

# **The Ontological Proof, the Option, and the *Unique Necessaire*: Maurice Blondel's Examination of the Proof in Anselm, Descartes, and Malebranche**

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*Maurice Blondel makes reference to and use of the ontological argument both in his early *L'action* (1893) and his later metaphysical Trilogy. This paper examines Blondel's interpretation of the argument as a central part of his philosophy and Blondel's discussions of the argument in his interpretation of Anselm, Descartes, and Malebranche. The first part of the paper discusses Blondel's reinterpretation of the argument in *L'action* (1893) and the second part discusses his further reinterpretation in *La Pensée*. The third part discusses Blondel's interpretation of the ontological argument in Anselm, Descartes, and Malebranche in relation to broader themes motivating their work, which he discusses in articles in the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* and the *Rivista di filosofia neoscolastica*. I argue that Blondel gives Descartes a priority over Anselm, and Malebranche over Descartes. In the fourth part, I argue that the priority Blondel assigns to Descartes over Anselm ought to be minimized, and discuss two similarities between Blondel's position and Anselm's position.*

In his early works *L'action* (1893) and the *Letter on Apologetics*, Maurice Blondel argues that philosophy cannot fully avoid the implications and demands posed by the “religious problem,” a problem posed within philosophy concerning how philosophers articulate and understand philosophy's relationship to religion, in particular to Christianity. One continual drive within many currents of increasingly secular philosophy characteristic of the early modern period, the Enlightenment, and later modernity, consists in attempting to set aside this problem, to make it into a peripheral or derivative concern that could be dealt with or even simply ignored after the real philosophizing had been finished. One source of the fertility and radicality of Blondel's work is that he deliberately takes on modern thought head on, generously giving it its space and hearing in order to ascertain whether its pretensions are just pretensions, claims that ultimately rest on willful self-assertion, millenary fantasies, or triumphalistic myopia, or whether the projects of the Enlightenment and modernity can make good after all, even though they entail or presuppose the rejection of the core and substance of the Catholic faith Blondel in which had been raised.

This critical technique and sustained program of taking modern thought seriously enough to turn it against itself, which Blondel called the “method of immanence,” involved examining whether the natural order could in fact be self-sufficient, adequate, and either exclusive of or the real ground of a presumably supernatural order. Through the detailed phenomenological analyses of the exigencies of human action carried out in parts 3 and 4 of *L'action* (1893) and the analyses of the relationship between philosophy and theology carried out in the *Letter on Apologetics*, the philosopher of Aix demonstrated on numerous levels that absolute claims made on the part of the natural order could not be made good, and that in fact philosophy conducted on a basis of

uncritical acceptance of and reliance on these themes denatured and emasculated philosophy as a discipline.

By focusing, however, on the theme of action in his early work and dealing with thought and being in relation to action, Blondel opened himself up to several avenues of criticism. The one most relevant to this paper would charge Blondel, as Pascal before him, with having made the existence, the nature, and the intelligibility of the supernatural order either a matter of non- or supra-rational experience or of a subjective decision positing the supernatural, so that he thereby downplayed the usefulness or even possibility of rational proof and understanding of the existence and nature of the supernatural. In light of the continual insistence of both the Magisterium and the doctors of the Catholic Church on the possibility of rational proof for God's existence and for rational investigation of God's nature, it could appear that Blondel's work represents a preoccupation with experiential proofs and evidences that, to say the least, goes against the grain of such thinkers as Anselm, Descartes, and Malebranche, and which, given its modern locus, would give the subjective an absolute priority over the objective. Such a new apologetics, seemingly grounded in phenomenology extending to religious experience, would appear at first blush irreconcilably opposed to anything like an ontological proof for God's existence. Blondel, however, does not write off the ontological proof. In fact, it comes to form an integral part of his philosophical system, and examining of his reflections on the proof and its proponents makes a double contribution to the history of philosophy. First, for those interested in Blondel, this examination illuminates Blondel's position on proof of God's existence and nature, a position that only partially fits the stereotype normally assigned to him as the "philosopher of action." Second, for those more interested in broader issues of philosophy and theology, Blondel's discussion of the proof and its proponents outlines a rich, profound and startling interpretation of the ontological proof.

