

CHAPTER II

THE REFLEXIVE ACT

A) FROM THE SPONTANEOUS ACT TO THE REFLEXIVE ACT

ART. 1: *Reflexion is consciousness taking possession of the activity that makes me be.*

Reflexion turns its back on the natural direction of life, i.e. on impulse and instinct, but only in order to mount back toward the source of all activity: it takes upon itself the very work of creation, at once through the intelligence that comprehends it and the will that carries it into the future. Reflexion therefore seems singularly difficult and dry but a feeling of incomparable joy accompanies it. It gives us a more or less profound access to the real; the reality it delivers us is cut to our measure yet it lifts us to the very measure of reality.

I cannot propose to myself an end without putting in question the entire activity that makes me be. Neither can I achieve that end (or fall short of it) without referring back to that activity in order to recover the value and sense of it. And there is in reflexion at the moment we perform it a constant regaining of self, which is not as often believed the knowledge of our activity's effects after it has subsided but the very consciousness of this activity in its constitutive

operation, which obliges us to experience and possess it. For the character of reflexion is not to apply itself to a ready-made object but to the very power of making it, whose movement lingers in reflexion, apparently changed in meaning, but in an admirable unity and reciprocity of the creative act and the reflexive verb without which the Act of Creation could neither be posited nor posit itself.

Before reflexion man is delivered to nature, i.e. to all the solicitations that constitute the élan and call of life, by way of which he hopes to preserve himself and grow: these are forces that carry him away. But they are also the conditions that allow him to insert his participated activity into the world; it is possible for him to abandon himself and not overcome them. The peculiarity of reflexion is to allow him to take them in hand, to agree to the conditions, to direct them, to use them. Reflexion mounts back to that original activity which obliges us to assume responsibility for what we want by producing our own reasons for acting.

ART. 2: The opposition between spontaneity and reflexion is a condition for the possibility of individual consciousness.

Should it be said that an initial spontaneity precedes the act of reflexion and that the latter comes and interrupts it? But then what would be the origin of the former? Could it have an independent existence? For we never posit it in itself but only in opposition to reflexion, which rejects it and consequently supposes it: it exists only for the person who has begun to reflect. However for reflexion to be produced there has to be a certain continuity or natural parentage between the initial spontaneity and this bending-back movement by which I try to render it mine, upon which the very genesis of consciousness depends. Now if spontaneity exists only in relation to reflexion, which discovers it in rejecting it yet is unable to divorce itself from it, am I not obliged to trace both back to a superior act they divide between them so as to allow me to establish my own life and personal consciousness within it?

Spontaneity and reflexion are distinguished from one another at the human level alone. The condition of our initiative and independence can be derived only from their division. The opposition between instinct and will in the practical domain, between sensation and thought in the theoretical domain, exactly define the difference between these two forms of activity. Doubtless they seek accord but they can never be confused; from the interval that separates them arises the possibility for each consciousness to be party to the world, i.e. to collaborate in its creation, to derive and inflect the power consciousness currently disposes, to put in question the élan that animates it, to suspend it, to take charge of it and change its direction. That is why reflexion always comes down to a virtuality that is left to us actualise since what is in question is the play of an activity which up to now was not different from pure impulse.

However impulse hardly coincides with the act that reflexion tries to regain, of which both impulse and reflexion are opposed yet inseparable faces. What we

call spontaneity or impulse is moreover what resists reflexion whenever it is exercised; it is what reflexion does not manage to reduce. Now, reflexion aspires to being a first beginning. It relies on spontaneity as a limit and an instrument. But always surpasses it. We go on taking part in the world, we remain connected to instinct and nature, but only so that reflexion can then enable us to mount back to their origin, i.e. to the unity of the creative act, from whose vantage-point nature and instinct can be regarded as signs of the fall only if they are also regarded as vehicles of participation.

ART. 3: Reflexion is the path leading from natural spontaneity to spiritual spontaneity.

When asked about the origin of spontaneity, and consequently of nature, one must reply that this is surely a matter of the sole means by which spiritual freedom can be introduced to the world. Spirit grafts itself onto natural spontaneity: it becomes manifest when reflexion requires the latter to mount back toward its own source-principle. In natural spontaneity, activity and passivity are one: I yield to the impulse I obey, which is indistinct from me. But spirit enables me to win my independence, to liberate and make my own the activity I receive, to turn it to good or bad use, sometimes drawing from it an egotistical joy and sometimes a means of union with the very principle that makes me be.

