with the basic dynamism of the will.

The climax of the analysis of action is the choice man must make regarding the uniquely necessary being. The analysis of action

has shown that implicit in man's acts of willing there is the desire that the objective element of action be dependent upon a uniquely necessary being, or God. But if man recognizes this dimension of action, he thereby obligates himself to serve God and to hold himself in readiness to accept any manifestations that God may choose to make of Himself. Thus man is confronted with a fundamental option. Will he recognize that God is what he fundamentally wants, or will he attempt to live ignoring God?

In the terminology of l'Action it is in virtue of this option that man's knowledge becomes truly objective, either from the light that an option for God brings, or from the internal conflict that an option against God brings. This terminology has occasioned much discussion. If knowledge is termed objective only after an option, or choice, then it would seem that the epistemology of l'Action is voluntaristic. It is the purpose of this thesis to examine this question, What do the terms objective knowledge and subjective knowledge mean in l'Action. In order that the discussion offered by various commentators be more readily understood, we will begin with a more detailed summary of the science of action presented in l'Action.

CHAPTER II

SUMMARY OF L'ACTION

"Yes or no, does human life have a sense, and does man have a destiny?"¹ With this question l'Action begins. The sense of life is questionable because life is not fully satisfying: its origin, goal, and nature are not clearly manifest. And even more importantly, life and the conditions under which it is lived are imposed upon man. The sense of life requires, more than intellectual clarity, that life as it is lived be loved and willed by man: "If I am not that which I wish to be, then I am not."²

In order to arrive at a universally acceptable answer to the sense of life, the science of action prescind from practical convictions which govern and illumine men's daily lives. It starts with men acting: men attempting to find satisfaction, clarity, self-expression.³ The transcendental necessity of this starting point is established by showing that the attempt to avoid it by willing nothingness is actually an affirmation of it. When man attempts to will nothingness, he actually only wills the

1p. vii.

2p. xxiii.

3p. xix.

nothingness of life as he lives it, and he so wills only in virtue of a love of a life which he has not been able to actualize.⁴ It is therefore undeniable that "in my acts, in the world, in me, outside of me, I do not know where nor what, there is something which I want."⁵

The science of action will determine the necessary dimensions of this something by restricting them as much as possible. And one finds immediately that this something cannot be limited to a flow of sensations, for if it were the only thing given in our primary intuition of the world, it would "disappear, because, discontinuous, self-contained, unrelatable, always finished and always in the past, it would be only a dream without memory, without past, present, or future."⁶ A further dimension must be added: a principle of organization and correlation.

The ultimate form of the principle of organization and correlation of sensation is the understanding of the objects given in sensation according to scientific concepts. This dimension of action is required by the curiosity which is born of reflection on the antinomies of sensible knowledge, and the conflicts in individual taste which lead one to conclude that sensation is incomplete knowledge.⁷ A science is the organization of sensible data according to constructed systems of symbols;

⁵P. 41.

⁶P. 46.

⁷P. 48.

for example, physics' organization of data by calculus. Scientific knowledge in its totality is the unifying of diverse sciences. Thus scientific activity necessarily implies a symbol-devising activity on the part of the knower.

At this point Blendel emphasizes an element of his methodology which is important in the understanding of the epistemology of l'Action. The analysis to this point, as well as the analysis giving subsequent dimensions to action, does not distinguish characteristics of action that are an organization imposed on a given by the agent from characteristics pre-existing in the given and discovered and represented in the knowing subject.⁸ A materially objective given is not denied. The existence of other sources of action both personal and non-personal is regarded as given with the existence of any individual subject. What is prescindend from is the origin of the characteristics of the given. The possibility of this formal prescindend (prescindend from the origin of formal characteristics) derives from knowledge being, in any analysis of it, a state of consciousness of a content having an objective element and a subjective element. The objective element is what is organized; the subjective element is the principle of organization of the objective element. The realist interpretation of this situation maintains that a formally objective given is re-presented in the knower, while the idealist holds

⁸P. 87, note 1.

that the formal determination is imposed by the knower. In the initial analysis of action, "all metaphysical or critical pre-judgment is done away with."⁹

L'Action proceeds to an analysis of freedom which is an important step in demonstrating that the objective aspects of action are not in opposition to the subjective aspects, for freedom itself is shown to be derived from objective elements. The analysis of freedom begins with an analysis of consciousness. Consciousness results from the conflict between desires prompted by diverse possible plans of action. Without this conflict there would be no consciousness.¹⁰ Thus freedom begins in consciousness with a conflict within the given or objective elements of action. Freedom itself is manifested in the discovery one makes that one follows a plan of action not merely because it is of itself more powerful as a motive, but because one adds "something of one's self."¹¹

The experience of freedom leads to a further integration of the objective with the subjective. Because one is free, one experiences a desire to realize the values presented in diverse schemes of motivation. But one cannot do this since many are mutually exclusive. Thus there is a disproportion between the basic dynamism of the will and individual choices. One cannot solve this situation by willing freedom, since

⁹P. 88.

¹⁰P. 111.

¹¹P. 118.

freedom of itself is nothing; it is the non-choice of individual schemes of action. One must solve the situation by willing an object which will satisfy the basic dynamism of the will. Thus freedom requires a sacrificing of one good for another and commits one to a program of self-realization involving a search for the adequate object:

It is necessary to transport the life of the subject into the object which proposes itself as an end. Which is to say that that which we know of force and liberty is only a means to attain the fullness of that which we desire; we are in a relation of dependence with regard to the realization of our true end. In short, what we truly want, is not that which is already realized in us, but that which goes beyond us and commands us. Whatever one wills, one wills that which is not yet. In truth, a heteronomy imposes itself always on our consciousness.¹²

It is necessary to exercise freedom in external activity in order to establish the sincerity of one's choices.¹³ The resistance that one finds in bodily fatigue, inertia, and emotions conflicting with the realization of one's intentions seems initially a threat to subjectivity, an element which cannot be integrated into the basic dynamism of the will. The truth is, however, that the overcoming of this resistance, the effort-requiring selection of one scheme of motives despite conflicting motives and despite the resistance one encounters in realizing the chosen plan of action, is the genesis of individual personality. I am unique because I

¹²Pp. 133-34.

¹³p. 143.

have chosen myself: I will stay what I have chosen because I had to choose strongly to choose effectively. To will to be myself, I must will to find opposition.¹⁴

Reflection on the exercise of freedom shows that it is the power to choose among dynamisms which are given to men and which are the foundation of their existence. Man is creative only by giving a new organization to what already exists. All action is thus an appeal for a co-action. The form of every production results from the efficiency of the agent and from the material on which the agent works. Man educes rather than produces.¹⁵ Thus in the integrating the objective elements of action with the subjective elements, l'Action reaches the stage where the objective, as a source of activity which interacts with the subjectivity of the agent and modifies the agent's works, is integrated with the subjectivity of the agent.

Man finds that he desires not only impersonal agents involved in his activity but personal ones as well. He recognizes a desire to be found by others, to be seen by them in the works that he produces. This is the first step in his recognition that he desires them to be subjects equal to himself in originality.¹⁶ He desires that his productions be assimilated

¹⁴p. 194.

¹⁵p. 215.

¹⁶p. 228.

by them according to their own personality and continue to develop in them. This development is possible only if they have a subjectivity equal to his own.¹⁷

In a further expansion of the social dimension of action, man finds that he desires to act not only as an individual, but as a member of a state, and ultimately as a member of the whole of humanity.¹⁸ In acting as a member of a group, man recognizes that his original projects will be modified by other members. Accepting this movement of the center of activity to a position outside of himself, is the foundation for the acceptance of the moral law.¹⁹ The precepts of this law are discovered a posteriori from the experience of mankind, but this a posteriori necessity is but the specification of an a priori desire for action with a social dimension.

The next stage in the discovery of the dimensions which action must have if it is to satisfy the basic dynamism of the will marks the transition to realities which lie beyond that which is directly experienced.

Thus the profound aspiration of man unfolds little by little; thus unfolds the series of means by which he seeks his end. The entire order of nature reenters the field of his experience. All that which he receives from it a posteriori he has already solicited a priori.

¹⁷P. 241.

¹⁸P. 276.

¹⁹P. 280.

That which he seeks is the definition of his own proper interest; yes, but what should he understand his own proper interest to be? He traverses the universe without encountering it. Consequently he becomes disinterested in the universe. The world has an ambiguous character. Consciousness does not find itself at home with the world: it requires something else, beyond, to explain it and to give it a sense. Natural morality, useful for indicating the continuity of the progress of life and the awakening of consciousness, is consequently made to depend upon a new form of thought and action, upon a metaphysical morality. By a new thrust, the human spirit conjectures [suppose] most naturally an ideal world beyond the actual world.²⁰

The failure of the world to satisfy man is not due essentially to the fact that his actions fail to realize all that he had intended them to. Even if man found that nothing opposed the effecting of his worldly plans, he would still find in his action a primary contradiction: "he wills, but he has not willed to will."²¹ It is this primary contradiction which leads man to the discovery of the "uniquely necessary being."

It is not enough, in other words, that the crossing is pleasant; why have I embarked? Is not there an unexplainable constraint which spoils at the source every human action, even the most successful? Does a noble and generous spirit accept even the greatest of goods if it has been imposed? Without a doubt most men do not have sufficient insight or pride to appreciate the whole of the incongruity of this situation. All, nevertheless, have a strong feeling of not being in possession of themselves; they know that they do not find in themselves either the origin, or the subsistence, nor the end of their action.²²

²⁰Pp. 289-91.

²¹P. 326.

²²Ibid.

Thus man finds that he must act. The science of action began with the demonstration that action was a necessary starting point which could not be escaped. But man does not find the source of this necessity within himself; it must therefore come from outside of himself.

It is this conflict which explains the forced presence in consciousness of a new affirmation; and it is the reality of this necessary presence which makes it possible for us to be conscious of the conflict. There is a 'uniquely necessary being.' The whole movement of the determinism [the dialectic of the basic dynamism of the will and its realization in concrete choices which necessitates the incorporation of new dimensions into the concept of action] carries us to this conclusion.²³

The uniquely necessary being is God. Man is thus brought to the fundamental choice, or option, of his life. He has discovered that God is the source of his action. Man ought then to submit himself to God.

"For man by himself cannot be that which he is already in spite of himself."²⁴ That is to say that man does not furnish the necessity of the dynamism which makes him what he is. This then is the option:

Yes or no, is he willing to live, even to the point of dying, if one can put it this way, in consenting to be supplanted by God? Or will he pretend to be sufficient without him, to profit from his necessary presence without making this presence voluntary, to take from him the power to do without him, and to will infinitely without willing the infinite.²⁵

²³p. 339.

²⁴p. 354.

²⁵p. 355.

