

Article

From Circle to Cycloid: The Philosophical Value of Religious Cult in Maurice Blondel's *L'Action*

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Abstract: This article explores Maurice Blondel's (1861–1949) later notion of the “cycloid” of thought, particularly as this helps us to understand his earlier work *L'Action* (1893). The aim is to demonstrate how Blondel incorporates aspects of the Christian faith, particularly the Eucharist, into his philosophy without abrogating his “method of immanence”. In particular, the article shows how Blondel saw attention to the Christian spirit as essential to the development of a metaphysics that attends both to finite actions and to the action of God, *actus purus*.

Keywords: Maurice Blondel; idealism; sacramental theology; eucharist; Philosophy of Religion; secondary causality; cycloid; cult; superstition; revelation

1. Introduction

Speculative idealism is often associated with a particular shape, namely, the circle. Striving to get beyond his own inheritance, Ludwig Feuerbach says, “The circle is the symbol and the coat of arms of speculative philosophy, of the thought that rests on itself. Hegel's philosophy, too, as is well known, is a circle of circles” (Feuerbach 1986). Depicting a philosophical system as a circle is usually, as in Feuerbach's statement, intended to be derogatory of a style of thought that is pathologically self-referential even if logically consistent, but with a consistency that is based on its conclusions resting on its premises and vice versa. A circular system may be comprehensive in scope, but it is capable of encircling so many of the vagaries of human experience and the heterogeneity of nature by reducing them to its predetermined shape. Anything can fit into the circle, so long as it is made compliant.

Maurice Blondel (1861–1949), although equally a critic of what he calls the “idealist illusion”, thinks that human life is indeed incomplete until, as he says triumphantly at the end of *Action*, “*le cercle est fermé*” (Blondel 2007). Yet, although he is equally seeking to close the circle, and thus his critique of Spinoza, Hegel, and others is not based on their attempts to be speculatively comprehensive, Blondel claims that these idealist circles are incomplete because of their immobility, their inability to gain traction, to move forward. As he concluded his critique of it in 1898, the idealist illusion is precisely to think in the following way:

The abstract and the general are the rule of the concrete; the particular, the individual, and the subjective are eliminated from science. Nothing is seen unless it is in the form of an impersonal rationalism, by a thought that is fixed, rigid, gutless, without any opening, *without any movement*, without any suspicion of the inside of things, conceited, intolerant, and despotic (Blondel 1956).

Blondel is a thinker of the concrete, in search of an integral realism, and thus thinks of the circle not exclusively for its geometric perfection, but how its shape is uniquely suited to a particular task, namely, forward movement. A wheel will spin around its own axis without any forward progress if left in its ideal, undisturbed state. To move, it needs tension; it needs the resistance of the hard earth to stop its ineffectual cycle and to gain ground. The circularity of thought needs to be met by the resistance of life, of action,



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and it is only by living out one's ideas that they cease to be inert. Likewise, the ultimate error of much of modern philosophy, what Blondel calls its "radical vice", is the belief that "the speculative solution of the problem of life, under whatever forms it is presented, is equivalent or superior to the effective solution" (Blondel 1966c). For Blondel, on the other hand, the effective solution ultimately brings with it the speculative solution, but only when the wheel of thought is willing to traverse the whole range of human experience, including the initially unfamiliar ground of revealed religion.

Blondel did insist, from his earliest work to his latest, that he was a philosopher, not a theologian, and as such held to his "method of immanence" consistently. In other words, whatever may have been his own personal religious convictions, his philosophical work was deployed solely within the realm of phenomenologically available data. He aimed, as he said in the *Letter on Apologetics*, "not to fall into the temptation of using what he believes for the benefit of what he knows" (Blondel 1994). Nevertheless, no matter how insistent he may have been on this point, many view his seminal text from 1893, *Action*, as a text whose overt theological conclusions and apparent religious ambitions suffuse the entire work, rendering it suspect as a philosophical thesis. Here, we will analyze how theological themes are used in *Action*, particularly its controversial final section, Part V, especially with regard to how the Eucharist appears in this text and how it reflects his own evident Eucharistic devotion. The role of the Eucharist at the end of *Action* is misunderstood in two primary ways: either as an explicit importation of theological data into his philosophical project, that is, a theological takeover of philosophy, or as a pseudo-Hegelian rationalizing of the sacrament. Instead, using a notion he develops later, namely the idea of the cycloidal movement of thought, we can read *Action* as an example of how data from revelation, in this case the Eucharistic Host, can provide the circle of thought and life with the opportunity for cycloidal movement. Although there are implications on a wide range of issues, from the value of flesh, of symbolism, of sacrifice, here we will see how the cycloidal movement of philosophy as it crosses Eucharistic territory provides thought with the means for avoiding mono-causal metaphysics in favor of a plastic notion of causality in which secondary causality can cooperate with divine causality without compromising the integrity of either human or divine action. This is particularly relevant to Blondel's argument, not only in *Action* but equally in his later trilogy.

