

BOOK I

**THE PURE ACT**

## PART ONE

### THE METHOD

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#### CHAPTER ONE

### THE EXPERIENCE OF THE ACT

#### A) THE ACT: INTERNAL ORIGIN OF MYSELF AND THE WORLD

*ART. 1: Metaphysics seeks to recover the primitive act upon which both my being and that of the world depend.*

The path leading to metaphysics is particularly difficult, and few agree to climb it. For it is a question of abolishing whatever appears to sustain our existence: visible things, images and all the usual objects of interest or desire. What we seek is an internal principle—long designated “the act”<sup>1</sup>—which gives rise to everything we can see, touch or feel: a principle that must be put into play rather than merely conceived and that, according to the success or failure of our operation, explains both the experience before us and the destiny we can give ourselves.

In the philosopher there is always a secret reticence. For he mounts back to the very springhead of everything-that-is. Yet all springs have a mysterious and sacred character, and the least glance is enough to trouble them. These sources at

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<sup>1</sup> The author refers to a long tradition dating back to Aristotle. Thomas Aquinas for instance harks back to Aristotle in conceiving of God as “*actus purus*”.

once contain intimations of the divine will, which I tremble to interrogate, and intimations of my own will, which I tremble to engage. Obscurity and mysticism are often signs of such reticence. What can I grasp, what can I express, but this pure will's manifestations—which determine it, individualise it, limit it and already corrupt it?

Philosophers have always sought the primitive fact upon which all others depend. But the primitive fact is that I can neither posit being independently of the I that grasps it nor posit the I independently of the being within which it is inscribed. The sole foothold in presence to which I always return, the sole fact which is for me primary and indubitable, is my insertion in the world.

But where is the actual point of insertion? It is not in my solitary thinking, not in the obstacle that halts me (showing me what I am not more than what I am) and not in the agony which, at the moment I am ready to give myself being, makes me feel my oscillation between being and nothingness. Yet the thinking, the obstacle and the agony are all inseparable from the birth of consciousness, and even compel it to be endlessly reborn since they are there to prevent habit from forming, or to free me from it if it has already formed. The primitive fact resides in an infinitely more positive experience: my active presence to myself. This is my feeling of responsibility to myself and the world.

The experience which occasions both the emotion that life gives us and the revelation of our own being does not, therefore, consist of the spectacle spread before our gaze—of which we are a part—but of putting-into-play a movement we are able to accomplish, one that depends on our lone initiative, awakens us to self-consciousness and, in changing the state of the world, shows us the dominion at our disposal. As soon as I note the power I have of moving my little finger I find myself repeating this gesture a hundred times with the same wonder.<sup>2</sup> Only then do I begin to take hold of the real from within, i.e. by way of the very activity from which it derives, an activity which forms my being and which I either set in motion or suppress through a simple decision that depends on me alone.

However, movement here is only the sign and witness of a more secret activity. Still, it suffices to show that instead of being carried away by an endless becoming in which I constantly escape myself I can on the contrary take hold of what I am in an act through which I wrench myself from becoming in order to resume endless being—lacking which I would not perceive becoming itself. That is to say, what is in question an act of creation, which is always a consent to what I wish to think, to produce or to be.

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<sup>2</sup> In *Of Spiritual Intimacy* (1955, a posthumous collection) the author cites this experience as one of two early realisations that shaped his life and philosophy. The other was his discovery that all things take place solely in the present.

ART. 2: *Metaphysics hinges on the experience of the act I dispose, which nonetheless surpasses me: inwardly in the power that feeds it and outwardly in the effects it allows me to produce.*

Metaphysics rests on a privileged experience: that of the act which makes me be. Yet we almost always think we can have no other experience than that of the object. Hence the act itself has always seemed impossible to grasp: likewise thinking<sup>3</sup>, which grasps everything else, has always seemed ungraspable in itself precisely because we have always tried to grasp it as an object.<sup>4</sup> It was therefore natural to relegate it to a world hidden from us and to consider it either a hypothetical being or a mysterious activity we called “transcendental” in order to show that it forever escape us. Between thinking and the physical object we allotted an intermediate zone of psyche, apprehended by an illegitimate experience we gave the name “introspection”, in which the act of thinking created for itself a kind of interior object. Yet we are not very certain that psychic states exist; and in any case there is no state deserving this name that does not seem to express a relation between the act of thinking and the physical object which is our own body. But the act of thinking, though it can never be isolated, is not hidden from us. We attain it in a lasting experience that is indistinguishable from its accomplishment; and this experience is truly metaphysical because it goes beyond every physical experience. It is both personal and universal: though I can verify it only within myself it is neither a purely contingent given nor an arbitrary operation since it is the experience of a true activity that necessarily contains its own justification.