In the chapter entitled "Le lien de la connaissance et de l'action dans l'être" the relation of the option to knowledge is defined. It is this chapter which has caused the controversy over the epistemology of l'Action. At the beginning of this chapter the phenomenological character of the preceding analysis is restated. The analysis has dealt with practical necessities:

It has always been a question of determining the necessary sequence of the demands of the practical order, just to the point where, by the definition of its total conditions, the truth of the relationships which action requires will be absolutely established. How the idea of objective existence forms inevitably in us; how we invincibly affirm the reality of the objects of our knowledge; what is precisely the sense of this objective existence, under what conditions this reality necessarily conceived and affirmed, is actually real, these questions, initially, only continue the movement of practical determinism.²⁶

Blondel recognizes that one might be tempted to give to the analysis an absolute value which he does not intend it to have; he explicitly rejects this interpretation: "Whatever the contrary habits of thought of the reader might have been able to persuade him, it has only been a question of means subordinate to action, without it being a question of raising to real truths these practical conditions."²⁷

²⁶P. 424.

²⁷P. 425.

Real truth is consequent to the option: "That which expresses simply the needs of our will must attain, before our understanding even, absolute truth. That which is as yet only a factual necessity will be founded in reason."²⁸ It is the option which effects the presence of "absolute truth before the understanding. The real truth of objects, their being, does not reside thus in the inevitable representation which we have of them; it consists in that which it depends upon us to will or not to will regarding them."²⁹

The way in which the relation between knowledge and option is defined could lead one to believe that Blondel is proposing a voluntaristic concept of cognition, "that he is attributing to knowledge a character which is not properly intellectual since it seems that he is subordinating it to a voluntary act."³⁰ But he denies that this is the case. "In choosing, it is not a question of making reality subsist in itself because an arbitrary decree has created it in us; in choosing, it is rather a question of making it be in us because it is in itself and as it is in itself. This act of the will does not make it depend upon us, but rather makes us depend upon it."³¹ For though our knowledge of reality is

²⁸P. 425.

²⁹P. 436.

³⁰P. 440.

³¹P. 440.

"founded in reason" only subsequent to option, antecedent to option our knowledge of reality is inescapable:

Thus insofar as we are unable not to posit that chain of necessities which is the condition of our practical activity whatever it might be, we are inevitably lead to attribute to it objective existence, because, if one may put it this way, this real truth of objects of thought is antecedent to the substance even of the will. The issue is decided prior to the dialectical play of ideas, there where the most radical doubt cannot penetrate, beneath the region of the understanding, before the intervention of discursive thought, more deeply than where intellectual necessities rule, even to the point where we will ourselves: we are incurably, things are incurably for us.³²

Blondel explains the paradoxical relationship between knowledge and option by saying that option adds to the mere representation of truth the possession of it: "Perfect knowledge unites to a view of the truth a complete possession of the real."³³ Cognition before option is termed "la connaissance de l'être;" cognition after option is termed "l'être dans la connaissance."³⁴

We have been speaking of two states of knowledge, knowledge before option and knowledge after option. However, two sorts of knowledge after option must be distinguished, since the option may be either for God or against him. In the former case, there is a positive presence of being

³²p. 431.

³³p. 440.

³⁴p. 436.

in knowledge; in the latter, there is a negative presence which is experienced as a privation.³⁵

It must be noted that the option occurs in the science of action only when all the dimensions of action have been elaborated:

To believe that one can attain being and legitimately affirm any reality whatsoever without having attained the end of the series which goes from the first sensible intuition to the necessity of God and of religious practices is to delude oneself: one cannot stop at an intermediate object and make of it an absolute truth without falling into the idolatry of the understanding; every premature assertion is illegitimate.³⁶

By showing that to submit to God is in conformity with the basic dynamism of the will, l'Action has succeeded in demonstrating that there is no opposition between the subjective and the objective elements of action. The progressive integration of objective elements into the dynamism of the subject lead to the confrontation with the most objective element, God. For God is the supreme regulator of man's existence before whom man must hold himself in readiness to receive whatever revelation God may make.

In the course of the analysis of action, any metaphysical definition of subjective and objective was prescinded from. The subjective and objective aspects of phenomena were simply described: the objective

³⁵Pp. 437, 439.

³⁶P. 428.

element is what is organized; the subjective element is the principle of organization of the objective element.³⁷ Now at the conclusion of the chapter "Le lien de la connaissance et de l'action dans l'être" Blondel presents a metaphysical definition of objective existence and of knowledge.

The metaphysics of l'Action is a relational metaphysics. We are given not a universe of beings which are mutually related, but rather a system of relations which in their interaction constitute beings. Objective existence must be located in the totality:

Neither extension, nor duration, nor the symbolism of science, nor the life of the individual, nor society, nor the moral order, nor the constructions of metaphysics can be made subsistent realities Reality is not . . . in one of the terms more than in the others . . . It resides in the multiplicity of reciprocal relations It is the complexus itself.³⁸

Knowledge is defined in terms of this relational metaphysics. In the phenomenology of action, it was stated that the subjective-objective structure of the phenomena admitted an idealist or a realist interpretation.³⁹ Blondel's final position is a synthesis of these two views. Both the knower and the thing known contribute to the formal determinations of the phenomena. "Reality resides in the multiplicity of

³⁷See above, p. 8.

³⁸p. 453.

³⁹See above, p. 8.

reciprocal relations." Knowledge itself is part of this series of relationships. "Placed in the series, our knowledge undergoes and produces things as a mediator; that which it undergoes, that which it produces, that which it is, there, from its particular point of view, is what constitutes objective existence."⁴⁰ The relational character of the metaphysics of l'Action is confirmed in a metaphor which Blondel uses to illustrate it: "The reality of the phenomena is comprised between two beams of which it is the point of convergence and which, in reuniting in us, constitute it in itself."⁴¹ Here the two beams are respectively the sensible element of a phenomenon and the element which is grasped by the understanding. Reality is to be located in neither the one nor the other but rather in their interrelation. Nor can the phenomenon be defined without relation to the knower. It is the "reuniting in us" which constitutes the phenomenon in itself. The two aspects of the phenomenon, the aspect known by the senses and the aspect known by reason, are only real in virtue of the fact that while "irreducible to one another, they are connected in the unity of the same act of the will, the same sensibility, and the same reason."⁴²

⁴⁰P. 453.

⁴¹P. 454.

⁴²P. 455.

Blondel distinguishes his position from idealism by saying that "things are not because we make them be, but they are such as we make them be, and such as they make us be."⁴³

It does not suffice to say then that the being of sensible things is to be perceived if one does not add that the perceiver is also himself in virtue of the perceived. To be objective is thus to be produced and to be undergone by a subject, because to have a real action on a real being is to be real.⁴⁴

Objective existence is defined above as that which the subject produces and undergoes. This leaves the question open of how the subject determines to what extent it produces a phenomena and to what extent the phenomena is produced in it. Blondel answers the question in terms of what the subject experiences as added to itself. Thus the science of action began with the willing of an indeterminate something. This is one subjective term, comprised essentially of the subject alone. At the end of the science of action, all of the dimensions of action have been integrated into the basic dynamism of the subject. This is a subjective term correlative to the first subjective term. "The difference between the subjective terms, that is exactly the real object."⁴⁵

⁴³P. 454.

⁴⁴P. 456.

⁴⁵P. 451.

Finally the science of action is related to concrete experience. It is the function of the science of action to make explicit what is necessarily implicit in our action. The science of action does not lead us to make affirmations; it reveals to us the affirmations and their consequences which are already parts of our experience, albeit unexplicitated parts. From this point of view the whole of the science of action is phenomenology, even the part which gives a metaphysics of objective existence and of knowledge.⁴⁶ For even this part of l'Action only makes explicit what is already implicit in our action. Blondel claims to construct his analysis not by deduction or induction, but by making manifest what is already present in experience. The evidence for any statement can only be found in concrete experience. "The science of practice establishes that one cannot supply for practice."⁴⁷

⁴⁶P. 452.

⁴⁷P. 463.

CHAPTER III

THE CONTROVERSY OVER L'ACTION

From the time L'Action was published in 1893 until the present, much has been written in discussion of the three principal objections that have been brought against it. It has been maintained, initially by the faculty of the Sorbonne, that Blondel sacrificed the rights of reason to religious faith, that his work was not properly philosophic.¹ L'Action was labeled subjectivist or Kantian on the grounds that according to it speculative reason knew only ideas without knowing whether or not these ideas corresponded to reality, and that it was only through action that one established the correspondence to reality.² Thirdly Blondel was accused of naturalism, of making the Catholic supernatural something required by man's nature, hence of denying its gratuity and the impossibility of knowing revealed mysteries by unaided reason.

The fundamental grounds for these objections are to be found in Blondel's position on subjective and objective knowledge in relation to the option. If it is the option that establishes objective knowledge in the

¹Bouillard, pp. 29-30.

²M. B. Schwalm, "Les illusions de l'idéalisme et de leurs dangers pour la foi," Revue Thomiste (Sept., 1896), p. 440; cited by Bouillard, p. 34, who mentions that Schwalm later withdrew these objections but that since then others have urged the same objection.

scholastic sense of the term, then the doctrine of l'Action is subjectivist or Kantian. If the option, required by the basic dynamism of the will, is for or against not only God as known by natural reason, but for or against God as known in specifically supernatural mysteries, then it is not only subjectivist but not properly philosophic. And from the point of view of the theologian, if in answer to the charge of subjectivism, it is urged that the option is rationally necessary, then the mysteries of faith and hence the supernatural are reduced to the natural.

There is evidence that the discussion of these problems has been fruitful. According to Dru and Trethewey, Beuillard's Blondel et le Christianisme seems to have been almost unanimously acclaimed in France by Christian writers as a definitive interpretation.³ In answer to the objections to the epistemology of l'Action, Beuillard maintains that what Blondel terms subjective knowledge is a necessary knowledge which is co-extensive with its object, and hence equivalent to objective knowledge in the scholastic sense of the term. It is termed subjective by Blondel relative to the more complete possession of its object attained in choosing it, or in the terminology of l'Action, in making an option with regard to it. Regarding the objection that Blondel makes objective knowledge depend on an act of faith and that he reduces the supernatural to the natural, Beuillard maintains that fundamentally the option has to do with a

³Maurice Blondel, p. 98.

supernatural, not in the specifically Catholic sense of the term, but in the sense of that which is beyond what man can attain in his present situation. That is, Blondel is not dealing with what is properly supernatural but rather with what is transnatural. Blondel is doing something analogous to what other Catholic philosophers have done in indicating that man, to be perfectly fulfilled, needs a more complete knowledge and love of God than he can attain in this life.⁴

Our concern in this thesis is with the philosophical aspects of the interpretation of l'Action. Thus the thesis focuses on the meaning of the terms objective knowledge and subjective knowledge as they are used in l'Action in their relation to the option. In this subject what is relevant is the function of the will and the intellect in the option and the nature of subjective and objective knowledge as described in l'Action. As was indicated in the summary of l'Action, the science of action develops the various dimensions of action and defines the process according to which these dimensions are elaborated and the manner in which they are known. Whether or not action includes a transnatural dimension or a specifically Catholic supernatural dimension does not essentially alter the epistemological problem. For if in l'Action objective knowledge in the scholastic sense of the term is attained only through choice, then the epistemology of l'Action is voluntaristic. That it might also be making

⁴Bouillard, p. 90.

the attainment of truth dependent on a choice involving the supernatural would be only a further development of the voluntarism.

