

Article

Pascal and Blondel on Real and Notional Knowledge

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Abstract: This article examines real and notional knowledge in the work of Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) and French Catholic philosopher Maurice Blondel (1861–1949). It explores the relationship between real and notional knowledge through the themes of disproportion, diversion, contingency, and faith in each thinker and argues that the right relationship between real and notional knowledge is the organizing principle of their thoughts.

Keywords: real knowledge; notional knowledge; Blaise Pascal; Maurice Blondel; modernity; faith; contingency; diversion; disproportion; action; human rationality

1. Introduction

In the middle of the twentieth century, the historian of ideas Isaiah Berlin wrote a now famous essay with the memorable title, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (Berlin 2013). Berlin derived the title from an occult proverb attributed to the Greek poet Archilochus which says: “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog one big thing” (Berlin 2013). Berlin used the proverb to structure the essay’s argument about Tolstoy’s view of history and as a figurative way of connecting two basic intellectual orientations to reality. Foxes lead lives and entertain ideas that are centrifugal. They “pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related to no moral or aesthetic principle” (Berlin 2013). On the other hand, hedgehogs act, think, feel, and understand the world and themselves in a centripetal way. They “relate everything to a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance” (Berlin 2013). Plato, Dante, Pascal, Hegel, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Proust, and many others belong to the latter. Aristotle, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Erasmus, Goethe, Joyce, and many others belong to the former. To follow Berlin’s classifications, twentieth-century French Catholic philosopher Maurice Blondel (1861–1949) is a hedgehog, and the structuring insight of this article is that Blondel and seventeenth-century French Catholic intellectual Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) share a single, universal, organizing principle to recover within modernity the right relationship between real knowledge and notional knowledge.

The genealogy of the distinction between real and notional knowledge precedes Pascal and Blondel. Thomas Aquinas expresses the distinction in terms of reason (notional) and intellect (real), see (Aquinas 1947). Real knowledge is the perfect form of knowledge, Josef Pieper notes in his little book on contemplation’s relation to happiness in Aquinas, because it is “knowledge of what is actually present . . . thinking, on the other hand, is knowledge of what is absent” (Pieper 1958). In turn, this means that the “person who knows by intuition has already found what the thinker is seeking; what he knows is present ‘before his eyes’” (Pieper 1958). The distinction structures John Henry Newman’s idea of doctrinal development in *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* and Newman uses it to great effect as part of the dialectical process the human mind employs in distinguishing different forms of assent the intellect makes in the *Grammar of Assent*. In his fascinating book on the right (real) and left (notional) hemispheres of the human brain and their role in the formation of Western civilization, Iain McGilchrist argues that Western thought since the Enlightenment has placed a preponderance of value on the left hemisphere (notional knowledge), and, according to



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McGilchrist, is in desperate need of retrieving the role of the right hemisphere to overcome modernity's impoverished view of the world. (McGilchrist 2012).

What is modernity, where did it come from, and how did it develop are complicated and fascinating questions that extend well beyond the scope of this article. However, conventional answers to these questions typically revolve around some version of the "subtraction story", as Charles Taylor calls it in *A Secular Age* (Taylor 2007). That narrative purports to explain the genesis of modernity, the emergence of the "immanent frame", and modernity's elision of the Transcendent as a natural, inexorable process of progress that entails the rejection of scholastic thinking in favor of new empirical methods of science, instrumental rationality, and rationality's liberation from the claustal confines, illusions, and limitations of pre-modern knowledge.

In the past several decades, this story of modernity's origins has been called into question for its simplicity and self-congratulatory tone. Still, this narrative provides a broader intellectual and cultural framework for understanding the organizing principle in Pascal's and Blondel's thoughts. Although each thinker recovers the right relationship between real and notional knowledge at different stages of modernity and by employing distinct discourses, each articulates the recovery through the themes of disproportion, diversion, and contingency and their effect on humanity's relation to the Transcendent.

2. Pascal on Real and Notional Knowledge

Pascal was an unconventional early modern thinker. His intellectual formation was shaped in large part by his father's association with the Mersenne Circle, a group of natural philosophers associated with Minim friar Père Mersenne that had close ties to such European scholars as Pierre Gassendi, Thomas Hobbes, and René Descartes. At a young age, Pascal was privy to the Mersenne Circle's discussions and became interested in the sciences and involved with engineering, writing scientific essays, performing experiments, and inventing technology that brought him into contact with the greatest mathematical and experimental minds of the seventeenth century. The Mersenne Circle had broken with the Baroque Scholasticism that was prevalent within early modern universities. Early modern Baroque Scholasticism was immersed in Aristotelian logic and the language and grammar of formal causality and teleology. It was the form of Scholasticism Francis Bacon pilloried in *Novum Organum* (1620) for its imprecision, sterility, and lack of promise in gaining human mastery over nature.

