

## PART TWO

## BEING AND ACT

## CHAPTER IV

THE ACT OF BEING<sup>1</sup>

## A) THE ACT, OR THE GENESIS OF BEING

ART. 1: *The Act is one with Being, considered in its self-genesis.*

In placing Being at the debut of philosophic speculation<sup>2</sup> we have not supposed an object situated across from the I according to which the latter would regulate all its processes but an All to which the I is party. Being goes beyond the I but at the same time sustains it. Thought can affirm nothing that is not included in Being and that does not constitute a determination of it. Before analysis Being can appear to us not as empty but as indeterminate. Then it bursts into an infinite abundance of individual differences as soon as we engage our thinking and our life in it. In contrast to all other ideas, which express no more than the possibility of an object and permit no conclusion with respect to its reality, the idea of being gives us a footing in being: since there is nothing outside being the idea of it is

---

<sup>1</sup> In a footnote the author refers readers to his article "Being and Act" published in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* ("Review of Metaphysics and Morals") published in 1936.

<sup>2</sup> The author here adds a note referring readers to the first volume of *The Dialectic of the Eternal Present*, namely *Of Being*.

there and then adequate to its referent<sup>3</sup>, though this referent is only matter for discursive knowledge which will never succeed in exhausting it.

Moreover, being is independent of each particular object since it can equally be affirmed of every object and since, whatever its exact nature, the same being is always affirmed in it. By this it shows its identity with the act, as we see in the act of thinking which is also capable of positing all objects but has no more definition than being itself, i.e. than objects determine. In contrast to the object, which always has a nature or content, being has none, which suffices to show us the immaterial and, if one likes, subjective character of being, obliging us to identify it with the act which thus becomes the common source of the being attributed to every object.

The identity of being and the act delivers us from agnosticism which, in positing being as outside us and heterogeneous with us, requires us to consider it as both unknown and unknowable. But the act renders us interior to being and coextensive with it through our own operation. Being ceases to be for us a mystery since it is indistinguishable from its own genesis<sup>4</sup> and since by engendering itself it resolves in a single stroke the problems that most deeply interest us in the world, i.e. the problems of meaning and value: for meaning and value are affirmed and created by the act at the moment it agrees to be posited. Someone will perhaps tell us that we thus transfer the mystery of being to the act: he will ask us why, if the act is the ground of being, it has no need of grounds itself. But we reply that the act is indeed the mystery of mysteries if we take it as a given object that we might try to explain by some cause external to it. We say rather that its intelligibility derives precisely from that which, having no origin, is the eternal origin of whatever has one and thereby grants interiority to whoever exercises it: the disposition and possession of himself. Being at the very root of the real the act brings us so much satisfaction and light that it is absurd to seek something beyond it, i.e. a fundament to the fundament of all that is. Whoever follows the natural movement of his thinking always seeks an act that is the principle of what he wishes to explain; the adult does not differ from the child in this. But when he asks for the principle of the act, routine intellectual mechanisms begin to take over in him; it is a little as if, having discovered the light that illumines all that exists in the world, we were to ask what light illumines this light.

It is the same thing to posit an act from which everything-that-is must emerge – which we are obliged to suppose from the fact that there is nothing real that does not have the act as its origin – and to posit an act from which everything-that-is must be deduced, for thinking itself is not only coextensive with what-is but is itself an act from which everything thinkable can be drawn.

---

<sup>3</sup> Lavelle reviews his arguments (detailed in *Of Being* and *The Total Presence*) in favour of the proposition that the idea of Being is adequate to its referent, i.e. Being itself.

<sup>4</sup> Doubtless many readers will see self-genesis itself as a mystery.