As was stated above, Bouillard's interpretation has been almost universally acclaimed in France, both with regard to the philosophical and the theological issues. Taking exception to Bouillard's interpretation was Père J. H. Nicolas, O.P., who in a review of Bouillard's book repeated his earlier "complaints . . . about Blondel's subjectivist and anti-intellectual approach to the problem of knowledge."⁵ The only other major criticism of Bouillard's work is offered by Henry Duméry in Raison et religion dans la philosophie de l'action⁶ and "Blondel ou l'occasion d'apprendre à lire."⁷

In discussing the meaning of objective and subjective knowledge in l'Action, we will consider first Duméry's Raison et religion dans la philosophie de l'action, since this is his first comprehensive treatment of the epistemology of l'Action and since it is used as a point of reference by Bouillard.⁸ Then we will consider the objections of J. H. Nicolas, cited above. We will then treat the interpretation of Albert Cartier in

⁵Dru and Trethewan, p. 98.

⁶Éditions du Seuil, 1964.

⁷Archives de Philosophie, XXVII (Janvier-Mars, 1964), 64-97. Bouillard responded in "Philosophie de l'action et logique de la foi," Archives de Philosophie, XXVII (Janvier-Mars, 1964), 113-150, and in "Lecture de Blondel," Archives, XXVIII (Avril-Juin), 279-287.

⁸Paris: Aubier, 1948.

Existence et verité: philosophie blondelienne de l'action et problematique existentielle, since his interpretation treats the fundamental point of Nicolas' objections and is also used as a point of reference by Bouillard.⁹
We will then take up the discussion between Dumery and Bouillard.

⁹Presses Universitaires de France, 1955.

CHAPTER IV

FOUR INTERPRETATIONS OF L'ACTION

Henry Duméry

In La Philosophie de l'action, Duméry intends to answer the following objections: (1) The dimensions of action are developed in virtue of the dynamism of the will, a blind force. The acceptance of the objective validity of the dimensions is by an act of the will. Therefore, on two counts, the objectivity of the dimensions of action has not been established. (2) Even if the objectivity of the dimensions of action were legitimately established, according to l'Action the truth of a single dimension of action cannot be established until all the dimensions of action have been elaborated. Thus, before man has come to know God, the final dimension of action, he cannot make any valid affirmations.

The substance of Duméry's answer to the first objection is that the basic dynamism (the volonté voulante) is a cognitive as well as an appetitive principle. This answers the criticism that the dimensions of action are elaborated by a blind force. With regard to the option, Duméry maintains that it is the recognition that being, apprehended as having its source in the Absolute, is the principle of the basic dynamism of the spirit. The option is thus the recognition that the dimensions of action which have been elaborated are not necessary merely relative to the dynamism

of the subject, but relative to the absolute being which is the source of the necessity found in the dynamism of the subjects dependent on the absolute being. The option is thus an intellectual act. It is also a volitional act. As an act of the will it is the subjection of the subject to the being who is the principle of its action. The option is thus one act with an intellectual and a volitional aspect. We will now consider Duméry's interpretation in more detail.

According to his analysis, the method of l'Action comprises a method of residues (méthode des résidus) and by a method of implication (méthode d'implication). According to the method of residues, l'Action works from experience. Elements of experience are admitted to the science of action as they are shown to be necessary conditions for the self-realization of the subject. An effort is made to exclude elements of experience. Some elements are found to be indispensable to the self-realization of the subject; these elements are the residue.¹ The method of implication, used in conjunction with the method of residues, establishes the relation of necessity between the dimensions of action by showing that each dimension of action requires the subsequent dimensions in order to fulfill the dynamism of the subject.²

The total method is called by Duméry regressive analysis (analyse

¹Duméry, p. 49.

²Ibid., pp. 111-12.

régressive), i.e., an analysis of action which leads one back to the source of action, which is, ultimately, the Absolute Being. The regressive analysis is clarified by the explanation that is neither a method of empirical association nor a method of pure deduction. It is rather an a priori synthesis.³ The science of action constructs the necessary dimensions of action from what is given in experience and from what the subject requires for its realization. According to a method of empirical association, the dimensions of action would be merely recorded as they are found in experience and then systematized. For example, one could make the observation that there is a social dimension to men's action that is the context of individual action. But l'Action goes beyond this and shows that the social dimension is required by the dynamism of the human spirit trying to realize itself. At the same time, the dimensions are not arrived at by pure deduction from the starting point of a subject necessarily willing something. The dimensions are only revealed as a subject interacts with his world and finds action lacking the full dimensions of action unsatisfactory. As Dumery observes:

The governing idea of Blondel is that experience itself carries an immanent dialectic, which far from being explainable by a mutual conditioning of facts according to a principle of association or evolution, is alone able not only to establish constant relationships, but in addition to ground and justify necessary connections.⁴

³Ibid., p. 33.

⁴Ibid., p. 44.

The connections are necessary because they are made in virtue of a principle, the self-realization of the subject. When it is discovered in the course of the analysis that the human spirit is what gives meaning to the rest of material creation, one realizes that the norm of the self-realizing subject is really being. One further discovers that the source of the being of the subject is the Supreme Being. As Dumery points out, "The idea of being in Blondel is more exactly the idea of Being."⁵ Action then, through which the necessary dimensions of action are established "requires that this constituting act implies in turn the mediation of a pure Subject or a self-realizing Value, which is able to be universally judge not only of fact but also of necessity."⁶

Thus though the dynamism at work in the analysis is termed by Blondel a dynamism of the will, it is completely "different from brute impulse, since it does not proceed from an 'obscure and irrational volition!'"⁷ "From the beginning the intellect has a thrust, the will has eyes."⁸ The norm is not defined until all the dimensions have been

⁵Ibid., p. 107.

⁶Ibid., p. 111.

⁷Ibid., p. 35, citing l'Action, p. 488. The context: "An obscure and irrational volition: it does not merit that name. It is in a will, not reasoned at first, but capable of being reasoned. . . ."

⁸Ibid., p. 33. One will note that saying that the will is capable of being reasoned, i.e., that one can give a reasoned explanation of its operation, is not quite equivalent to saying that it is a cognitive power. See above note 7.

explicated because being as it can be known by man is not a fact or an essence; it is a dynamic principle. It can only be grasped in the totality of its manifestations and as a principle which reveals itself moving toward a goal through progressive actualizations. "Action is not a determined act on the level of facts, because it is in the intelligible order a dynamism (puissance orientee)."⁹ "To put off the solution of the ontological problem . . . is . . . to refuse to introduce being in pieces It is necessary to go through the whole series of objects, or rather to move upwards even to the transcendent first principle, before returning to the given and conferring on it being."¹⁰

The second part of the first objection was that in the option the objective validity of the dimensions of action was established by an act of the will. Dumery meets this objection by defining option as "the recognition of the normative a priori and the identification with its movement."¹¹ Two elements are discernible in the option: the recognition of the norm and the identification with its movement. In the option as recognition of the norm, the subject acknowledges that the dimensions of action were not explicated with a necessity relative only to the subject himself, but that this necessity had its source ultimately in the Absolute. As recognition of the norm, Dumery refers to the option as an ontological

⁹Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 92.

¹¹Ibid., p. 113.

judgment. But besides being the recognition of the norm, the option is also an identification with its movement. The norm has been operative in the elaboration of the dimensions of action, which present themselves as the means of the subject's realizing himself, i.e., as intermediate ends. Also the norm, Absolute Being, is revealed in the dialectic of action as the ultimate end toward which the inferior dimensions of action are leading. To identify with the movement of the norm is thus to accept as one's final end and to submit oneself to it. But the recognition and the identification are not separate acts. "The option . . . is . . . at one and the same time intellectual and moral."¹²

That the recognition of the norm and the identification with its movement are necessarily connected may seem surprising. Cannot one separate the recognition of a transcendent norm of truth from the acceptance of it as an ultimate final cause?

The basis for connecting the recognition of the norm and the identification with its movement is that according to l'Action "the phenomenon which occupies a place in the series of efficient causes does not really subsist in our thoughts if it does not occupy a place in the system of means and ends."¹³ The series of efficient causes is the dimensions of action considered as that which effects in man the perfection

¹²Ibid., p. 110.

¹³Ibid., p. 112, citing l'Action, p. 433.



that he is striving for. For example, the social order is considered an efficient cause in its function of perfecting man's individual action. But the dimensions of action are not arrived at by mere observation. The norm operative in their development was concerned with them as means to the self-realization of the subject. Thus one cannot separate in the science of action one's conception of something as existing from one's conception of it as a means of achieving self-realization. In fact, according to L'Action one could not form any conception at all of the objective existence of something if it were not in some way related to our will: "The simple idea of an objective existence implies the double law which forms one and the same determinism."¹⁴ Thus the necessary dynamism of the will leads one inevitably to the option as an intellectual and volitional act: "There is thus no object of which it is possible to conceive and affirm the reality, without having embraced by an act of thought the total series, without submitting one's self to the exigencies of the alternative which it imposes on us, in brief without passing the point where shines the truth of the Being who illumines all reason and in the face of whom it is necessary that every will take a position."¹⁵

Having established the option as an intellectual as well as a volitional act, Duméry takes up the problem of Blondel's calling knowledge before option subjective and knowledge after option objective.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 112, citing L'Action, p. 432.

¹⁵L'Action, p. 435.

According to Duméry's interpretation, there is never in the concrete a purely subjective knowledge followed by an objective knowledge. For the sake of a clear analysis, l'Action treats separately aspects of action which in the concrete order cannot be separated. Thus though according to the procedure of l'Action the option is introduced toward the end of the analysis--

In the concrete application of the norm, the option is at all points contemporaneous with the search. Being, if one may put it this way, does not wait in the vestibule before being introduced. Its presence is immediate and permanent, and the role of the option is never anything but to recognize this.¹⁶

Since the option is at all points contemporaneous with the search, so are subjective and objective knowledge.

The option is isolated and emphasized in the science of action as an emphatic statement that "being and knowledge cannot be separated."¹⁷ It seems that what Duméry means here is that one cannot know the truth about what l'Action says about the dimensions of action without experiencing them personally. According to him what Blondel means when he says that the "knowledge of being connaissance de l'être implies the necessity of choice" and that "being in knowledge l'être dans la connaissance is not before but after the liberty of choice" is as follows:

¹⁶Duméry, p. 111.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 114.

He does not intend in saying this to connect the validity of knowledge with an existential choice nor to introduce being into a thought which has lacked it: he affirms on the contrary that it is impossible to separate being and knowledge, without destroying, with their relation, their reality and even their intelligibility; and if one practices just the same this separation . . . one effects a mortal vivisection, which juxtaposes a representation to a thing, instead of maintaining in living knowledge the real presence of being.¹⁸

Thus Duméry has answered the objections that the dimensions of action are developed in virtue of the dynamism of the will, a blind force, and that the objective validity of the dimensions was established by an act of the will. The objection remaining to be answered is that even if the objectivity of the dimensions of action were legitimately established, according to l'Action, the truth of a single dimension of action cannot be established until all the dimensions have been elaborated. And thus, before man has come to know God, the final dimension of action, he cannot make any valid affirmations. Here again the distinction is made between what is true for the science of action and what is true for its concrete application. It is only in the science of action that the affirmation is delayed until the norm according to which the affirmation is made has been fully presented. In the concrete the norm is always present and operative.