Bacon's early seventeenth-century call to break with the old ways of Scholasticism and to heed his new empirical method emerged around the same time as René Descartes' (1596–1650) new methodology for attaining a purely objective system of knowledge and establishing the foundation for certain knowledge about the world. Descartes' desire to reconcile scholastic metaphysics with the mechanical principles of the new science of Galileo and Copernicus required him to circumscribe Aristotle's expansive notion of substance by reducing all reality into mental and physical substances. In so doing, he created a new metaphysical picture of the world that privileged notional knowledge found within the pure intuitions of human consciousness and disembodied ideas of human history.

Pascal's recovery of real knowledge's relation to notional knowledge is inextricable from the Cartesian *cogito* that emerged within Descartes' new metaphysical picture of the world. For Pascal, the sciences are a window through which humanity perspicaciously perceives itself in order to recognize that there exists no certain point of reference within nature or humanity. "Vanity of science. Knowledge of physical science will not console me" (Pascal 1995); we see, think, and live from within "un petit cachot" (little prison cell) (Pascal 1995).

Such is our true state. This is what makes us incapable of certain knowledge or absolute ignorance. We are floating in a medium of vast extent, always drifting uncertainly, blown to and fro; whenever we think we have a fixed point to which we can cling and make fast, it shifts and leaves us behind; if we follow it, it eludes our grasp, slips away, and flees eternally before us. Nothing stands still for us. This is our natural state and yet the state

most contrary to our inclinations. We burn with desire to find a firm footing, an ultimate, lasting base on which to build a tower rising up to infinity, but our whole foundation cracks and the earth opens up into the depth of the abyss (Pascal 1995).

The precarious character of human knowledge in Pascal's epistemology stands in sharp contrast to Descartes' conceptual confidence. Pascal was unsparing in his criticism of Descartes, once calling his mechanics "useless and uncertain", complaining that "even if it were true we do not think that the whole of philosophy would be worth an hour's effort" (Pascal 1995). He decried Descartes' natural theology as "pretentious", and declared that, like Pico della Mirandola before him, Descartes was striving under the illusion that he could obtain a comprehensive notional knowledge of nature (Pascal 1995). What is more, Descartes' natural theology bowdlerizes humanity's relation to the Transcendent. It disproportionately emphasizes the cognitive process in generating the idea (notional knowledge) of the Transcendent and gives the mistaken impression there is a purely notional, direct route to the Transcendent that all human beings are equally equipped to follow.

Pascal objected to Descartes's sanitized account of human rationality because it neglected the relation of humanity's distorted desires (real knowledge) to the Transcendent. From Pascal's perspective, an adequate account of human rationality's relation to the Transcendent needs to consider the reality of "diversion" (*divertissement*). Diversion names the countless willful and real distractions humanity employs to avoid confronting its contingency.) It is the "clearest sign of the disordered soul; it discloses the tragedy of the human condition, the inexorable desire for happiness, whose achievement constantly eludes our grasp" (Hibbs 2017). Moreover, diversion is no neutral observation of the state of the human soul. In fact, one indirectly adopts a volitional aversion to the Transcendent as a result of one's preoccupation (diversion) with greater or smaller concerns in this life. The willingness to avoid one's contingency is, as Pascal understands it, the source of indirect resistance to the Transcendent. Put simply, diversion from the contingency of one's finite, non-necessary being is simultaneously aversion to a necessary Transcendent being.

In Pascal's early work, we also see the recovery of real knowledge in right relation to notional knowledge through various distinctions. For example, he distinguishes between the "spirit of geometry" (*esprit de géométrie*) and the "spirit of finesse" (*esprit de finesse*) to account for the indemonstrability of the foundational principles of thought (For all its rigor, mathematics is limited and incapable of demonstrating the source of all reasoning. Notional knowledge and abstraction do not exhaust the reality of what is known. Beyond abstract thought, there is a *terra certa et incognita* whose domain the "spirit of finesse" explores, and in Pascal's *Pensées*, the distinction between the "mathematical and the intuitive mind" discloses the disproportion between real (*esprit de finesse*) and notional (*esprit de géométrie*) knowledge.