This paper consists of four sections. In the first section, I discuss Blondel's rehabilitation of the proof in his early work, *L'action* (1893). In the second part, I turn to his later work *La Pensée*, where he revisits the proof in greater systematic detail. The third part, based on two articles written for the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* and the *Rivista di filosofia neoscolastica*, addresses Blondel's assessments of the function of Anselm's, Descartes' and Malebranche's treatments of the proof in relation to the broader themes motivating their philosophical work. In these articles, Blondel gives Descartes a priority over Anselm, and Malebranche over Descartes. In the fourth part, I argue that the priority Blondel assigned to Descartes over Anselm ought to be minimized and highlight two similarities between Blondel's position and Anselm's position.

## I.

The phenomenological analyses of the exigencies of human action, or, to use the term that Blondel himself chose, analyses carried out by the method of immanence,<sup>1</sup> lead the human

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<sup>1</sup> Blondel's most succinct definition of this method is given in the *Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma*.

subject past the modern horizons of immanentism and naturalism, into the realization of our requirement of and reliance upon a “one thing necessary,” involved not only in action, but thought and being as well. In the face of this realization, however, one remains free to the extent that one is compelled to make a fundamentally determinative option for either egoism or charity<sup>2</sup>. One has to decide what one will take to be the “one thing necessary.” This decision is reflexive, for it involves deciding on what will be considered the relevant terms of the problem, most notably whether the problem of human destiny can be resolved within naturalistic and immanentist horizons or whether something beyond these is not only required, but already relied upon.

Egoism involves either a denial of the supernatural status of this “unique nécessaire” in philosophical dilettantism, or pessimism, or an idolatrous subordination and usurpation that relocates this necessity in the self or in a naturalistic or superstitious order with which the self secretly identifies and maintains as self-subsistent reality. In all of these cases, according to Blondel, it is the self that is ultimately affirmed, even if it means the denial, domination, or denigration of everything else. The option for charity involves a mortification of the self that leads beyond the horizons of the human self while still remaining a philosophical project open not only to the possibility of transcendence, but what is demanded by one’s relationship to what transcends the human self.

This option comes to be because of the radical insufficiency of human being, thought, and action, which the human subject can realize but not remedy by itself. The reflexivity of the option is also highlighted in the realization, which can be suppressed or grappled with, that one is already involved in having made the option previously and that correlative to one’s responsibility is the freedom to continue with one’s previous choice or to opt differently. Egoism and charity are not, for Blondel, only moral or practical. Our speculative, logical, metaphysical, and epistemological projects and commitments are precisely that, ways in which we opt to commit ourselves, neither wholly arbitrary nor absolutely necessary, and they involve not only our willing, but also our intellectual habits, our disciplines, our methodologies. All of these are ways in which our options congeal.

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Trans. Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1964) 157: “The method of immanence, then, can consist in nothing else than in trying to equate, in our own consciousness, what we appear to think and will and to do with what we do and will and think in actual fact, so that behind factitious negations and ends which are not genuinely willed may be discovered our innermost affirmations and the implacable needs which they imply.” He gives another description that takes into account the intersubjective and interpretive nature of philosophy in *L’action* (1983): *Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*. Trans. Oliva Blanchette (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, 1984) 7: “To take the viewpoint of all other minds, to find out what light, partial truth, temporary limitations each one contributes, is to practice what one has called the ‘method of immanence:’ this means that one enters as it were into the interior of all consciousness, of all realities, instead of drafting them in the narrow thought we form of them.”

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of this option Cf. my “Blondel’s Conception of the Option between Egoism and Charity and Its consequences for Intellectual Life and Culture”, *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 2002, Vol 25.

This option is involved in how one approaches the ontological argument, and correlatively, within the perspective generated in the option for charity, the ontological argument assumes a productive role.

Thus again the ontological argument will acquire a new meaning and forcefulness. It is not a matter of indifference in the dialectical presentation of proofs, to follow one order rather than another. With another order we run the risk of seeing the idea of perfection as an arbitrarily constructed fiction without real foundation, whereas it is a quite vivid reality in our consciousness and it derives from our total action all the positive certitude there is already in us.<sup>3</sup>

Blondel's description of the proof here has two key traits. First, like Anselm and Descartes, he reiterates a traditional defense of the scope of central terms of the proof, "it is legitimate here, and only here, to identify the idea with being,"<sup>4</sup> and also stresses that the formulation of the proof does not exhaust it, that it requires its very object in order to possess its efficacy. "[T]he ontological proof never has for us all the force it has in itself; for it is absolute only where there is a perfect idea of perfection itself, where essence is real and existence is ideal."<sup>5</sup> For Blondel, the very human capacity to formulate the proof already involves the object, or better put, the acting subject of the proof.