The unique nature of metaphysics is to describe this constitutive experience, which possesses a character of pure inwardness but through which everything that can be posited is set in place, including the plurality of consciousnesses and the very accord they seek – which eludes them. Here, the world ceases to be for us a simple representation, though we might ask how it was bound to become such. It is always a question of ourselves and the way we are engaged in the world. It is ourselves we seek and, in seeking ourselves, we necessarily find a world that determines us and that we in turn determine.

I exist only through an act I accomplish internally: an act that is always at work even when I do not make it my own and that, as soon as I participate in it, is ever judge of itself and mediator between knowledge and desire. It is the heart and secret of creation.

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<sup>3</sup> What Lavelle (along with Descartes) calls “thinking” includes what most English-language readers would regard as consciousness or understanding.

<sup>4</sup> In what follows Lavelle explicitly recognises a form of self-knowledge that occurs ahead of whatever object, thus distinguishing himself from thinkers who regard knowledge as having an exclusively object-like character. Yet in common with them Lavelle often describes self-knowledge in terms of a circular movement where perceptions and states provide a kind of feedback. It seems *two* sorts of self-knowledge are possible.

But I immediately discover two things that have always tended to escape theorists: *first*, if the act results in a movement, the act itself resides in the decision that a movement will take place and not in its release, which ever remains an incomprehensible mystery. Moreover, movement here enjoys no privilege for I rediscover the same decision, which is only a pure consent, in all the initiatives of my consciousness, right up to the attention I pay to the worldly spectacle, without which it would be nothing. One way or another there is an operation we are free to accomplish, and one way or another a result is obtained for which the operation is the means rather than the cause: as for that result, science—considering it only from the outside through the representation offered to our regard—tries to describe a mechanism, but only after a result has been obtained. Now it is this junction of the interior and the exterior, of an act realised inside us and an effect achieved outside us, that we will try to resolve by the theory of participation.

This theory finds additional support in a *second* observation, one that often escapes those who consider the interior act as constituting the deepest essence of our being: for it is not enough to say that its effects are exterior to it and follow from it yet go beyond it in such a way that no one could deduce them; it is also surpassed from within, so to speak, by the initiative it contains, which in turn supposes a pure efficacy—ever present and available—that it puts to work but with regard to which it remains secondary.<sup>5</sup>

Thus experience of ourselves shows us that the act appropriate to us is surpassed by effects which at once depend on it, because we willed them, and do not depend on it, because they result from the universal order; and it is equally surpassed by the source upon which it draws, which we can define in itself as an eternal actuality and, relative to that, as the very power it actualises, which in offering itself for participation makes appear all the powers of the I and all the powers we see at play in the world

The power to act strikes us as a miracle solely because this act is both received and exerted, in such a fashion that, at the moment we think to give it being, it gives being to us.

ART. 3: *The word "act" should be preferred to the word "activity".*

One might ask why we use the word "act", which always seems to designate a particular and limited operation, rather than the word "activity", which designates the very power from which all acts derive. There is a fourfold rationale for this which all those who grasp the significance of our analysis will quickly understand. In the first place the word "activity" is abstract while the word "act" is concrete (it is the essence of activity, which is only the generic name for particular acts). Secondly, the word "activity" only ever expresses a

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<sup>5</sup> The author distinguishes between the eternal act and its temporal deployment by individual beings.

possibility while the word “act” expresses an accomplishment. Thirdly, an external perturbation is needed for the exercise of an activity while the act is self-generated. Finally, activity evokes its contrary in passivity but the act has no contrary, with the consequence that acts do not differ from one another in that they are all acts but precisely in the melange of activity and passivity we can attribute to them.<sup>6</sup>

We see then that to posit the act is not to resolve everything by a mere word, as someone might reproach us. To say that the act is the ultimate foundation of the real is to say that it is invisible because it is never shown to us and because it is only revealed to us through a work to be done, a task to be realised or a duty to be fulfilled.<sup>7</sup> This suffices to put us forever above all suspicion of idolatry.