ART. 2: *To say that being excludes nothingness is to say that the act is the eternal passage from nothingness into being.*

The passage from nothingness into being, or from nothing to all, which is the mystery of creation and the ambition of every explanation, can only be realised by the act, that is to say, by freedom.<sup>5</sup> Not that there are here two distinct terms, nothingness and being, between which the act might make a transition. Since nothingness is not and being never ceases to be, being never begins. We oppose these two terms in the abstract in order to describe the nature of the act. In reality they are like end-points of participation's functioning, between which we endlessly pass from one form of existence to another: the first is then a relative nothing with respect to the second but both are no more than forms that participation makes appear at the heart of condition-less being, which excludes nothingness and does not spring from it.<sup>6</sup> And the temporal span in which these forms succeed each other, which is the condition of their possibility, is itself inscribed in being and possesses no generative virtue. It is, one might say, both derivative and infinite. Its derivative character means that instead of being the primary condition without which the act could not be exerted it is engendered by the act from the moment it is engaged. Its infinity expresses the eternity of the act which ever finds its beginning in itself. The act is not set into motion at any specific time but introduces the products of participation at every moment. It is one with the passage from nothing to everything which is forever realised in the absolute and which in the relative sphere is paralleled by the indefinite passage from one form of existence to another, i.e. by the uninterrupted cycle of births. Here is the element of truth in pantheism. But in such a doctrine the act that founds all particular existences is one with them; in itself it is indistinguishable from sheer nothingness.

The peculiarity of the act is that it cannot be regarded as a given datum; it is rightly the origin and genesis of things, the principle that produces them. That is why the act is often presented as having a negative character with respect to being; but in that case being is confounded with the given world. This negative character is mainly insisted upon by those who want the constitutive process of the mind to be a process of refusal, which puts methodical doubt above the *cogito*.<sup>7</sup> But the act denies finished being only in order to affirm that it is the agent that creates it. And doubtless it would be possible to construct on this affirmation

---

<sup>5</sup> Superficially this resembles the position of the Russian philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev who equates nothingness with the freedom from which being emerges. But Lavelle plainly rejects the notion that nothingness can be creative. Rather, the act "excludes" nothingness and resides wholly on the side of being. Freedom means self-generation. On the manifest level this translates to self-determination.

<sup>6</sup> In other words the sense of something-from-nothing applies only to the human perspective where unrealised possibilities may come to fruition. Humans are *given*—predisposed by the act—to project this structure back upon it.

<sup>7</sup> A reference to Descartes' formula *cogito ergo sum* ("I think therefore I am") which he derives from a process of systematically doubting everything until an indubitable assertion is found.

the entire doctrine of the act which, precisely because it is ever a passage from nothingness into being, is impossible to grasp in other way than through its very accomplishment, whereby it continually falls back on itself as origin (in the tri-fold form of thought, will and love) and situates itself beyond the world that lies before our eyes in order to affirm itself as the world's inner creative principle.

The thought of nothingness is contradictory since the thought that posits it is itself a being. But if it is absurd to imagine that we could posit nothingness in an absolute fashion we can at least posit the nothingness of our individual being and for instance picture a world in which we would be absent, like the world that preceded our birth and will follow our death. The thinking in which I participate is a thinking that goes beyond me and brings universality with it; by way of it I can think of myself as a present or absent object without that thinking itself undergoing any alteration save in the operation through which I participate in it. The thought of nothingness therefore makes sense only in relation to me. It gives me the liveliest consciousness of the original act of will which at every instant compels me to insert myself in being and tears me from my nothingness through a step that depends on me alone to accomplish.<sup>8</sup> My will leaves me suspended between nothingness and being, and as has been said, the thought of a nothingness from which I am ever emerging—and into which I am always in danger of falling back—brings me an anxiety inseparable from life, which activity is meant to overcome. This thought of nothingness has only to cross my mind in order to make the world that greets me appear suddenly full of beauty, hope and light, though I can always banish myself from it.

## B) THE ACT OF BEING

*ART. 3: The fundamental act is the act of being, of which "the notion of being" and "the fact of being" are derivative expressions.*

It should not be astonishing that we consider the person as expressing the deepest essence of being, i.e. whose nature is such that being *is* by way of its act. In saying that it is act we do not diminish being or even determine it according to one of its properties: we uncover its root so to speak. Which is immediately clear if we reflect that when I posit being here or there it is understood that it is not only being with respect to me (otherwise it would be nothing but a phenomenon) but being with respect to the power I attribute to it of saying "I am." It is therefore striking that I can consider the word *being* as a substantive only because it is first of all a verb, and a verb that is the union of active and passive modes; it

---

<sup>8</sup> The act of taking consciousness is perhaps the prime example of a virtual "passage from nothingness into being". It appears to be Lavelle's model for the act of being.

is because I posit my being that I can posit another being; but to posit him as being is to suppose that he is capable of positing himself.