2. The Cycloidal Host and the Philosophy of Insufficiency

For Blondel to address the question of religious cult, particularly the sacrament of the Eucharist, does not make him an anomaly in modern philosophy. To the contrary, from the attempts to justify transubstantiation by Descartes and Leibniz, to the overarching philosophy of cult and speculative re-evaluation of the Lord's Supper in Hegel, to the denunciation of the superstitious nature of the sacraments in Spinoza and later Kant, it is clear that Blondel is following in a long line of philosophical attention given to Christ's body and blood under the form of bread and wine.¹ While some theological topoi, when read superficially, could be said to avoid a direct confrontation with philosophical speculation, the Eucharist enters quite directly into the discussion of the nature of, for instance, substances, particularly composite substances (and thus substantial bonds), of extension, and of the flesh. In the Eucharist, of course as a consequence of the Incarnation and following its logic, the supernatural takes on flesh, places itself as a challenge to notions of the constitution of the flesh, and of the flesh's availability to divine action.² What is unique about Blondel, then, is not that he included the Eucharist within the expanse of his philosophy, which is common, nor even how he wrote directly about the mechanism of the Eucharistic conversion, which he did even less than others, but how he allowed his own philosophical project to move forward, precisely as philosophy, by its confrontation with the Eucharistic Host.

First, let us consider the argument that Blondel was dissembling his apologetic and theological ambitions in *Action*, such that the idea of a "method of immanence" was simply a smokescreen disguising his primarily religious goals. As evidence for this, one only

needs to look at either the *Carnets intimes* or his *Lettres philosophiques* to see how his interior life revolved around Christ and the Eucharistic Host.³ And here, in these initially private writings, one can see that the sacrament plays a generative role for his conception of philosophy, particularly of metaphysics. For an example of his Eucharistic devotion, note that on November 11, 1889, Blondel wrote in his diary: “*Dulcus hospes animae*: host, that beautiful word with the double meaning that charity gives to it; receiving and received, it is all one, in the union of love” (Blondel 1961a). But his devotion was not unrelated to his intellectual life, as can be seen in a letter to Victor Delbos just a few months earlier, written after he had already begun writing the first draft of *Action*:

Where is the solution to the problem of immanence and transcendence? It is in the Incarnation and Communion. The monist confusion of finite and infinite is only an abortion, a vague forgery of unity. The ideal of unity is found in the Host, which sums up in itself the whole of nature, the fat of the earth, dewdrops, sun rays, before, by a type of perfect nutrition, it becomes humanity and even divinity in order to form in us a new being, a reality, so to speak, more than divine, a truly universal synthesis (Blondel 1961b).

This letter, in addition to anticipating his later notion of Panchristism, seems to suggest that the resolution to essentially philosophical dilemmas is only ever realized in the Person of Christ and in the sacramental system of the Church.⁴ Yet, a closer look at *Action* reveals a different procedure than merely a philosophical prelude to a foregone theological conclusion. These religious motivations behind the composition of *Action* do not negate his philosophical method, as a religious datum is being used not insofar as it is divinely revealed, but insofar as it is phenomenologically available. This will only be understood when we turn later to his notion of the cycloid.

The other misreading of how religious cult functions in *Action* is that it is a reduction of supernatural revelation to the level of reason. This was, in fact, why many scholastic theologians were wary of Blondel’s work, as they could not see how his method was not a naturalizing of the supernatural, a diminution to the contours of reason of what is discovered by revelation and understood only by faith. That is to say, there is not enough daylight between the methods of Blondel and Hegel. Undoubtedly, Blondel’s phenomenology is not wholly dissimilar from the German idealist’s, and comparisons between the two are rightly to be made.⁵ The argument would then be the following: just as Hegel, particularly in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, argues that the Lord’s Supper is the moment at which Spirit truly comes as the community—the *Gemeinschaft*, in which God exists as and within the communal Spirit—so for Blondel, concrete religious cult, which is specified as the Catholic Eucharist, is the necessary means for the completion of the dialectic of action. In both cases, what was originally considered to be a datum of supernatural revelation is now rendered into a common phenomenon, one understood not by faith but by a speculative system that has the sophistication capable of showing the true meaning of a sacrament. The result would be an epistemological and ontological Baianism whereby the supernatural becomes a constituent part of nature, thereby being owed to it as a simple matter of justice.

Although this reading is equally a misreading, it correctly notes that the sacrament does in fact aid Blondel’s strictly philosophical reflection. How this aid is actually given, however, is what is misunderstood. There are a variety of ways in which Blondel later clarifies his method of immanence and its relationship to religious dogmas, particularly his concept of a “philosophy of insufficiency”, which he explains in depth in his 1932 “Le problème de la philosophie catholique” (Blondel 1932).⁶ More illuminating for our purposes here is his later notion of a cycloidal movement of thought, a term he begins to use throughout his later trilogy (1934–1937), and which is developed and deployed with regard to theological themes most explicitly in *La Philosophie et l’Esprit chrétien* (1944).⁷ The notion of the cycloid is also best considered as a further specification of the insufficiency of philosophy, as the higher modes of thought circle back around not only to complete philosophy, but also to expose its gaps, to show its radical insufficiency. The cycloid is

used in *L'Être et les êtres*, for example, to discuss how human personhood emerges out of being, without either negating lower forms of being or being presupposed by them. Note, in particular, how even in this philosophical discussion, sacramental vocabulary is utilized: “Thus personal life is not just something superadded to an edifice that would already be stable, and in a sense, complete without it; is it not rather a cycloidal movement? Does it not descend down below in order to draw up above, to lift and carry along with itself the entire mass on which it is based and nourished in order to transubstantiate it in some way?” (Blondel 1935). Even within this immanent frame, Blondel locates a cycloidal movement, whereby personhood, at the top of the wheel, moves around back towards the bottom in order to raise what was below up to new heights.

