

God's Relation to Dialectical Volition According to Blondel and Hegel

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In the “Translator’s Preface” to Maurice Blondel’s dissertation *Action* (1893): *Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, Oliva Blanchette remarks that in “some respects Blondel was to French Catholicism what Hegel had been to German Protestantism.”¹ Blanchette then goes on to caution, however, that the similarities between the two thinkers may end with their shared attempt to rekindle the study of religion within the bounds of philosophical inquiry. On the one hand, this serves as a prudent road sign for a comparative study. Not only does the amount of Hegelian texts that Blondel read remain unknown,² but also in many ways the concerns, concepts, and conclusions of both philosophers are wholly diverse. On the other hand, many of the striking similarities in the nineteenth-century works of each thinker challenge whether or not their confluence really ends so abruptly. In particular, both (1) understand phenomenology to be a necessary, but only partial constituent of the whole of philosophy; (2) are wrongly interpreted as defending a crude idealism; (3) proceed, contra Descartes, by admitting and working through contradiction, falsity, and negation;³ (4) believe that philosophy deals scientifically with necessity

1. Maurice Blondel, *Action* (1893): *Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, trans. Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), xix.

2. Olivia Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 110.

3. *Action*, 12: “We must...take in all the negations that destroy one another, as if it were possible to admit them altogether. We must enter into all prejudices, as if they were legitimate, into all errors, as if they were sincere, into all passions, as if they had the generosity they boast of, into all philosophical systems, as if each one held in its grip the infinite truth it thinks it has cornered.” Cf. Georg Wilhelm Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W.

and universality; (5) employ a form of dialectic that is neither sterile nor merely formal but dynamic and morphological;⁴ and (6) are concerned with what necessarily follows from freedom's unfolding in the family, society, and state.⁵ At the very least, such parallels suggest a broader comparative horizon for the work of Hegel and Blondel, within which a focused analysis might move.

By means of distinct dialectical methods, both Hegel and Blondel describe the human person as a subject that thinks and wills in a variety of different contexts, each more expansive than the last. Furthermore, the trajectory of such thinking and willing—the insertion and concretization of freedom in the world—immanently involves God. How does each philosopher conceive of the will's action in the world?⁶ How does God cooperate with or bring to fulfillment the final causes of the will? In an attempt to begin to answer such questions, this essay will first examine portions of Blondel's *Action* and describe its portrayal of God's relation to human willing. Next, drawing primarily from the "Introduction" to *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* and *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, Hegel's notion of the will and its unity with the panentheistic God⁷ will be outlined. Finally, and rather briefly, the dominant threads that both nineteenth-century conceptions of the role of

A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1991), §83 Addition 1.

4. Cf. Peter Henrici, *Hegel und Blondel: Eine Untersuchung über Form und Sinn der Dialektik in der 'Phänomenologie des Geistes' und der ersten 'Action'* (Pullach bei München: Berchmanskollege, 1958); Jaime D. Gonzalez, "La Dialectica de la Acción según Blondel," *Revista de Filosofía de la Universidad de Costa Rica* 14 (1976): 49–60; and chapters 10–12 of G. R. G. Mure, *An Introduction to Hegel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948).

5. Cf. Léo-Paul Bordeleau, "Une genèse de la vie sociale selon Maurice Blondel," *Philosophiques* 2, no. 1 (1975): 55–82; *Action*, Part III, Stages 4–5; and Georg Wilhelm Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Part III, Sections 1–3.

6. While this essay will bracket the more specific question of the metaphysical status of the will in favour of describing its *activity*, the nineteenth-century psychologies of each philosopher notwithstanding do not render their work irrelevant for contemporary issues. Cf. for instance, Fichra Long, "The Postmodern Flavor of Blondel's Method," *International Philosophical Quarterly* XXXI, no. 121 (March 1991): 15–22 and "Why Hegel Now?" in Gianni Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 130–140.

7. Glenn A. Magee, *The Hegel Dictionary* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 101.

providence in willed transformation share will be highlighted, followed by critical questions for further study.