Mathematicians who are merely mathematicians therefore reason soundly as long as everything is explained to them by definitions and principles, otherwise they are unsound and intolerable, because they reason soundly only from clearly defined principles. And intuitive minds which are merely intuitive lack the patience to go right into the first principles of speculative and imaginative matters which they have never seen in practice and are quite outside ordinary experience (Pascal 1995).

The difference between knowledge of the heart (real) and philosophical (notional) knowledge is perhaps Pascal's most well-known and misunderstood distinction. The "heart" is not an independent emotional drive dwelling deep below the reach of rationality. It is the source of intuition, the mysterious faculty within the human person that makes the first principles of reasoning possible. "Knowledge of first principles, like space, time, motion, number, is as solid as any derived through reason, and it is on such knowledge, coming from the heart and instinct, that reason has to depend and base all its arguments" (Pascal 1995). Properly understood, then, Pascal's aphorism "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing" is neither a *cri de coeur* nor euphemism for occasions of irrationality (Pascal 1995). It is, as Blondel keenly observes, an affirmation that the "reasons that reason ignores are still reasons; and we can and must . . . remove the blindfold" (Blondel 1966).

To “remove the blindfold”, so to speak, entails retrieving the autochthonous aspect (real knowledge) of human rationality within modernity in order to recover reason’s right relationship. Pascal retrieved this aspect of human thought through the spirit of finesse, intuitive mind, knowledge of the heart, and in the *pensée*, “Disproportion of Man” (Pascal 1995). The *pensée* brings into relief the paradoxical position of the human person, that he is “[e]qually incapable of seeing the nothingness from which he emerges and the infinity in which he is engulfed” (Pascal 1995). It is this disproportion that elicits within the human person the desire for the Transcendent.

What else can he do, then, but perceive some semblance of the middle of things, eternally hopeless of knowing either their principles or their end? All things have come out of nothingness and are carried onwards to infinity. Who can follow these astonishing processes? The author of these wonders understands them: no one else can. Because they failed to contemplate these infinities, men have rashly undertaken to probe into nature as if there were some proportion between themselves and her. Strangely enough, they wanted to know the principles of things and go on from there to know everything, inspired by a presumption as infinite as their object. For there can be no doubt that such a plan could not be conceived without Infinite presumption or a capacity as infinite as that of nature (Pascal 1995).

In modernity, humanity finds itself in a state of abeyance, suspended between the extremes of nothingness and infinity. The disproportion of humanity is the impetus behind humanity’s longing for the Transcendent, and it broaches a latent awareness of its epistemic limitations; it is this disclosure to consciousness that strips the presumptive veneer of notional knowledge and shifts reason toward real knowledge.

3. Blondel on Real and Notional Knowledge

Blondel appreciated the way Pascal’s thoughts removed the “blindfold” of notional knowledge. Blondel’s appreciation of Pascal was tempered by the recognition that the distinction between real and notional knowledge in Pascal’s work needed clarification and development, which Blondel himself would articulate in his work later work, *La pensée*, as the distinction between the “noetic” and “pneumatic” (Blondel 1934).¹

However, Blondel’s first sustained attempt at recovering the relationship between real and notional knowledge came to expression through the regressive analysis of the phenomenon of action in *Action* (1893) (Blondel 1984).² In this work the dialectic between real and notional knowledge animates the categories of freedom and necessity. Freedom is never absolute but is real only in being exercised through the process of deliberation among particular intentions, wherein it must choose to place itself. The necessity of actualizing freedom in action by choosing among particular intentions is the occasion by which the inherent dialectical tension between freedom and necessity emerges from within the will. The inevitable choice of one particular intention creates disproportion within the act of freedom itself. The object willed, what Blondel names as the “willed will” (*volonté voulue*), or the particular intention one has chosen as a specific goal or end, is confined, and is no longer proportional (equal) to the infinite power of willing, or, as he calls it, the “willing will” (*volonté voulante*). It is the disproportion within the will itself that becomes the dialectical principle between the two wills (willed will and willing will), and through which one finds oneself engaged in the phenomenon of action.