This is then transferred to the question of theology most explicitly in *La Philosophie et l'Esprit chrétien*, though we will see that, retrospectively, it also provides something of a hermeneutical key to *Action* fifty years earlier. In these late works, he notes that his method of analyzing the Christian spirit in a philosophical register is not, perhaps despite all appearances, theology. He intends to keep Christian revelation and philosophical reason as distinct, even if the main goal is to show how the two are reciprocally enriching, how they work together symbiotically, as a consortium.⁸ At the very outset of the first volume, he notes that the cycloidal viewpoint allows for philosophy to be enriched in its speculative range, its set of explicit questions, by theological data, as well as to be aided in arriving at insights that belong within the domain of the method of immanence, even if they were first discovered elsewhere (Blondel 1950a).⁹ Because the Christian spirit shows itself fully within the world, it is an object of phenomenological analysis as is anything else, making it a suitable philosophical object. Thus, while the volumes of *La Philosophie et l'Esprit chrétien* look very much like theological treatises, given that they analyze the Trinity, Christ, the Church, and the sacraments, Blondel is here intending to analyze the philosophical relevance of the Christian spirit, for even if it is not philosophically certain that God has revealed himself in Christ (and thus Blondel does maintain some idea of philosophy as, at least initially, *etsi Deus non daretur*), it is the case that Christianity, its spirit, its dogma, and its artefacts exist for all to see.¹⁰ Undoubtedly, a philosophy of the Hindu spirit would be equally open to this kind of analysis, but for reasons that will become clear, Blondel thinks that the Christian spirit is uniquely capable of reinforcing a dynamic and open mode of philosophizing, such that an open philosophy and the Christian spirit come together into a “conjugal union” (Blondel 1950a).¹¹

Consider how a cycloid functions: it is the movement that follows a point on a wheel in motion, such that the top of the wheel circles around towards the ground, and then immediately moves upward again as the wheel moves forward.¹² For Blondel, the cycloid is a figure of that critical interplay between thought and action, the high and the low, with each presupposing the other and immediately following the other, the alternation of which is required for any forward movement. What is also required, if it is not to spin in place, is the confrontation of reason with revelation: “Now the frictions between natural reason and Revelation are comparable to those moments of resistance without which our life would get stuck in place, while it is the resistant and even rocky ground that provides our advance with support and with opportunities for momentum and progress, rather than with obstacles” (Blondel 1950a). The tension that philosophy feels when confronted with the Incarnation, for instance, can be a moment for forward progress, for a deepening of properly philosophical considerations, when otherwise it would have remained spinning in place. Content of a supposed divine origin, even if not accepted as divine, can elevate, expand, and clarify what is natively possible, at least in theory, for philosophical thought.

The cycloid can help illuminate Blondel's expanded use of the *Vinculum* and his repeated confessions that he considered the Eucharist to be uniquely capable of clarifying the tension between immanence and transcendence. We could say that, indeed, from his earliest work to the latest, Blondel is advocating for what could be called a “sacramental metaphysics”, a metaphysics sharpened and shaped by confrontation with a dominically established cult.¹³ It is necessary, however, to see how he comes to this conclusion, par-

ticularly in his seminal work, *Action*. Blondel knew that thought can easily drift towards monisms of all kinds, and it would be a mistake to read *Action* as if the argument reaches a level of apodictic certainty or some sort of self-evidentiary status that he expected would be universally accepted. His major conclusions in Part V about the completion of action in a supernaturally established religious cult are, he says, based not on the affirmation that this is the case, but that it is possible (Blondel 2007). Thus, his sacramental metaphysics (his “metaphysics to the second power”) functions likewise as a possible, though unnecessary, conclusion that can only be verified or falsified via action. Blondel’s famous thesis is, to be sure, that the supernatural is both necessary and impossible, but “necessity” here should not be interpreted as logical necessity, but an existential necessity, or perhaps something like Thomas Aquinas’ *conveniens*, something like an aesthetic necessity (Blondel 2007).¹⁴ On the other hand, however, this non-necessary conclusion is not lacking in any certitude, but it is a certitude available only to those who not only *speculate* about the end of action, but who arrive at the completion of the dialectic of action in actual fact, with deeds that require no little asceticism and mortification: “The conclusion of a science of action, then, must not be: ‘Here is what should be thought or believed or done’; what is that? It must be to actually act. That is everything, everything lies therein”.¹⁵

Even without an actual revelation, it is still possible, according to Blondel, to have a robust distinction between created and uncreated being, a view in which primary and secondary causality are in no way conflictual, and a conviction that if God were to make himself available, it would be in concrete cult. There are numerous historical examples of philosophical or religious thought arriving at precisely these, or proximate, conclusions. However, while it is a possibility to arrive at this conclusion without revelation, concrete religious practice insists upon such a conclusion, at least if one prizes consistency between rational discourse and human action, as of course Blondel did. And though he seems to only have discovered Thomas Aquinas’ writings in any depth in 1910, his position in *Action* is not so different from Aquinas’ answer to the question of why revelation includes things that could hypothetically be discovered by reason alone. Thomas’ answer is that, without revelation, the truths of God would only be known by few people, and with much difficulty, and with an admixture of many errors (Aquinas 1947). The sacramental metaphysics that Blondel develops in *Action* is not a product of revelation per se, but it is certainly strengthened by it according to the cycloidal mode of thought.