1. The Will's Relation to God According to Blondel

Blondel's then-controversial dissertation *L'Action* constitutes a rigorous and highly original attempt to explain the source, movements, motivations, means, and end(s) of human willing. Fifty years prior to Sartre's publication of *L'Être et le Néant*, Blondel begins his first tome with existential audacity: "Yes or no, does human life make sense, and does man [sic] have a destiny?"⁸ The first two parts anticipate negative replies to this question from the aesthete, *flaneur*, pessimist, and fatalist. Against these, Blondel sets forth arguments against the possibility of conceiving, willing, or doing nothing; one cannot have a clear and distinct idea of nothingness, much less a substantial will for it. Thus, before setting to work on his positive phenomenology, a minimum of givenness that all inevitably affirm must be posited, namely, "*Il y a quelque chose* (there is something)."⁹ The third part of *L'Action* opens with arguments for the necessity of a unique, novel science of subjectivity, since: (1) sensation and the mathematical are irreducible to one another; (2) science is always "already more than it knows;"¹⁰ and (3) that mediating and free conscious action which gives rise to science itself must be known as it originates from and reinserts itself into the general determinism of the world.¹¹ Since one *must* will something, and since that which wills cannot be dealt with *as such* by the diverse positive sciences, a new approach must be found. This task of grasping the will as such is the primary concern of Blondel's phenomenology of action.

8. *Action*, 3.

9. Michael A. Conway, "A Positive Phenomenology: The Structure of Maurice Blondel's Early Philosophy," *Heythrop Journal* XLVII (2006), 579–600. Also see *Action*, 52.

10. *Action*, 88.

11. For more on Blondel's contribution to philosophy of science see Raymond Jahae, "The Concept of Positive Science in the Main Works of Maurice Blondel," *Gregorianum* 85, no. 3 (2004): 539–558 and Adam C. English, "'Science Cannot Stop With Science': Maurice Blondel and the Sciences," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 2 (April 2008): 269–292.

These aforementioned arguments concerning matters of existential import as well as the philosophy of science prepare the way for a thorough phenomenology of action. Blondel's centrifugal phenomenology covers the first threshold of individual consciousness to embodied and social action, and "the driving principle, that ultimate source, Blondel names Desire,"¹² or the willing will. The emergent dialectic between the willing will (*la volonté voulante*), or "what proceeds from the will," and the willed will (*la volonté voulue*), or "what becomes the object of the will,"¹³ underlies each of the successive ambits of the core of Blondel's text. Where an equation between one's restive willing and that which is willed might be expected, the circuit in fact remains open, and the lack of a resolution propels the phenomenology to broader networks of praxis in which the fundamental "disconcerting and inexplicable disproportion"¹⁴ remains. The willing will could neither remain solely within itself nor ever fully cognize its various unconscious intentions and embodied actions. In other words, "The will progresses over a double movement of immanence and of transcendence... that is no more than the result of the dialectical tension between thought and praxis which can never arrive at adequation in itself."¹⁵ Thus, by itself human action knows no completion.

Freedom, according to Blondel, emerges from natural necessity and serves as the locus of life's drama.¹⁶ One cannot escape this freedom, the options that are presented to it, the exigencies that it feels, or the duties that are found within it. Whether one unknowingly begins to will a previous concession, initiates a new project, makes arbitrary decisions, or submits to a pragmatic rule, each of these inevitably involves the free action of the

12. Jean Lacroix, "Blondel et la dialectique du Désir," *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 71 (1973): 681–697. My translation of « Ce principe moteur, cette source ultime, Blondel l'appelle Désir. »

13. *Action*, 134.

14. *Action*, 4.

15. Isaac R. Fernández, "Filosofía de la praxis en M. Blondel," *Espíritu* XXX (1981): 19–39. My translation of "La voluntad progresa sobre el doble movimiento de la inmanencia y de la transcendencia... que no es más que el resultado de la tensión dialéctica entre pensamiento y praxis que jamás llegan a adecuarse entre sí."

16. On the roles of "existence" and "life" in the context of Blondelian thought, see Clara Mandolini, "Blondel and the Philosophy of Life," *Phenomenology and Existentialism in the Twentieth Century: Book I: New Waves of Philosophical Inspirations* CIII (2009): 253–273.

will. The infinity of possible moments of freedom finds itself prepared by the external determinism of the natural world. And, insofar as free action returns to what metaphysicians have called the “community of causes,” or, if free action abides by the necessity of reasonable, practical morality, it can be said to pass from its infinite potential back to necessity.¹⁷ At each further stage of the will’s dialectic, however, the problem of its inability to equal itself still remains. “Before we will and in all that we will, then, there inevitably subsists something which, seemingly, we do not will.”¹⁸ Even socio-political action, common morality, and participation in many religious ceremonies do not carry the willing will to fulfillment.