## B) THE ACT'S EFFICACY

*ART. 4: The act should be defined as sheer efficacy: it is the supreme source of every determination and all value.*

In seeking to define the act's essence we find no better expression than this: it is pure efficacy. It is in this sense that it has been considered superior and foreign to all knowable forms of existence, each of which invariably implies some determination, i.e. some passivity. Thus, even though it is invisible, the act is omnipresent, and nothing in the world is brought forth for which it is not in some sense the realising power. Consequently, given that the act always engenders some particular effect, the effect is explained by the act through whatever is positive in it; and the limits that circumscribe it and allow it to be defined are explained by nature or the circumstances of participation.

Whatever work the act seems to perform divides it, expresses it or renders it visible yet cannot be regarded as its end. All joy of possession is joy in its achievement, for which the possession is only a worldly image. Likewise the act is confined to its own play, which accounts for the two nearly-opposed senses of the word “play”. For it is taken in the sense of diversion when we regard all serious activity as useful activity; but then, once utility is satisfied and all our needs are met, we can still ask: “What remains for us? Only to die?” Yet what remains for us, is this not precisely the end toward which useful activity tended and already began to sketch out and prepare? Is it not a purer activity, free of every care, self-sufficient and – in plain and direct terms – delighted with its own play?

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<sup>6</sup> Curiously Lavelle does not give the argument that activity suggests a span of time whereas an act can refer to something that is instantaneous and once-and-for-all: an eternal instant so to speak. That is a position he will address at length in *Of Time and Eternity*.

<sup>7</sup> All of which suggests that the act is revealed only by way of the object, which goes against what was said in ART. 2. The apparent vacillation continues throughout the author's writings.

One could say that the act is absolutely undetermined; that is true, but on the condition that we consider this indeterminacy a sign of its richness and not its poverty; such indeterminacy excludes all limitation yet only to allow all beings to create themselves through a process of participation, i.e. of limitation. One could consider the act as an infinite possibility, and that is in a sense legitimate with respect to finite beings who indeed will never finish actualising it. But it is only true at the point where this actualisation is produced, so that from the act's perspective it is on the contrary finite beings who dwell in a state of unachieved and imperfect powers.

Finally, one could also say that there is a total indifference to good and evil in this infinite act from which both take their origin; accordingly, instead of being the principle of value, the act would have to be subordinated to the good in order to receive a value. That however is only an appearance. Evil always comes from passivity, i.e. from a limitation of the act, which at a certain moment renounces itself, flags and allows itself to be seduced. By this sign has always been recognised the intervention of the demon in the world. It also is the distinctive character of passion. We say that evil is victorious over us, that we give way to it. We always have a rather clear consciousness of this weakness, this defeat, each time it appears in us. It is even the case that what little is left to us in the way of activity puts itself in evil's service, so to speak, and becomes its accomplice: and this we rightly call "perversity". By contrast the good is the purity of the act regained at last; and this word "purity" is itself instructive: it represents for us the original essence of the good, i.e. that transparent and innocent activity which no selfish preoccupation can interrupt and which no pursuit of external advantage or slavish pleasure can soil.

*ART. 5: If the act is sheer efficacy, the effect it produces is its testament and not its end, for the act is its own end.*

It is pointless to ask whether the act displays an efficacious character in its own right. For we understand by "act" this very efficacy; and in contrast to the act, the object or state is precisely that which, being without efficacy, testifies to it. We almost always think that efficacy is recognised by its product so to speak. Rather, this product marks its limitation; moreover we can say that the inefficacy in it refers us back to an efficacy without which it would not subsist. We will gladly concede that efficacy resides in success but success here is identical with the act itself, considered as pure action; the effect adds nothing to it, though it must always remain present. It is the medium of activity and not its end. Through it, our always-limited initiative enters into rapport with the eternal activity<sup>8</sup> and finds in it an object that answers to it. The nature of idolatry is to

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<sup>8</sup> An apparent slip. Having rejected the word "activity" earlier (see ART. 3) Lavelle now uses it in reference to the eternal act. Perhaps he means only that the act appears as an ongoing activity from a temporal

consider this object as having an independent and self-sufficient existence; meanwhile the nature of impiety is to scorn it, not to see that it is only by giving it full relief and not trying to simplify it that our personal act finds union, not only with the universe in front of it but with the very source on which it constantly depends.