3. The End of Action

To understand why the cycloidal method is not an abrogation of his method of immanence, nor a rationalizing of the supernatural, we can reread *Action*, particularly Part V, to see how sacramental themes enter within the sphere of rational reflection in order to elevate it to where it could have, at least theoretically, arrived on its own. As he says in the *Letter on Apologetics*, and we should trust that this applies to *Action* just three years prior, a philosopher cannot “start off covertly on the basis of one’s faith and then pretend to reach it for the first time, and one can no longer keep one’s beliefs discreetly at a distance from one’s own thinking” (Blondel 1994). A cycloidal movement, even one that traverses the Incarnation and the Eucharist, does neither.

It is only in the fifth and final part of *Action*, “The Completion of Action”, where Blondel begins, although with trepidation and most often with metonymy and with allusion rather than a direct naming, to analyze Christian practice and dogma as a “hypothesis” presented to human thought, as something potentially “revealing” and not as assuredly “revealed” (Blondel 2007). His justification for including the Christian spirit in his analysis at this point is that his goal throughout *Action* was to follow the movement of the human spirit through its various pathways, including its missteps, its credulity, and its overall tendency towards superstition. After having noted that heteronomy was a *conditio sine qua non* of authentic human action, despite all warnings from Kant, he follows human action through its desire for friendship, its movement towards communal life and the family, and finally to various attempts that humans make to complete action. This Augustinian *cor*

inquietum does not have an obvious terminus within the world, though human actions indicate that we, almost as an inevitability, attempt to bring action to its conclusion, to close the gap between the concrete determinations of the will (the “willed will”, *la volonté voulue*) and the infinite capacity for willing (the “willing will”, *la volonté voulante*), within the finite sphere rather than by transcending it. This is why Blondel’s analysis of superstition at the end of Part III is essential to understanding Part V, for the possibility of a non-superstition completion of human action explored in Part V can only be grasped fully when humanity’s inexorably superstitious behavior is relentlessly exposed.

Blondel presents the search for the completion of human action in all its forms, in all the ways in which humanity seeks to find a match between the infinite capacity for willing and an actual object of the will. Thus, before arriving at the Eucharist, he tests other cults, other superstitions, for their capacity to complete human action. Instead of arguing for the legitimacy of cultic practice, Blondel produces trenchant and insistent critiques of superstition that would have been the envy of any Protestant Reformer protesting against the sacramental system of Catholicism or of any Enlightenment *philosophe* holding in disdain the religious barbarism and fetishism of those who remain in their self-imposed intellectual infancy. The notion of “cult”, as it first appears in *Action*, is pronounced without any affection and with a lively awareness of the abuses towards which the cultic practitioner inevitably drifts. While Blondel never studied or commented on Feuerbach with any seriousness, the following demonstrates that Blondel too knew that cult often is nothing more than auto-affection, a form of self-divinization in which the ideal self is projected onto an external object: “The object of cult, then, somehow projected and created before the adorer, like a mirror wherein the will can reflect its full image and its whole warmth, is only an occasion for the will to know itself better and to learn to equal itself” (Blondel 2007). Cult, in its first instance, short-circuits the dialectic of action, which now seeks to close off the transcendent orientation of the will by remaining satisfied with itself, turning the worshipper into another Narcissus, ignorant that the object of cult is none other than the self. Feuerbach’s insight is then in no way rejected by Blondel, but rather honored as a correct evaluation of much of human religiosity, at least as religiosity stops short of rather than reaches its transcendent end. Feuerbach will need to be overcome, but he must first be proven correct. Throughout Part III of *Action*, we could say that Blondel cycles through, repeats, and validates all the critiques of Catholic sacramentality that have accumulated in the four centuries that had elapsed since the Reformation.

In addition to Feuerbach, the critiques of superstition made by Enlightenment *philosophes*, Immanuel Kant,¹⁶ and Auguste Comte¹⁷ are all given voice by Blondel. Although it was Voltaire who said that “superstition puts the whole world in flames, philosophy extinguishes them” (Voltaire 2010), that is also essentially Blondel’s program in *Action*. Arguably, however, Blondel’s critique is all the more incisive and poignant, for he aims to show that not only the obviously grotesque religious abuses count as superstition, but that even the supposed philosophical triumph over concrete religious rites is itself evidence of superstition. Thus, whereas Voltaire happily looks forward to a community of philosophers in which superstition will be nothing but a bad memory, Blondel’s critique is more searching, for he finds it even in its seeming absence:

There is perhaps more credulity and intolerance hidden in sectarian negation than in violent fanaticism. . . In the order of phenomena, there is no contradiction or exclusion, no possibility or impossibility; there are simply determinate facts. But the moment that, from these facts, one claims to draw a negation bearing on the very possibility of other facts, one abandons science and facts. The most impious are still superstitious (Blondel 2007).

The facile critique of superstition by these philosophers is, for Blondel, evidence that superstition has triumphed indeed, given that one has decided to close off all possibilities and to fetishize that which is at the expense of what could be, especially given that the phenomenon of human action seems to indicate the necessity of a supernatural order.