Reflexion does not do away with the spontaneity of instinctive being: it only interrupts and regulates the course of it: it is ever the individual who reflects, and it can be said that life's impulsion remains in him even when he puts it in question, and indeed in the very act by which he does so. However when he abandons himself to impulse he forgets himself; now that he wants to take charge of and possess the impulse he attaches it to a spiritual activity having some rapport with it, one that requires it as an instrument. But he can discover it only on the condition of exercising it. Thus through a kind of paradox instinct can, as has been seen, belong to consciousness only when consciousness begins to detach itself from it; similarly the spiritual act toward which consciousness tends resides beyond it and appertains to it only in that consciousness seeks it but does not coincide with it. In other words consciousness lives by participation: it constantly oscillates between a nature that carries it along and a freedom that is never quite pure.

It is therefore insufficient to say that reflexion supposes spontaneity, or even that it illumines it and makes it ours; it suffuses natural spontaneity, which is in fact imposed on us willy-nilly so that we might attain spiritual spontaneity and which rightly grounds it, providing both its material and means. Up to the moment this spontaneity has been liberated reflexion looks for itself in vain. One might say that it is not in itself creative, though it ever seeks the act which engenders its own grounds by engendering itself: one could say that it gives

itself over that – but also realises itself; for what it finds is the act, i.e. *being*, which receives from itself the very being it has.

Thus reflexion ever tends toward that perfect freedom which obeys no external determination and produces its own justification. It has to surpass nature's productivity in order to regain that spiritual efficacy without which nature itself would have no meaning to us: the two must be regarded as opposed though they cannot be dissociated. In life's happy moments they are reconciled; nature then becomes docile and transparent so to speak; it complies so well with the action of the mind it seems to efface itself. And it must not be said that consciousness has disappeared; rather, it has regained so much light and so much unity that a problem is there only to give us a solution, an effort to allow a triumph and a pain to make us sensible of the joy it delivers.

The possibility of turning back towards that initial activity we hope to make our own is the sign of our freedom. And depending on whether we make use of it or not, we either surrender to natural spontaneity or ground our spiritual existence.

M. Le Senne¹ has admirably noted the role played by the obstacle in this dialectic. It must be remarked however that the obstacle may offer many occasions for reflexion but it does not necessarily give it birth; it can redouble our élan or discourage it, if we remain helpless. Let us also remark that the smallest obstacle is best for the birth of reflexion, just enough to allow us to take a spiritual possession from our activity yet not so much as to rivet our attention. And perhaps it could even be said that reflexion is already implicated in the most elementary experience, which is not that of the obstacle but that of the given, so that we cannot perceive the given without taking consciousness of the activity that presents this perception to itself. That is the very beginning of all reflexion and all explanation. For this presenting activity yields only representations, which fact already leads us to consider it as surpassed by a creative activity in which it participates.

B) FROM THE REFLEXIVE ACT TO THE ACT ABSOLUTE

ART. 4: *Reflexion shows us how we create ourselves through an act of participation.*

We immediately glean that reflexion is the justification and the putting-into-play of participation: for on the one hand, since reflexion signifies a return, the activity we exercise must be received rather than produced. On the other hand, the efficacy reflexion employs must be homogenous with it. And if consciousness

¹ René Le Senne (1882-1954), a moralist and metaphysician whose *Obstacle et Valuer* appeared in 1934.

is born precisely in order to render our own an activity that until then was not ours, that activity must have some rapport with consciousness since it had the power to arouse it and since the nature of consciousness is precisely to lift us to it.

Reflexion is itself an application of my freedom: it is also a first beginning, a creation absolute with respect to me—but it is only an appropriation of a power already present in the real world, which I try to regain in order to make it mine. It should not be surprising that reflexion immediately regards itself as adequate to the whole of what-is. It admirably displays the features of participation. For it gives birth to the I. It establishes the I as origin of itself but by requiring it to re-ascend to an act that is the common origin of everything real. It does not arbitrarily suppose, as one might think, the existence of the creative act; it proves it and experiences it in performing it, realising its operation in reverse so to speak.