The act is almost always represented as creative and its creation as subsisting outside it so to speak: it might enter into repose and disappear as soon as the creation has been produced. We believe, on the contrary, that the peculiarity of the act is to create itself and to have no other goal than itself. It would be in a sense true to say that the created world is for it only an instrument it makes use of in acting<sup>9</sup>, which is why, whatever one might say, creation ever passes away while the act is eternally reborn, i.e. it has never ceased to be.

Besides, how could there be any goal beyond the act itself? The goal of an act<sup>10</sup> cannot be an object in which it would come to die but a purer and more perfect act in which it would on the contrary blossom. We witness this in the exercise of intellectual activity which seeks the truth but, instead of breaking off when it is found, becomes contemplative, i.e. engages in an unobstructed activity that is one with its object. No one can doubt that the voluntary act, instead of ceasing, reaches its peak at the moment when the objects we have turned into obstacles disappear and when spontaneity, at first halted by reflection, coincides with reflection in the end.

That the act is not an operation which produces the thing and afterwards leaves it behind to subsist on its own we can demonstrate by observing that the thing is actual<sup>11</sup> precisely when it *is*<sup>12</sup>. If there is no other real being than that which is actual, it is because being is the act itself. It exists in and through the operation that produces it; it *is* that operation. There is nothing real or in-itself or for-us except through the act that makes it real, and when it seems to us that this reality is achieved, it has already disappeared, or at least has—in ceasing to be the aim of the act that produced it—fallen to the rank of material for a new act. A thing can *be* only by way of the interior act that holds it in existence, or at least by way of that act of apprehension which gives it the completely humble form of existence known as phenomenal or as existence-for-another.

Thus, all creation occurs along the path that separates the participated<sup>13</sup> act from the act absolute: it measures the distance separating them. Accordingly one can say that the act both creates nothing (if one wants to say that, in eternally begetting itself, it is entirely self-sufficient) and that it creates everything-that-is

perspective. More interesting is the suggestion (which follows) that the objects I encounter are called forth from the act in response to my initiatives.

<sup>9</sup> A question remains as to why a self-sufficient being is connected with an instrument or expression.

<sup>10</sup> A *human* act, I take it since the pure act is already perfect.

<sup>11</sup> Literally, *en acte*.

<sup>12</sup> My italics here and below.

<sup>13</sup> Or, shared.

(if one wants to say that it offers participation a super-abundant possibility it constantly puts to work yet can never exhaust).

We can now easily understand why the act which is always exerted in the present has no other efficacy than that of presence. It is enough that it creates itself: that is its eternal essence. It does not tend towards any end outside itself, any end it might produce by effort so to speak. And in creating itself it creates all the rest, i.e. all its manifestations and all its effects, which always arise from the greater or lesser perfection<sup>14</sup> of one's participation in it.<sup>15</sup>

How wrong to think that something must be added to being for an act to occur! In reality, since being is efficacy itself, it is sufficient that it be laid bare for its activity to be exerted. Whatever action one might want to add to it would seem an impotent labour of self-love which believes itself capable of enriching what-is when it is a matter of simply discovering it.

But though the word "act" excludes time<sup>16</sup>—since it would otherwise be necessary to introduce passivity into it with respect to the past and indeterminacy with respect to the future—and though there is, as everyone supposes, a necessary link between the act and actuality, the act does not have that character of immobility that is generally attributed to non-temporal being. Far from this it is instead pure movement or perfect mobility, completely interior to itself and alien to every path already travelled or yet to be travelled. It is like a self-feeding flame that, without changing place, never has any of its parts in repose.<sup>17</sup>

*ART. 6: Since the act is origin of itself and all that is, it is also the creator of its own reasons.*

The peculiarity of the act is to produce its own light, to bear constant witness to itself, to clarify itself with reasons and—considered in its creative essence—to call into existence and sustain through its efficacy all the things and all the beings<sup>18</sup> that fill the world. Need we ask what it is, given that it is the origin of everything-that-is, drawing from itself even that which makes it be? Need we ask its reason for being, given that it engenders all reasons, i.e. contains and surpasses them all? Need we ask to be shown it, given that it is the light by which everything is seen? When we pass from the pure act to the shared act<sup>19</sup> there is a singular reversal in perspective, which in a certain sense is the key to all

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<sup>14</sup> The French language allows for superlative degrees, i.e. for greater and lesser perfections.

<sup>15</sup> As I understand this the world arises within consciousness as the result of a more or less imperfect appropriation of the act. Effectively it is created by observers; nonetheless its ultimate source is the act.