Indeed, what does every attempt to penetrate the very mystery of perfection reveal? (For the ontological proof is only a play of entities if it does not have this daring and necessary bearing.) If perfection is a mystery to us, it is not because it is not known to us or because it might not know itself; far from it, it is because we necessarily conceive it that it knows us and that it knows itself absolutely.<sup>6</sup>

He employs two traditional tropes that indicate that his appeal to interiority does not bring the proof within the horizons of a closed modern philosophical subject: "its obscurity is constituted in our eyes by an excess of light. . . . Its inaccessible interiority does not escape us in that it is alien to us, but that it is more interior to us than our own interior."<sup>7</sup>

The second trait highlights Blondel's originality. We grasp the necessity of the proof not as a purely speculative argument, but practically, through the exigencies and tissue of our action in relation to our thought and being. In this light, the proof transports us beyond merely affirming the existence of a *quo maius cogitari non posit* into the Trinity.

[W]hat is disconcerting to us in it, is the absolute equation of being, knowing, and acting. It is a subject in whom everything is subject, even the consciousness it has

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<sup>3</sup> Maurice Blondel, *L'action (1893): Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*. Trans. Oliva Blanchette (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, 1984), 322.

<sup>4</sup> *Loc cit*, 322.

<sup>5</sup> *Loc cit*, 322.

<sup>6</sup> *Loc cit*, 322.

<sup>7</sup> *Loc cit*, 322.

of itself, even the inward operation by which it realizes itself by finding a response equal to its call and a love corresponding to its own.... It is more incomprehensible without the trinity than the trinity is itself incomprehensible to man. The trinity is the ontological argument transported into the absolute, where this proof is no longer a proof, but the truth itself and the life of being.<sup>8</sup>

For Blondel, the proof loses the roots of its meaning in isolation. At this point, one might compare Blondel to Leibniz, who argued that, although the proof was valid, one had to demonstrate the possibility of its object, for Blondel maintains that practice fulfills this function. For Leibniz, however, such a demonstration is a preliminary speculative operation, while for Blondel, the proof is enmeshed in the tissue of our practical life. The proof gains its necessity for us when figured in the concrete and complex actuality of our action, where the proof does not stand alone, but is contextualized with other proofs: "What the discursive labor of thought renders lengthy and leaves sterile, then, becomes immediate and practical, if, in the multiplicity of proofs, we find the means of presenting them all together. All together they are more simple and direct than each taken separately: they are valid only in their synthetic unity."<sup>9</sup>

## II.

Blondel refused to issue a second edition of *L'action* (1893) and, much later in his life, reworked its central themes into the metaphysical Trilogy of *La Pensée*, *L'Atre et les Atres*, and a revised *L'action*. In the first of these, he revised his analysis of the ontological proof; without rejecting the earlier discussion's central themes, he provides some much-needed explanation. In the third chapter, he turns to the idea of God, proofs, and the principles of reason. Before approaching the proofs directly, he notes an option involved in our approach to "ideas and principles of reason."<sup>10</sup> The question is whether these involve "a reality that can not be said to be objective except insofar as it results from a propulsion of nature and consciousness" or "an effective presence, a real transcendent that the very consciousness of the immanent givens of our thought depends on."<sup>11</sup> This option is one modality of the option discussed earlier.

In the first case, the entire logical, metaphysical, social, and religious edifice is grounded solely on what one has called the "category of the ideal," without being able to lead to anything other than the superman who is, at bottom, only a cult of humanity indefinitely projected into the future.... In the second case, in return, it is this very end, so secret as it may still be, that provides to all of our effort, to all of the future, not only a more or less fictive or anthropomorphic ideal...but a positive stimulation, a grounding point [*point d'appui*] and a lever of an infinite

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<sup>8</sup> *Loc cit*, 322-3

<sup>9</sup> *Loc cit*, 323.

<sup>10</sup> Maurice Blondel, *La Pensée*, vol. 1 (P.U.F.: Paris, 1933), 162. Translation of this and all other citations of Blondel not from *L'action* (1893) are the author's.