By faithfully expressing the indestructible link between the I and the universe reflexion thus allows an understanding of the I's original nature. For it is always the experience of a possibility. And this possibility is the I's very reality. But it is at the same time the possibility of the All, though there is an infinite distance between the actuality of the I which upholds the possibility of the All and the actuality of the All which upholds the possibility of the I. However that same distance obliges us to think that, from the I's perspective, the actuality of the All might become its own possibility. We then experience the insertion of our own participated activity in the initial, total and absolute activity which, dare we say, founds our independence upon our very dependence. And through its reflection in our consciousness it produces our representation of the world.

Situated between an impulse from the body and an inspiration from on high reflexion teaches how to make them agree. It allows us to rise from the former to the later, to glimpse in the body's impulse not only a limitation or a temptation but a gift of spontaneity which is such that it can alternatively make us slaves, if we surrender ourselves to it, or liberate us, even though by bringing us into existence it does no more than lend us the force needed to reawaken our relationship with the Absolute through our own efforts.

ART. 5: Infinite regress, which is the mark of reflexion, reveals an act that is the eternal first-beginning of itself.

Reflexion seems to suppose an object it ponders in order to discover its possibility. Yet this possibility resides in an act whose accomplishment depends on reflexion, and the act by which it posits itself is its object² first and last. The object, which initially seems given, is no more than an occasion for the act of

² I suspect the word here takes the sense of a target or goal, e.g. the object of an exercise in contrast to the sense of something observed, the central connotation throughout this section.

reflexion. Moreover we see that it is never truly given but always posited. And as soon as we recognise that it is posited, reflexion has already begun. We therefore find ourselves in the presence of an activity that is constrained to discover within itself the reason for this object's being posited. That the object cannot be posited without the activity already shows that the word "object" means nothing more than the point to which the activity is applied. The activity ever departs the given in order to re-ascend to the act that produces and explains it; in this sense it is immediately transcendent with respect to all experience that is confined to the purely given.

But that the activity of reflexion is arrested by the object, if only for a moment, shows us that it stands across from it and surpasses it. Thus, in positing it, the activity posits itself (which is rightly the definition of reflexion) and it carries within itself the possibility of positing itself eternally. For in order to posit itself it must know it posits itself, and know it posits itself ad infinitum so to speak. We grasp in this activity the point of connection between the world and the I: a point where the I appears subjected to the world so that reflexion can be born—but where reflexion always dominates so that the world itself can be posited. Because reflexion is the power of surpassing itself, i.e. in ever taking itself as an object, it lays claim to the power of engendering all that is by engendering itself. It puts us in the presence of an activity that is self-caused, i.e. cause of the very essence of all true activity. By entering into an infinite regress as soon as it begins to exert itself, reflexion witnesses the nature of the act, which is ever to be *its own beginning, i.e. to be eternal*. Through reflexion the act posits itself as both relative and absolute: relative with respect to the creative act, which consequently has for reflexion an ideal or virtual character, but at the same time absolute in that it is itself an act, inseparable from the creative act which so to speak performs its own kind of reflexion on itself.

ART. 6: *The world is formed in the interval that separates the reflexive act from the creative act.*

We almost always err about the true nature of reflexion. For we think that it takes the worldly spectacle as no more than a retrospective possession. But reflexion is a return to an act in which we participate; and it is through this participation that the worldly spectacle is produced, for the act that drives reflexion is at once its principle and its end. Between this principle and that end the world appears. Thus the entire world is formed in the interval separating the reflexive act from the act of creation. The same reflexion that discovers the world in a certain sense makes it be; and who could say whether there would be a world without it? Cutting through the world it mounts back to the creative act. But in first breaking away from the act it clears an inner space which opens only to close and within which can appear all the manifold forms that testify to the act's efficacy. From the necessity of return one will therefore not assert the

futility of having left in the first place, for only between leaving and returning is there a world.

If it is by way of reflexion that I try grasp the principle of the act from which everything is inferred or created, that is because I can draw from the act the conditions through which my finite mind (indeed *every* finite mind) can participate in it so as to produce the represented world. Accordingly one can assert this theorem: *there is an identity between the act through which the world is created and the act in which I am invited to participate.*

It can therefore be said that the representation of the world is the reflected image of the creative act. But one can go further: for creation is nothing more than the act by which particular consciousnesses are called to provide themselves a represented world in order to fashion themselves.

Reflexion, in harking back to the principle of absolute activity in which it participates, obliges me to posit my limits as well as the boundlessness of the act, alternatively to consider it as incapable of being posited since it is always positing and since it is for all worldly beings the act by which they are enabled to posit themselves. That is what I mean when I say it is infinite. It allows me to posit myself, in determining myself, but only by participation in its essence and by elaborating a world relative to me that continually testifies to my limits while offering me a limitless field of action. As has been observed, the act has no form. Nonetheless my act of participation witnesses to its reality and efficacy through the operation which permits me to discern and circumscribe worldly forms.