<sup>16</sup> See Note 6.

<sup>17</sup> The author seems to allude to one of the fragments of Heraclitus: "This kosmos, which is the same for all, was made by no god or man but was, is and always will be ever-living fire, with measures kindling and going out."

<sup>18</sup> Lavelle distinguishes between these two. By "beings" is meant *human* beings.

<sup>19</sup> Or, participated act.

the problems that encumber philosophical thinking: if the opposition of the act and being is the very condition for the play of our thinking then the Absolute Act must be the supreme principle of that inexhaustible revelation which to us is being; and within our consciousness the shared act must constantly seek the total presence of Being, with which however it never coincides.

There is great naivety in wanting to derive Being from certain reasons that ground and justify it. For such reasons must themselves be interior to Being. They certainly cannot be absent from it, and since Being *is*<sup>20</sup> it carries its own reasons within itself, produces them in producing itself. Since there is no heterogeneity between being and intelligence—which has no other aim than to know being and is competent to realise this knowledge precisely because it exists<sup>21</sup> and because there is a consubstantiality between being and itself—there is nothing in being that can rightly escape intelligence or spurn its jurisdiction. To say that Being engenders intelligence is to say that it engenders its reasons for being. Everything-that-is must therefore be susceptible of being thought possible and necessary. And in the measure that there is within being a will-to-be and that this will-to-be, like the thought of being, rightly applies also to the indivisible totality of being, it introduces a value to being that saves it, just as thinking introduces an intelligibility that explains it.

To say that the act is creator of its own reasons is to say that it perpetually offers itself to us under the aspects of intelligibility and value, which are the engines of participation and its effects. There is no act that does not have as its aim an increase in the world of grounds for understanding and love.

In the world of participation my own being depends on my will; as for the being of the world I can but think it: it is only an idea within me. But this will and this idea are in accord, for the idea of the world would not exist without my will, which sustains it, and my will would not exist without the idea that nourishes it. Through this will, through this idea, through their rapport, the world is continually put back into the crucible: it is held to furnish its own justification. And depending on the attitude I take toward it, it will appear intelligible or unreasonable, deserving of horror or admiration. Always, freedom must take the world in hand and, according to the side it chooses, freedom can always prove itself divine or demonic.

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<sup>20</sup> My italics.

<sup>21</sup> Literally, *is*.

## C) CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE SELF-ACCOMPLISHING ACT

ART. 7: *The act, far from escaping consciousness, constitutes the very essence of it.*

One might ask how the act could be accompanied by consciousness since there is consciousness only of the object. But in addition to the fact that there is consciousness of the object only through the very act that perceives it, why would we hark back to such an act—which no one avoids doing, neither those who hold that the world depends on a divine act nor those who hold that representation depends on a transcendental act nor those who hold that experience such as it is given to them depends on an act of attention—if that act did not set consciousness in motion at the moment it arises, if it did not invite us to seek in its exercise the *raison d'être* for all the effects it produces and all the givens it puts before our eyes?

But there is more: not only does the word “act” necessarily imply consciousness, since without it we would be dealing with a blind force that hardly merits the name “act” to any degree, but it must also be said that consciousness is constituted by way of it, i.e. by way of the interior initiative through which a person takes possession of herself<sup>22</sup>, engaging in undertakings she has chosen and for which she has assumed responsibility. The act is not, as often believed, an operation deduced from its effects (again, what right would we have then to call it an act?), it is an operation we exercise in order to become what we wish to be.

One is therefore wrong in identifying consciousness with the light that illumines an object. Rather it is the act that produces this light. The object the light enfolds is an object of knowledge; but consciousness is the generation of this light through the act that makes me be. Hence there is nothing apart from the act to be consciousness of, though we must allow that whenever it is exercised it is inseparable from the knowledge of some object. It is the awakening of subjectivity, it ever remains the hearth of it. Far from excluding consciousness it expresses its original and ever-nascent purity. To place the act outside of consciousness would be to banish from it all intimacy, subjectivity and appurtenance, i.e. whatever takes its essence from act. The act is the initiative by which the being who makes it makes himself in thinking he makes it. It is therefore the source and essence of consciousness, as Descartes saw, in contrast to all those who hold that only states take place in our consciousness and reject the very freedom that produces them—a tragic mystery in which freedom escapes us.