What is remarkable therefore is not that being supposes the act but that I can find within being only the act by which it posits itself and not the act by which I posit it. It is insufficient to say that to be is to act, as if the act were a natural follow-up to being: it must be said that the fundamental act upon which all others depend is *the very act of being* of which all particular acts are a sort of expression and dispersion according to the circumstances of time and place. And I can indeed say that being is given to me but only as a power whose employment is left to me: realised through an inward operation whose accomplishment always depends on me. It is true that I can only ever accomplish this act of being in an imperfect fashion; and though I need to engage it I never fully succeed, and never manage on my own. Other beings around me, the whole of nature and the supreme act in which my act participates and through which I make my being truly mine—all must be there in order for me to be able to act and to be. Otherwise Being would not be as it is, continuous and indivisible. But just as the act through which I posit my being is nothing more than the pure act offered to all particular acts so that they can may find the force to realise themselves, the particular actions I effect are in their turn nothing more than an expression suited to the time, place and circumstances of the constitutive act of my own being.

The insufficiency of the act of participation that makes me be, the limitation of all my actions, these are correlatives of a passivity with which I am always associated and from which I ever try to free myself. But this very passivity attests to an activity that is exerted elsewhere and that I am obliged to undergo. And passivity and activity are so inseparable, indeed so indiscernible, in me that the being I receive, instead of gainsaying the being I posit, is one with it; it responds to it and even strikes me as something I propose to myself, thereby imitating—thanks to the laws of participation—that act without passivity and limitation which in positing itself posits the whole of being in the very same stroke. It is clearly seen therefore that in its true sense being is confounded with the act of being; and I find it present in me both in the measure that I accomplish it and in the measure that I depend on it.

All the difficulties bearing on the word “being” stem from three distinct but inseparable senses of it:

1. The *notion of being*, the sole notion that is plainly universal since nothing can be posited that is not contained in it. It cannot however be considered void or abstract since it can be filled with particular determinations (though only by dividing it rather than adding to it) and since the word “being” only ever represents a concrete and individual reality, whether it is a question of the entire universe or of such and such object in the midst of others.

2. The notion of being therefore cannot rightly be separated from the *fact of being*. For being is always such and such, i.e. in such a time and such a place. So the universality of the notion finds expression in the exigency for every being to be just what he<sup>9</sup> is, with all the traits that constitute him, i.e. in the universal fact of being always an individual.

3. The notion of being was purely thought: it found its expression in the fact of being, which is ever an experienced fact. But all experience is that of an object exterior to us.<sup>10</sup> Yet the peculiarity of being is to be for-itself and not for-another: my being cannot be affirmed by another, it can be affirmed only by me; which is to say that I can receive being only by at the same time giving it to myself. Thus the fact of being is, for the observer outside it, nothing but testimony of the *act of being* which alone permits us to grasp being in its essence and root.

We will then easily understand that the act of being, precisely because we only participate in it, puts us in the presence of the fact of being (which presence always overflows its accompanying fact) and that the universality we must attribute to it is only ever that of its notion.

ART. 4: *The act is not an operation added to being but its very essence.*

It is hard to avoid taking being as anterior to the act, i.e. a prerequisite without which the act could not be posited. Just as substance is considered – no doubt, wrongly – as the carrier of qualities so too being is construed as an agent different from the acts it accomplishes: they either express its nature or add to it. But what is this agent before starting to act? Logically, if its acts are already contained in it, they are acts in appearance alone and become such only from the perspective of time. If they have a novel character, what is their connection with the being that produces them? They are what goes beyond it and imply a momentum we do not know how to account for.

If being is not a mere name we will exhaust ourselves looking for what it might be if not the act that makes it be, i.e. an act that coincides with its being. Yet we<sup>11</sup> believe the same being can accomplish a plurality of acts, as if the unity of being were not always on the contrary an effect of the unity of the act that posits it. We also believe that every act has a particular destination, as if such an end were not where the act comes to rest and breaks off, as if the act were not to itself its own beginning and end. But it is a very grave bias to regard the act as

---

<sup>9</sup> The word in question can also be translated “it”. I have used the personal pronoun since being rightly refers to persons. But it must be allowed that “being” and “act” can have impersonal connotations as well, e.g. when being is confused with manifestations and when the act is considered as a principle.