The modern philosopher, whether a skeptic, a Deist, or a mechanist, is correct to highlight the powerlessness of finite action to produce on its own a supernatural effect, but he errs in then making a metaphysical claim about this being theoretically impossible: “A powerlessness can be observed, but not an impossibility” (Blondel 2007). Blondel, in *Action*, wants to stay with what is observable within the immanent domain, which is finite action and it alone, but at this stage he leaves it as an open question what *les philosophes* dismiss with prejudice, namely, the cooperation of finite action with a supernatural cause, or stated more particularly, the existence of a genuine divine cult. What philosophy can indeed demonstrate is that finite action is powerless to achieve that which the human will seems to demand, but the realization of this powerlessness stems from the possibility of its realization. That is to say, superstition is instructive of the fact that human action seems to act as if the infinite can be contained within the finite, although ironically it then demonstrates that the infinite is indeed beyond human capacity. Though less obviously so than previous iterations, it is the great superstition of the modern philosopher to lend to these finite facts, even the total network of all finite facts, a coherence and absoluteness that they do not possess. Part III of *Action* concludes with the tragedy of the fact that humans seem to need concrete religiosity, rather than a vague sense of the divine, but that any actual example of this closure of human willing for the sake of a particular cult only signals the death of action.

Part IV of *Action* shows the inevitability of the question of God, of that concern for the One Thing Necessary (*l'unique nécessaire*), and of either deciding, and thus acting, in its favor, which would lead to the completion of action, or of denying it, which is the death of action. Living and acting, then, with one's will open to the divine will may be the best that humans can in fact achieve, as this would be the dialectic of action carried out with the utmost seriousness and responsibility, resulting in an expectation of something that is impossible to realize by human action alone. There is still something utterly tragic about this “deeply felt expectation of an unknown messiah”, this “baptism of desire”, for the innate movement towards literal practice will have to be subjugated and denied, as no non-superstitious mode of cult has been found (Blondel 2007). And thus, while superstition could be avoided, and one can, and indeed must, abnegate the self in favor of God and the divine will, this does not constitute anything like a public, concrete religion, but a private asceticism and mortification with the hope, but not the actuality, of fulfillment. Part V, then, introduces the *possibility* of human action being completed not only in a state of expectation, but in actual fulfillment, a baptism not only of desire, but of water.

The fifth and final part of *Action* begins with an appeal for the expansiveness of the philosophical enterprise. It has the responsibility of investigating everything that falls under its purview, and thus Hegel is not wrong to search out philosophical insights in ancient and contemporary cultural and religious forms, as he does in his *Philosophy of History*, even if Blondel would disagree about Hegel's particular interpretations. If we are to allow everything to betray some truth, no matter how imperfectly, and thus analyze the wisdom of the Upanishads for indications of philosophical questions and answers, for example, then Christianity's particular wisdom and practices should equally fall under the consideration of the philosopher. As he says, “It would be strange if it were scientific to study the letter and the spirit of all cults except one” (Blondel 2007). Of course the great German philosophers have always included Christianity as an object of reflection, as seen in Kant, Fichte, Hegel, and Schelling, although France at the end of the nineteenth century was far less hospitable to the notion of Christian faith as a bearer of philosophical interest.¹⁸ Thus, Blondel means to look at Christianity, particularly its religious cult, not as if it were actually divine, a decision that is beyond the bounds of the method of immanence, but in its own claims to be divine. Like the German philosophers, Blondel believes that the scope of philosophy's circle must include everything that is available within the immanent sphere, including Catholic sacramentality. The difference, however, is that Blondel does not think that these other philosophies have allowed sacramentality to actually provide resistance that would turn their circular movements into a progressing cycloidal movement. For

Blondel, on the other hand, philosophy is indeed capable of expanding the immanent frame to its own limits, to help it reach an awareness of its own insufficiency, with the help of content that may have origins beyond the immanent frame. Again, the philosopher cannot decide that Christian cult is positively of a divine institution, but she can analyze the claim about that institution, and decide whether or not, were that claim to be found truthful, it would fulfill the exigencies of human action, thus bringing action to its supernatural and still-cultic fulfillment, all the while avoiding superstition.

It is only here, at the very end of *Action*, that we begin to see, to use Mario Antonelli's term, that the Eucharist is the "keystone" to Blondel's philosophical apologetics in *Action* (Antonelli 1991).¹⁹ Architecturally, the keystone is the last to be added to the arch, though it was intended from the beginning. Likewise, the Eucharist was *primum in intentionem* and *ultimum in executionem* in Blondel's construction of *Action*. Nevertheless, the Eucharist as keystone is only a hypothetical possibility for the dialectic of action, for it may be the case that there is no keystone at all, no given stability and terminus to the human desire to take hold of the infinite in a finite form. The analysis of the Eucharist is simply to note that the Christian cult could in fact function as a legitimate keystone, as fitting the narrow requirements of the arch, if indeed it is what Christians claim it to be. For Blondel's own life, this was verified in action, by his own literal practice of Christian cult, to which he remained faithful. *Action* does not decide whether or not it is indubitably the keystone, but rather recommends that the only means of verification or falsification is by liturgical action. With Pascal undoubtedly in mind, Blondel says "*fac et videbis*", do and you will see, for "it is not from thought that faith passes over into the heart, it is from practice that it draws down a divine light for the spirit. God acts in this action and that is why the thought that follows the act is richer by an infinity than that which precedes it. It has entered into a new world where no philosophical speculation can lead it or follow it" (Blondel 2007). It is action, here specified as sacramental action, that moves thought cycloidally farther than it is natively capable of travelling. The sacramental actor speaks, as it were, philosophically, enacting a worldview via action.