The secret of the act is therefore to create the relation of self with self that is consciousness; it is the possibility—ahead of being applied to whatever object,

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<sup>22</sup> I follow the feminine gender of *personne*.

which is always a mere phenomenon – of making self a being which in unison with the act stands opposed to<sup>23</sup> all phenomena and precisely permits thought of them. Far from being opposed to one another, the act by which I produce what I am and the act by which I produce the consciousness of what I am are indistinguishable. Maine de Biran<sup>24</sup> perceived this fundamental truth which is the key to metaphysics; he affirmed it even more clearly than Descartes, for whom it was so obvious he did not think it could be gainsaid. The I for Biran is identical with will; and the I knows itself through the act that brings it into existence. Nobody could establish a distinction other than a purely formal one between the will-to-be and the will-to-be-conscious, between his being conscious and his very being. The coincidence of these two wills, which is revealed again in every act of participation, is the secret of the Pure Act, which precedes the possibility of their dissociation. That possibility can manifest only when we contrast a being that is not ours and that far surpasses our own being with a cognizance that is ours but that, while adding nothing to what it is, nonetheless adds to what we are. But that possibility does not pertain to the act that grounds our personal being or the act that grounds the being of the All.

ART. 8: *Consciousness is one with the intuition of the self-accomplishing act.*

Rapport between the act and consciousness always appears obscure because we imagine that the act is posited first and that a consciousness comes along later and applies itself to it from the outside in order to illumine it. But the act engenders consciousness of everything else at the same time it engenders consciousness of itself.

It is strange that in taking consciousness we are most often disposed to focus on the object to the exclusion of the act that grasps it, thereby considering consciousness as effectively pertaining to the object but not to the act that posits it, and this on the pretext that we cannot make an object of this act. But in addition to the fact that the word “consciousness” pertains in a privileged fashion to the light that illumines the act when we accomplish it, without which it would not be an act, and in addition to the fact that the word “knowledge” is best suited to the representation of an object, it is obvious that we would never have any idea of the act if everything were reduced to an objective display such as that entertained by the empiricists. Moreover, if we tried to turn the act into an object the act would immediately flee us in the direction of the operation that posits this new object and permits us to grasp it. Thus is explained why Kant preferred to place the act beyond consciousness rather than to make it an object for consciousness. But consciousness is not knowledge, though it cannot be

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<sup>23</sup> In the sense of preceding or standing across from.

<sup>24</sup> Marie-Francois-Pierre Gonthier de Biran (1766-1824), an important influence on Lavelle. He emphasised inwardness over external experience and drew attention to the role of will in bodily movements. Many regard him as a forerunner of French existentialism.

separated from it.<sup>25</sup> It is the internal experience of the act in its initiative and its accomplishment. That we have such an experience is without doubt sufficiently verified by an examination of will. In it we best grasp the act in a pure state, independently of every image. Who dares say that the will is known only through its effects, even though it is always known together with them? Who dares push empiricism so far as to maintain that the will can only be inferred? Now the peculiarity of consciousness is precisely to accompany and reveal the initiatives of the will, which is born, bends, changes sense and succumbs in me and with me according to the choices of internal consent. It is doubtless in it that we encounter, in the most direct and lively manner, the essence of the act of participation, considered at once as received and assumed, as founding our interiority, as infinite in principle and limited in fact. And one can say that by way of their rapport with will, thought and love in turn merit the name “act”: firstly because both are implicated in will, if it is true that we can only will what we think and what we love; next because, if thought gives us a virtual representation of a world that surpasses our will, love is a kind of appeal to the will of another—the expectation, the request and the hope that it is turned toward us, as our will is turned toward him, and that he will be our support in being as we try to be his.<sup>26</sup>

There is nothing more beautiful, and doubtless more difficult to realise and express, than this consciousness of the self-accomplishing act which through a sort of purity and shyness of itself draws from darkness and nothingness all the objects to which it is applied in order to know and produce them, without ever becoming itself an object situated amid others: in this respect it is like the light that envelopes everything we see but is seen in turn only by a gaze pure enough and disinterested enough to discern the various ways it is reflected, refracted and divided in objects themselves.

Consciousness of the self-accomplishing act transcends time, not because it flees to a mysterious world where time is no longer but because it is exercised in a present it cannot depart. Yet this present is not a punctual present since, on the contrary, it is realised through an incessant superposition of the thought of what has just been and the thought of what is going to be. This exact superposition constitutes consciousness of the self-accomplishing act. That consciousness is the same as existence itself, always midway between the two nothings of what is not yet and what is no longer. But it encompasses them as the indivisible unity of a possibility that is realised.

