

## CHAPTER V

### THE UNITY OF THE ACT

#### A) THE UNITY OF THE ACT, FUNDAMENT OF THE UNITY OF BEING

ART. 1: *The unity of the Act founds the universality and univocity of Being.*

A simple logical analysis of the notion of being compelled us to attribute two traits to Being<sup>1</sup>: universality and univocity<sup>2</sup>. The infinite distance separating Being from the nothingness it excludes was enough to show us that wherever being is affirmed it can only be affirmed absolutely and indivisibly. It has no degrees, is neither more nor less. Paradoxically we could go on extending our nature and our determinations without ever adding anything to Being, which is present in its entirety in the smallest wisp. There are infinite manners of being but the being of all those manners is the same. And doubtless that is possible only because the being that belongs to the wisp—which far from being an

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<sup>1</sup> Author's note: "Cf. *Of Being*, First Part, II and III." In what follows Lavelle summarises the central findings of the first volume of his *Dialectic of the Eternal Present*, only now from the perspective of the Act. Past tense constructions refer back to the earlier work.

<sup>2</sup> As Lavelle employs the term, univocity is the character of being essentially indivisible and thereby having a single meaning in every context or instance.

abstraction and a generalisation, on the contrary gives it a concrete and individual character—is one with the single being of the All, without which the parts of the All could not be sustained. To say that Being is universal and univocal is to say that we are all party to the All which gives us its being; outside of it there is nothing. The difficulty is not in understanding how there can be differences among particular beings but in how those differences can appear without effectively shattering the unity of Being; herein lies the problem of participation.

As soon as one realises that being, considered in its self-sufficient reality, is not an object, since an object has meaning only for a subject and can therefore be no more than a phenomenon, but is interior to itself and an act that forever accomplishes itself, then universality and univocity—though mysterious and difficult to reconcile with the manifold aspects of experience when they are considered as properties of an object—find their true foundation and the meaning they otherwise lack. The original character of the act is precisely this universality and univocity; they arise through its exercise so to speak, and in such a fashion that the charge of abstraction that could be levelled at us owing to our assertion of Being's universality and univocity loses all pertinence when it is a question of the act. And it will be easily seen that when we attributed these features to Being we necessarily apprehended and posited Being through an act of thinking that remained always identical with itself. Being's universality and univocity were one with the unity of that Thinking which not only claimed being for itself but submitted being to its jurisdiction, i.e. deemed itself competent to know it so as to penetrate its immensity—to which that Thinking was essentially always inadequate in fact but adequate by right. The univocity of being is therefore nothing more than the perfect simplicity of the act that makes being be; and universality is nothing more than the result of its infinite fecundity. As soon as the act is exerted both find their justification so to speak.

*ART. 2: The unity of the Act founds the totality of Being, infusing it with its infinity.*

One first needs to note that there is a singularly close relation between the act and totality. To begin with, the very idea of totality cannot be objectified: plainly there is an All only for an act that embraces the harmony of its parts in single regard; however there are no parts unless the unity of the act distinguishes them and already totalises them. If someone maintains that the All is an idea that illegitimately gives the infinity that forever lies beyond us borders like our own we will reply that the Being we call "total" is indeed infinite but that this infinity refers exclusively to the inexhaustible character of the analytic operation through which we distinguish parts within Being and the synthetic operation through which we reunite them. The inexhaustibility of these joint operations, analysis and synthesis, testifies to the presence within us of the act that produces them

and can never be halted, i.e. that Being endlessly supplies. And the notion of totality intends no more than the ever-present indivisibility of the act through which Being can be posited, which allows us to consider all the divisions and unfinished constructions through which we try to cut Being to our measure as so many means by which our finite being inserts its relative and participated life into it.

Dialectic ought to show how the act is the common foundation of the ideas of totality and infinity. Totality is the unity of the Act considered as the unique and indivisible source of all particular modes, which loosely speaking always seem to be contents of the élan which produces them and in which all beings participate according to their power; and infinity is the impossibility of our ever seeing the production of modes exhausted and of totalising them on the plane in which they appear; for their unity resides exclusively in the principle that founds them. The One that engenders the many can indeed be called an infinity; but it is only a potential infinity; as for an actual multiplicity, it is finite at every instant; and at every instant I try to reduce it to the abstract unity of a system that grows ever more detailed yet never rounds into a true All.

