JEFFREY M. WALKEY

THE ESSENTIAL STRUCTURE AND INTENTIONAL OBJECT OF ACTION: TOWARD UNDERSTANDING THE BLONDELIAN EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGY

ABSTRACT

Maurice Blondel (1861–1949), the French philosopher from Dijon, has been associated with intellectual movements of various sorts. Most relevant to our purposes here, he has been considered a precursor of both the phenomenological and existential movements of the 20th-century. In this essay, we will begin by discussing particular affinities between Blondel’s philosophy of action and phenomenology – two in detail, namely, “intentionality” and the phenomenological *epoché*. In this discussion I will attempt to show that Blondel’s phenomenological analysis, by way of his “suspending reserve,” reveals the essential intentional structure of human action – specifically illuminating the fundamental object of intentionality in all willing. Building upon the case established for a phenomenological reading of Blondel, I argue that we also discover its existential character. Finally, having shown the legitimacy of calling Blondel’s philosophy of action an existential phenomenology of action, I will propose Blondel as a dialogue partner for furthering our understanding of phenomenology as conceived by A.-T. Tymieniecka.

INTRODUCTION

*Yes or no, does human life make sense, and does man have a destiny?*

– Maurice Blondel, *L’Action* (1893)

With these words Maurice Blondel initiates his grand masterpiece – an investigation into what he sees to be the central question of human existence. It is an unfortunate fact, though, that this thinker of such genius is so often ignored – especially in the English-speaking world. In what follows, the hope is that we will see in Blondel a significance and relevance too often overlooked.

In his writings we find thought of great originality and complexity. So complex that during the defense of his dissertation (i.e., *L’Action*), Blondel was bombarded with objections to – among other things – his writing style and...
obscurity. One such objection is captured in this somewhat amusing exchange between Blondel and an examiner, Paul Janet:

Janet: Your thought is obscure; your manner of writing obscures it still more. I have spent an hour on one of your pages and have not succeeded in understanding it . . .
Blondel: There is a certain clarity which, as Descartes himself remarks, is often deceptive and dangerous . . . If I have rewritten certain parts of my work six or seven times, it was not for the pleasure of remaining obscure. Style is not only a passage giving others access to our thought, it is also a protection against their hasty judgment.²

Similarly, William James commenting in a letter, remarks, “Reading, yes! But understanding is another matter . . . In spite of the rare felicity of much of your expression, you remain to me esoteric.”³ Given his supposed obscurity, it comes as no surprise that Blondel is notoriously difficult to classify. However, there has been no shortage of attempts. Commentators have placed him alongside those who espouse voluntarism, fideism, crypto-apologetics, modernism, irrationalism, and subjectivism. In a more positive (or at least neutral) tone, Blondel has been associated with personalism (Emmanuel Mounier and John Macquarrie), philosophies of life (I.M. Bochenski), Bergsonism (also Bochenski), and the Scottish common sense school (Fiachra Long). He has even been dubbed a “kindred spirit” by James, who was a prominent (if not “the” prominent) figure in pragmatism.⁴

Most relevant to the present discussion, Blondel has very often been associated with the methods and figures of both Phenomenology and Existentialism. Specifically with regard to phenomenology, Knut Hanneborg has noted the provocative, though “not unfounded opinion” that Blondel is the “first phenomenologist.”⁵ Eugene Thomas Long, in his treatment of twentieth-century philosophy of religion,⁶ goes so far as to include Blondel as a phenomenologist.

Given this, it does not seem illegitimate to attempt further elaboration of particular similarities between Blondel and phenomenology. And with this, it is my hope that the discussion below may aid in our understanding of these similarities, and perhaps put us on more stable ground in adopting Hanneborg’s own position – namely, that “Blondel is a principal precursor of 20th-century phenomenology.”⁷

With regard to Existentialism, the connections initially seemed much more spurious. Yet, upon further study, one begins to notice a marked similarity in the projects and conclusions of Blondel and certain existentialist thinkers. Macquarrie has noted Blondel’s “tendencies”⁸ as an anticipation of “ideas later developed in existentialism.”⁹ In fact, Macquarrie credits him with being a precursor to, and possibly an influence on a non-German derived French existentialism, whose “best-known representative” is Gabriel Marcel.¹⁰