<sup>11</sup> *Loc cit*, 162.

power, in order to raise contingent and deficient beings, from their very indigence, to participation in the creative cause.<sup>12</sup>

This option develops in a rigorous analysis, no longer just of the exigencies of action, but those of thought as well, and this option involves the stance one takes towards what Blondel calls “this litigious argument,”<sup>13</sup> a stance that depends, however, neither on whether one grants premises of the proof or not, nor on whether one grants a formal and hypothetical validity to it, but on the more fundamental question as to whether one considers the proof in abstract isolation or as integral to our life of thought.

Reduced to its ideological tenor, the proof that some have called the proof of proofs and the keystone of demonstration thus seems a caducity, as if, in place of the granite that actually holds up the vault of the entire edifice, one placed there an inconsistent concept, a trompe-l’œil painting, a verbal definition that rings out, but which does not contain the unbreakable block of divine substance.<sup>14</sup>

If one elects instead, as Blondel does in *La Pensée*, to investigate how, in our thought, the idea of God is necessarily posed and “instead of claiming to seize the ontological mystery of God in its essential and substantial perfection, we note as a necessary request, but as an inaccessible reality, that without which all of what nature and consciousness offers and even imposes on us,”<sup>15</sup> the proof takes on a different function, scope, and meaning. Without this refiguration of the proof, we risk:

a more intimate and incurable battle between two incompatible conceptions, between what has been called “the God of the philosophers,” who would not be living because reason often claims to see in Him only the scientific aspect and the coherence of natural laws, and the God of the spiritual and religious tradition where faith seeks a source of generosity and love in the very sacrifice.<sup>16</sup>

The proof need not end in “a stabilizing and saturating deism. It awakens to the contrary a more dramatical question, a more intense and vital desire, a further movement of which we have to show that it is it normal, obligatory and decisive.”<sup>17</sup> Under Blondel’s interpretation, the erstwhile conclusion of the proof is only a conclusion under an abstract consideration of the proof.

Blondel reaffirms his earlier doctrine that the ontological proof cannot be productively and adequately considered in speculative isolation. “We do not begin from *nothing*. An ensemble of coherent and inevitable affirmations is imposed on us as actually implicated in all that we

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<sup>12</sup> *Loc cit*, 162-3

<sup>13</sup> *Loc cit*, 173.

<sup>14</sup> *Loc cit*, 175.

<sup>15</sup> *Loc cit*, 175.

<sup>16</sup> *Loc cit*, 176.

<sup>17</sup> *Loc cit*, 176-7.

think.”<sup>18</sup> He notes the artificiality involved in “believing that each of the arguments that aim at proving God have, separately, an equivalent and formally exhaustive value.”<sup>19</sup> In fact, if they are proofs at all, they share a doubly common ground that unites them.

If, therefore, the traditional proofs, each one in turn, have an already conclusive force because all of them rest on a fundamentally rational affirmation and, even more, set to work a rational argumentation, we must add that these proofs, whether taken from exterior things, or the world of consciousness, or the order of reason, complete each other, compenetrates each other, and fortify each other.<sup>20</sup>

For Blondel, the ontological proof does not suffice in isolation, but does have a fundamental significance. “[I]ntroduced at its level into a modestly progressive demonstration, it has an irreplaceable role to fill for the good of reason.”<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, this role is a reflexive one shared with other proofs. “They have the role of preparing, of awakening a decisive option between paths where the intervention of the most enlightened thought and the most responsible freedom have to be employed in all of their integrity.”<sup>22</sup> Their import is neither purely speculative nor purely practical, for this incoercible option not only remains after the proof has prepared its way, but also is another modality of the fundamental option discussed twice earlier.

It could be objected against Blondel, at this point, that he has indulged himself in a circularity. For, if the role of the proof is to prepare and awaken a decisive option, it seems that, given the discussion of the option above, the possibility of the proof playing this role is predicated precisely on having made the option for charity. So, one could argue, the proof simply convinces all the more the already convinced, but completely fails to address the unconvinced. What is at the root of the matter, however, is not simply conviction or belief, but the reflexive

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<sup>18</sup> *Loc cit*, 330.

<sup>19</sup> *Loc cit*, 173.