It would seem however that Duméry's analysis, even if accepted without qualification, does not establish that the epistemology of l'Action is completely non-voluntaristic. It has been shown that the basic dynamism

¹⁸Ibid.

of the will operates according to the norm of being. But the recognition of this norm as founded in absolute being and not merely as expressing the needs of the self-realizing subject is made in an act in which the intellectual element and the element of moral choice cannot be separated. This would indicate that before a moral choice is made, the subject does not know the absolute necessity of the matter about which the choice is made. Thus the norm for action is to be true to oneself, not to be true to what is known to be absolutely necessary. It is true that eventually the norm operative in the self-realizing subject is known to be being, and this being is ultimately known to be a participation in absolute being. But Duméry does not indicate that independently of moral choice the norm of self-realization is known to be based on absolute being. The question remains then, whether independently of moral choice, the norm of the self-realization of the subject in virtue of which the various dimensions of action are said to be necessary is reflexively known to be absolutely necessary.

J. H. Nicolas and Albert Cartier

The issue of the nature of the grounds of reflexive certainty in l'Action which is not treated explicitly by Duméry is taken up explicitly by Nicolas and Cartier.

In his review of Blondel et le Christianisme, Nicolas acknowledges that Bouillard has shown that it is Blondel's intention that knowledge be not dependent upon an act of the will. He cites the quotation from l'Action

that Bouillard uses to establish Blondel's intention: "It is not a question in choosing of making reality subsist in itself because an arbitrary decree has created it in us" Commenting on this citation, Nicolas observes that it certainly demonstrates Blondel's intention of avoiding subjectivism. But it does not tell us how he succeeds in doing so. It is true that prior to the option, man is in possession of the truth, "but how does he know that he is?"¹⁹ Thus Nicolas raises explicitly the nature of the grounds of reflexive certainty in the epistemology of l'Action.

It is Nicolas' contention that this difficulty is inherent in Blondel's starting point in which he avoids any "realistic" or "idealistic prejudice," making the principle of necessity the dynamism of the will.²⁰ According to Nicolas, "the necessity of being which is expressed in the principle of identity is the first and fundamental necessity upon which philosophy is based. A philosophy of reflexion on the life and acts of the subject is profitable, but it cannot be done until being is affirmed and it cannot progress without a constant reference to being."²¹

In Existence et vérité, Cartier explains, as does Duméry, that the basic dynamism of the will (volonté voulante) is not a blind force. In fact it would most correctly be named "intelligible law," or "rational

¹⁹Père J. H. Nicolas, "The Centenary of Maurice Blondel," Revue Thomiste, LXII (July-Sept., 1962), 433.

²⁰See above, p. 9.

²¹Nicolas, p. 436.

regulation."²² For l'Action establishes that one necessarily wills one's own being. The dialectic of l'Action represents man's efforts to become himself. Man recognizes that he is not yet what he desires to be. He can only become himself through his choices. In integrating the various dimensions of action into his choices, the subject is obeying the inner law which says, "Become what you are; will what you will."²³ The subject is seeking an immanent truth, the adequation between what he desires to be and what he is. The faithful pursuit of this immanent truth leads the subject to the conclusion that it will not be achieved without a relation to a transcendent being.²⁴

In distinction from Duméry, however, Cartier clearly indicates that in establishing the immanent necessity or subjective need of a transcendent being one has not established the objective existence of such a being: "In determining the immanent truth the question of a transcendent truth, of the adequation of thought with an objective reality, is not yet raised."²⁵

According to Cartier, it is by the option that one "founds reflexively truth and being."²⁶ Thus it would seem that Cartier interprets

²²Cartier, p. 140.

²³Ibid., p. 142.

²⁴Ibid., p. 167.

²⁵Ibid., p. 154.

²⁶Ibid., p. 184.

l'Action as saying that one attains reflexive certitude by an act of the will. However, Cartier understands the option as an act which, while remaining free in the sense one can choose positively or negatively, is not arbitrary. For it is only in choosing positively that one is following one's reason. The option is governed by a rational necessity, not an absolute necessity. One remains free to reject the light: "In the unique act in which with consent man recognizes the Transcendent, his intelligence only affirms it as necessary because his will freely chooses it, but the will in turn in so choosing to obey the voice of reason."²⁷ This explanation of the option leaves still to be explained Blondel's terming knowledge before option subjective and knowledge after option objective.

The key idea in Cartier's explanation of this point is expressed in a quotation which he takes from Blondel: "One must never forget that in effect every thought is at one and the same time act and knowledge" (toute pensée est à la fois acte et connaissance).²⁸ As knowledge, thought is the elaboration of the relationships between different things. As act, thought is the affirmation of the truth of these relationships. These two aspects of thought are transcendently related; one cannot have one without the other. For before one can by the act aspect of thought

²⁷Ibid., p. 178.

²⁸Ibid., p. 215, citing "L'Illusion idéaliste," Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale, 1898, p. 740.

affirm the correspondence to reality of a set of relationships, one must make the relationships. And this making of relationships is thought as act.

Insofar as it is act, thought participates in the spontaneity of the subject, it is engagement, it is affirmation; but insofar as it is knowledge, it reflects the objective given, it ascertains necessary relationships. These two elements are in reality inseparable²⁹ One cannot relate things without affirming the relations.³⁰

The elements of thought, act and knowledge, "are found in varying amounts in every concrete operation of the human spirit, from the most speculative judgment to the most engaged action."³¹ In the option, these elements attain their highest expression. But every act of thought has the structure of rational choice which was shown to be true of the option. What has been made explicit in l'Action's explanation of the option is operative, though its operation is not adverted to, at all stages of the science of action as they are concretely realized in man's life.

Thus Cartier solves the problem of subjective and objective knowledge in l'Action by distinguishing between the science of action as it is formally presented in l'Action and the concrete application of the science to human life. This distinction which Duméry established by showing that the norm operative in the option is the same norm, though not yet explicitly

²⁹Ibid., p. 216.

³⁰Ibid., p. 224.

³¹Ibid., p. 178.

formulated, that is operative at all stages of the science of action,³² Cartier establishes through his analysis of thought in terms of act and knowledge.

It is only in the dialectical order that subjective knowledge can be said to be before option. In reality it is not a complete act of knowledge . . . which is nothing without the option which opposes or confirms it. But in that encounter with the basic dynamism of the will, whatever form it might take, it becomes objective knowledge In the real order, there is no anteriority of posteriority: from the first instant the whole has being, constituted an objective reality because action is immanent in it and contemporaneous with it.³³

Cartier's analysis, however, is weakened by his inability to account for all of the formulations of l'Action:

However, one must admit that . . . many expressions, especially in Chapter III of Part V, entitled "Le lien de la connaissance et de l'action dans l'être" . . . provoke by their ambiguity a certain embarrassment And this ambiguity is not only caused by a defect in expression; it reveals . . . a subtle slipping in thought, a deformation . . . which makes him without his being conscious of it, unfaithful to his principle.³⁴

The expressions that Cartier has reference to are those which state that "philosophy does not furnish the being of which it studies the idea."³⁵

³²See above, p. 34.

³³Cartier, pp. 184-185.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 220-221.

³⁵Ibid., p. 220.

These statements affirm that philosophy studies only the necessary relations between phenomena and that the possession of being comes only with the affirmation concretely made, which lies outside of the activity of philosophy. In so doing Blondel is being unfaithful to his principle that "all thought is at one and the same time act and knowledge."

He hardens in a real separation transcendental relations. In desiring to really remove the subjective element from the activity of philosophy, he separates in effect theory and practice, affirmation and relation, reflection and engagement, thought and action But in doing this he forgets that to construct a theory is a concrete act, that even prescinding from the ontological question, one cannot relate phenomena without affirming the relations; that thus the dialectic, a work of reflection, in order to be accomplished, calls for an engagement at each point. He forgets that which he has so often pointed out, that when action in relation to being is understood as the source of the spiritual dynamism, antecedent to all distinction of faculties, thought itself is an action; that, as such, it is structured by the conditions that it itself has brought to light . . . including the supreme condition, the option before the Transcendent Being, 'which it attains only at the end, although (it is nourished by it) from the beginning.'³⁶

However, it is just this principle of the inseparability of thought as action and thought as knowledge upon which Cartier has based his solution to the problem of objective and subjective knowledge in l'Action. To admit that Blondel "forgets" this principle is to weaken the analysis which depends on it, especially when one remembers that the principle is not cited from l'Action but from a later work.³⁷

³⁶Ibid., pp. 223-24, citing l'Action, p. 427.

³⁷See above, p. 40.

Henri Bouillard

Bouillard finds the solutions of Cartier and Duméry to the problem of subjective and objective knowledge in relation to the option unacceptable because he does not believe that the option and subjective and objective knowledge can be made transcendental principles of all acts of knowledge, that the temporal element can be entirely removed. The temporality of the option in l'Action corresponds to a certain temporality of the option in concrete experience. In support of this position, Bouillard quotes a letter of Blondel to Dom Bede Lebbe, written April 3, 1903:

It is the nature of analysis . . . which forces us to reunite in a whole and to separate in two symmetrical parts that which precedes and that which follows action. In reality the rhythm of cognition and practice is an infinitesimal progression, and as we act without ceasing in order to know, so we know without ceasing in order to act, speculation never remains purely speculation. One should not reason as if knowledge did not have its support in the possession at least implicit but real of being; I say only that knowledge once explicitated by reflection, is not an end in itself, a termination, but a means, the beginning of action in order to obtain a better possession of being through it.³⁸

According to Bouillard the "two symmetrical parts" are respectively knowledge before option and knowledge after option. These parts precede and follow "action" which is equivalent to saying that they precede and follow option, for option is the choosing required for concrete action, and action always expresses a choice, whether made implicitly or explicitly. In partial support of the positions of Cartier and Duméry is the statement

³⁸Bouillard, p. 147.

that knowledge is an infinitesimal progression. Thus there is not just one option, but many. There is a distinction between the science of action and the realization of it in man's life. However these many options are acts, not the principles of acts, and thus the interpretations of Dumery and Cartier are incorrect in this regard. Another solution must be found for the problem of subjective and objective knowledge in l'Action.

Bouillard's solution is consonant with the statement in the letter to Dom Bede Lebbe to the effect that "one should not reason as if knowledge [knowledge before option, hence subjective knowledge] did not have its support in the possession at least implicit but real of being."³⁹ Examining the meaning of the term "subjective knowledge" as it is used in l'Action, Bouillard finds grounds to assert that it signifies what current usage calls objective knowledge. Subjective knowledge in current usage means a knowledge "affected by the particular dispositions of individual subjects in such a way . . . that it cannot be universally acknowledged as an adequate expression of the truth." However subjective knowledge is described in l'Action as

. . . 'a certain knowledge of being of which we are not able to divest ourselves,' a knowledge 'co-extensive with its object,' in such a way that 'there is between being and knowledge an absolute correspondence and a perfect reciprocity.' Could one desire more precise statements? That which Blondel calls 'subjective knowledge of the truth' is identical

³⁹Ibid.

with what current usage terms objective knowledge and to which the Aristotelean and scholastic tradition accords ontological significance une portée ontologique.⁴⁰

Thus knowledge prior to option is not termed subjective according to the ordinary sense of the word. It is subjective only relative to the mere complete possession of being, either positively in the affirmative option, or by way of a "positive privation" in the negative option.