We would will to be self-sufficient; we cannot be. Against the determinism of willed action seems to rise an opposed determinism, one stronger and more evident still. We have only to follow everyday language to recognize it: the will does not seem to have willed itself; in what it wants it perpetually encounters invincible obstacles and odious sufferings; in what it does, incurable weaknesses or faults whose consequences it cannot repair insinuate themselves; and death, by itself, sums up all these teachings. Before we will and in all we will, then, there inevitably subsists something which, seemingly, we do not will. (Blondel 1984)

The ideal of freedom is the proportion between the wills, but the disproportion between the will's particular decision (the willed will) and the infinite power of the will (the willing will) is great enough that the will's natural trajectory is to search for a willed object less disproportionate to its infinite power of willing. "What we sense from the start, without having to be able to express it, is that the will is not content with any of the objects it has willed. There is always less in what is done or desired than in what is doing and desiring" (Blondel 1984). The willing desire for an object proportional to its infinite power of willing is the phenomenological site of the dynamism at work in the human person and the starting point for Blondel's account of human action. The conflict (polarity) developing within the will's desire and its execution is the source of the will's disproportion and reveals humanity's longing for the fullness and completion of action, and humanity's inability to achieve the desired proportion between the two wills on its own.

The speculative goal of *Action* (1893) was to articulate the distinction between real and notional knowledge through the dialectic of the wills and synthesize them in the phenomenon of action. In Blondel's work published after *Action* (1893), real knowledge, "knowledge by action", the "implicitly lived" (*implicite vécu*) is part of the rigorous rational dialectic in the intuitive encounter with the intrinsic life of being (Blondel 1922). It is our encounter with being itself or, as Oliva Blanchette observes, a "recognition of a higher order of being given in a world that contains it only in a finite way" (Blanchette 2010). In notional knowledge, with the "explicitly known", we exercise abstraction and employ concepts, images, and linguistic expressions to represent the objects we apprehend in our concrete experience of the real. Notional knowledge is necessary to create the distinction between the knowing subject and the object known and make explicit thought possible. Notional knowledge, Blondel argues, "is not in vain; it has its own truth and function; it is attached to another which is its secret condition and of which it makes possible its subsequent expression" (Blondel 1922). The distinction between notional and real knowledge comes into sharper focus when we understand the simple difference between the pictures of our vacation, which prompt our memories of the vacation, and the living (lived), real experience of the vacation, which cannot be replaced by pictures. Our pictures, as glossy, fun, and enjoyable as they might be to look at, and as useful as they might be in calling to mind our memories of the vacation, are incapable of replacing the living (lived) experience of the vacation.³ Here, what distinguishes real and notional knowledge is presence. In real knowledge, we encounter the presence of the real in a different way than our representations created through notional knowledge.

Blondel's account of real and notional knowledge was criticized by early twentieth-century Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, who thought notional knowledge deserved greater emphasis. In contrast to Maritain's Aristotelian-Thomistic epistemology, real knowledge is not "realism", the latter understood in the sense of a real correspondence between our notions, concepts, and representations of objects in the world. Real knowledge is an encounter, a discovery, or, as Blondel would call it in a late work, an "implication" with the "intelligence of higher truths and principles [that] alerts us to a certain disorientation between ourselves and the world of phenomena; it gives rise to a metaphysical wonder and moral consciousness that cuts us loose for speculation and action in a broader sense that somehow sets phenomena aside" (Blanchette 2010).

In *Le procès de l'intelligence*, Blondel suggests that real knowledge is a conscious awareness of God's presence and is characterized by stages of perfection, depth, and unity. Here, Blondel follows Augustine, Pascal, and Newman to a point, then, perhaps under the influence of Pierre Rousselot's (1878–1915) interpretation of Aquinas' epistemology, Blondel moves beyond these three figures and offers a modified version of Aquinas' account of judgment by connaturality which Rousselot observed was missing in Newman's *Grammar of Assent*. The objective of the dialectical process is to discern real knowledge's perfection, depth, and unity in its encounter with God's eternal presence in reference to being as other. Individuals encounter real knowledge through compassion and sympathy, what Blondel calls "*cognitio per passionem*". Real knowledge is receptive and open to the being of all

things, including the divine within the individual being of all things. However, “this is not an abstraction from the real, but rather a universalization of our sympathetic openness to share and receive from all” (Worgul 1985). The culminating moment of real knowledge is knowledge by action and synergy, knowledge by “connaturality”, as Aquinas puts it. It is the progressive recognition of God’s presence in the union of love that comes to expression in “faithful action”. Blondel’s point in distinguishing real and notional knowledge in the cognitive process is not to denigrate or usurp notional knowledge, instead, it is the occasion by which we recognize that conceptual knowledge does not exhaust reality, but rather enters into the dialectic of action in a synthetic process that opens reason to all that is real.⁴