<sup>20</sup> *Loc cit*, 331. In an earlier piece from the 1930s, Blondel’s contribution to a discussion “the problem of God and philosophy” in the *Bulletin de la société française de philosophie* contains this passage: “One will object that the proofs of God are isolable and that one alone suffices to many minds: *non omnia exigimus omnes*. I respond: yes and no. Actually the majority of believers do not use all of them in an explicit manner. Still though if it is so in practice, does this mean that learned reflection would have to neither to take account of the complexus of arguments offered, nor to examine each separately and all together, nor to seek why some proofs seem to have, for this or that mind, an isolably decisive value, nor to understand why many believe without having need of a systematic demonstration? It is that there is a concrete and broadly human manner of thinking that, without lacking light and reasonable value, dispenses with technical justifications that it otherwise would agree with, by being capable of exceeding them. And, if such a proof, more or less weak in its imprecise form or in its perilous isolation, carries conviction into so many souls, it is doubtless that in these souls, even unbeknownst to them, a secret commentary, moral dispositions, and a permanent rectification of aspirations and intentions validate what speculatively remains deficient. . . . But by insisting on the necessity to exceed the letter of solidly rational proofs, let us not rob ourselves of this framework as indispensable to the security of our progress towards God as the skeleton is to our most supple movements. And just the skeleton that one risks taking for a work of death is in reality a work of life and an instrument of progressive force, the classic proofs of God remain truly vital in the economy of our spiritual ascension.” “Lettre de M. Maurice Blondel”, *Bulletin de la société française de philosophie* (Vol. 30, no. 1), 47-8.

<sup>21</sup> *Loc cit*, 174.

<sup>22</sup> *Loc cit*, 179.

structure of the option. The proof makes the structure of the option more clear and its demands more pressing, precisely because the option is not something made and finished for all time. The option for egoism never produces the closure and self-sufficiency it attempts to impose in a denial of the insufficiency and inadequacy of the self; the seeming necessity of its effects are based on human volition, so that the option for charity, and the perspective it brings, remains a possibility.

### III.

We turn now to the priority that Blondel establishes between Malebranche, Descartes and Anselm. First, in “La clef de voute du système cartésien,” Blondel ascribes the ontological proof this status as Descartes’ keystone. He distinguishes between the Cartesian and Anselmian proofs.

For Saint Anselm, the argument is founded on the idea of the most perfect being that we can conceive; and this idea contains, as the most essential of perfections, that of actual existence. Still, we remain within the womb of our own thoughts. Doubtless, in his time, the distinction between the realist point of view of objective knowledge and the psychological point of view of subjective affirmation was not as cleanly made as it was later.... A legitimate objection was raised against the Anselmian reasoning since in the end our anthropomorphic notion of the most perfect found itself exploited by a syllogism where the premises are not even grounded on a properly metaphysical affirmation and a genetic study of our conception of God.<sup>23</sup>

Blondel advances two claims for the priority he assigns Descartes. First, he argues that Descartes employs a novel type of deduction fundamentally different from Aristotelian-Scholastic syllogistic reasoning, and that “[b]efore criticizing Descartes, one must first understand him as he is.”<sup>24</sup> Blondel claims, rather unconvincingly, that Descartes use of “a mode of reasoning that he borrows from his habits and from his essentially mathematical turn of mind,”<sup>25</sup> escapes Kant’s criticism. Second, and more cogently, he argues that in order to grasp Descartes’ specifically ontological argument in the fifth Meditation, one must proceed ascensionally through his thought; Blondel in effect reiterates his claim that the ontological argument cannot be successfully grasped let alone judged in isolation.

It is surprising that the majority of Descartes’ commentators should have misunderstood this original position that consists, on ascending planes and with a growing scope, in staging the three proofs of God, not isolated at all, but

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<sup>23</sup> Maurice Blondel, *Dialogues avec les philosophes: Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, Pascal, et St. Augustin* (Aubier: Paris, 1966), 131.

<sup>24</sup> *Loc cit*, 133.

<sup>25</sup> *Loc cit*, 132.



complementary, that Descartes gives us, and the criteriological consequences that he draws from the success of this movement.<sup>26</sup>

What Blondel has in mind are the proofs provided in the first and third Meditations, and he argues that “[t]he first two proofs are actually indispensable in order to prepare, justify, and legitimate the properly ontological argument.”<sup>27</sup> Blondel views the first two proofs as “renovated employment of traditional arguments,”<sup>28</sup> and writes of them as the “roots”<sup>29</sup> of the ontological proof of the fifth Meditation.

