

CHAPTER VI

EXISTENCE AND ESSENCE

A) THE DIVISION OF EXISTENCE AND ESSENCE

ART. 1: *Being is the unity of essence and existence.*

In employing the word “being” we intend something anterior to the distinction between essence and existence, something which contains them. It constitutes their unity – not their synthesis (as if they could somehow precede it) but the principle from which they emerge and then oppose one another as soon as analysis or participation has begun. No one would dream of excluding existence from being since the words are often taken as synonyms; but that should not justify the criticism often levelled at Being, that it is an empty and abstract concept which supposes existence but not the nature of the existing object. For the very word “existence” designates precisely that which can never remain a simple concept, i.e. a mere possibility, but is the very actuality of what-is. Being is therefore the indivisibility of essence and existence, i.e. it is *the existence of essence*, or essence taken in its actuality rather than in its possibility.

Yet while conceding that existence is contrary to the state of possibility when essence is not joined to it, someone might note that it is at least not contradictory

to divide existence from essence, which then becomes possibility itself. However the univocity of being obliges us to overcome the opposition between possibility and existence, since one would not know where to locate essence if not in being. Taking existence solely as the character of things that are, it is still necessary to concede the existence of possibility, i.e. of essence. Thus there is a kind of reciprocity between the two terms because all existence is the existence of an essence and because an essence cannot be proposed without positing its existence, at least as an essence. But if being is the undivided totality of possibilities, essence is somehow a part of it, and not a result, i.e. an effect of the combination of an essence and an existence originally independent of one another. There at the interior of pure being all possibilities have a global existence, actual and eminent, though they become formal separate possibilities when they begin to detach from pure being in order to be, so to speak, offered for participation. In this sense we can say that, contrary to what is generally thought, Being precedes and founds possibility within the absolute and that it is we who isolate a possibility in order to make it ours and turn it into an actuality. Thus in God and in us the relation between possibility and existence is reversed so to speak, since what is actuality in God becomes a possibility with respect to our eventual participation whereas what constitutes actuality for us is precisely the act through which we render a possibility ours.

ART. 2: The nature of the act is to separate essence from existence so as to unite them.

We are used to taking essence as a pure possibility, an abstraction that has to be given existence, i.e. an actual and concrete status formerly missing from it. Essence therefore strikes us as anterior to existence, which then makes it real.

But what is this essence which subsists outside existence and is only made real within it? Where are the arms and legs of possibility? If being is univocal I am at least obliged to consider possibility as one of its modes, instead of contradictorily taking it as exterior and anterior to it. Besides, we know very well that when we want to realise the passage from essence to existence we always bring into play a third term, lacking which nothing could be produced. That is the act we identify with being. Hence we must take our departure from the act, and the opposition between essence and existence amounts to no more than an analysis of the act; it is the effect of reflection.

Must we then agree to take the act as the realisation of essence? Yes, without doubt. But not in the sense that essence would be given first as a pure essence in a mysterious world of thought or reason which we would then need to transform into an existing world, i.e. to convert into an experience. Rather, it is true in another, more profound sense: the act is the process that precisely allows us to discover essence, and up to a certain point to shape it.

The distinction between the act by which I posit myself in being and the being I take as an ideal object which I try to attain, to possess, enters the world as the distinction between essence and existence. But being contains both this act and its object, the reality I am and the ideal to which I aspire. It is the unity of thinking and what is thought, of willing and what is willed, of loving and what is loved, and each person constitutes himself by separating these and then re-uniting them in a synthesis appropriate to him.

The unity of essence and existence within Being therefore becomes obvious as soon as the identity of Being and the Act is seen. For the nature of the Act is, one might say, to dissociate them in order to unite them. It creates between essence and existence a rupture in relations or, if preferred, a broken circuit, since God is all essence and this endlessly becomes existence by way of participation. By contrast, in our case the character of participation is endlessly to transform existence into essence. It can also be said that only the individual being has existence. But the nature of that existence is such that it must be continually sacrificed precisely in order to acquire an essence. In taking its essence upon itself the I assumes responsibility, in accordance with its forces, not only for itself but for the universal being.

ART. 3: *The classic relation between essence and existence must be reversed and existence considered as the means of winning my essence.*¹

There is nothing to fear in reversing the classic relation between the notions of essence and existence. If I am inclined to ask *what* I am before asking *if* I am, I affirm the primacy of essence over existence. Still, I can think about what I am only in an experience that first reveals the fact *that* I am.² Surely someone will argue that my thinking extends beyond my individual existence so that, since I am able to think of what I am not, I can also regard myself as a pure thinking from which I detach my existence only to add it later on. But I am so much under the sway of being that I already know I am ahead of knowing what I am. My essence is something I have yet to find and make real.