We are aware that our knowledge is imperfect and incomplete, especially in our efforts to organize and grasp the world more clearly through conceptual (notional) knowledge. This awareness impels us toward real knowledge and ultimately toward a synthetic union without the confusion of notional and real knowledge in living thought. Blondel’s objective in distinguishing real and notional knowledge and locating their synthesis and unity in the concrete ontology of action was to prevent notional knowledge from the gnostic temptation of “rationalizing the spiritual life, or canonizing the temporal carnal order, as if the metaphysics of the sensible were moving on the same plain and were in composition with the sense of the invisible and with the kingdom of incarnate Wisdom” (Blondel 1922). The dialectical movement between real and notional knowledge devolves into ideology when it stalls within the purely notional moment of the process and fails to continue the movement toward synthetic unity with real knowledge in action. Consequently, it impedes the gift of divine wisdom from coming to expression in its fullest form within the whole process of cognition and the entire movement of intelligence that constitutes living thought.

4. Epistemic Affinities: Disproportion, Diversion, and Contingency

One way to bring into sharper focus the epistemic affinities between Pascal and Blondel is to read Blondel’s thoughts as phenomenologically teasing out the disproportion, diversion, and contingency Pascal observed in human beings and recorded in *Pensées*. From within this hermeneutical framework, the dialectic of the wills in the first three parts of Blondel’s *Action* (1893) delineates the disproportionate structure of the human soul practicing diversion and subsequently discovering its contingent nature.

As the dialectic unfolds the heteronomy of the will at various stages within the immanent order of reality, it returns again and again to the natural and social sciences, and also the personal and social institutions of the natural order (communal life, nation-state, and superstition), searching for action’s completion but discovering only diversions that pronounce its disproportion and affirm its contingency (Blondel 1984). Even though action cannot find its completion in the natural order, philosophy remains unrelieved of the task of demonstrating the impossibility and insufficiency of action in that order. In the Blondelian horizon then, the “fullness of philosophy consists, not in a presumptuous self-sufficiency, but in the study of its own powerlessness” (Blondel 1984).

The fourth part of *Action* (1893) takes up the metaphysics of action (ontology). The “Third Moment”, as Blondel describes it, explores action’s movement toward transcendence. It arrives at the one thing necessary, God, only after it has exhausted the natural, psychological, social, mathematical/empirical, and mystical explanations of the necessity of the phenomenon of human action. However, we must be careful not to interpret Blondel’s arrival at the one thing necessary as the logical outcome of a deductive argument. For Blondel “God is not the conclusion of a syllogism” (Somerville 1968). Rather, God is the inexorable and necessary source or principle of the dynamism of the will, present at the beginning and the end of action. Blondel’s arrival at God’s existence emerges from the impossibility of God’s non-existence. The process of acknowledging the impossibility of God’s non-existence has arisen through the conceptual interplay of revealing (presence) and concealing (absence) in the dialectic of action. For in revealing the impossibility of “absolute non-being”, Blondel is revealing the contingency of “relative being”. As he notes, the “idea of nothingness is not without the idea of something else. And the argument that might best be termed *ontological*

is this counterproof that establishes the impossibility of absolute non-being, by grounding itself on the insufficiency of relative being" (Blondel 1984).

Here we arrive at the key metaphysical theme that forms the overarching horizon within which the dynamism of action comes to expression: the distinction between finite and infinite being whereby the former is understood as possibly not having existed and the latter understood as possibly being all that there is, with no decrease in goodness or greatness. It is helpful to note the unusual way in which Blondel approaches the distinction. Unlike the traditional approach,⁵ in which God's formal features distinguish God's infinite being from a finite being, Blondel observes the formal feature of humanity, the heteronomy of its will. In doing so, he establishes the otherness of finite being to an infinite being, bringing into relief the condition of the possibility that humanity's participation in God's life does not reside in finite reality. Within the purview of finite reality's contingency, the necessity of being as such for the fulfillment of finite reality becomes the principal source of unity to human action. Blondel summarizes it this way: "Without [God], all is nothing and nothing cannot be. All that we will supposes that it is; all that we are requires that it be" (Blondel 1984). God, then, is the source of the unity of the wills that dwells within humanity but is not of humanity. This distinction, according to Blondel, derives from humanity's inability to achieve the proportion between spontaneous (free) and willed action. The argument for the insufficiency of all finite reality through human action is, in turn, an argument for the contingency of finite reality with the greater force coming through the immanent aspect of finite reality.