In l'Action the contrast between knowledge before option and knowledge after option is expressed in various ways. Most of these are listed below opposite their correlative term:

Page 425	besoins de notre volonté nécessité de fait conditions pratiques moyens immanents au vouloir	verité absolue fonde en raison verités réelles fins immanentes à la pensée
426	idée nécessaire du Dieu réel	Dieu soit réellement . . . pour nous
	la science des apparences déterminisme des phénomènes	-- --
427	idéal conçu	réel opéré
428	connaissance certain, coextensive à son objet la connaissance la vue de l'être	l'être la possession de l'être
436	la connaissance de l'être nécessité interne	l'être dans la connaissance véritable réalité
450	connaissance subjective	--

It is Bouillard's contention that where these expressions indicate an imperfection in knowledge it is only an imperfection relative to a complete

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 148, citing l'Action, pp. 427; 428; 428; 439, 440.

possession of being. He acknowledges that Blondel's terminology is equivocal and indicates some of the changes which Blondel made as early as 1898 in L'Illusion idealiste, which is a reworking of the last chapter of l'Action. The term "subjective knowledge" is replaced with "speculative knowledge," "speculation," or "abstract idea." The knowledge after option is called "effective" rather than "objective."⁴¹

Bouillard has established to his satisfaction that knowledge prior to option is universal and necessary. He goes on to maintain that prior to option, knowledge is reflexively certain. The subject knows that the principle of his knowledge is being which has its source in Absolute Being. The subject knows that his affirmations are absolutely true and not merely true relative to his own nature. The stage in the science of action where this is made explicit is the affirmation of the uniquely necessary Being, which occurs in Part IV.

That which I have voluntarily posed is thus not able to be suppressed nor to maintain itself: it is this conflict which explains the forced presence in consciousness of a new affirmation; and it is the reality of this necessary presence which makes possible in us even the consciousness of the conflict. There is a 'uniquely necessary being.' The whole movement of the determinism carries us to this term: because it is from it that the determinism begins, the whole sense of which leads us back to it.⁴²

⁴¹Ibid., p. 149.

⁴²Ibid., pp. 173-74, citing l'Action, p. 339, note 1.

Part IV has thus "established the necessary transition from the science of phenomena to the affirmation of being."⁴³ In the preceding stages of the science of action, we have been describing what appears without making any affirmations about being. From this point on we are treating with "not that which appears, but with that which is."⁴⁴ Henceforth, statements in l'Action will have ontological weight; they will be affirmations about being.

There remains the possibility that the reader will be misled by the statements at the beginning of Chapter III of Part V, "Le lien de la connaissance et de l'action dans l'être." Here Blondel warns the reader against the "temptation to attribute to the previous affirmations a metaphysical significance that they do not have."⁴⁵ So far, the dimensions of action are only "phenomena." Included in the phenomena are: "'certitude of the uniquely necessary being, the inevitable alternative, the death-bringing or life-giving option,' -- precisely these dimensions of action which make up part IV."⁴⁶ However, according to Beuillard, these statements do not mean that Blondel is denying all ontological significance to the analysis of Part IV and in turn giving this significance to Chapter III of Part V. For he says also of the analysis of this chapter that when it

⁴⁴Ibid., citing l'Action, p. 323.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 179, citing l'Action, p. 452.

⁴⁶Ibid.

talks about the "real existence of the objects of thought and the conditions of the practical order," it talks about them as "phenomena."⁴⁷

Beuillard's answer to the apparent contradiction between his analysis of the ontological significance of the affirmation of the uniquely necessary Being, and statements in Parts IV and V of l'Action denying ontological significance to both Parts IV and V is twofold. First, he points out that all of l'Action is in a certain sense phenomenological. The necessary relations established between the dimensions of action, including the necessary affirmation of being, depend upon experience. Experience in l'Action is the experience of making choices, realizing in concrete personal experience the dimensions of action, moving from one dimension to another because of the experience inadequacy of the inferior dimension. Experience is had in living life, not in the scientific analysis of it. The science of action is only an organization of this experience. It is not within the science of action itself that affirmations regarding being are made. "Philosophy, according to the author of l'Action, does not affirm being: it shows that we affirm it necessarily and indicates the conditions in which we affirm it most appropriately. At the heart even of its ontology, it remains phenomenology."⁴⁸

However within this all encompassing phenomenology, we can distinguish a description of phenomena which prescind from saying anything

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 169.

about the relation of the phenomena to being, and a description of phenomena which includes a relation to being. The latter begins with part IV where the relation of phenomena to the uniquely necessary being is described. However even Part IV does not ask the reader, as part of the science of action, to make the affirmations regarding being which are described there. These are made in concrete experience.

Thus the first part of Bouillard's explanation of the statements in Chapter III of Part V to the effect that what precedes this chapter is merely descriptive is to show that even the ontology of l'Action is situated within a phenomenology. However the fact remains that while affirmation of the uniquely necessary being in Part IV and the discussion of the relation of knowledge and being in Chapter III of Part V are ontologies within a phenomenology, yet Blondel says that in Chapter III of Part V that which as yet has been only "a need of our will" will become "absolute truth."⁴⁹ If both Part IV and Part V contain ontologies, there must be some distinction between them.

Bouillard interprets the ontology of Part IV as an ontology "en soi." The affirmation of the existence of the uniquely necessary Being is considered in the context of the "moral and religious problem of our existence." In Chapter III of Part V we are formally concerned with being itself. We are explaining why it has the relation to action that it does. We are concerned with ontology posed "pour soi."⁵⁰

⁴⁹L'Action, p. 426.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 180.

In a more general view, Bouillard observes that it is possible that the misunderstanding of l'Action by some has resulted from a misunderstanding of Blendel's intention. "Because Blendel declared that he intended to undercut idealism or Kantianism through the consideration of subjective necessities, some have been able to believe that he wished to start with the pure subject and to establish the existence of objects represented in him."⁵¹ But this is not his intention.

Internal phenomena or the content of consciousness are for him intentional objects. When he poses the question of their 'objective existence' or of their 'real existence' . . . it is not a question of knowing if something external corresponds to our internal representation, but to know if the objects of our knowledge and the ends of our will carry in themselves something of the absolute.⁵²

According to Bouillard, it is true that certain expressions in l'Action are ambiguous, but when one understands them correctly one realizes that "for Blendel objective existence is synonymous with being, which is synonymous with the Absolute." Thus we can understand "être" as "l'étant, in the plain sense of empirical existence" or as "that which is self-sufficient, the absolute."⁵³ In expressions such as "l'être dans la connaissance is not before, but after the liberty of choice," one should understand "être" not as "étant" but as the absolute.⁵⁴

⁵¹Ibid., p. 166.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid., p. 151.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 153, citing l'Action, p. 436.

As was indicated above, the basic point of contrast which Bouillard makes between his analysis and Duméry's is that one cannot solve the problem of the subjectivity of knowledge before option by making it a component of all acts of knowing, which in their concrete, and therefore complete form, always include the option and are thereby objective.

Bouillard also raises a further and more general objection to Duméry's analysis of Blondel's method. In Bouillard's own analysis the dialectic by which l'Action proceeds, the dialectic between the volente veulante and the volente veulu, is a dialectic at all stages between the dynamism of the will and the capacity of concrete choices to satisfy this dynamism. Thus the dialectic is always involved with real being, which is encountered in concrete choices. Bouillard believes that Duméry incorrectly substitutes for real being encountered in concrete choices hypothetically real being. He does this because he believes that philosophy is not competent to decide on questions of fact. Thus it cannot say that a given dimension of action actually exists. It can say that if it exists then it is in accord with the fundamental dynamism of the spirit. Bouillard quotes from Blondel et la religion in support of this interpretation of Duméry's analysis of Blondel's method.

Certain interpreters believe that the negative option ought to be condemned by the philosopher as being a rebellion against real being. This is a dangerous and abusive view. For it contradicts the principle of the method of immanence, which intends that philosophy be only critical, that is to say incompetent on questions of fact. The negative option is censured by philosophy in that it takes away the last stage from the

series of necessary and ideal conditions; it is a fault against consistency and coherence. But as far as saying that it is a fault against real being . . . only a free consciousness can do that.⁵⁵

Thus in Duméry's analysis, the negative option is a fault against reality if it is a decision against what is in reality the case. But only concrete experience, "a free consciousness," can do that, and this concrete experience is put outside the dialectic of l'Action.

This leads Bouillard to conclude that Duméry's analysis, proceeding as it does on the distinction between "analyse régressive" on the one hand and "plan ontologique" or "plan réel de l'action" on the other confuses questions of être and of fait.⁵⁶ Bouillard means by this that where Duméry claims to disqualify philosophy on questions of fact he is in reality disqualifying it on questions of being, because what l'Action says about being, it says in virtue of a dialectic between the basic dynamism of the will and concrete choices. The concrete choices are a factual element. If one eliminates this factual element then one changes the nature of the dialectic.

Response of Duméry to Bouillard

As was pointed out above, Bouillard's main objection to the interpretations of Duméry and Cartier was that the option could not be made an element of an act of knowing. Commenting on Bouillard's analysis Duméry

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 193, citing Blondel et la religion (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954), pp. 101-102.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 194.

says, "I have very great difficulty in finding my thought in Blondel et le Christianisme, 146-157, regarding knowledge before and after the option."⁵⁷

However Duméry does not take up the passages from his work cited by Bouillard and show how they were misinterpreted. The main point of his refutation is that Bouillard is wrong in minimizing the possibility of an option regarding each object that enters into the life of the subject. However this does not answer the main point of Bouillard's analysis. Bouillard does not deny that there can be more than one option. His point is that in however many options there are, the structure of the option is that it is an act, not an element in an act, and that it is preceded by subjective knowledge, and followed by objective knowledge. His objection to Duméry's analysis is not that it postulates many options, but that it makes subjective knowledge, option, and objective knowledge parts of an act and not acts in themselves.

In La Philosophie de l'action, the option was defined as "the recognition of the normative a priori and the identification with its movement."⁵⁸ The recognition of the norm is an ontological judgment; the identification with its movement is a moral choice. In Raison et religion the recognition of the norm is clearly separated from the identification with its movement. The option "accomplishes an ethical choice."⁵⁹ Ante-

⁵⁷Duméry, Raison et religion, p. 140, n. 98.

⁵⁸See above, p. 32.

⁵⁹Raison et religion, p. 140-141, n. 98.

cedent to the option there is an ontological knowledge, and this knowledge is not affected by the option.

The analytic reflection knows only necessary relations. But the internal necessity of these relations is normative and thus ontological. As a logic of being, the philosophy of action is an ontology. However, only the option and practical action vivify us and make us enter personally and freely into the order sui generis of effective realization.⁶⁰

Thus Blondel's position is "classic."⁶¹ In this area, all that distinguishes his position from the classic position is his vocabulary. It is true that before the introduction of the option into the science of action Blondel denies that his statements have ontological significance. But what he means by this is that mere knowledge is not enough to make what is known real in our lives. His real concern is with "ontogenesis: making be that which ought to be."⁶² Unfortunately he uses the term "ontology" for what he ought to call "ontogenesis." Thus Blondel departs from the classic position in that he "plays upon the word being, failing to use the transcendental good to designate being as salutary, and reserving the word ontology for that for which his contemporaries would use axiology."⁶³

Thus in Raison et religion, while Dumery disagrees with Bouillard on the frequency of occurrence of acts which are at least implicitly options,

⁶⁰Ibid., pp. 127-28, n. 2.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 136.