The gravest bias is taking the universe as a given All in which at a certain moment the Act happens to arise so to speak, whereas there is nothing but the Act; precisely because it is one, it brings with it the intimate presence of the All wherever it is exercised. But this All is not a sum that could be obtained by adding up all the modes of participation. For participation itself is only a possibility, always on offer and never withdrawn; the two infinities of space and time are there to represent it. By contrast an All that precedes its parts and founds them, that allows them to be born within it and never to be detached, can only be the undivided act that is at once the foundation of each of them and the connection between them all; like the act itself the All is therefore indivisible; it is transcendent to all the things it will ever contain, just as the Act is transcendent to all the givens it will ever give rise to.

It is now easily seen how two very different directions of thinking can be distinguished, depending on whether the act is so to speak forgotten and then reduced to the totality of its effects—which gives rise to all the forms of empiricism, positivism and materialism—or whether on the contrary it remains the eternal act whose effects manifest it without diminishing, increasing or altering it in any way.

Indeed when one speaks of particular acts, how could they be distinguished from one other except from the perspectives of space and time where they are localised in order to be exercised? But the act escapes time and space. Only its effects take place.

In pronouncing the word “being” we have totality in mind, and this totality is almost always taken to include space and time and all that these contain—but in such a way that the being that strikes as one is immediately dispersed so that, though we try to grasp it in the simplicity of its essence, it immediately spreads

beyond us in every direction owing to its infinitude, preventing our arms from ever reaching and closing around it. Consequently in order to regain its indivisible essence it would be necessary to pull back into it the totality of space and time which constitute not only its extension but the conditions or laws of its exercise. That is only possible if we conceive of it as a perfectly pure act and not an immense thing.

*ART. 3: The unity of the Act is, throughout its various modes of employment, the unity of a single efficacy.*

No one has seen with more admirable clarity than Malebranche the act's perfect unity which is such that, wherever it is posited, it must be posited absolutely, i.e. as indivisible and infinite at the same time. As for imagining that differences could be introduced to the nature of the act by speaking of a plurality of acts: they are distinct from one another through their intent and their object, i.e. through their limitation, and not through their nature as act, which contains nothing more than sheer efficacy. Hence every activity is susceptible of an infinite number of employments. In itself however absolute activity has none since it is self-sufficient and remains always interior to itself; still, it permits all employments. As soon as engaged it manifests its pliability and measureless power.

It is noteworthy that we can represent to ourselves the differences between various acts only by reference to the individuals who accomplish them and who, though they retain a certain initiative, are nonetheless agents and instruments of a power surpassing them. Will we say that the act is the inalienable property of individual consciousness and that, unless conjoint, the constitutive act of each consciousness is separate from all others? But here again one must guard against illusion. Each being takes possession of the act and disposes of it through an initiative unique to him. But its efficacy is always freely-given and never idle; no creature adds to it or ever subtracts from it, though each creature constantly alters the world's configuration and determines her personal destiny according to the use she makes of it. Apart from the fact that it is impossible to confidently attribute true independence to worldly acts—which owing to the solidarity, equilibrium and compensation among manifestations shows the profound unity upon which they all depend—there is no modification in the universe, however slight, that does not testify to the presence of a participated act. This demonstrates that this act in a certain fashion conditions all others and requires us to construe the modifications the universe continually undergoes as a system that indefinitely transforms itself.

In all the diverse objects I perceive, in all the diverse ideas by which my thinking grasps the significance of the real, in all the diverse feelings through which my personal life unfolds, in all the diverse operations by which I modify and transform the world around me, I come back to the efficacy of the very same

act, always identical with itself though divided and imprisoned. And because this activity is always identical with itself throughout a plurality of functions, they all belong to the same consciousness, support and necessarily call for each other. And when I turn from one to another nothing is changed but the activity's point of application.

One need only consider the word "act" in complete purity, free of whatever form of passivity that might limit or determine it, to see that it is absolute simplicity. The Act is, one might say, capable of everything; but the nature of our particular consciousness is always to render it capable of some specific thing. Lacking this there would be no difference between thinking it capable of everything and thinking it capable of nothing.