The forgoing conflicts and dialectic of the free will lead it to the necessary option presented to praxis. At this juncture, one can either opt for or against “the one thing necessary,” or God. Blondel writes, “Voluntary action is made equal to itself in consciousness only inasmuch as we recognize in it the presence and the cooperation of the one thing necessary.”¹⁹ The idea of the infinite, of perfection, of the Good, and of God either lead to a positive, cooperative, and willed assent of human to divine action, or, rendered illusory abstractions, are brushed aside as having no source and term. According to *L’Action*, the “proof” for the necessity of this alternative lies not in detached, formal argumentation, but rather (within the context of life itself) in each stage of the will’s infinite and insufficient dialectic. What, then, might willing the affirmative alternative entail?

In opting, willing, and hoping for the cooperation of one’s will with God’s will, the coaction of both constitutes a synthesis while nevertheless not resulting in apotheosis. Persons find the culmination of action in the bond between human and divine willing through mortification, revealing doctrines, seeking the good, putting faith into action, and despite the temporary and edifying trials of suffering. In this willed unity-in-difference

17. Cf. *Action*, 125: “In short, in order to act we have to participate in an infinite power; to be conscious of acting we have to have the idea of this infinite power. But it is in the reasonable act that there is a synthesis of the power and of the idea of the infinite; and this synthesis is what we call freedom.”

18. *Action*, 302.

19. *Action*, 333. For an analysis of the presuppositions of this argument, see “Die Kritik der Voraussetzung Gottes in Blondels ‘Action’” in Ulrich Hommes, *Transzendenz und Personalität: Zum Begriff der Action bei Maurice Blondel* (Bamberg, Germany: Vittorio Klostermann Frankfurt Am Main, 1972).

between the human and the divine, one acts and becomes *as if* one were God.²⁰ Moreover, and despite bracketing ontological questions during his employment of a method of immanence, Blondel argues that opting for the supernatural implies God's working in each mundane action:

In a sense, action has to be entirely from man [sic], but it must first be willed as entirely from God. In this perfect synthesis of one with the other, one cannot say that the first part of the act comes from one and the second from the other. No, each has to act for the whole. There is a communion of two wills only on this condition: the one cannot do anything without the other. And action, a common work, proceeds nevertheless in its entirety from each.²¹

The dialectic between the willing will and the willed will, then, culminates authentically in opting for and working “alongside” the one thing necessary. And this coactive volition, which provides a new hermeneutic and direction for praxis, in many ways gives birth to God in the world.

2. The Will's Relation to God According to Hegel

Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, which outlines his philosophy of objective spirit, charts the concretization of freedom during the various moments of its unfolding. This text of practical philosophy, which incorporates his logic of the concept, deduces and demonstrates the necessity of freedom's realization in the world—first as right (*Recht*), and then in its particular social determinations, such as the family, civil society, and the state. While it does not proceed like Blondel's dissertation by way of a phenomenology of action, it nevertheless demonstrates the progressive manners in which Spirit objectively particularizes itself by means of free will. In order to clarify Hegel's understanding of the necessary realization of free will in relation to God, the concept of freedom in and for itself as

20. *Action*, 386. The number of times in which Blondel makes use of the words “as if” here evinces that the human and the divine have not wholly dissolved into one another, but that the absolute goodness of the latter can still only be understood metaphorically, subjunctively.

21. *Action*, 354.

dialectically presented in §§5–7 of the “Introduction” to *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* must be presented.²²

After a brief description of the aim of a philosophy of right and its relation to positive law, Hegel begins his deduction of right from freedom. Specifically, he articulates the three syllogistic moments of this concept of freedom (in which both cognition and volition are operative) in §§5–7. In these three sections, Hegel sets forth the abstract concept of free will in itself. In §5 he writes, “The will contains the element of *pure indeterminacy* or of the ‘I’'s pure reflection into itself, in which every limitation, every content...is dissolved; this is the limitless infinity of *absolute abstraction* or *universality*, the pure [affirmation or] thinking of oneself.” This constitutes the moment of *universality* in §§5–7 and describes the infinite indeterminacy of the “I”'s pure reflection into itself. “The original (moment of the) I is nothing other than the ‘I’ as having and being and positing *only itself*...without any otherness.”²³ In his remark, Hegel describes this aspect of the “*Ich*” as able to abstract from every determination (*Bestimmung*) and limitation and to flee from particular contents. This universal and indeterminate freedom, however, remains *negative* (as opposed to the *positive* infinity of Fichte's conception of the “I”) and often realizes its being-there in a purely negative or deleterious way, as exemplified by religious fanaticism or *la Terreur*.²⁴