Existence is so to speak my fitness—real and indeed present—to give myself an essence through an act that depends on me. That is the only way I can conceive of inserting my particular being into the total being. The insertion is my achievement. It demands that instead of taking my essence as a ready-made reality that somehow or another I have to bring down from on high, I take it as an end I need to produce. Existence is given to me for that.

Existence does not make sense as a means of realising an essence already set in place but as a means of determining it by choice and then coinciding with it.

¹ Though the doctrine that existence precedes essence is generally associated with Sartre it is plainly spelled out in this chapter which appeared six years ahead of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. No debt to Lavelle is acknowledged by Sartre.

² My italics throughout.

Instead of asserting that essence is the possibility of existence we say that existence is the possibility of essence. Through our choice of essence we fix our eternal place in being – which confirms our theory of reflexion.

To hope to derive existence from an essence that is given first is therefore to misconceive the relation between these notions since existence is only there to allow me to win my essence. But I can win it only by way of a free act which, though usually expressed as a passage from essence to existence, would be better expressed in the reverse sense, i.e. as a passage that leads me from existence to essence.

ART. 4: There is a change of order between existence and essence depending on whether it is a question of things or free beings.

Confusion about the relation between essence and existence arises because the relation depends on whether things or free beings are in question. Where things are concerned their existence is disclosed to us by phenomena. To the extent that they are considered pure phenomena they might be said to have no essence. Nonetheless by “essence” we understand the characteristics that we attribute to things and that allow us to think of them through a mental act: in that case essence, i.e. as the thought of a thing, becomes also its possibility. Yet the essence attained in this way is our own, or at least it is the essence of the mind³ insofar as it is conscious of its power in the reflexion it brings to bear on the thing. This suffices to show that there is no other essence than that of the mind.

But where a free being is concerned what we call his existence is not his phenomenal character; it is his freedom. Previously we sought the possibility of the thing and identified it as its essence. Now we find this possibility given to us as the existence of the mind. Yet it must be put into play. And the nature of this putting-into-play is to give the mind an essence it was lacking. Thus we can say that whereas before we sought essence in order to explain existence, which was so to speak implicated in it so that the mind could think of it, now the role of existence is to choose and engender its essence.

It follows that for the free being the possibility of what he will be constitutes his current essence; in the case of the thing its current existence is the condition to which the mind attaches itself in order to recall the thing’s essence, i.e. a possibility that subsists only in the mind and that has two sorts of hold on the thing, intellectual and material.

We can never do other than to associate the essence of things with the spiritual act by way of which they are what they are. Yet here arises an ambiguity, for either I direct myself to the act through which I think of a thing by representing it to myself in a concept, or I hark back to the act through which the thing engenders itself from within by making itself a subjective being or an I, just

³ Or, spirit. For Lavelle and many French readers the same mental processes have a spiritual significance. In any case the two meanings are expressed by a single word: “*esprit*”.

as I myself do when I say “I think”⁴. So I hesitate, poised between two opposed conceptions of essence. But it is easy to see that the act by which I create the representation of a thing puts me on the track of the interior act through which, in creating itself, the thing produces its peculiar manifestation. The two paths are opposed yet converge: the first path, where I try to recreate from the outside the objectivity of the thing without ever being able to coincide with the act that gives it being; the second, where I really perform this act, so that I truly am my essence instead of just thinking it, yet without ever succeeding in encountering or coinciding with my own objectivity.

B) THE THREE SENSES OF THE WORD “EXISTENCE”⁵

ART. 5: *Existence is manifest being.*

The indivisibility of essence and existence inevitably leads us to conclude that being is existence when considered in its exteriority and essence when considered in its interiority. And the relation between terms is so exact that being is indistinct from nothingness when it is not manifest, so that it is only there where it is shown that its presence can be affirmed; where it is not in evidence we demand proof of it, lacking which we doubt that it has the least possible reality, even as a pure power. Consequently it is only there where it is manifest.⁶

In general we associate existence with the location of an object, and indeed only with an object that is posited and not with the act that posits it. Existence always has the character of something outside us, something that consequently can be posited only relative to us (i.e. only in its phenomenality). In a sense it is reasonable to speak of the existence of someone else as the existence of a self, and when speaking the same way about ourselves we tend to take ourselves as objects or phenomena.