Blondel notes, however, that Descartes adapts the ontological proof to an end quite clearly different than the one traditionally envisioned. “Descartes uses...the divine attributes in order to assure the success of his metaphysical construction and his scientific enterprise, of which he asks that it assure man’s mastery over nature.”<sup>30</sup> These intentions, however, already involve the option and the concrete setting of philosophical thought, as turning to the provocatively entitled article “L’anti-cartésianisme de Malebranche” indicates. Blondel writes:

[T]here are, in every truly organized system, two vitally united elements which mutually determine each other and of which one informs the other as an original principle of synthesis and animation: on the one hand, an ensemble of conceptions susceptible of analytic expression and which seem communicable from one mind to another by discursive procedures like something passing from one hand to another; on the other hand, an attitude of the entire spiritual being, a disposition at the same time congenital and acquired, which constitutes the profound person of the philosopher, his nature of mind, his vision and his will of life, his principal inspiration and his final aspiration, which does not have to be the object of a reflection in order to be the very spring of his method, the transubstantializing food of his doctrine, what is ultimately at stake in his research.<sup>31</sup>

In terms of the first of these, Malebranche is clearly an innovative follower of Descartes, but in terms of the second, “the decisive element of a doctrine...that which translates the unknown secret of the heart, the intimate life of the spirit, and as it were, the soul of the soul,”<sup>32</sup> the two thinkers substantially diverge. What fundamentally motivates and structures Malebranche’s philosophy is that he “considers the present life, human science, philosophy as steps in our reintegration in God.”<sup>33</sup> For Blondel, who maintains the scope and meaning of the ontological proof to lie in its concrete involvement in our lives, Descartes in fact denatures the

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<sup>26</sup> *Loc cit*, 134.

<sup>27</sup> *Loc cit*, 134.

<sup>28</sup> *Loc cit*, 134.

<sup>29</sup> *Loc cit*, 135.

<sup>30</sup> *Loc cit*, 139.

<sup>31</sup> *Loc cit*, 62-3.

<sup>32</sup> *Loc cit*, 63.

<sup>33</sup> *Loc cit*, 63.

proof, not by making it a path towards a fuller understanding, but by the project and its conceptions to which he subordinates it.

Descartes, when he speaks as a philosopher, proposes to us a God of power, a transcendent will, whose plans are not for us to divine; of his perfections, he extracts precisely that and only that which is adapted to his plan: truthfulness, as a guarantee of our normally used faculties; immutability, as a guarantee of the fixedness of laws sovereignly established in nature.<sup>34</sup>

Descartes employs God, as Blondel puts it, “in order to dispense with Him”, ultimately “making God a captive of His own perfections.”<sup>35</sup> The ontological proof becomes “the extrinsic affirmation of a synthesis in-itself,” and is placed within the framework Descartes establishes for it, ruling out “the notion of a logical continuity and a purely intelligible necessity.”<sup>36</sup> Malebranche does not follow this path, for his employment of the paradigmatically Cartesian progression from doubt to certitude is informed by Christian themes Descartes scarcely concerns himself with.

[T]he clarity that he wants to gain is not that of a rational fact to note, to “touch without understanding”, it is an intelligibility, of a divine essence; the prejudices to take away are not just those of hasty judgments, of too-bold acts of will, whatever their occasion and origin may be; it is actually from our constitution, and it is the consequence of sin, the trace of original ignorance and concupiscence.<sup>37</sup>

The very task and composition of philosophy is altered.

It is not enough to do metaphysics one hour or one year in one’s life, nor, in order to never have to reconsider them, to attach the first links of a chain of truths that stretch out endlessly for the terrestrial profit of humanity, nor of seeing once and for all everything that there is to be seen at each point. It is a matter of an incessant purification, of a renewed application, of a *habit* of one’s entire being.<sup>38</sup>

The point of the proof is not just to settle once and for all a vexed question; rather it assumes a certain central place within a philosophical system that remains an ascesis. Blondel notes a certain trade-off Malebranche makes, where the loss of “the possibility of knowledge of matter and even individual existences by idea” leads to a restoration “as counterweight to his intransigent intellectualism, a philosophy of quality, of excellence, of order, a hierarchy of

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<sup>34</sup> *Loc cit*, 68.

<sup>35</sup> *Loc cit*, 68.

<sup>36</sup> *Loc cit*, 69.

<sup>37</sup> *Loc cit*, 79.