Philosophy, not even the philosophy of action, is capable of establishing preconditions to which revelation must conform, which would be to naturalize the supernatural. This is the case because Blondel had already established that mortification and abandonment to the divine will is the proximate terminus to action, and thus the final step cannot be the easy recognition of a particular cult that happily fits all expectations. In this respect, we can see Blondel's honesty: after rising above the temptation to superstition, should we not expect that the completion of action would be something rather elevated, a religiosity with minimal ritual practices, something more akin to Vipassana meditation than a mediatory priesthood, a diversity of initiatory rites, and with a culturally specified *sacramentum sacramentorum*? How could revelation "enclose itself in the letter of a symbol, a rite, or a sacrament without changing the purity of the interior sense into idolatry?" (Blondel 2007). He then goes on to demonstrate that a philosophy of action can indicate that the "cry of nature" is not abolished or sublated, and thus that all the essential steps of the dialectic of action from earlier in the text are not abrogated, but finally grounded within the firmness of a revelation that is as corporeal as it transcendent. That is to say, a true revelation would be communal, it would be bodily, and thus would be a communion in the social order as well as a communion with the divine. Again anticipating his later affinity for Thomas Aquinas, here Blondel is insistent that a revelation would be made in accordance with our finitude, particularly as this is constituted bodily and in the mode of action.²⁰ It would certainly also be dogmatic, that is, it would meet the need for knowledge, but as with all knowledge, it would be a knowledge that flows from and returns to literal practice, to concrete norms and acts. In particular, this divinely sanctioned literal practice would confirm the basic law of all religious striving, namely, the necessity of sacrifice. This can be confirmed by any anthropologist, and Blondel does not attempt to construct a religion wholly discontinuous with natural religiosity, for it would be no use, he suggests, to have a revelation that destroys the recipient rather than elevating and perfecting him. Thus,

“Sacrifice is the solution to the metaphysical problem through the experimental method”, which is ultimately a double sacrifice, the sacrifice of God to accommodate his breadth to our finitude, and the sacrifice of humanity that goes through all of materiality in order to reach the immaterial God (Blondel 2007).

4. Conclusions: The Discovery of Coaction

Without going into any further detail about Blondel’s attempt to open a space for the philosophical possibility of a non-idolatrous literal practice, one that seemingly only the concrete singularity of Christ and his dispensed flesh could meet, we can return to how this philosophy functions as a cycloid.²¹ We briefly traced the movement towards the Eucharistic conclusion, but now we must look back to see how that conclusion strengthened and confirmed his philosophical positions made earlier. Again, those were decisions that are possible, though not necessary to detached philosophical speculation, as every type of exaggerated idealism or empiricism would easily confirm. In this brief conclusion, one such example of how this cycloid functions for Blondel will be held up as of particular importance, although others could be explored as well. This also returns us to our first quote, which stated that it is the sacramental Host that helps us to avoid metaphysical monisms. The subtle argument operative throughout *Action* is a defense of the integrity of finite action, as well as its capacity to participate in divine action. Blondel names this variously as secondary causality, coaction, assimilation, cooperation, symbiosis, and synergy, all of which are not only preconditions for sacramental practice but also for a philosophically dense notion of human action. Without hyperbole, in fact, it is not mistaken to see secondary causality and its cognates as Blondel’s original and perduring insight, operative throughout all his major texts and in the disputations that preoccupied him throughout his life. This is also why, no matter the losses in style, in inspiration, or in intellectual fervor,²² the later Blondel of the trilogy also results in certain advances in precision. In *Action I* of 1936, for instance, Blondel reframes the goal of his philosophy of action precisely within the tension between God as *actus purus*, and thus primary causality, and the secondary, and thus not illusory, causality of finite creatures. While this could be read as an unfortunate capitulation to the pressures he experienced by then-regnant Thomists, it is better to see this in continuity with his lifelong engagement with Spinoza, Leibniz, and Malebranche, who show him that his philosophy of action must be situated within the broader issue of metaphysics. Blondel was always drawn to each of these figures, but no matter how much he could read them with a generous spirit, in the end he always interpreted each one as drifting inevitably towards different varieties of a metaphysical monism, towards a mono-causal metaphysical landscape. Note, in particular, how it was Leibniz’s Eucharistic speculations that *almost* salvaged his metaphysical ambitions.²³