*ART. 4: The Act is the common source of all aspects of the real and of all relations.*

Every imperfect and limited act is homogenous with the act by which the world is created before our eyes and upon which we continually draw (for the act can be differentiated only by its object and not by its nature, by the barriers it comes up against and not by its internal efficacy). The moment it is accomplished it engenders itself and nothing external can be posited except in relation to it, as observed in its conditions, which exist only owing to the impetus that evokes and integrates them; or in its object, which exists only owing to the intelligence that conceives it; or in its effect, which exists only owing to the will that produces it. The conditions, the object, the effect are mere givens that do not carry their reasons inside them. The act explains them more than it produces them; only the act is real, or at least nothing is real except by way of it, since everything else depends on it and one way or another enters into it as an element of its possibility or of its limitation. It is both the principle of what it accomplishes and of what resists it. For in exerting itself it encounters an obstacle and in taking consciousness of it, it has consciousness of itself.<sup>3</sup> Every object we might possess is an obstacle accepted, transformed and spiritualised. In itself the object is action. It acts on us: it provokes a response in us. And as soon as our will to defeat it is changed into acceptance of a presence that enriches us, the object brings us merit. Then will becomes love. The will to defeat was a will to destroy. But love saves what is and calls into being what is not.

Every power we find within us is an act in reserve, not exercised, or at least something offered by participation which has not yet been accepted. Every state is the other side of an act we have accomplished, or an act we have suffered, or again a meeting of the two. The present is actualised only by an act of perception, the past and the future only by an act of memory or an act of will: and the different phases of time always have fresh content, displaying the conditions

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<sup>3</sup> Of course the act of taking consciousness implies direct self-consciousness as a basis for encountering objects.

needed for the realisation of our unique life, i.e. of the distance that ever separates the pure act from the act of participation.

It can be said that the peculiarity of the act is to express the inward determining essence of relationship. In this guise it conveys the unity of being precisely because it makes a bridge between modes; and that is why we always consider it to have a point of departure and a point of arrival, to unify one term with another (e.g. two ideas, an intention and an effect), to oblige the I to go out of itself so to speak in order to give something of itself and to receive something in turn, to more closely join each aspect of being with the All it is party to. Relationship is nothing more than a kind of refraction of the pure act in the realm of participation where each form of existence has an independent initiative that is somehow bound to every other form of existence.

So it is easy to show that the act alone is one but it is diversified by various modes of limitation and participation which always give rise to the appearance of some object or some particular end to which it is applied. And the unity of the act is further confirmed by this observation: while all facts are necessarily particular, all the processes of thinking and willing have by contrast a general character which testifies to the common origin of all facts and reveals in them an efficacy capable of surpassing every effect they might produce, rendering them apt to be repeated: this immediately suggests that there are categories of thinking and willing.

## B) THE UNITY OF THE ACT DISCOVERED AT THE VERY HEART OF PARTICIPATION

*ART. 5: At the interior of every consciousness occurs a link between the individual and the universal which reveals the act of participation at work.*

The peculiarity of participation is to disclose to me an act which, at the moment I accomplish it, appears as both mine and not-mine, as universal and personal at once. In a similar fashion a mathematician providing a demonstration performs an individual act that can be executed by all. However since he leaves no doubt that his demonstration is valid not only for himself as an individual but for all finite beings to the extent they participate in reason, i.e. since he recognises a universal power that all reasonable beings can exercise, it will be granted that it is a power only with respect to whoever agrees or refuses to actualise it. To say that it is only power when we do not actualise it but that it can only be actualised by us is to fail to understand that we actualise it through an efficacy which is in it and not in us but which is turned into a power precisely so as to allow us to make it ours.

The experience of self is therefore already the experience each person has of his connection with a universal at once present in him and actualised by him, though within certain limits he is obliged to recognise as his own and to overcome without end. This internal opposition and solidarity between the individual and the universal is recognised by everyone who reflects on the nature of reason and glimpses that this word refers to a legislation he never completely obeys but whose value is immediately plain to him and all others. Now, to seek reason in oneself is to find that one is not all reason even though reason itself is indivisible. One can easily allow that there are as many reasons as human beings and that reason is identically repeated in each consciousness as the form or ideal that determines them all. But one would be hard put to say why, if it resides wholly in the individual, reason itself does not betray signs of individuality. That is to say there is only one reason whose law is recognised by all beings, though they do not always abide by it. Here we do not conceive of reason as an object; rather, we see it as expressing the participation of all individuals in an activity surpassing the initiative of any of them. Now, if there is no insuperable difficulty in saying that an identical reason illumines and directs us all, though individuals inevitably stray from it, it is because we have to do with an abstract expression of the fundamental experience we keep returning to: the same pure act continues to solicit us though the response we make to it is always original and imperfect.