Pascal articulates his account of the insufficiency of finite existence in much less phenomenologically rigorous and much more cosmologically and existentially fraught terms. His encounter with the contingency of human existence took place in the deafening eternal silence of the infinite spaces of the universe. "I see the terrifying spaces of the universe hemming me in, and I find myself attached to one corner of this vast expanse without knowing why have I been put in this place rather than that, or why the brief span of life allotted to me should be assigned to one moment rather than another of all the eternity that went before me and that which will come after me" (Pascal 1995). The universe that disquieted Pascal was the early modern heliocentric universe whose newly discovered orbits had silenced the rotating planets of the divinely ordered medieval cosmos. In the modern, disenchanted universe, Pascal discerned the non-necessity of his own existence and through that insight discovered that the finite form of humanity is in need of an infinite (geometrical) medium for its existence: "Therefore I am not a necessary being. I am not eternal or infinite either, but I can see that there is in nature a being who is necessary, eternal and infinite" (Pascal 1995). Human beings tarry between nothingness and the Transcendent at the level of being and therefore are not transparent to themselves. They are neither angels nor beasts but are somewhere between, living in an intermediate state as bodily beings at one with the world, and at the same time, as embodied souls that are other to the world. "Man's dualism is so obvious that some people have thought we had two souls" (Pascal 1995). The dualism of human existence is a sign that something has gone wrong with humanity. "Man's greatness is so obvious that it can even be deduced from his wretchedness, for what is nature in animals we call wretchedness in man . . . He must have fallen from some better state which was once his own" (Pascal 1995). Humanity's dualism is a mark of its fall, brokenness, and also indicative of its potential, transfigured grandeur.

The epistemic affinities between Pascal and Blondel take a more explicit form in *Action* (1893) when Blondel alludes to the Latin Vulgate of Luke 10:42 and *Pensée* 270 in which Pascal observes that "God diversified this single precept of charity to satisfy our curiosity, which seeks diversity, through a diversity which always leads us to the one thing that is necessary for us" (Pascal 1995). For Blondel, when the will discovers its contingency it recognizes the "one thing necessary" that remains veiled.

In my action there is something I have not been able to understand and equal, something which keeps it from falling back into nothingness and which is something only in being nothing of what I have willed up to now. What I have voluntarily posited, therefore, can

neither surpass nor maintain itself. It is this conflict that explains the forced presence of a new affirmation in consciousness; and it is the reality of this necessary presence that makes possible in us the consciousness of this very conflict. There is a 'one thing necessary'. The entire movement of determinism brings us to this term, for it is from this term that the determinism itself begins, the whole meaning of which is to bring us back to it (Blondel 1984).

Only after human consciousness becomes aware of the natural and mystical diversions to which the phenomenon of human action is prone is it faced with an "alternative". The alternative consists of one of two possible choices, which resonate with the Hebrew scriptures (see Sirach 15:14–17 and Deuteronomy 30:19–20). The first belongs to the "Death of Action", the genuine exclusion of the infinite in favor of diversion. Having demonstrated the impossibility of humanity rectifying the disparity between its wills, the reconciliation must be brought about by a will totally other to finite reality. It is possible for humanity to refuse to reconcile the wills by making any particular diversion the ultimate end of its action. The living death of action ensues as a result of humanity's inability to see the infinite horizon of the good it pursues in action.

On the other hand, the "Life of Action" is emancipation from diversion through conscious affirmation that the human will, which includes the willed will and the willing will, cannot rectify itself by itself. For human action to be fully and truly free, it must freely conform its willed will to the will that is the source of its freedom. Blondel's Life of Action does not ascribe any positive content to the Transcendent. Instead, it postulates the necessary presence of the Transcendent hidden in the mystery of the human will. Reason can disclose the necessity of the Transcendent for the perfection and completion of action, but it can only show its necessity; it cannot disclose its content.

The existential option for the Life of Action that comes to expression at the end of *Action* (1893) in Blondel's declaration, "It is", is Blondel's personal testimony of faith that recovers real knowledge and sets it in the right relation to notional knowledge. For Blondel to affirm it is, even after postulating the hypothetical Transcendent as the necessary conclusion to the philosophy of action in *Action* (1893), is not to prove its real truth through notional knowledge alone. Alone, notional knowledge shows the necessity of posing the alternative: "Is it or is it not?" Notional knowledge discloses how this great question imposes itself upon humanity and notional knowledge demonstrates that we cannot pronounce for or against the Transcendent. However, notional knowledge "can go no further, nor can it say, in its own name alone, whether it be or not", Blondel says at the end of *Action* (1893) (Blondel 1984). The task of affirming whether it is or is not falls to real knowledge in relation to notional knowledge, to the living person in her lived experience, in whom the intellect (reason) resides in relation to the will, and where the synthesis between real and notional knowledge takes place within the "intimacy of totally personal action" (Blondel 1984).