While Blondel did earlier attempt to distinguish Malebranche from Descartes, noting the religious impulses of the former, Malebranche’s occasionalism would also render an analysis of all the vagaries, contradictions, and advances of human action superfluous (Blondel 1966a).²⁴ In the second volume of the later *Action* in 1937, Blondel clearly has a Malebranchian occasionalism in mind when he writes: “let us again try to see how far, hypothetically, the divine condescension could go in order to allow secondary causes to participate in the First Cause” (Blondel 1963). Yet, even if it is usually named otherwise, the problematic of “secondary causality” is evident throughout the *Action* of 1893.²⁵ This is the case not only in his explicit discussion of “coaction” and “cooperation”, but in his claim about a synergy in which an action done by both by God and by man is “entirely the work of each cooperator” (Blondel 2007).²⁶ That is to say, a guiding force for all of Blondel’s thought was the plasticity and plurality of the notion of causality, given that he assiduously critiqued any and all mono-causal monisms, whether of the idealist or materialist variety. And it seems that it is in sacramental practice in particular that Blondel learned that divine action and human action are not dialectically posed against one another, but exist for a *concursum*, for a cooperation that brings human action to its proper end. This insight is also evident in the numerous debates that occupied Blondel’s life, of which we can note the

following examples: his critique of both historicism and extrinsicism in his *History and Dogma* was based on their mono-causal understanding of Tradition: either only historical manifestation without transcendent truths (as in modernism) or only supernatural truths without real historical origins (as in extrinsicism). Likewise, his later intervention in social questions with his critique of monophorism was based on his insistence that political questions, too, cannot be reduced to a single, theocratic influx, but instead demand a “double afference”, a cooperation between human striving and the intervention of grace (Blondel 2000; Bernardi 2009).

What the hypothetical possibility of Christian sacramentality offered to Blondel’s thought was a commitment to a cooperative understanding between God and creation, between *actus purus* and human action, between theology and philosophy, and ultimately between dogma and history and Church and society. The cycloidal movement of sacramentality functions so as to hold apart what thought so often fuses together. Just as Christian religious cult is considered to be of divine institution, thus to originate in grace and revelation, and yet to also be the actions of concrete human actors, namely priests, communicants, and catechumens, so the idealist tendency towards determinism and a synthetic presentation of the necessity of historical movement need not negate the freedom of the human will and the contribution made by human actors. The monistic interpretation is indeed the easier one, but when thought confronts the resistant ground of sacramentality and moves across its terrain, Blondel insists that then philosophy learns of the duty to investigate the possibility that finite beings could actually bear the dignity of cooperating freely with a primary and sovereign cause. Blondel’s philosophical devotion to the Christian cult was not primary to prop up or sanction one particular religious expression, but instead to save and legitimize the philosophical relevance of finite human action, without which the completion of action in sacramental practice would be seen as purely extrinsic to human dynamism. We can conclude with a quote from volume two of the later *Action*: “Through literal practice a new spirit seeps in: the feeling of a god who does not only demand a tribute, like an egotistical and fierce tyrant, but one who expects of human actions that they be what they should be, as if their perfect and regular performance were necessary to the order that he desires, and to total harmony” (Blondel 1963).²⁷ It may be that we only honor human action in all its glory, which includes both its momentous capacity for self-determination and its utter limitation, when that action is specified as inchoately sacramental and teleologically oriented towards communion: “Every act tends to become a communion” (Blondel 2007).

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Notes

- ¹ For a survey of much of this history, with particular attention devoted to Blondel, see (Tilliette 2023).
- ² This is how Blondel characterizes how Descartes is confronted by the question of transubstantiation. See (Blondel 1966b).
- ³ Oliva Blanchette comments in detail about the frequency of Blondel’s attendance of Mass throughout his life in (Blanchette 2010).
- ⁴ Another example, from his *Carnets intimes* on 9 January 1886: “Je ne sais parler que de ce dont j’ai comme un souvenir personnel, que de ce que j’ai ressenti ou souffert. Il faut que je puisse parler d’une théorie philosophique comme d’une aventure que je conte en lettre, en conversation. . . Le pur abstrait n’existe pas pour moi. J’ai besoin du contact, de la matière, de la chair et du sang. *Si vous ne m’aviez pas donné votre Pain, rien ne m’aurait soutenu à quelque hauteur.* Je ne comprends rien au formalisme kantien, à la superstition austère du devoir, aux exigences délicates de l’honneur. Je serais tombé au plus bas, au plus sale. Vous me sauvez”. (Blondel 1961a).
- ⁵ He has, indeed, been called the “French Hegel”. For a close comparison of the major works of Blondel and Hegel, see (Henrici 1958).