⁶²Ibid., p. 213.

⁶³Ibid., p. 136.

his analysis of the nature of optien is the same as that of Bouillard. And, as Bouillard has done, Duméry must show that the subjective knowledge which precedes optien is in fact objective knowledge. He does this by showing that the demonstration at the beginning of l'Action that action is unavoidable and that it necessarily has a subject-object structure establishes the basic objectivity of the science of action which precedes the optien. But for methodological reasons, the objectivity of the analysis is not adverted to until the inclusion of the optien completes the science of action. "Subjective" means "a criticism of the conditions of the possibility of an object in abstraction from the reality of that object."⁶⁴ But this "reality" is established before it is abstracted from; therefore, the conditions of possibility are in fact real.

Thus l'Action begins with the "empirical real," "the given presented for criticism, before formal verification." Through a phenomenological reduction, a "formalized real" is attained: "The formalized real (or the formal of the real) is the phenomenal real, that which the phenomenological reduction attains: it concerns lived experience itself, but considered according to its sense, abstraction being made from all realization."⁶⁵

The various dimensions of action are developed in the study of the

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 195.

⁶⁵Ibid., pp. 216-217, n. 117.

formalized real. Here the central thesis of Duméry is that though "the rule of action" developed in the study of the formalized real is developed in "abstraction from all realization," yet it has an "ontological necessity." This ontological necessity is found in the starting point and in the process in which the various dimensions of action are developed. It is called an ontological necessity because the subject has an intellectual grasp of it; it is not present in him as a brute fact which he cannot understand. Thus speaking of the necessity of the starting point Duméry says:

The ontological proof which reveals action to be unavoidable . . . rests on the real contradiction which it would be to maintain that the will could, without willing, not will or will nothingness. It concludes, consequently, not to the sole necessity of recognizing that practical reason acts in us (even if we cannot understand how it acts), but to the clear truth: whatever one thinks, whatever one does, action wills itself in willing something, posits itself in positing an object. Under these conditions, the impossibility of suppressing it implies the necessity of affirming it, not as a fact, but as a subjective a priori, as an objective a priori.⁶⁶

Thus the study of the formalized real gives an ontological proof for the existence of subjects as such and objects as such.

The elaboration of the various dimensions of action which lead up to the option has also an ontological necessity which is based on an "ideal objectivity, an internal necessity, a realist ontology where the formality of the 'logic of being' is not an abstract coherence, but an initiative of

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 207-208.

the spirit which discovers its needs in its 'conceptions,' its requests in 'that which it constitutes.'"⁶⁷ And just as the necessity of the starting point is found in the impossibility of denying it, so the "absolute certitude" of the "rule of action" is established by showing that its denial implies a denial of the dynamism of the spirit: "The apodicticity of the rule is founded on the necessity immanent in concrete action. The former is no more able to be contested than the latter is to be denied, since its negation makes use of it again."⁶⁸

It is the ontological necessity of the starting point and of the rule of action which is built upon it which distinguishes Blondel's position on the relation of practical action to speculative thought from that of Kant. It must be granted that there are formulations in l'Action which appear Kantian; as for example: "What difference can science establish between that which will always appear and that which is? . . . In the practical order it is different: in acting as if it were, it [the subject] possesses that which is, if it truly is."⁶⁹ However, the "true thought of Blondel is not in the juxtaposition of a phenomenal series and a noumenal liberty,"⁷⁰ but in the necessary link between thought and action established in the ontological proof at the beginning of l'Action.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 143, citing l'Action, p. 370.

⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 195-196.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 198, citing l'Action, p. 463.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 199.

The necessity of the starting point and of the system of relations which is built upon it is an ontological necessity. However at the beginning of l'Action it is not presented as such. The beginning of l'Action presents merely the fact that there are necessary elements. The ontological implications of these necessary elements are not presented until the science of action has been completed, since Heidegger wished to present these implications in terms of the total science.⁷¹ Since the formalized real is developed in "abstraction from all realization,"

. . . the ontological necessity which precedes the option is hypothetical insofar as the necessary affirmation of being has need of being given content /d'être pris en charge/, of being posed in thesis, by a free subject who will save himself in ratifying it or lose himself in denying it. But it is alreadythetic on the intellectual level, already apedictic, judicative. Otherwise it would not constitute that "necessary presence" of being which offers itself as criterion, as norm, or as sanction for the personal choice.⁷²

Thus the ontological necessity is hypothetical insofar as it has been made in "abstraction from all realization." It becomes real only when it is realized in concrete action. However this realization is not necessary

⁷¹Ibid., p. 209.

⁷²Ibid., p. 138. One will recall (see page 53 above) that Heidegger reproaches Duméry for making the dialectic be comprised of the volonté voulante and hypothetically real being. One sees here that he uses hypothetical in a special sense. Commenting on Heidegger's criticism, Duméry writes: "He takes the formalization, the phenomenological reduction of empirical action for a reflection on the idea of action. Nothing could be more incorrect. A phenomenology describes the action in act as in act. Doing this, it does not act, it reflects. But its reflection grasps the act according to its intention, in its operation, without ceasing to see it where it is, in the lived practical order" Ibid., p. 265, n. 6.

to complete it on the intellectual level, for it is the product of an a priori necessary starting point and the dimensions of action which are included in it are the necessary expressions of the "initiative of the spirit." The following quotation corroborates this analysis of the formalized real.

Duméry reminds the reader in a note:

I restate that the criticism of action controls a formalized real, not a real real; its ontological judgment is upon real being in the sense of objectively founded and founding, not upon real being in the sense of realization-choice. Only living and acting consciousness has competence regarding the latter.⁷³

As was stated above, the ontological necessity ceases to be hypothetical when it is realized. Duméry distinguishes two realizations, and two types of real being correlative to the two realizations. First, "there is a real being which is necessary, having issued from the unavoidable realization of necessary being which is the same as formal being." Secondly, "there is also a real being which designates the possessed real, accepted, interiorized by choice; it results from the realization of the 'veulu,' of the elicited realization."⁷⁴

It is the second type of realization which is the option. In its most developed form the option is the explicit choice for or against God. But as we have seen above, in Duméry's analysis the option is frequently implicit in the acceptance or rejection of other values. These value

⁷³Ibid., pp. 215-16, n. 115.

⁷⁴Ibid., pp. 216-217, n. 117.

choices are always based on objective knowledge, for it is the first type of realization which is constitutive of being:

All depends on a distinction to be made between action in the practical order as a realization (free and inevitable) of necessary truth and the option as a renewal of this constitutive realization under the formality of good and evil. To speak rigorously, it is not the option which is constitutive of being. It is ontogenic liberty, liberty in act, whatever be its choice The option supposes the realization of the necessary, it does not decide it; it only decides, in the words of Blondel, 'the use which one makes of it.'⁷⁵

In l'Action the ontological implications of the two types of realization are not made explicit until the total science of action has been fully exposed. But this does not mean that in the practical order one is unaware of the ontological foundation of one's knowledge until after one has made a value-choice regarding it. In the practical order one does not abstract from the reality of objects. Blondel does so in the science of action because he is primarily interested in ontogenesis, how one realizes personally being as good. If the ontological implications of a particular part of the science of action were made explicit before the total science was developed, one might derive an ontology from this partial ontology. This would be illegitimate:

⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 215-16. Duméry acknowledges that l'Action is not always clear on this point: "The imprecision of the 1893 thesis comes from the fact that in several passages necessary being appears to remain purely formal, when its realization ought to have priority and serve as the foundation, the measure, the sanction of the option, which are real (at the same time they are epistemological and critical." Ibid., pp. 216-17, n. 117.

Ontology, as the verification that such and such an object is necessarily connected to an objectivity based on principle, can be formulated with regard to a particular notion. But ontology cannot. It only issues from concrete action, which realizes simultaneously all its conditions.⁷⁶

Thus in l'Action knowledge prior to option is called subjective.

This means that it comprises a "critique of the conditions of the possibility of an object in abstraction from the reality of that object."⁷⁷

But in the practical order one does not abstract from the reality of objects. Therefore in the practical order one makes value choices on the basis of an objective knowledge.

When l'Action states that knowledge after option is objective, it does not mean that objectivity in the basic sense of the word is only attained after option. The objectivity which depends on the option is in the order of value:

To simply will it [an object] as necessary is to remain subjective; one wills for oneself, to be oneself. To will it as valuable in itself is to be fully objective; one recognizes that its reality is irreducible to the desire that one experiences, to the representation that one makes of it The good option wills the Absolute, not to satisfy a need, but to restore it to itself; it wills the neighbor, not out of egotism, but out of love, not as a complement to itself, but as another subject.⁷⁸

When we compare Duméry's position as formulated in Raison et religion with Bouillard's in Blondel et le Christianisme and in his reply

⁷⁶Ibid., pp. 209-10.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 195.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 211.

to Duméry in Archives de Philosophie, we see that there are significant areas both of agreement and disagreement.⁷⁹ On the side of agreement, they give essentially the same analysis of the function of the option. The knowledge on which it is based is necessary and adequate to its object. The option determines the use that one makes of the truth. In Duméry's terms it "vivifies" us and "makes us enter personally and freely into the order . . . of effective realization."⁸⁰ In Bouillard's terms the option is ordered to a complete possession of being.⁸¹

They are also able to agree on a common formulation of the relation between the volente voulante and the volente voulu as a dialectic of the basic dynamism of the will and concrete choice, and disagree only on its application to the supernatural order. Bouillard states that he agrees with the following formulation by Duméry: "The process of formalization attains the real action, the real subject and object, such as they are lived, and does not substitute representations which are their doubles."⁸² However he maintains that Duméry is not consistent when he speaks of the desire for the supernatural: "Why does he reduce the desire to 'a logical insertion of a necessary idea into the description of the conditions of

⁷⁹"Philosophie de l'action et logique de la foi," XXVII (Janvier-Mars, 1964), 113-150.

⁸⁰See above, p. 53.

⁸¹See above, p. 46.

⁸²Bouillard, "Philosophie de l'action," p. 132, citing Raison et religion, p. 203.

action?' Why does he not recall here that the process of formalization attains an authentic desire, immanent in a real action and lived by a real subject?"⁸³

There are significant differences between Bouillard and Duméry in their analysis of "subjective knowledge," especially in their analysis of its reflexive certitude. Apart from any question of reflexive certitude, Duméry interprets "subjective" to mean "a criticism of the conditions of the possibility of an object in abstraction from the reality of that object."⁸⁴ However, as the knowledge preceding option in the concrete order it is no longer subjective because in this order there is not an abstraction from the reality of objects. According to Bouillard, even within the science of action, apart from any distinction between the science of action and its concrete application, subjective knowledge is equivalent to that which "the Aristotelean and scholastic tradition accords ontological significance."⁸⁵ It is objective in this basic sense because from the beginning of l'Action, "internal phenomena . . . are intentional objects."⁸⁶ They are termed

⁸³Ibid., p. 133, citing Raison et religion, p. 327. This discussion is continued in two articles in Archives de Philosophie: Duméry, "Blondel ou l'occasion d'apprendre à lire," XXVIII (Janvier-Mars, 1955), 64-97. Bouillard, "Lecture de Blondel," XXVIII (Avril-Juin, 1965), 279-87.