5. Faith and Real Knowledge in Pascal and Blondel

Blondel's personal confession of faith at the end of *Action* (1893) is, like Pascal's, formulated in a way that assigns a preponderance of value to the dimension of real knowledge in the act of faith. For Pascal, faith is different from proof. "One is human and the other a gift of God . . . This is the faith that God himself puts into our hearts, often using proof as an instrument . . . But this faith is in our hearts, and makes us say not 'I know' but 'I believe'" (Pascal 1995). Faith is the result of an encounter with grace in the human person mediated through knowledge of the heart (real knowledge). The role real knowledge plays in the act of faith, for Pascal, means that the theological consequences of the Fall are present in humanity's encounter with the Transcendent. The ontological and epistemological implications of the Fall are in us "in whom this light has gone out and in whom we are trying to rekindle it, people deprived of faith and grace, examining with such light as they have everything they see in nature that might lead them to this knowledge, but finding only obscurity and darkness" (Pascal 1995). It is a tragedy of the Fall that human beings still naturally long for but lack the means by which they can render themselves proportionate to the divine love of the Transcendent. Yet, this anthropological paradox is a sign of hope.

It is a function of “ironic pedagogy” designed to raise awareness of one’s own ignorance, pathological avoidance, and also hope in God’s mediator (Hibbs 2017).

For both Pascal and Blondel, the epistemic implications of the Fall are disclosed through the tension that evidence for God is in nature, but God is hidden (*Deus absconditus*) (see Pascal 1954, pp. 509–11). When Scripture speaks, “it says that God is a hidden God, and that since nature was corrupted he has left men to their blindness, from which they can escape only through Jesus Christ, without whom all communication with God is broken off” (Pascal 1995). In a far less explicitly theological register than Pascal, Blondel calls attention to the impoverished pursuit of a hidden God through notional knowledge alone.

[T]he moment we seem to touch God through a trace of thought, He escapes us, if we do not keep Him, if we do not look for Him, through action. His immobility can be aimed at as a fixed goal only by a perpetual movement. Wherever we stop, He is not; wherever we walk forward, He is. It is a necessity always to go further because He is always beyond. As soon as we no longer wonder at Him as at an inexpressible newness, and as soon as we look at Him from the outside as a matter for knowing or a simple occasion for speculative examination, without youth in our heart or loving anxiousness, it is done with: all we have in hand is phantom and idol (Blondel 1984).

Pascal and Blondel were convinced that the desire for the Transcendent evinced hope in a mediator. Each in his own idiom understood hope in a mediator is elucidated from within the proper configuration of the relationship between real and notional knowledge.⁶ By design, the epistemic tragedy of the Fall, the apophatic reality of the Transcendent, and the recovery of real knowledge function as an index of hope in a mediator, who, for Pascal, orders the relationship between real and notional knowledge in the act of faith: “[k]nowing God without knowing our own wretchedness makes for pride. Knowing our own wretchedness without knowing God makes for despair. Knowing Jesus Christ strikes the balance because he shows us both God and our own wretchedness” (Pascal 1995).

Recovering real knowledge and setting it in the right relationship with notional knowledge was the framework through which Blondel interpreted Pascal’s involvement with Jansenism. Pascal’s involvement with Jansenism began with his attraction to its promotion of faith through real knowledge by means of moral and spiritual seriousness among the laity that involved the practices of frequent communion and intentional Christian community. However, when Pascal became a partisan polemicist mired in the trappings of Jansenism’s reaction to laxism, Jesuit casuistry, Pascal was in thrall to the abstractions of notional knowledge within Jansenism’s moral rigorism, theological anthropology, and penitential-sacramental approach to the spiritual life.⁷ Still, Pascal always emphasized God’s transcendence as a form of the elevation, not denigration, of humanity. In Pascal’s thought, Blondel observes, there is an “infinite distance which, even independently of any fall, leaves God beyond the normal grasp of any creature whatever, as the one, consequently, who loves freely and who alone can fill the abysses, but who would no longer be goodness and truth if he suppressed them” (Blondel 1923). Pascal had to oppose Calvin’s theory of predestination and its external nature as restricting divine providence and limiting the total transcendence of God. Pascal’s thought was indebted to, derived from, and resonated with Jansenist themes regarding the human condition, but paradoxically, Blondel contends, Pascal was “anti-Jansenist” in that he discovered humanity’s supernatural destiny is not an external imposition but a response to the gift of love and goodness that takes place in the soul’s encounter with the Transcendent through the Incarnation as it comes to expression in the living tradition (real knowledge). There is a clear sense in Pascal that God deigned to disclose to humanity in its temporal state the “historical, substantial, ontological character of the conditions and the very sources of [humanity’s] supernatural destiny” (Blondel 1923). The human soul’s encounter with the Transcendent in time is the result not of a necessity inherent in our humanity, but of “a gift that is really, historically, gratuitously divine” (Blondel 1923). Moreover, the encounter takes place primarily through practices (real knowledge) of the living tradition.⁸