- 6 This philosophy of insufficiency is also a major theme in (Blondel 1934). The idea of an insufficiency inherent to philosophy is found already in (Blondel 2007, 1994). Note (Blondel 1994, p. 155): “there must be some trace of this insufficiency, this impotence, this demand in man simply as man, and an echo of it even in the most autonomous philosophy”.
- 7 Particularly the first volume, (Blondel 1950a). See pp. 29–31, 100–1, and esp. 225–33.
- 8 See (Blondel 1950b, p. 297; 1950a, p. 30) for detailed discussion.
- 9 Thus, although Blondel and Gilson did indeed oppose one another in the 1930s regarding the question of Christian philosophy, Blondel’s position does not exclude Gilson’s (such that philosophy is Christian because revelation has historically been the means for introducing new philosophical issues), but rather presupposes it, even if Blondel’s main aim was to expound the insufficiencies of philosophy and he differed regarding the terminology (“christian” vs “catholic” philosophy). For these “Christian philosophy” debates, see (Sadler 2011).
- 10 Note how this position is consonant with his earlier critique of “extrinsicism”, whereby Christianity would most certainly *not* be found within the historical flux of the world, but would float above it in a quasi-Docetic manner.
- 11 (Blondel 1950a, p. ix): “chacune d’elles [philosophy and the Christian spirit] conserve une initiative originale en même temps que chacune prepare ou stimule une coopération et, à vrai dire, une sorte d’hymen pour une union féconde. . . dans une coopération comparable à une sorte d’union conjugale”.
- 12 Note that both Leibniz and Pascal were concerned with some of the mathematical issues involved with the cycloid, which may be the source of Blondel’s interest. Blondel explicitly mentions Pascal’s work on the cycloid in (Blondel 1950a, p. 225).
- 13 For the importance of Blondel’s insistence on the importance of metaphysics, particularly as this places him in conversation with contemporary phenomenology, see (Ciraulo 2021).
- 14 Thus, although it does signal a change that he ceases to use “necessary” in the second version of *Action* in 1936–1937, he is also reacting to ways in which “necessity” was largely misunderstood in the 1893 text.
- 15 Thus, in addition to being called a sacramental metaphysics, or even a Christic one, we could call it a metaphysics of mortification: “Mortification, then, is the true metaphysical experiment, the one that touches on being itself”. (Blondel 2007).
- 16 Kant is named and his definition of superstition is cited in (Blondel 2007, p. 293).
- 17 Comte is obviously on Blondel’s mind when he speaks of those who, after critiquing superstition, still need “rituals, and this counterfeit of the ceremonies of a real cult. . .” and when the apotheosis of man is aimed for as the “messianic coming of Reason or the attempt at a positive religion of Humanity”. (Blondel 2007, p. 291).
- 18 For the influence of German philosophy on Blondel, see (McNeill 1966).
- 19 The other major work tracing the role of sacramentality in *Action* is (Doherty 2017).
- 20 In particular, I am thinking of the Thomistic axiom that *quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*. Blondel alludes to this axiom in (Blondel 1949, p. 176).
- 21 As already noted, Blondel does not use the term “cycloid” until much later, but the concept of the circularity of thought and its need to become a moving circle is present throughout *Action*. “And because action always brings new nourishment to thought, as thought brings new lights to action, this moving circle does not stop and does not close in on itself. Speculation and practice are always at once in advance and in arrears of one another. . .” (Blondel 2007, p. 274). See also (Blondel 2007, pp. 158, 176).
- 22 As Henri Bouillard puts it, “The Trilogie. . . is burdened with repetitions, words of caution, backtracking. The dialectic has lost its bite and the style its brilliance and movement. These faults can be explained in part by the fear of objections and the concern for avoiding misunderstandings”. (Bouillard 1969, p. 41).
- 23 Blondel was much more optimistic about the role that the *Vinculum Substantiale* played in Leibniz’s philosophy in his second dissertation of 1893, but his later edition of his book on Leibniz showed more precisely how Leibniz failed to follow the possibilities of the *Vinculum* to their natural conclusions. The French translation of the Latin thesis is (Blondel 1972), and Blondel’s later edition is (Blondel 1930). It is impossible to separate Blondel’s own philosophy, particularly his Eucharistic philosophy, from his lifelong engagement with Leibniz. As he later wrote, “my long thesis on *Action* became, as it were, the prolongation and complement of my short Latin thesis. . . [action] seems to be the *Vinculum* in act” (Blondel 1930, pp. 131–32).
- 24 Even in this (Blondel 1966a) (originally from 1916), which is a mostly positive portrayal of Malebranche, he does speak of his “monster of divine Egoism”. (Blondel 1966a, p. 71). In the later *Action I*, Blondel notes how Malebranche and Descartes err in opposing ways on the issue of secondary causality. We could say that Malebranche overcorrects Descartes, leading to the irresolvable problem at the heart of Malebranche’s system, namely, evil as caused by God: “A la différence de Descartes qui avait escamoté la métaphysique des causes secondes en attribuant à l’efficience de notre action une réalité miraculeuse et aussi inscrutable que les décrets du vouloir divin (Deus tria mirabilia fecit. . . liberum arbitrium. . .), Malebranche inversement a été hanté par le problème de l’efficacité de notre agir. Afin de ne rien soustraire dans l’ordre réel à la seule «efficace» de Dieu, il a restreint notre libre arbitre à l’unique décision idéale, et c’est Dieu qui intervient pour réaliser nos propres résolutions. D’où, en cas d’infidélité à la conscience et aux préceptes divins, l’énormité de la faute qui, en vertu des lois générales, contraint le Tout-Puissant à être exécuteur de nos crimes mêmes”. (Blondel 1949, pp. 291–92).
- 25 Blondel does explicitly use the term “secondary causes” once in (Blondel 2007, p. 420).

- ²⁶ On “coaction”, see (Blondel 2007, pp. 207–17). Note also the very important quote of Bernard of Clairvaux on grace and free will in (Blondel 2007, p. 371).
- ²⁷ (Blondel 1963, p. 326). Compare with (Blondel 2007, p. 288). The key difference between the two texts is that the 1893 version ends with “. . .était nécessaire à sa propre perfection”. The later edition clarifies this ambiguity, in that it avoids the possibility that it is God perfecting himself through creation rather than giving to creation its possibility for perfection through a harmony with divine action.

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