<sup>10</sup> This contradicts Chapter One “The Experience of the Act”. I gather the author is addressing past philosophers who equated being with the appearance of things. For *them* all experience was that of an external object. In a roundabout fashion Lavelle is refuting the view that being resides “out there”.

<sup>11</sup> A deluded “we” is in question.

the effect of a reality that is active ahead of it. For in saying it is active, if we do not equate it with the act itself, we set up between it and the act a relation similar to that between cause and effect, which always tends to become a logical or mechanical link between terms. Yet the act that grounds every link is not subordinate to any of them. One seeks a principle on which the act depends, or an object it is capable of producing, only when one lacks the force to elevate thinking to the indivisible simplicity of the act's perfectly pure exercise.

Hence in an unexpected twist those who consider being as abstract criticise the act for being suspended in a void if being is not already there to support it. But being must be one with the act: for if I choose not to take being as an object (i.e. an image, an appearance or a spectacle), if it is sheer inwardness and initiative, (i.e. at once "in-itself" and cause of itself), I must define it by the word "act". Thus we are not limited by way of being's universality to asserting simply that the act necessarily *is*: we are introducing a much more profound connection between being and the act. The word "being" has so full and beautiful a meaning, it so completely dispels the opaque veil that subjectivism and phenomenalism interpose between the real and ourselves, it gives our life so much gravity and simplicity, so firm a seat in the absolute, that we should not abandon it at the moment we discover the interior act through which it is realised. And the word "act" must not appear to confer on the workings of the finite I a kind of pre-eminence relative to the total being that founds its possibility and allows it to play a part. Rather this total being can only be regarded as a limitless act, i.e. an act without passivity.

It is sometimes thought that being stands in relation to the act as an inert thing to a creative gesture. But this gesture is only a movement, i.e. an image of the act and not the act itself. And to say of the act (properly so-called) that it is immobile is not to imply a petrified movement but the principle that animates all possible movements. In fact language always contrasts being with the thing and never confuses them. When we say that our concern is with *a* being it is to emphasise that our interest is not an object or a simple appearance but an individual possessing a unique inwardness, an original activity that is a hearth of initiative which takes responsibility for itself. When we say "Being" instead of "a being" how could we subtract from it the traits comprising the originality of each being, even though each realises them only in an imperfect fashion? Traits are drawn from the Being in which beings participate: no one can seriously believe that this Total Being is an immense thing or an abstract designation. On the contrary there is nothing in it but the traits roughed out in particular beings (albeit in a pure state) which allow them to be distinguished, either through the bodies to which they are connected or through the things that threaten to enslave them. And for that reason we give Being the name "God", or conversely we believe that God alone merits the name "Being" absolutely, i.e. without any determination.

Against the identity we have set up between being and the act one could doubtless invoke the formula "*operatio sequitur esse*"<sup>12</sup>. But what we would precisely like to show is that the operation is not a sequel to being, that it would have to be posited ahead of a sequel for a sequel to be possible; rather it is the essence of being, the interior process by which it *is* at the same time that it creates itself<sup>13</sup>. Also it can be said that being is nothing more than operation, i.e. efficacy, and alternatively that it is one with the act of being.

ART. 5. *The act is without foundation and without effect.*

It always seems we could not conceive of the act residing in isolation. We always want it to be the expression, the mode, the manifestation, the operation or the effect of a subject that precedes it and can do without it. But no one could tell us what would become of the subject when it does not act, or how it could overcome its inertia, or how its being would differ from its operation when it acts. For this foundation<sup>14</sup> is for us only a thing, and by affirming that the act must be carried by the thing we let it be understood on the one hand that we attribute the greatest reality to the thing (though it is only a phenomenon for a subject who is interior to himself and regards the thing as residing outside of—though in rapport with—him) and on the other hand that we know the thing better than the act, even though it is external to us and up to a certain point impermeable while the act we perform contains our very inwardness, which is the measure of all we can know of the world if it is true that we can only know what we do.