Reflexion permits me to take possession of a principle that is always present, i.e. immanent to us so to speak; in turning activity back on itself reflexion allows the activity to have consciousness of its true nature. Yet reflexion is at once a point of arrival and a point of departure, for an activity proves its existence, its fecundity, only through being exercised, i.e. through its creation. A created being rises from the world to God only in order to resume endlessly creating the world along with God. There is no need to justify the operations of the mind since it is through them that the world is justified. Here more than elsewhere movement evinces itself in moving, and the created realm is its eternal testament.

C) THE REFLEXIVE CIRCLE

ART. 7: The created realm and reflexion form a circle which is characteristic of the Act itself.

The unique character of the Act is to be both its own beginning and end: in acting ever to contemplate itself acting, and to create within itself the operation by which it does so. In this continual circulation, which we only succeed

describing in the language of succession (as is always the case in an analysis that obliges us to differentiate parts in an indivisible richness), two directions strike us as opposed to one another through a simple optical illusion: though the circular movement remains faithful to itself it appears sometimes to mount and sometimes to descend, and we have the illusory experience that departure and return are not the same. In intuition, as soon as it loses a little of its purity, a certain oscillation allows us to rejoin them. Without this³ circulation between creation and reflexion the Act would not be a spiritual act; it would not have any interiority to itself. It would be no more than a moving *thing*. One cannot even say that the act's reflexive aspect is secondary to its creative aspect, which is only true in the psychological order of things where the ontological order is shown as running in the opposite direction. In reality the act can only be defined as the reciprocity of the creative process and the reflexive process. And that is so true we can equally say that creation is first, since without it reflexion would have no impulsion or nourishment, and that reflexion is first, since without it creation would have no spirituality or light.

ART. 8: Reflexion introduces us to a circle where time is at once created and abolished, which witnesses to its non-temporal character.

In reflexion there is a creation and possession of self that is realised through a continual renewal and appraisal of self. But the two operations can be distinguished from one another only through the medium of time and only for a finite consciousness. In the pure act they coincide, as indeed they coincide within us at moments when our life approaches unity and perfection. However it cannot be denied that—even there, in the domain of time—the non-temporal is for them an origin, an end and the very milieu in which they are deployed.

The same movement that introduces us to time leads us back to eternity and reunites the intelligible with the intellectual act. Thus, in the rhythm of this coming and going which is ever finished and ever resumed, time is at once created and abolished, just as in the movement of the sea, which also seems an eternal rhythm. We find it again at the very heart of ourselves, in the endless oscillation of creative will and reflexive intelligence, the flux and reflux of our mind which continually opens an interval that is continually filled. One can equally say that reflexion reverses the flow of time and that it suspends it. It would be a singular error to think that reflexion indefinitely pursues a regressive and temporal course that never terminates. For it could be said that its peculiar originality is on the contrary immediately to situate itself outside time so that at each instant it can recover the principle through which the world can be given to

³ Given the drift of this paragraph I feel the word “apparent” would have been appropriate here. Strictly speaking circulation describes a temporal process which cannot apply to an atemporal unity. Nonetheless, as will be seen in later chapters, Lavelle persists in referring to the Act as a kind of circulation.

us and our action inserted in it. Thus every act seems a first act to us, not because it springs from time's origin but because it transcends time: it never descends into time, though all its effects are found to take place there.

ART. 9: *The circle characteristic of the Primary Act finds expression in the reflexive verb*⁴.

Reflexion always marks a process of return in which the mind takes possession of the act that makes it be, acquires consciousness of itself and becomes enclosed so to speak in the living circle of its own sufficiency. Of all acts the intellectual act has ever appeared the purest because it seems the most immaterial. One therefore understands why Aristotle regarded it as the very summit of the act and defined it as the thinking of thinking⁵, and not as the thought of an object. But that is not enough. If thinking expresses the light that accompanies the act, *will* best characterises its origin and *love* its fecundity. But in order to grasp under these new headings the perfect self-sufficiency that is the principle of itself and all-that-is, it must be added that what is in question is not the willing of an end but the willing of willing, and not the love of any particular being but the love of love. The object, the end, the individual here are only means that permit thinking, willing and love to be affirmed and realised, though it should be understood that these terms appear to divide and limit the efficacy of an internal act which in its most profound essence indivisibly thinks itself, wills itself and loves itself eternally.