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<sup>25</sup> Consciousness itself is not knowledge in the usual sense of the word, which implies objects. Still, Lavelle would agree that *something* is known within consciousness alone and he makes that plain in what follows. His writings tend to associate the words “consciousness” and “knowledge” with the cognition of objects; by contrast he favours words like “interiority” and “intimacy” in relation to consciousness-in-itself. Sometimes it is unclear which of the two senses of consciousness is in question.

<sup>26</sup> The author regards the aforementioned faculties as closely related but distinct “powers” of the I which he treats at length in Book Three.

Only, if one considers that no mental<sup>27</sup> activity is beyond consciousness and that consciousness is indistinct from its sheer exercise then we can enlarge the sense of the word “experience” to signify that creative experience by which we assist<sup>28</sup> in producing the advent of ourselves and the world such as it is given to us. To describe this activity will also be to justify it to ourselves.<sup>29</sup> This will reveal the end it pursues, the limits that restrict it, the target it aims at and the one it hits, the possession it has been given and the convergence or divergence between what it seeks and what it obtains. In describing it as an activity of participation, inseparable from creative power and drawing upon it in due measure, we will show that the totality of experience is formed for it and thanks to it; for our obvious passivity with respect to the given world becomes the presence to us of whatever in the pure act surpasses our own operation but is nonetheless evoked by it and responsive to it. Matter then ceases to be an unintelligible term, irreducible to or heterogeneous with thinking. Likewise the act ceases to be a transcendental condition of experience, producing it while remaining alien to it: rather, it accompanies consciousness and even establishes it in its two essential traits: attention to self and mastery of self. There is no longer anything in-itself<sup>30</sup> or behind the world since our thinking is coextensive with being in both its power and its essence, though being surpasses it in two ways: through the eternal act that inspires it and through the infinity of appearances spread before it. Finally we see an end to the unexplained correspondence between our thinking and outward things since they have the same origin and since things spring up in front of thinking in order to express its power and its limits: what it is can only evoke (yet co-achieves) and what is for it always and indivisibly a product, an obstacle and a gift.

ART. 9. *When our activity is purest our consciousness is most nearly perfect.*

We will above all not allow consciousness to be identified with doubt or with mere enquiry. Consciousness reaches its highest point in discovery, i.e. when its operation finally coincides with its object. We will add that, in its most nearly perfect form, consciousness does away with whatever duality remains in it as long as there is still some slackness in its activity. We know that every true act captures us entirely, the intellectual act as much as all others; if then self-consciousness diminishes, will it be said that the abbreviated consciousness also diminishes and that, under the excessive contraction, the act fades, as with certain states of inspiration where our activity seems to be swept away? Will we say that only through insufficiency, abandon and lack of mastery do we cease to

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<sup>27</sup> Or, spiritual.

<sup>28</sup> This word in French is perfectly suited Lavelle’s purposes: it means at once to aid, to witness or to be present to and to participate in.

<sup>29</sup> Lavelle is looking ahead to topics he will address in subsequent chapters.

<sup>30</sup> Doubtless in the Kantian sense of an undefinable entity X existing “out there”, presumably impacting the senses but forever closed “in-itself”, beyond direct inspection.

think of ourselves? And if consciousness ceases to be attentive to the individual and passive part of ourselves, to our states, is it not because, instead of losing itself in its object, as we believe, it is completely concentrated in the act it performs and no longer distinguishes itself from it? Hence it is in an act that occupies us completely that we need to look for evidence that in some way approaches the identity of the pure act with perfect consciousness, which is the very definition of spirit. Our consciousness, in which it seems we can always distinguish an interior act from the state to which it pertains, is only a participated form: it introduces a shadow to the pure light, and it is this contrast between shadow and light that constitutes our very experience of the world.<sup>31</sup>

We are perhaps wrong to take as secure the thesis that the imperfection of consciousness, its inadequacy, the presence in it of an object which is an obstacle it unsuccessfully tries to assimilate are fundamental laws of its operation and that it is effaced in getting what it seeks. We have personal experience of certain acts of pure consciousness where self-love is silent, effort fades and the object, ceasing to resist us, is one with the operation that penetrates, comprehends and makes use of it. There, where consciousness is always active, it is nothing but light. It enjoys its self-sufficiency in an uninterrupted circulation in which, from its own act, it creates a being whose act is forever reborn. The pure act would be only a blind spontaneity or a mere thing, i.e. would never be an act, if it did not pursue this astonishing dialogue with self that constitutes its inwardness and very spirituality. What is there to say of the finite act of consciousness that, in its most perfect form, turns away from the object before it but does not cease to nourish itself on the pure act through a two-way movement, both received and given back, which constitutes its proper essence?