In the assertion that the act needs a foundation there is even a curious reversal of the real connections between exteriority and interiority. For we only speak like this because we take the foundation to have true interiority, that of essence, whereas its act would require essence to go out of itself in order to enter into rapport with the outside. But we know on the contrary that there is an act only at the moment it is performed and that it is wholly interior to itself; it constitutes the very reality of essence, and to attempt to refer the act to a foundation other than itself is to base interiority on exteriority, which is the pretension of materialism, not metaphysics.

Just as the act has no foundation it has no effect. For effects limit it and show us neither its power nor its efficacy but the point where it halts or comes to die so to speak. In every effect the act has become a thing, detached from me in order to be rendered visible to the eyes of another, and indeed to my own eyes.

But in the measure the act becomes more nearly perfect every distinction between it and its effects is abolished, as we see in the case of pure thought or

---

<sup>12</sup> "Operation follows being."

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

<sup>14</sup> The support in question refers to a subject whose essence is void of all activity. For Lavelle such a subject is a mere "thing" and not a person; hence my use of impersonal pronouns.

pure love. Effects arise merely as testaments and are wanted only as long as the act remains imperfect. In the measure that it is simpler and barer they cease to be necessary: they can only divide and corrupt it. They rush to its aid only when its frailty once again needs backing up, when it needs to provide itself with proofs and to call upon *things* to justify it. There are no beings in the world who are so alack that an act of pure presence to themselves, to another being or to God has not revealed a plenitude or an efficacy infinitely greater than all words and gestures. Then expression detracts rather than augments. It always breaks off when the act approaches its peak. So the very movements by which it expresses itself measure its insufficiency, as we observe in the role played by effort<sup>15</sup> and in the way such movements make up for what is missing in the act as soon it starts to wane.

The impossibility of grasping the act other than by exercising it and the tendency of knowledge to objectify everything lead us to consider the act as the relation between a productive agent and the resulting effect. But the agent is not anterior to the act since the act makes him an agent in the first place and since we cannot understand how the act could come out of something alien to itself, i.e. how it could not be self-engendered. Again, we always regard the act as expressing itself through an effect, forgetting that this effect (which is exterior to it) is nothing more than its sequel or trace in the world of things and that the effect dissimulates the act more than manifests it: it expresses what is not fully act in everything we do, i.e. whatever passivity is mingled with the act, and we take this as testimony of its fecundity.

It is doubly to diminish the value of the act of will to subordinate it to both the agent who produces it and the end he realises; rightly the agent becomes an agent through the act of will, and the end toward which it tends is nothing more than its phenomenon. However it is easy to understand that, in participation, we can always distinguish between the act's principle and its end since the principle resides precisely in an act that goes beyond us (though it penetrates us in some fashion) and since the end is testimony of both our temporal existence and the liaison established (for participation to be possible) between an operation I perform and a given that answers to it.

One could not over-insist on the impossibility of considering the act as an accidental determination of a subject who, possessing an immobile essence in advance of acting, might thereby furnish the act with a kind of fulcrum. Things only seem that way when we are dealing with multiple, different and interrupted actions that strike us as associated with some passivity in which the totality of the I remains obscurely present despite opportunities for participation. We know very well however that it is not on the side of passivity that we must look for the veritable subject but on the side of the act whose engagement is nonetheless

---

<sup>15</sup> In other words the act is in itself effort-free. The experience of effort is external to the act and marks a falling-away from it.

erratic and precarious. It is only when this act is produced that we begin to say "I".

Consequently when we have to do with an act that is pure act and alien to all limitation and passivity, where is the alleged foundation? There is no room here to suppose an agent anterior to this act who would contain its possibility. On the contrary the act makes the agent. It comprises the self and the efflux. Thus can be observed how, in breaking the continuity of the Act, every passive determination brings with it an element of exteriority which, even if I link it to my own I, obliges me to distinguish what I am from what pertains to me. I therefore do not have to establish an after-the-fact unity among the acts I accomplish since their diversity finds a place in my consciousness only by way of my passivity, i.e. my weakness.