Section six marks the transition of the infinite and indeterminate “I” in its most abstract universality to its moment of particularization and determination, akin to the movement from the major to the minor premise of the standard syllogism: “‘I’ is the transition from undifferentiated indeterminacy to *differentiation*, *determination*, and the *positing* of a determinacy as a content and object...Through this positing of itself as something *determinate*, ‘I’ steps into existence [*Dasein*] in general...” Here, the abstract and universal “I,” which, as Aristotle notes of the *nous*, can in principle consider all things, wills *something in particular*. Thus, a “will

22. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 25–64. It should be kept in mind that, just as Plato's model of dialectic differs from that of Kierkegaard, so too does Blondel's dialectical presentation of the will differ from that of Hegel's dialectic. Whereas Hegel might expect a moment of sublation in Blondel's method, only to find a deficiency wrought by the *Verstand*, Blondel might view Hegel's dialectical method as honourable but too facile and robotic.

23. Adriaan Peperzak, *Modern Freedom: Hegel's Legal, Moral, and Political Philosophy* (Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 195.

24. *Modern Freedom*, 491.

which, as described in the previous paragraph [§5], wills only the abstract universal, wills *nothing* and is therefore not a will at all. The particular [thing/action/event] which the will wills is a limitation, for the will, in order to be a will, must in some way limit itself" (§6). In other words, in choosing and willing this particular *X*, the universal "I" actually delimits and determines itself by means of a realized act of (the indeterminate) will.

Section seven, the result and sublation of the forgoing two sections, constitutes the restoration of the previous abstract/universal (§5) and particular (§6) moments. This section serves as the result of a double negation in which the will is grasped in its free self-relation: "The will is the unity of both these moments—*particularity* reflected *into itself* and thereby restored to *universality*." In this final phase of the development of the abstract concept of right, the "I" recognizes that it is *both* finite and limited and nevertheless universal and with itself. And, in this sublation, objective Spirit emerges.

In everyday, societal affairs, the abstract and conceptual structure provided above is not fully realized without the guidance of a subject's free and rational willing. The immediate will, with its natural drives, desires, and inclinations, for example, which are neither good nor bad in themselves, must be integrated by a "reasonable"²⁵ and free will. Similarly, one must understand choice (*Willkür*), which is both "independent of *and* bound to natural drives"²⁶ as distinct from the will (*Wille*) in its rational, actual, and transformative freedom. Hegel's further description of the actualization of the concept of free will in §§10–24 provides an account of human willing that: (1) calls for a rational unification of the will's being-in-itself and being-for-itself (§17) and a purification of the drives of one's immediate will (§19); (2) acknowledges that the will seeks happiness and requires education (*Bildung*) (§20); and (3) denominates the will which has being in and for itself as *truly infinite* (§22).

While free will in this practical philosophy serves as the means by which Spirit realizes itself in laws, ethicality, the state, and world history,

25. This is Adriaan Peperzak's neologistic translation of the term "*vernünftig*," since "reasonable" and "rational" carry diverse connotations that do not fit Hegel's (onto-)logic. For a brief discussion of *vernünftig* and *verständlich*, see *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, 352, n. 43.

26. *Modern Freedom*, 204.

this exhausts neither the meaning of Spirit nor of freedom.²⁷ While the equivocal term “spirit” may signify, depending on the context, the psychological, the realm pertaining to subjective spirit, or the creation of art, it also serves as “a name for the One that is the Whole,” or God.²⁸ Understood as God, Spirit operates, reveals itself, and incarnates itself in the world. Spirit does not transcend the world as a being beyond the totality, since this would *differentiate* it from the world, thus rendering it finite, but rather envelops the world, guiding its self-completion. In regards to free will, such providential enveloping constitutes the *sine qua non* of objective Spirit. In this respect, Hegel “replaces the traditional conception of God as existing apart from creation, perfect and complete, with one which claims that God only truly becomes God *through* creation.”²⁹ Despite this novel panentheism, however, Spirit nevertheless maintains many of the divine attributes found in classical, Western (onto-)theology.