Pascal's and Blondel's recovery of real knowledge's right relation to notional knowledge in modernity required rehabilitating the ontological dimension of belief (real knowledge) and reintegrating it as a central feature in relation to notional knowledge in the act of faith.⁹ For both thinkers, real faith is the result of an encounter with the Transcendent that takes place in the living, human person when real knowledge is set in the right relationship with notional knowledge, and becomes the organizing principle in which alone all that the person is and says has significance.

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Notes

- ¹ In an earlier article exploring philosophy's starting point and living thought, the distinction and synthesis between real and notional knowledge takes a more technical form of "prospection" for real knowledge and "reflection" for notional knowledge (See [Blondel 1997](#)).
- ² The original and first French version was published in 1893 after his doctoral defense at the Sorbonne (see [Blondel 1893b](#)). A second French version was published as two volumes in 1936 and 1937 as part of Blondel's trilogy on thought, being, and action. All references in this article are to the English translation and title ([Blondel 1984](#)).
- ³ In *Le procès de l'intelligence*, Blondel uses the example of the distinction between the explorer's notebooks and maps, which offer him tools to analyze, organize, remember, and understand the inexhaustible reality (*la réalité inépuisée*), the explorer's "lived experience", of the exploration (See [Blondel 1922](#), pp. 245–46.)
- ⁴ Blondel was fond of using the image of a cycloid and its movement to describe the dialectical tension between real and notional knowledge and its trajectory within other categories. The "cycloidal" method of his thought distinguished it from the circularity of reason in Idealism. Key to the image as an analog for thought is that a cycloid never becomes a circle. That is, it never returns to the same point. For Blondel's initial use of the image (see [Blondel 1997](#), p. 139). It is interesting to note the pedigree of the cycloid in Blondel's thought. Pascal published a number of papers and letters on the curve of the cycloid that are considered a genuine contribution to integral calculus. For Pascal's work on the cycloid, (see [Pascal 1954](#), pp. 180–83). Pascal's work on the cycloid was taken up by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), whose thoughts also had a profound influence on Blondel.
- ⁵ Here we have in mind Thomas Aquinas's important distinction in questions 3 and 7 of the *prima pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*, where he distinguishes between God's 'formal features' (simplicity and infinity) and God's 'attributes' (goodness, beauty, justice, and mercy), the former establishing God's otherness so the latter can be analogically predicated. For an excellent account of Aquinas's distinction.
- ⁶ Blondel discovered the idea of the *vinculum substantiale* in the thought of the early modern philosopher, mathematician, and polymath Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, and more specifically, in Leibniz's correspondence with Bartholomew des Bosses, a Jesuit theologian keen to reconcile Leibniz's philosophy with Christian doctrine and the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. For a philosophical introduction to the Leibniz and des Bosses correspondence, a detailed analysis of the *vinculum* and its relation to the problem of transubstantiation, and the English translation of the correspondence (see [Leibniz 2007](#), pp xix–lxxix). The idea would become the subject matter of Blondel's Latin thesis of 1893 and the idea from which the philosophy of action transpired as the link between thought and being, immanence and transcendence, and history and dogma. After these two works, it would unfold as a central theme around which his thought interweaves the trinitarian structure of history, the encounter between infinite and finite beings, the Eucharistic action of the church, and the notion of tradition as the bond between history and faith (see [Blondel 1893a](#)).
- ⁷ In his moral *Provincial Letters*, Pascal mocks and derides the laxist casuistry often associated with seventeenth-century probabilism and Jesuit morality from a Jansenist perspective and captures the highly divisive and caustic character of French Catholic culture indicative of the intense reformist activity taking place within the Catholic Church (see [Pascal 1954](#), pp. 659–945.)
- ⁸ For Pascal's influence on Blondel's account of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist as the true universal concrete reality see, ([Blondel 1946](#)).
- ⁹ Pascal's emphasis on real knowledge in the encounter with the Transcendent should make us wary of the common interpretation of Pascal's "Wager" as a cold Cartesian calculus aimed at a disinterested individual whose disengaged reason should accept it without objection.

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