### C) IDENTITY OF AND DISTINCTION BETWEEN BEING AND THE ACT

*ART. 6: The identity of being and the act renders being subject to participation.*

To posit being as a first term to which all others are party and on which they depend is still only a defence against the position of sceptics and agnostics who want to deny thought and life their connection with the absolute, i.e. their seriousness and gravity. But straightaway the question arises: What is this being within which I posit myself? Will I say I can posit it only by giving it determinations, by contrasting its various aspects? But how can it contain aspects that differ? Having affirmed its universality and univocity, which we recognised running through all differences, will we be embarrassed by our victory? How can we explain the appearance of these differences? Is there no feature of being that, in opposing itself so to speak, permits us to engender the infinite multitude of its forms? Well, we propose to show that being reveals its interiority to us in the act; that one cannot accuse the act (as one does being) of being a purely abstract designation common to everything that is; that this act justifies itself in positing itself; and that in describing the conditions of its exercise we oblige ourselves to recover all the limitations and determinations that constitute for us the richness of the world, all the continually-offered forms of participation through which living beings, all thinking beings, continually constitute their nature and destiny.

The unity of being does not allow us to resolve the problem of participation. For if there is an absolute break between nothingness and being, if we cannot pass from one to the other, and if nothingness is a contradictory notion, namely that of an existing thought of a non-existence, then there are no degrees of Being and participation seems impossible to comprehend. By contrast where the Act is concerned there is no difficulty in allowing that it is always the same Act and that, without dividing itself, it furnishes each particular being with all the

efficacy and power it needs to become what it is. For the reverse of activity is not nothingness but passivity: yet the passivity in us is always activity in some other being such that the various degrees of participated activity, instead of shattering the unity of the Pure Act, presuppose it and testify to it.<sup>16</sup>

As Descartes enquired after being revealed to himself as a thinking being, “Who am I—I who think?”, so too we enquire, “What is this being that we cannot avoid positing and that can be posited by us only because it first posits itself and gives us the power to posit ourselves and it as well?” But just as Descartes found that this being who thinks is also a being whose whole essence is to think we too see that it is precisely the most profound character of being that we need to examine now in asserting that it is sheer self-positing power. And the difficulty we encounter here is basically the same as that of Cartesian philosophy. For just as Descartes, after having said “I think therefore I am”, is compelled to find why there are particular thoughts so we too need to show how this act, in positing itself, shatters its unity so to speak and seems to burst into particular actions which, taking on a passive character with respect to each other, introduce to the act an opposition somehow integral to it that can be compared to the traditionally-recognised opposition between being and appearance.

*ART. 7: The distinction between being and the act expresses the very condition of participation.*

Being and the act have a common trait: neither can be demonstrated; they can be grasped only in an experience. But the being in which I participate is one with the act I accomplish. Consequently if asked how we can designate the totality of the real by both “Being” and “Act” without thereby equating them we must reply that an interplay of difference and identity appears fundamental to the participation through which my life is constituted and for which these two poles are conditions. Being is not before me as an immovable object that I try to reach. It is within me as an operation that demands I give myself being and that, by permitting me to penetrate it, obliges me to conceive of the totality of the real as a possible object of participation. Participation therefore obliges me to embrace

---

<sup>16</sup> The author proposes to show how the problem of unity and difference can be resolved by contrasting Being and the Act. Though these two name the same truth they also diverge. While Being allows no degrees or differences, the Act evokes a multitude of acting beings to which it confers “efficacy and power”. Also, while Being has no legitimate converse and can only be conceived as a unity, the Act immediately suggests a possible converse in passivity. Though instances of passivity among temporal beings seem to subtract from the Act there is no overall loss since a lack of activity here is balanced by surplus elsewhere. However questions arise as to whether the Pure Act can logically contain any seeds of passivity and whether the notion of the Act really does lead to the prospect of many actors. Lavelle’s argument here appears to work backward from a multitude of actors already in existence to an act that must ground their possibility whereas what is ideally wanted is an insight into the ground of multiplicity within the Act itself. Even if it were supplied there would remain an unexplained difference between the potentially multiple Act and the always-singular Being. Lavelle continues his discussion of these matters in what follows and at length in the next chapter.

both homogeneity and heterogeneity, not only between the participating and the participated but also between the participated and the participable.<sup>17</sup> Most people are disposed to call Being the totality of the participable. Then the act would be destined solely to sustain and explain the participated. But in rendering it participated the act precisely shows us the essence of the participable. Hence we can now regard the act itself as being, or the participable as a limitless act. The contrast between a being that goes beyond us and an act that belongs only to us is needed to make participation possible; but the unity of these terms is justified the moment we see that the act that gives us being is not something external to being but on the contrary reveals its interiority and allows us to penetrate it.