Succinct, key nuances of Hegel’s understanding of the free will’s relation to God can also be found in *The Encyclopaedia Logic*.³⁰ Sections 233 to 234, for example, describe willing as the converse of thinking’s mediation of representations and otherness. To will is to attempt to determine the world according to the ideas one has of it. But the externally transformative movements of the will and cognition’s appropriation of the world contradict one another, thus giving rise to the distinction between “is” and “ought.” The good as it is actualized through this contradiction brings about the notion of infinite progress,³¹ and without this contradiction the need for willing would disappear altogether.³² In the “Addition” to §234, Hegel claims that one cannot stop at this finitude of the will; rather, the mature person

27. While this essay focuses largely on free will as Hegel describes it as the condition of objective spirit, for an analysis of it within subjective spirit, see Damion Buterin, “Knowledge, Freedom and Willing: Hegel on Subjective Spirit,” *Inquiry* 52, no. 1 (February 2009): 26–52.

28. *Modern Freedom*, 160.

29. *The Hegel Dictionary*, 99.

30. While the limits of this essay do not allow for a full treatment of the differences between volition in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* and *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, a helpful reconstruction can be found in Hector Ferreiro, “Reconstrucción del Sistema de la Voluntad en la Filosofía de Hegel,” *Revista Latinoamericana de Filosofía* XXXV, no. 2 (2009): 331–361.

31. *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, §234.

32. *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, §234, Addition.

trusts in providence's working and strives to reconcile the will's finitude by returning to cognition. This return receives narrative expression in Hegel's interpretation of the first creation myth of Genesis. Here, the human will, tempted to eat from the tree of the cognition of good and evil, falls into sin, yet, by virtue of being created in the image of God (Gen. 3:22), can be healed again *through cognition*. "It is thinking that both inflicts the wound and heals it again."³³ As the culmination of *The Encyclopaedia Logic* with the Absolute Idea suggests, Spirit immanently actualizes all reality, up to and including the "healing" of the will by means of the divinization of self-thinking thought.

Concluding Remarks

The foregoing has highlighted the distinct and similar manners in which Blondel and Hegel conceive of God's relation to the will's dialectical moments. While the former believes that the finite will's dialectic, through thinking, leads one to an ultimate decision posed to the will, the latter ultimately preferences cognition over the will. Also, although the unity between the subject and God remains central to the texts analyzed, for Blondel such unity always concernedly maintains the transcendence of God, whereas Hegel's Spirit unifies all reality in a radically immanent way. But, Hegel would agree with Blondel that "The idea of God...is the inevitable compliment of human action,"³⁴ while Blondel would agree with Hegel's claim that "All labour is directed only at this or that goal; and when it is attained, we are amazed to find just what we willed and nothing more."³⁵ In the deduction, definition, and/or description of these processes, however, the two philosophers part ways. Let us conclude with a few comparative, critical questions posed to both thinkers, if not to a variety of Christian philosophers in general: While Blondel and Hegel remain concerned that determinism, pessimism, and/or empiricism might disrupt a holistic,

33. *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, §23, Addition 3. See also Georg Wilhelm Hegel, "The Story of the Fall" in *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion One Volume Edition: The Lectures of 1827* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 442–446.

34. *Action*, 326.

35. *The Encyclopaedia Logic* §237, Addition.

dialectical philosophy of the will's relation to providence, do these in fact pose the greatest challenge to grasping this human-divine relation? Does not inexplicable, event-like tragedy pose the primary obstacle? In other words, does not the unpredictable shattering of the tragic event—to which Blondel's account of suffering³⁶ and Hegel's understanding of evil³⁷ do not do justice—grind to a halt the ascendant dialectical philosophies of each?

36. Cf. *Action*, 350 ff. It simply does not seem to be the case that “La souffrance est la voie qui marche et qui monte; et pour beaucoup avancer, il suffit de vouloir bien se laisser porter.” Maurice Blondel, *L'action (1893): essai d'une critique de la vie et d'une science de la pratique* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses universitaires de France, 1950), 383.

37. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §139.