The act by means of which I think, and which consequently grounds the unity of my consciousness, is independent of the content I give it—which content makes me a particular individual. Doubtless I am the one who must accomplish the act but the accomplishment that makes it mine neither changes the nature of the act nor exhausts it. Its perfect availability remains intact. I find it always unalterable whatever the use or abuse I make of it. Its universality again finds expression in me through the possibility it has of assuming an abstract and formal character so as to envelop all that is. But it would be a grave error to think its universality is solely owing to this abstract and formal possibility, for that possibility expresses only the fact that the act remains indivisible even when participated. Possibility then becomes nothing more than non-participation. And when we go from the possible to being, where the formation of our personal existence is concerned, it is obvious that the possible makes sense only with respect to the way it is rooted in absolute being so that our participation with respect to the Pure Act becomes a pure possibility. The whole secret of metaphysics lies precisely in the reversal of relations between Being and the possible, according to whether one goes from the Total Being to the particular being or ascends from the latter to the former.

Not only does the act, when stripped of concrete applications and taken in relation to myself as a universal possibility, rightly encompass all that is, it founds—independently of you and me—both my being and yours while justifying their rapports. Yet as soon as it is engaged by your initiative or mine it

gives rise to our autonomy and our differences (which result not only from our individual nature but from our liberty). It seems to repeat itself forever only because it is superior to time while nonetheless engaged in it; it both engenders time and goes beyond it, as much through the continual renewal it brings to the instant as through the connection it establishes between all instants.

As soon as attention is brought to bear on this act that makes me be I discover—with an incomparable emotion doubtless no consciousness can escape—its infinite fecundity. A light always accompanies it. I can participate in it because it is participable by all. So it again appears as an infinite possibility but here ceases to be abstract since it is continually offered as a living gift of self which continually asks to be received, i.e. to be actualised.

*ART. 6: The Act resides in a limitless efficacy which, instead of shutting me within the limits of my subjective consciousness, obliges me constantly to break through them.*

To say that the act is eternal is to say that it is the first beginning of ourselves and the world, rediscovered by us at every instant. Wherever I act I encounter the same absolute initiative, the same rupture with the past in the form of acquired knowledge and habit, the same putting back into question of what I am and what the world is. A flawless activity is offered to my flawed participation. In the measure I make it mine it never loses its youth and newness.

It appears there exists in the world, ever available throughout time, an efficacy upon which beings continually draw so as to actualise it in their consciousness. They must draw from the source. Otherwise one could understand neither how they manage to accord with one another nor how they manage to oppose one another, for two forces that clash and seek to destroy each other must stem from a single nature. One would gain nothing by saying that that this efficacy is only the supposition of an infinite possibility posited in advance so that our action can be executed. We are obliged to take this possibility as a real possibility—or if preferred, an existing possibility. That is to say it is an ever-active, ever-effective being-in-itself which becomes a possibility only with respect to us so that in actualising it we can make it ours in accordance with our forces.

The experience of participation, instead of closing us in the narrow domain of subjective consciousness, requires us to extend it. Thanks to this I can posit the act as extending beyond me, along with its traits of unity and universality, with its presence constantly on offer to all spirits, with the possibility it grants me of thinking, willing and loving through a going-out of myself (i.e. out of my individual being) that is one with a return to the heart of myself (i.e. to the inner principle that grounds my being at the same time that it grounds all others). Thanks to it I feel my limitation and try to overcome it. Thanks to it as well I found my initiative on the very recognition of my dependence. This idea is admirably expressed by Descartes who knows very well that in positing my



being as finite I also posit the infinite I limit and can never contain, though I penetrate it ever more deeply. In the language of the act we say that every participated act takes the power it disposes from the pure act, though the latter remains unchanged. And this act is exerted in me imperfectly (without thereby suffering division) since my passivity with respect to the given world is ever the expression of what responds to the world while surpassing it. I see, I know and I experience, as did Descartes with respect to the infinite, that in the measure my attention becomes more pure and my self-love more silent the act that founds me, i.e. by requiring me to found my own reality, also founds the universe in which it allows me to inscribe myself. This accounts for its changing face in response to the various inputs of participation.