Consciousness tends to be excluded from the pure act because the latter is thought to be too high above it. However it grounds, illumines and animates consciousness: it is at once the principle of self-consciousness and the principle of inter-communication between all consciousnesses. And if consciousness is always the summit of our life, how could we ever imagine it being abolished there where only the act remains, the summit of consciousness itself? It is in the purest and highest moments of our life, when our inner unity is most perfect, that consciousness is most transparent within it all objects emit only the light that illumines them.

If one wishes one can say that this act which is the clarity of everything else remains obscure to us. But this is only because it blinds us when we want to see it as an object, for the object always takes shape in that shadow-zone where our gaze seeks the light less than what halts and divides it.

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<sup>31</sup> A far from limpid exposition. Also, the analysis neglects moments of mindless confluence where a passive consciousness fails to distinguish itself from things and events. Here too is a coincidence of subject and object but not the one Lavelle has in mind.

ART. 10: *Consciousness of the act is realised through a return to self, which leads us to an analysis of reflection.*

One might say it is hard to recognise the act in the perfect indeterminacy of the pure act. But this indeterminacy is not negative: it is in a sense the point where all determinations find their source and confluence: they have their fundament in *it*, and not it in them. Also, though it makes us blink, we must not forgo embracing within our depths this original act upon which all we think and all we are depends. Though never offered to us free of determinations it is the principle that sustains them all.

But to want to grasp it is already to grasp it, doubtless not as an initial determination, but as that will situated above all determinations which gives birth to itself and reflects itself, seemingly in absolute sterility. The mind's constitutive act inevitably appears to make itself a kind of first object in this eternally-resumed return to self which Aristotle has defined once and for all as the "thought of thought" – without which it would not be an act and could not in any way be attributed to itself. In this apparently sterile doubling-back is a limitless fecundity: for though the creation of self by self is perfectly realised only in the pure act we ourselves can glimpse it through the intermediary of the world we give ourselves in representation and upon which we constantly act.<sup>32</sup> Only the pure act, with its perfect interiority, realises perfect self-consciousness. We search for it without ever attaining it; the consciousness we have of ourselves is always imperfect; it is of-a-piece with the consciousness we have of the world; and grows with it.

This consciousness is inseparable from the exercise of our activity; but that activity is always broken into distinct actions, each correlative of a particular form of passivity. Each is realised through various functions such as understanding and will, through which I represent reality to myself or modify it. They never coincide with but oppose, sustain and complement one another, allowing me to bring into reality that original intervention through which my personality itself is constituted.

Self-consciousness is never realised without the accomplishment of some action. It constantly oscillates between the thought of an action I have accomplished and the goal of an action I should accomplish, which terminals correspond rather well with the operations of intelligence and will. Thus perfect

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<sup>32</sup> The French text says "*only* through the intermediary . . .". This appears to contradict earlier arguments to the effect that there is an immediate acquaintance with the act, especially where will is concerned. Here Lavelle appears to side with those who maintain that human knowledge is always dependent on some object. I gather that from a *practical* perspective our immediate acquaintance with being tends to be mixed up with worldly objects so that our approach to self-being is normally in terms of them. Humans do enjoy direct knowledge of self and being but only in varying measures. Their experience is always to some degree clouded by objects.

consciousness of the self-accomplishing act is shattered within me owing to a perpetual coming and going. There, where this act surpasses time, where it is sufficient to itself, independent of whatever support and whatever effect, I must gather together in the same hearth the two processes of retrospection and anticipation between which my finite consciousness constantly oscillates and through which it tries at once to possess and to surpass itself. But consciousness in me extends as far as the act I am capable of accomplishing and making my own; it measures the amplitude of my participation. The unconscious is for it the non-participated. But that non-participated remains a possible consciousness which supports my real consciousness; and rather than limiting it, it calls upon my consciousness to surpass its limits. Therefore we must now try to penetrate the essence of the act and the nature of participation through an analysis of the act of reflection.