It will therefore not be surprising to learn that there are two kinds of priority: that of being to the act and that of the act to being, which shows their reciprocity and fundamental identity. From one perspective it seems that the act presupposes being since we began by positing being as universal; then the act would be a modality of it. But inversely the act appears to be the source of being; as soon as the two terms are distinguished being takes on a static character and seems to be—apart from the moment we put categories into play—only an effect and not a cause. If we grasp the act at first in ourselves then this path leads us to being, as we see in idealism; if the act's limitation strikes us then its arising seems dependent on the Total Being, as we see in ontology. If we consider ourselves as finished beings rather than as acts that accomplish themselves then we suppose that we rely on a creative act, with the consequence that, where the All is concerned, Being sometimes has priority (if we see it as the foundation of our act) and the Act sometimes has priority (if we see it as the creator of our being).

Just as Plato in *The Sophist* is disturbed that the same thing can be called “being” and “the one”, so that it then seems to cease to be one and to become two, we are disturbed that the same thing can by turns be called “being” and “act”—as if in saying that being is act we in a single stroke cast from being all that the act is precisely charged to produce. But just as being and the one differ only according to perspectives, and just as the one is a certain grasp of being, so too the act is neither prior to nor heterogeneous with being: it is the operation by which being eternally posits itself. And while they coincide in the absolute we are led to distinguish them from one another because, for finite consciousness, there is a complex correspondence between the being it is given and the act it accomplishes.

Thus is confirmed the thesis that the act is identical with being insofar as it produces itself and is self-sufficing.

---

<sup>17</sup> As I read the sentence “the participating” refers to one who participates, “the participated” to that in which one participates and “the participable” to that in which one may or may not participate.

ART. 8: *We are interior to Being only through the act that permits us to cooperate with it.*

For the world to deliver its mystery to us it must cease to be an object we try to know: it must become a creation to which we are party. For every object we contemplate, whatever the light that illumines it, still remains exterior to us. Its reality is imposed on us, we submit to it. We envelop it with a regard but do not penetrate it because we do not manage to coincide with the principle that produces it. That is possible only on the condition that the world ceases to appear as something outside us. But in fact we are in it, not simply as parts of a whole but as co-operators in an enterprise in which we have agreed to participate, an enterprise that depends on us and on which we depend.

Being can therefore be grasped only from within. Not because pure thought allows us to attain—under the heading of “Idea”—a more subtle yet more stable object for which the sensible object would be only an appearance, nor because introspection, by revealing to us our secret states, makes us attentive to a kind of intimate resonance with things for which consciousness has given us only a display. For one merely compounds the world’s mystery when one tries to explain what the gaze sees by way of what thinking sees, or indeed through what sensibility feels. Doubtless the latter compels me to avow a solidarity between my personal destiny and the world’s reality. Yet that solidarity is a constraint that enslaves me. It bears witness to an eternal continuity between the world and me that tears a cry from me as soon as the least filament holding me to it is cut. This felt oneness is still not acceptable or wanted. The world I take part in still strikes me as outside me; I can become truly interior to it only by borrowing from creative power the force by which I insert myself in it.

There is no other inside than the act by which, through consenting to be, I create my own being and inscribe within the totality of being a mark that eternally endures. Every object of thought is a realised act. Every state of sensibility is the reverberation of an act in a consciousness that has become receptive to it. In the act itself all distinction between subject and object is necessarily abolished. There is nothing in it that one can see or feel. It is immersed in its pure exercise. It is sheer initiative and a first beginning, it is at once being and a reason for being. Within it there is only what is ours: of all the things in the world it is the only one without exteriority. It is the most personal thing that is, and it can never be anything but personal.