*ART. 7: The Act's unity is apprehended by us at the very heart of participation.*

To say that the act is one—not merely, as everyone concedes, that it unifies everything, that it explains the synthesis of all its components and the transition from one moment to the next—is to say that it is simple and indivisible. When I understand, when I will, when I love, where is there any diversity in the act itself? It is instantaneous and without parts, and it is only when I explain it to you that I make elements and effects appear. These are not in it but only in the image that represents it or in the trace it leaves behind.

It can be said that in the living unity of my consciousness I have experience of an act that retains its ever-available identity throughout all particular operations susceptible of being repeated, modified or enriched; moreover it shows me it is participable by me and everyone.

The universality of the act is therefore not concluded solely from the indeterminacy and infinitude implied in its pure exercise, which so to speak gathers in itself the totality of possible actions. It is further verified by analysis of the act of participation, which implies for each particular being a going-beyond its limits, a surpassing of its individuality or nature, a connection with the All and an eventual communication with all things and all beings. One can find the totality of the Act already there in the most familiar processes. In whatever action, however humble, can be found an echo of the initial act from which the entire universe derives and which holds it in existence at every instant. The least of our gestures shakes the world: it is of-a-piece with all the other movements that fill it.

What is important is to acquire an experience through which—whatever the circumstances and events in which we are engaged, and despite the fact that our conduct, spread out as it is in time, is always faced with a new situation—we recognise that our consciousness manifests all its force and light only when it rediscovers within itself the presence of an Act that is always identical with itself, infinitely powerful and productive; an Act that nourishes our temporal life and that, when we turn away from it, abandons us to our limitedness, ignorance and

misery, leaving before us only a collection of givens deprived of all meaning and all connection between them and with us.<sup>4</sup> Then only is it discovered: that all liberties<sup>5</sup> have a common origin, though each of them acts by way of a consent that depends on each person alone; that all the faculties of the subject reside in the disposition of a single activity, though each subject realises an aspect of participation different from any other subject; and that all its operations put into play the very same efficacy, though each subject pursues an end of his own whose guiding aim is unique and irreplaceable.

Finally it can be said of the Act that when its simplicity is best preserved its fecundity is greatest. The essence of the spiritual life is precisely to attain a point where asceticism and abundance combine in proper proportion, and instead of opposing one another tend on the contrary to blend. The act makes its presence felt there where the whole of reality is exhausted and seems to vanish so that this invisible something—which is less than the smallest thing and even seems to efface itself—or to speak more plainly, this Pure Nothing, bears witness to its authority over the given, to the extent of becoming the omnipotence that produces yet ever surpasses it.

*ART. 8: In acting each individual takes responsibility for the whole universe as seen from his perspective.*

Our responsibility with respect to the Total Being is a testament in favour of its unity; there is no particular being who does not feel accountable for the entire universe, who has no clear idea that represents it, an ideal to which he tries to make it conform; he feels he ought to take creation by the hand and guide it. As soon as the act is revealed within us as an open possibility it is revealed as capable of bringing forth everything. Here is the metaphysical source of a generous ambition that ought to cure us of frivolous egotism. Only, nobody gladly consents to admitting he is only a co-creator of the universe. And all the misfortunes of every being stem from not knowing how to draw a line between his particular will and the absolute will, of which the former is only a participated form; he suffers from seeing other wills contradict his own, without realising that they support and complement him.

Doubtless it is impossible for the individual to place himself at the very centre of all that is, at the point from which emanate an infinite number of rays, each of which is a kind of offer made to a liberty. But each liberty is herself the centre of a new radiation. And she finds a fragile equilibrium between a grace to which she does not always respond and a necessity to which she always risks giving way. From this location of the I, at once eccentric and central, we find, in the here and now where we act, a kind of image that we are obliged to situate in space

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<sup>4</sup> Lavelle frequently employs heavily-laden sentences to summarise key aspects of his philosophy. This sentence speaks to the heart of his doctrine.

<sup>5</sup> The term is effectively a synonym for human beings. More will be said of “liberties” in later chapters.

and time, which rightly allows our action to reign over the totality of space and time and requires us to discover around us a diversity as large as our horizon. More exactly one sees the unity of our activity as realised by the manifold movements of the articulated body; this reflects the manifold of our intentions, and in turn is only accomplished in relation to the multiplicity of things; our gestures shape, one after another, the forms of the real, multiply them, transform them; and they assume their share of responsibility in the act that creates them.