⁸⁴See above, p. 56.

⁸⁵Bouillard, Blondel, p. 148.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 167.

"subjective" only relative to a more complete possession of being which goes beyond mere knowledge of it.

Beuillard does distinguish between the science of action and its concrete application. But he does so to explain statements in l'Action which say that even what is termed "objective" is in a sense subjective also. As was pointed out above, in Beuillard's view even the ontology of l'Action is descriptive. But Beuillard does not use this distinction between the science of action and its concrete application to make the knowledge preceding the option in the concrete order objective.

Duméry, on the other hand, claims that in saying that Blondel's "subjective" knowledge is equivalent to the "objective knowledge" of the scholastics, Beuillard does not take adequate account of the differences in methodology that the difference in vocabulary reflects: the Aristotelean, scholastic tradition does not make use of the phenomena-being category which Blondel employs.⁸⁷

There is also disagreement on what establishes the reflexive certitude of the knowledge upon which the option is based. This is an important point for it is precisely on this point that Nicolas bases his continuing objection to the epistemology of l'Action. According to Beuillard, the subject knows that the science of action is not merely the expression of what is necessary relative to the absolute, because the affirmation of the

⁸⁷"C'est faire bon marche des questions de vocabulaire, des differences de problematique." Duméry, Raison et religion, p. 137, n. 76.

"uniquely necessary being" reveals that the science of action is based on a necessity which transcends the subject and is grounded in absolute being.⁸⁸ Whereas, according to Duméry, even "the proof of God only establishes a necessary conception of the Transcendent without deriving from it the being of God."⁸⁹ In his analysis the absolute necessity of the science of action is grounded in its starting point which establishes the transcendental necessity of action and the dimensions of action which the science of action establishes.

⁸⁸See above, p. 47.

⁸⁹Duméry, Raison et religion, p. 197.

CHAPTER V

L'ACTION: AN EXPLICATION OF THE DYNAMIC PRIMACY OF THE GOOD

As has been pointed out above, even those who insist most strongly on the basic non-voluntaristic character of the epistemology of l'Action are willing to concede that there are formulations in l'Action which are unfortunate, that there are places where Blondel does not follow his methodology consistently, and that the vocabulary of his later works is better suited to his thought.¹

However, if one does not attempt to harmonize completely the epistemology of l'Action and traditional scholastic epistemology, one can see that the terminology and logic of l'Action are perfectly consistent.

The purpose of l'Action is to show that the elements of human experience which seem to be imposed on man from without do not make life meaningless, for an analysis of man's subjectivity reveals that he fundamentally desires that there be these elements imposed from without, i.e., the necessity of sacrificing some values in order to pursue others, societal restrictions, the obligations toward God. In the terminology of l'Action the elements imposed from without are termed objective. The fundamental dynamism of the human spirit is termed subjective. According to this

¹See above, Cartier, p.42; Bouillard, pp. 46, 51; Duméry, pp. 56, 62, note 75.

terminology the purpose of l'Action can be expressed as the effort to show that the objective elements are subjective, not in the sense that they are purely creations of human freedom, but in the sense that they are not in conflict with man's autonomy, but rather the conditions for its existence.

In Blondel's view, the subjectivity of the objective elements can best be shown when all the dimensions of this objective element have been exposed, including the existence of God, the uniquely necessary being. Therefore, until all the dimensions of the objective element have been presented, l'Action prescind from any statement on the objective validity of the analysis which it presents. To assert that the analysis was objectively true before it had been completed would be to impose an objective element before all the factors have been presented which show that it is not in conflict with man's subjectivity. The logic of l'Action then up to the chapter, "Le lien," merely shows that the dimensions of action which are successively presented do not conflict with man's subjectivity, but rather are required by it. The final stage in the development of the necessary implications of man's subjective dynamism is the uniquely necessary being. At this stage one is presented with the necessity of choosing to accept the uniquely necessary being as the transcendent source of all being and to live one's life accordingly, or to refuse this acceptance. But the question of objectivity in the epistemological sense has not been raised. What is at issue is whether or not one will consistently follow out the implications of the subjective dynamism.

The chapter, "Le lien," raises the question of the epistemological

objectivity of the analysis which precedes it. It concludes that this analysis is objective in the epistemological sense for the following reasons: (1) One cannot avoid recognizing the subject-object structure of phenomena, for it is part of the necessary starting point, the subject willing something. (2) If one follows out the necessary implications of this starting point, one sees that all the dimensions of action are required by it. At this point the dimensions of action are subjectively necessary, i.e., necessary in virtue of man's subjective dynamism. (3) One knows the transcendental necessity of the analysis from the consequences of one's choice, or option, regarding it. The positive option produces the awareness that one has achieved the fullness of existence by opening one's self to what is beyond one's self. The negative option produces an awareness of a privation. Either of these two experiences give evidence that the dimensions of action which have been elaborated in the science of action are not merely subjectively necessary.

The similarities and differences of this epistemology relative to traditional scholastic epistemology are evident. Prior to the option the idea which one has is objective in the sense that it is necessary and adequate to its object. However the absolute necessity of one's conceptions is not known in a reflex act of judgment, but from the consequences of one's choice.

This is the evaluation of the epistemology of l'Action which is given by Maréchal in "Phénoménologie pure ou philosophie de l'action?" In this article in which he contrasts the epistemology of Blondel in

l'Action with that of Husserl, Maréchal asserts that they present two epistemological extremes. In Blondel we have the dynamic primacy of the Good, in Husserl the formal primacy of the True. Maréchal says that prior to the option in l'Action knowledge is rightly termed subjective:

First, being is posed only in logical dependence on the initial and obscure necessity of the volente voulante; the metaphysics remains "subjective" (the word is Blondel's) in virtue of the principle of its necessity Then in virtue of the development of the exigencies of action, it is received in its "en soi," that is to say affirmed in its transcendence, by a supreme act of liberty.²

The following analysis will attempt to show that this interpretation shows that the terminology of l'Action is in harmony with its thesis, and that the logic of l'Action is perfectly coherent.

The Purpose of l'Action

l'Action begins with the question of whether or not human life has meaning. But as Beuillard recognizes at the beginning of Blondel et le Christianisme this general question is specified to the question of whether or not it is possible to resolve the conflict between "autonomy and heteronomy in our existence."³ Cartier points out that in the time of the writing of l'Action there was an attitude among idealist and positivist thinkers that "nothing could impose itself on man, requiring the assent of his intellect or the adhesion of his will which did not have its beginning in some way

²In Melanges J. Maréchal (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1950), I, 202.

³p. 18.

in man himself."⁴ This same idea is expressed explicitly in the Introduction to l'Action: "Involuntary and constrained being would no longer be being."⁵

Later on in Blondel et le Christianisme when Bouillard says that the problem of l'Action is not to know whether our ideas correspond to an external reality, but to know if the "end of our will and the objects of our knowledge carry in themselves something of the absolute," and again when he says that knowledge before the option is termed subjective relative to the more complete possession of the object after option, it seems that he has changed the perspective of l'Action.⁶ The question regarding the absolute is not directly to know if it exists or how one attains it, but rather whether or not it conflicts with man's subjectivity. And, as we will show further on, knowledge before the option is not termed subjective merely in a sense relative to a more complete possession, but subjective in virtue of the principle by which it is developed. When one remembers that the purpose of l'Action is precisely to demonstrate the subjectivity of the objective elements in man's existence, the use of the terms "objective" and "subjective" is perfectly understandable and appropriate.

⁴Existence et verite, p. 7.

⁵P. xciii.

⁶Pp. 167, 149.

The Ontological Implications of the Starting Point
of l'Action

As was pointed out above, Duméry maintains that prior to the option the dimensions of action are known to have ontological value, although in the science of action itself this ontological value is not explicitly claimed until the chapter, "Le lien," which is after the presentation of the option. He further states that this ontological value is established in principle by the starting point: every action has the structure of a subject willing an object, the attempt to deny this resulting only in the repositing of it.⁷ He emphasizes that this necessity is an a priori necessity not merely a factual one. A factual necessity would be one that is based on empirical experience. He gives as an example of such an experience the discovery that one might make that positive sciences are incoherent unless one affirms a subject-object structure of the world.⁸ The necessity is a priori because it is the condition of possibility for all thought and action. This analysis faithfully follows l'Action, which states that the subject-object structure is antecedent to all thought and therefore inescapable.⁹

At this point the question of the ontology of l'Action does not

⁷See above, pp. 56, 57.

⁸Duméry, Raison et religion, p. 208.

⁹l'Action, p. 431.

turn on the interpretation of what Blondel says, but on what one will claim is necessary in order to have an ontological necessity. For Duméry ontological necessity means a priori necessity. Maréchal calls this necessity subjective because it is founded only on the needs of the subject. It is not yet known to be founded on a necessity transcending the subject. It is essentially different from the scholastic ontological necessity which is based on a grasp of being in judgment. As we have seen the absence of an ontological necessity in this sense is what Nicolas objects to in the epistemology of l'Action.

The Methodology of l'Action and its Epistemological Implications

In developing the dimensions which action must have if it is to fulfill the basic dynamism of man, Blondel prescind from the objectivity of the formal determinations of the phenomena which constitute these dimensions: He does not resolve the question of to what extent these formal determinations are the product of the subject and to what extent they are the product of the object. He does state that there is a materially objective element in the phenomena; i.e., they are to some extent caused by that which is other than the subject.

Having formulated the starting points as a subject necessarily willing something, Blondel explains what he means by this "something."

It is good to forestall any misunderstanding. It is not the will which makes to be that which is . . . by the fact that it wills it implies something which it does not produce; it wants to be that which it is not already. So it is not a question of considering this

something either as something exterior, nor as interior or reducible to the representation which we have of it. It is a question of analyzing the content of the action willed in order to see that it comprehends the whole diversity of objects which appeared to be ends alien to the subject, but which are in reality only means to bridge the gap from that which we are to that which we wish to be.¹⁰

This passage establishes the fact that Heidegger holds that there is a materially objective element in the phenomena. The objectivity of the formal determinations is ambiguous at this point. It is stated that we are considering phenomena as neither external nor internal, and this implies that the question of the objectivity of the formal determinations is being left open. On the other hand the passage implies that these formal determinations are to a certain extent objective since they effect the passage of the subject from that which it is to that which it desires to be.

However in the following passage it is clearly stated that the objectivity of the formal determinations is left open:

One can say with equal justice either that the internal fact is a concentration and an expression of the whole exterior, or that the phenomena, whatever it might be, is completely interior to consciousness; because scientific truths, psychological facts, metaphysical affirmations, all these things are at first a subjective state. In place then of searching for a way to extract the notion of a subject from empirical knowledge, one can show how, even from the inside we are led to distinguish an inside and an outside. In this latter form, more precise perhaps but more paradoxical, the question now discussed now becomes: in every state of consciousness how can one separate

¹⁰Ibid., p. 43, note 1.

that which is objective representation from that which is subjective act? how can one separate and define, starting with empirical facts, that internal act which comprehends all phenomena. To be thus able to invert or mix the two terms, idealist or realist, of the question with impunity is the proof that all metaphysical or critical prejudice has been removed.¹¹

Here Heindel is saying that whether one takes a positivist position and denies the reality of the subject, or an idealist position and denies the reality of the object, one must still recognize that the phenomena have a subject-object structure. In his analysis he will analyze the phenomena according to this structure without settling at this point its ultimate foundation.