ART. 9: *Being and the act are opposed to one another as that which resists me and that which I dispose in testing the limits of my power.*

Someone will say that there is a contradiction between being and the act. For the act is the disposition of the possible. It is essentially malleable and can be turned in every direction. By contrast, being almost always seems mixed up with

resistance. And one might even say that being appears fuller when resistance is greater. Among things, visual representations have less reality to us than tactile representations because the latter offer a more solid barrier to our bodily movements. Also, visual impressions participate in being only in the measure that, when present, they do not lend themselves to fanciful modifications as do the representations of imagination. For the same reason ideas, which appear to depend directly on the activity of thought, have only a virtual existence to most people. If we on the contrary discover in them an essential immutability, if like Malebranche<sup>18</sup> we recognise that the peculiarity of a genuine idea is to resist me, to render vain all my efforts to modify it, then the idea is straightaway indistinguishable from being, and sensible becoming<sup>19</sup> fades and escapes us like a dream. Finally, if we give attention to Value and the Good as soon as consciousness realises it receives them; if these notions are imposed on us in spite of ourselves; if we cannot change them at will; if we are compelled to want and love them as soon as we see them; if, far from being forever uncertain, they are the criteria by which we judge our actions; and if we are uncertain only in knowing whether our actions can conform to them—then we are inclined to think that what we formerly called “being” was mere appearance and that genuine Being is rather one with Value, with the Good, which appearance imitates though always in an imperfect fashion. And we will say that appearance participates in Being to the degree that it participates in the Good which then becomes the living essence of all that is.

But this last remark merits pause. For to say that Being is what resists us is to say that it is an obstacle opposing us. Now it is true indeed that being appears always external to us, as if its role were to limit and arrest the *élan* of individual consciousness. But where could this *élan* go? By itself it is pure indeterminacy; and for us this indeterminacy is only a sign of our weakness and impotence. It wants never to end. It is a troublesome sign that abandons itself and delights in doing so. For it is the mark of an internal void we ourselves are incapable of filling. Sight, thought, will, all need an object in order to be posited, i.e. in order to be: until then they are sheer virtualities. The object adopts their form so to speak and supplies precisely what they lack. Also, far from taking being as the converse of the act, as something outside it that resists it, we must regard it as the perfection of the act: what fulfils it, what completes it. Precisely because it is fully achieved it is impossible for us to change it, as we note in the case of the visual object which, while present, fills the gaze and instead of leaving it unsatisfied supplies it with more than it can encompass; or in the intelligible object that abolishes every hypothesis and finally grants the intellect full play; or lastly in the Good which is the object of pure will and which, far from limiting it, is bound up in its full operation. Thus in the abstract one could indeed oppose the act to

---

<sup>18</sup> Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715), a major thinker in the Cartesian school and another key influence in Lavelle's philosophy.

<sup>19</sup> The world of change.

being by considering the first as an indeterminate power and the second as a fixed reality that forms an obstacle which paralyses it. But then the act would be merely possible and not real, and being would be exterior to a subject and not interior to itself: if the act begins to fulfil itself and if being interiorises itself then they approach one another and their deep identity is revealed. The indeterminacy of the act is abolished: and being, instead of being an obstacle to the act, expresses its accomplishment and so to speak the possession it has of itself.

There is much sterility, much self-love and pride in our very impotence, in the popular affirmation that the search is worth more than the possession. But then what exactly is the search worth? Is the refused possession a true possession? Finally, in being content with the search, does one not hope to be satisfied with insufficiency? Above all, are we not averse to receive from the outside this gift that would make us be? In order for it to appear completely given, must we always remain in a state of simple aspiration or mere wish?

There is between the act and being an apparent contradiction that shows their fundamental identity.<sup>20</sup> For the peculiarity of being is never to begin and the peculiarity of the act is to be forever beginning. But in coming together these two precisely define eternity. Which shows us that the act and being both outstrip time; that in this very outstripping the past and the future begin to converge, so to speak; that they are opposed to each other only when the act and being are once again set against each other, i.e. are not taken in their totality; and that each of them calls to the other for help in providing what is missing.

---

<sup>20</sup> The statement should perhaps be considered in the light of the essential relatedness of opposing terms and of their subsumption in a more original third term as Lavelle spells out in Part B of "Freedom and the Interval". Here the third term seems to be eternity.