The essence of the act is expressed by the verb. But the act creates nothing external to itself, or if you will, the creation of what is external to it characterises the imperfection and insufficiency peculiar to participation. It should therefore be said that the act can have no other action than on itself. This action is expressed by the verb *se créer*⁶ and by reflexive verbs generally. In the reflexive verb we best grasp the essence of a consciousness that knows itself, a knowing that is inseparable from the act that engenders it.

The reflexive verb admirably expresses the identity of the positing I and the posited I: it is precisely the verb of reflexion. And in the verb of reflexion I grasp the act through which being posits itself, not only with respect to the individual but universally, in Self⁷ and not merely in me. Moreover I should not be required to straightaway posit being as a first term, for I would not know how to introduce myself into a being I myself had proposed. I can therefore posit Being

⁴ A type of French verb which includes back-reference to the initiating subject, e.g. the “*se*” in “*se créer*” below. A kind of circularity is implied as in the phrase “she hurries herself”.

⁵ Usually this classic phrase is translated “the thought of thought” but I feel a more active construction better suits Lavelle’s philosophy. Both renderings are valid.

⁶ Translation: “to create oneself”.

⁷ As will be seen Self is trans-subjective. Ultimately it refers to God. In some respects it recalls the Vedic Atman.

only through an act by which I first posit myself. It is remarkable that in positing itself each I necessarily posits the possibility for all others also to posit themselves through participation in an “infinite power to self-posit”, which shows that the hearth⁸ of Being is everywhere, i.e. that there is only one hearth and that it everywhere transmits not only its light but its nature as hearth.

ART. 10: *The same circular process is met again in all the steps of our dialectic.*

Reflexion helps us understand why there is a circle at the heart of the real without which one could understand neither the nature of the act nor the possibility of participation. The peculiarity of participation is—instead of enriching being through a straight-ahead movement that abandons what it has just achieved at every step—to fold back on itself in each of its operations so as to consolidate possession of itself; between the act of creation and the act of reflexion that recovers it, the entire world is contained. This circle finds expression in all the steps of the dialectic:

1. In the principle $A = A$ which implies a taking-possession of the object through the very act that posits it. The self-positing truth guarantees itself in the same stroke. That is to say there is a mind that authenticates itself in authenticating whatever object. The principle $A = A$ recognises a distinction and an identity between the object and the knowledge I have of it; and the interval which separates the subject from object—ahead of their reconnection—is the interval required by all reflexion as soon as it is initiated.

2. In the constitutive act of thinking, which obliges us, whenever we posit an idea, also to posit the idea of this idea, and whenever we know that a thing is true, to know as well it is true that it is true.

3. In the fundamental relation—which gives birth to all others—by which thinking, born of being but only participating in it and doing no more than trying to recapture it, yet gives birth to consciousness and the represented world.

4. In all the initiatives of freedom, which draws from the foundation of being the power it exercises and feeds it back into the All after having transformed it, so that between the borrowing and the giving-back freedom defines and constitutes our individual being.

5. In the theory of participation, where the circle is first manifest in the form of a spatial simultaneity in which all assignable positions mutually determine one another; and at the heart of temporal succession, where its two-way career requires action to proceed from the past toward the future but finally allows the future in turn to become the past and from then on to constitute my spiritual present (in more general terms time is given us so as to break the circle and then rejoin it).

⁸ The word in question (“*foyer*”) connotes both hearth and home.

6. In the rapport among subjects, each of whom acts and participates relative to all the others, yielding a reciprocity that vouches for the unity of the source upon which they draw and the solidarity of all their modes of participated activity.

7. Lastly in the moral world, in the example of repentance where reflexion's characteristic movement takes its most gripping form. The committed fault belongs to the past. Therefore repentance does not remove it: repentance takes responsibility for it and mends it. Similarly all our actions need to be detached from us so we can take possession of them and render them ours, i.e. give them their value and spiritual significance. The Christian doctrine of the fall and its redemption expresses in moral terms the circular nature of a universe where participation reigns. However the appearance of particular beings does not rightly constitute the fall, as sometimes maintained, but the misuse of the power they dispose, and if a possibility of falling is necessary it is precisely so that the return to God is always the result of a person's own consent.