<sup>38</sup> *Loc cit*, 80.

perfections, where everything conspires in the end to unveil the most intimate plans of God to pull the creature and material extension from their ‘profane state.’”<sup>39</sup>

#### IV.

From the point of view Blondel originates in *L’action* (1893) and elaborates in the Trilogy, it is a misunderstanding to ascribe the greater fruitfulness of Malebranche’s consideration of the proof simply to having started from preliminary assumptions necessitated by his orthodoxy. A fundamental option that does not preclude the question is involved. Here a few remarks made by Bishop Peter Henrici about Blondel illuminate the relationship between the option and transcendence. He notes that, in contrast to two traditional ways of figuring access to transcendence, transcendence as given and transcendence as posed, Blondel’s work elaborates an access to transcendence as “ad-opted.”<sup>40</sup>

[W]ithout exiting experience, the access to transcendence finds itself in the very seeking [*recherche*] of the perfect coincidence, which, in that it is grounding and unattainable, reveals itself authentically transcendent, both to the subject and the given. This passage to transcendence is neither continuous nor inevitable; it is a matter of a seeking [*recherche*] to the point of an unsurpassable lack [*faillie*], that is, more of a disposition of openness to the interior of the very experiencing than of a process of investigation destined never to arrive at its end.<sup>41</sup>

I would argue that if this ad-optive path to transcendence is explicitly developed in Blondel’s position, one could make a case for something similar operating implicitly in Malebranche’s position; likewise, one could make a similar case for Anselm’s position, using as support Blondel’s footnote to “La clef de voute du systême cartésien.”

Our intention here is not to expose and evaluate Saint Anselm’s argumentation.... Under the reasoning [of Descartes] one could doubtless find again the concrete inspiration [of Anselm] and show that...the proof offered is grounded less on a logical apparatus than on an act of intellectual agnition, beginning with an already real although implicit motion of God in us.<sup>42</sup>

The terminology here is quite telling. “Intellectual agnition” is a neologism coined by Blondel to describe the modality of the option after the realization of the “one thing necessary.” His description of Anselm’s concrete inspiration which could be recovered under Descartes’ reasoning seems to be what he referred to earlier as “the decisive element of a doctrine...that which translates the unknown secret of the heart, the intimate life of the spirit, and as it were, the soul of the soul.”<sup>43</sup> It seems as if Blondel’s prioritization of Descartes’ version of the argument

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<sup>39</sup> *Loc cit*, 74.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Henrici, S.J. “Expérience et transcendence selon M. Blondel”, *Gregorianum*, Vol 58, no. 3 (1977), 558.

<sup>41</sup> *Loc cit*, 559.

<sup>42</sup> Blondel, *Dialogues avec les philosophes*, 131.

<sup>43</sup> *Loc cit*, 63.

over Anselm's treated the latter's version as if it were only the notional and analytic shell of his doctrine. Further but brief examination of Anselm's *Proslogion* strengthens the case that while Blondel did grant Malebranche a superiority over Descartes on the basis of the understanding of the proof developed in *L'action* (1893) and *La Pensée*, Blondel's approach to Anselm is incongruous, for on this very basis, it seems he should have recognized somewhat closer correspondences between Anselm's position and his own.<sup>44</sup> Here I will note two correspondences.

First, the argument, as is clear from the *Proemium*, is supposed to prove more than one thing; there are three specific goals assigned to the argument that Anselm sought, namely, "to prove that God really exists, that He is the supreme good needing no other and is He whom all things have need of for their being and well-being,"<sup>45</sup> and a further less determinate goal, "to prove whatever else we believe about the Divine Being."<sup>46</sup> The term Anselm employs rendered here by "to prove," *ad adstruendum*, resonates with the description of what the *unum argumentum* was to replace, "a connected chain of many arguments,"<sup>47</sup> giving emphasis to the syllogistic structure to which Blondel seemingly purports to reduce Anselm's position. Yet, such linearity is belied by the term *contextum*, and even more by consideration of the use of the central term of the proof, *quo maius cogitari non potest*. From the implications of this term Anselm not only argues to God's existence in Cap II, but equally in Cap. V to two central points about God's nature, that "existing through Himself alone, He makes all other beings from nothing," and that "God is whatever it is better to be than not to be,"<sup>48</sup> which includes being just, truthful, and happy. Likewise in Cap XV, he employs *quo maius cogitari nequit* to argue to God exceeding our thought. Anselm does not first prove God's existence on the basis of human thought and then subsequently use this proof in Caps. V and XV, as if he were deducing the ones from the other;. Rather, he continually employs the uncertain instrument of human thought,