Therefore we cannot accept without reservation Bouillard's statement that when Heindel declares that he intends to:

. . . Analyze the whole content of consciousness, to study the entire system of internal phenomena or subjective facts, one should not understand, despite the ambiguity of certain expressions, that he would proceed to a psychological analysis of subjective states . . . Internal phenomena or the contents of consciousness are for him intentional objects.¹²

But a distinction is necessary here. The internal phenomena are intentional insofar as there is a materially objective given. But their intentionality with regard to the formal determinations of the phenomena is left an open question.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 87-88, note 1.

¹²Bouillard, Heindel, p. 167.

The methodology by which l'Action proceeds also renders the phenomena subjective. The principle upon which phenomena are incorporated into the science of action is their being necessitated by the dynamism of the subject: "From the origin of this research, the only agreement which has been made is not to require of the will any concession, to receive only its own proper desires, to register only the results of its initiative."¹³ Therefore the phenomena are subjective on two counts: the objectivity of their formal determinations has not been determined, they are known to be necessary only relative to the needs of the subject.

According to Bouillard, this methodology is followed only up to the proofs for the existence of God. According to his interpretation, these proofs establish the absolute objectivity of the phenomena.

The Ontological Implications of the Proofs
for the Existence of God

The principal text upon which Bouillard relies to support his thesis that the proofs for the existence of God establish a transition from phenomenology to ontology in l'Action is as follows:

That which I have voluntarily posed is thus not able to be suppressed nor to maintain itself: it is this conflict which explains the forced presence in consciousness of a new affirmation; and it is the reality of this necessary presence which makes possible in us even the consciousness of the conflict. There is a "uniquely necessary being." The whole movement of

¹³L'Action, p. 147.

the determinism carries us to this term: because it is from it that the determinism begins, the whole sense of which leads us back to it.¹⁴

The italics are added by Beuillard to highlight the basis in the text for his interpretation. The significance of the affirmation being a "new affirmation" is that this suggests that a break is made with the preceding methodology. Of course this is only a supertative argument. The uniqueness of the matter of the affirmation is enough to make it a "new affirmation," and no change in methodology is necessarily signaled. The significance of the expression, "it is from it that the determinism begins," is that it states that what is attained in the demonstrations for the existence of God in l'Action is already implicit in all thought and action. However, one can grant this and still say that what is referred to in l'Action is a conception of God which is necessary only relative to the needs of the will. Beuillard goes on to cite a passage from the proofs for the existence of God in which it is said that to the degree that we form an idea of God we must affirm his reality, "because this idea even is a reality."¹⁵ And, here it does seem that Blondel is saying that God is affirmed absolutely and not merely that the dynamism of the subject makes one conceive of a God who exists.

As further evidence of his interpretation, Beuillard cites a letter from Blondel to the Abbot Bricout:

¹⁴Beuillard, Blondel, p. 178, citing l'Action, p. 323.

¹⁵Beuillard, Blondel, p. 174, citing l'Action, p. 348.

You ask me if I affirm "the reality of God," and if one can "demonstrate it rationally." I respond absolutely yes; and this is the meaning of the chapter in l'Action entitled: "L' unique necessaire" (p. 338 to 357). I show there how the whole determinism of our knowledge and our action leads us to this term We necessarily conceive God; through the effort of reflection, we justify our necessary and spontaneous conception, in demonstrating that God is affirmed as real and efficacious in us. . . ."¹⁶

Bouillard admits that there are passages in l'Action which seem to contradict his interpretation. Speaking of his demonstration of the existence of God Blondel says: "It is not a question at all of concluding to the being of God." And again: "We would not know how to arrive at God, and truly affirm him . . . except in being for him and sacrificing all the rest for him."¹⁷

However, Bouillard says that these and similar passages are ambiguous. They are to be understood in the same way that statements that knowledge before option is subjective are to be understood. Not concluding to the being of God means not achieving the full possession that the option achieves. But this does not mean that one does not have certain knowledge of God's existence as the transcendent source of all being. In support of this Bouillard might have cited the continuation of the letter to the Abbot Bricout where Blondel says that the only limit he places to the knowledge of God in this section is that he wishes to combat the illusion

¹⁶Ibid., note 8.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 175.

that "to know is already to possess and to equal the real."¹⁸

However, as we shall show in the next section, there is strong evidence that in Blondel's interpretation of these proofs within l'Action itself they do not constitute an absolute affirmation of God and a transition from phenomenology to ontology.

"The Bond of Knowledge and Action in Being"

In this chapter Blondel shows that our certitude regarding the objectivity of all the dimensions of action, including the divine dimension, is a function of our choices regarding these dimensions of action. He shows first of all that whatever one thinks or whatever one does, one forms an idea which contains at least implicitly all the dimensions of action. Apart from action, this idea is subjective in the sense that it is necessary relative to the subject. However in realizing the idea in action or in refusing to realize it, one either succeeds in becoming that which one wishes to be, or one is aware that one has failed in this regard. It is this awareness which makes one realize that one's idea of the dimensions of action is necessary not only relative to the needs of one's will, but absolutely necessary.

Blondel begins by stating that all that has preceded as well as all that will follow has only shown what is necessary in virtue of the dynamism of the will. Therefore the proofs for the existence of God have

¹⁸Maurice Blondel, Lettres Philosophiques (Paris: Aubier, 1961), p. 124.

not established a transition from phenomenology to ontology. For the certitude of the objective validity of the science of action is not found within the science itself but in concrete action:

But in order that one may not misunderstand either what has gone before or what will follow: it has always been the necessary sequence of the needs of the practical order that it has been a question of determining¹⁹

Whatever the contrary intellectual habits of the reader have been able to persuade him, it has only been a question of means subordinate to action, without raising to the level of real truths its practical conditions.²⁰

That which expressed simply the needs of our will must acquire before the understanding even an absolute truth. That which as yet is only a factual necessity will be founded in reason.²¹

To establish the efficacy of God conceived as real and living, this is not to prejudice the live reality of God who is conceived: his truth as yet is completely relative to human action as a practical means.²²

Blondel then shows that man cannot avoid opting, accepting or rejecting God as his ultimate final cause. He does this first by showing that all the dimensions of action, which we necessarily will, we necessarily conceive of as real, because they form a complete system and because we

¹⁹L'Action, p. 424.

²⁰Ibid., p. 425.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., p. 426, italics added.

necessarily conceive of them as that which will enable us to pass from what we are to that which we want to become.²³ This of course does not establish their objective validity; it only continues the presentation of the demands of the subject. Next he recalls that the preceding study of the dimensions of action has established that the dimensions of action proceed necessarily from the dynamism of the will and thus form a system in which one phenomena or dimension of action necessarily implies the others. Thus he is able to say:

There is thus no object of which it is possible to conceive and affirm the reality without having embraced by an act of thought the whole series, without submitting oneself to the demands of the alternative which it imposes on us, in short without passing by the point where the truth of Being shines which illumines all reason and in the face of which it is necessary that every will declare itself.²⁴

Because of the solidarity of the system, it is not necessary to explicitly conceive all the dimensions of action in order to have made the option implicitly: "Every particular object is able to become for the will, the matter of an option" ²⁵

Blondel then takes up the effects of the positive and negative option on knowledge. This treatment demonstrates that the awareness of the transcendent nature of the necessity of the dimensions of action is produced

²³Ibid., p. 433.

²⁴Ibid., p. 435.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 433-34.

by the effects of our choice, but that it is not the will which creates reality. First in the case of the negative option:

The subjective knowledge of reality remains comprehensive and positive; the objective knowledge of reality is comprehensive also but negative For . . . he knows equally that the real possession of that of which he has deprived himself would have given him an infinite increase of clarity and joy.²⁶

On the other hand, in the case of the positive option: "That which was simply the idea of the object becomes, in all truth, objective certitude and real possession."²⁷

The permanence of subjective knowledge and the effect of the positive or negative option indicate that it is not the will which creates truth: "It is not a question in willing of making reality subsist in itself because an arbitrary decree has created it in us; it is rather a question in willing of making it exist in us because it is in itself and as it is in itself."²⁸

As was stated above, in the course of their elaboration in the science of action, the dimensions of action are subjective on two counts: the question of the objectivity of their formal determinations has been prescindend from, and their necessity has been established only relative to the subject. In the relational metaphysics which concludes the chapter, "Le lien," the objectivity of the formal determinations of the phenomena

²⁶Ibid., p. 439.

²⁷Ibid., p. 440.

²⁸Ibid.

is defined in a way which confirms the function of choice in establishing their absolute necessity. According to this metaphysics, the meaning of objective existence cannot be found in the subject or the object taken alone:

Reality, thus, is not in one of the terms more than in the others, neither is it in one without the others; it resides in the multiplicity of the reciprocal relations which joins them all; it is in the complexus itself. Situated in this series, our knowledge submits to things and produces them as a mediator; that which it submits to, that which it produces, that which it is, this is what constitutes objective existence from its particular point of view.²⁹

Thus according to this analysis the formal determinations of the phenomena are the product of both their subjective and their objective element. The contribution of the objective element can be known from what it adds to what the subject was before it assimilated this objective element. Thus it is in the transition from what one desires to be but is not yet to the state of being that which one has desired to be that one knows the contribution of the objective element of the phenomena.

Conclusion

We believe that the preceding study has shown that there is a conflict between the epistemology of l'Action and scholastic epistemology on the point of how one comes to know absolute necessity. On the basis of passages in the proofs for the existence of God and of Blondel's own testimony in the letter to the Abbot Bricout, Bouillard makes a good argument

²⁹Ibid., p. 453, see also above pp. 19-21.

that this absolute necessity is known in subjective knowledge. However we believe that the argument for saying that absolute necessity is known only in objective knowledge is too strong to be dismissed as the result of ambiguities in l'Action. The definition of subjective as that which expresses the needs of the will is not based on isolated texts in l'Action. l'Action begins with the dynamism of the will; it is this dynamism which is the principle according to which dimensions of action are incorporated into l'Action. This meaning of subjective is repeated with emphasis at the beginning of the chapter, "Le lien," and applied explicitly to the proofs for the existence of God. The relational metaphysics at the end of this chapter supports this interpretation also. Therefore we believe that this is the dominant meaning of subjective in l'Action.

We believe that if one does not recognize this meaning as dominant, one runs the risk of missing the important contribution of l'Action to epistemology: the evidence which can be given from the point of view of the will realizing itself in concrete action for the validity of the dimensions of action which are demonstrated in l'Action. From the point of view of scholastic epistemology, we would say with Maréchal that l'Action is a valuable exposition of the dynamism of the Good, which ought to be complemented by an exposition of the dynamism of the True.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Thomas J. Marsh, S.J. has been read and approved by his director from the Department of Philosophy.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

5/20/68
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