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<sup>44</sup> Aimé Forest's article "St. Anselm's Proof in Reflexive Philosophy" (of which I was ignorant when first presenting this paper) makes a somewhat different case with respect to representatives of reflexive philosophy (Blondel, Jacques Paliard, Louis Lavelle, Ferdinand Alquié) in relation to Anselm. Forest makes a distinction in assessing the fidelity of these philosophers' reappropriation of Anselm's argument, writing that "we are led to very different conclusions, according to whether we consider Anselm's method or his doctrine." *The Many-Faced Argument: Recent Studies on the Ontological Argument for the Existence of God*. John Hick and Arthur McGill, eds. (New York: MacMillan, 1967), 297. Although Forest draws parallels between the methods of reflexive philosophers and Anselm, he concludes: "One will still hesitate to acknowledge an accord between reflexive philosophy and St. Anselm's teachings. We cannot say that these extremely original endeavors hold to the letter of the argument in the *Proslogion*" (299). Forest continues, "we can recover the principles of this reflexive form of argument in St. Anselm. But we should recognize that in his thought this is only an uncompleted and roughly sketched idea, an intellectual outline rather than a system" (299). This leads Forest to conclude that "the reflexive proof is authorized by St. Anselm, rather than in agreement with him" (300). My divergence from Forest's assessment stems from my considering Anselm's "argument" or "proof" to include more of the *Proslogion* than simply Cap. II-IV, an interpretation first suggested to me by Dom Paschal Baumstein, O.S.B. to whom I am greatly indebted.

<sup>45</sup> Saint Anselm, *Proslogicon*. Trans M.J. Charlesworth. (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, 1979), 103.

<sup>46</sup> *Loc cit.* 103.

<sup>47</sup> *Loc cit.* 103.

<sup>48</sup> *Loc cit.* 121.

relying on aid and even revelation that he entreats and hungers for, to come to know something of God and in that knowledge to be transformed by God.<sup>49</sup>

For Blondel, such a transformation takes place by the orientation of the person in the fundamental option made in relation to the “one thing necessary.” It does not take place solely in the human mind or consciousness, for human being, thought, and action are, as they are likewise for Anselm, insufficient, non-identical, and inadequate.<sup>50</sup> The self-identity of God, moreover, is not the identity of abstract being, but the equal and coterminous reality of the divine predicates or names, as Anselm realizes: “And you are life and light and wisdom and blessedness and eternity and many suchlike good things; and yet You are nothing save the one and supreme good.”<sup>51</sup> This leads into the second point of correspondence. For Anselm, as for Blondel, God is not only possesses the fullness of being lacking to all other beings, the very nature of this fullness involves a superabundance expressed in the Trinity. Blondel never mentions, and was perhaps unaware of Anselm’s telling use of the term “one thing necessary” at the end of Cap. XXIII, where this refers back to the Trinity just discussed, but also ahead to a promise of a shared good in a divine economy of redemption, enjoyment of all goods, and friendship in God. Considered in terms of the mutual involvement of these themes and the asceticism of the will and the intellect involved in the option for charity, it is unfortunate, particularly since his work was to be a vindication of the resources of the Catholic faith and intellectual tradition in the face of modernity, that Blondel failed to fully explore the fertility and depth of the Scholastic Doctor’s thought.

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<sup>49</sup> Forest acknowledges this, writing: “In the establishment of his proof, St. Anselm relies on the double experience of the self-reflection of thought on the one hand, and its truthfulness – or ‘rectitude’ – on the other... This is not only an initial attitude; it should be constantly revived and should accompany every moment of the quest. “St. Anselm’s Proof in Reflexive Philosophy,” 297.

<sup>50</sup> Cap. XXII establishes “That He alone is what He is and who He is.” Anselm writes that all other things are not “altogether” (*non omnino*) or “in a strict and absolute sense” (*non. . . proprie et absolute*) what they are. God alone is entirely what He is, or put in another way, God’s being is fully God’s being. It is worth noting that Anselm concludes that chapter writing: “And you are life and light and wisdom and blessedness and eternity and many suchlike good things; and yet you are nothing save the one and supreme good, You who are completely sufficient unto yourself, needing nothing, but rather He whom all things need in order that they may have being and well-being.” This last formulation is the second term of what the *unum argumentum* was to prove. Saint Anselm, *Proslogion*.

<sup>51</sup> *Loc cit.* 145.