Up to a certain point I always posit myself as independent of the act by which I posit myself, for in casting myself as existent I take a place in the manifest world, I manifest myself to another person, I become so to speak the being of my act.

Thus in one of his *Letters* Lachelier⁷ admirably distinguishes between existence and being itself: existence, he says, is nothing more than the emptiness

⁴ The French text employs the Latin word “cogito”—reminiscent of Descartes’ famous formula “*cogito ergo sum*”.

⁵ Each of the following articles describes a different take on existence.

⁶ Lavelle here characterises a common understanding which conceives of being exclusively in terms of exteriority or manifestation. Understood in itself however, i.e. in essence, it is wholly inward: it *is* but does not rightly *exist* or stand forth. Note 16 gives further background on this.

⁷ Jules Lachelier (1832-1918). A logician and idealist, he asserted that there are different kinds of knowledge corresponding to different levels of existence, with science corresponding to the lowest level.

of time and space in contrast to the plenum of being which is neither temporal nor spatial; existence is a kind of blank page, available for participation. Hence it is not surprising that it seems at once a hollow form – since it has meaning only with respect to what it is capable of containing and integrating, i.e. an indeterminate matter⁸ by way of which the subject shapes himself in shaping his world – and the external condition without which such action could not be exercised, i.e. made manifest. Existence is therefore whatever is external to us, whatever has extent and duration, whatever tends to take shape and be displayed, and indeed whatever is covered by a surface, the surface being the limit of the thing behind which it conceals what rightly pertains to it⁹. Yet the surface also allows the thing to have relations with us and to become a pure appearance for us.

ART. 6: Alternatively, existence can be contrasted with the self-positing act as the fact of being posited, either by me, another person or the all of being in the measure it agrees to receive me.

To say I have existence I need not only the indubitable intuition of my act but a reflexion that repeats it and thereby takes itself as an object: I need from all other manifest beings testimony not only that they behold the appearance of my body but that they recognise in me a will whose effects they can see and feel.¹⁰

In order to submit myself to existence the entire universe is needed. If it ceased to be my guarantor even for a moment, if other beings passed me by without noticing my existence, if the universe held no trace of my actions, nothing whatever that could be grasped by myself or others, my existence would become no more than a dream, and self-doubt would invade me.

It could be said that I always feel a need to be confirmed and supported in my existence through the judgment of another being, and I always sink into despair or folly when I no longer have recourse to him. The existence of my body is guaranteed by the affirmation of someone who perceives it and whose conduct shows that he takes it into account. I naturally want my unique place in being, which is inseparable from my value, to be respected by everybody around me. To scorn, to ignore someone is to reduce him to nothingness. However only

⁸ Lavelle introduces the conception of matter as a hyle-like substance awaiting form. On this view the world is a human creation only with respect to its shape; in itself it is an independently-existing stuff.

⁹ In the case of an “indeterminate matter” what “rightly” belongs to the thing can be no more than its character as formless stuff. More likely Lavelle intends an innate essence. Presumably such an essence could be conferred only by God or “the all of being” mentioned below, and not by human beings.

¹⁰ The sentence offers a resolution of apparently conflicting assertions by the author: on the one hand that I am directly self-known, on the other that I know myself through a feed-back process. Both are true. Inwardly, at the level of being, I have the “indubitable intuition of my act”; outwardly, i.e. with respect to my existence in the manifest world, I know myself (i.e. my character, my role, my talents, etc.) through my effects on the world and through feedback from other people. However Lavelle is not consistently clear on this matter. The next sentence already introduces an element of doubt.

someone's love of me can reach beyond what I manifest or do to what I am, to my pure inwardness and eternal essence. Here I can distinguish three degrees of loving: that of an unfamiliar person, i.e. a being whose existence I have not considered and who annoys me when he pretends to consider mine; the love of a person who returns the same love I have for him, seemingly in greater measure, so that I always feel unworthy of his gift; and God's love for me—the only love that grants me being, whose intent is purely spiritual and the supreme end of all loving since it is love's source, to which in a burst of gratitude I continually render back to him the love he has given me.

No matter how confident I am in myself, existence still has a unique value for me: I can only claim to be secure in the measure that someone takes account of me; and it is perfectly right that my faith in the existence of others is the condition of their bearing witness to me, a testimony I require, for without it my existence seems incapable of amounting to anything more than subjectivity, mere possibility or illusion.

Let us go one step further. The individual I who participates in the total being (but cannot be identified with it) exists only owing to this totality from which he can only relatively separate himself. He remains in being even when he separates himself from it: the infinity of being still surrounds and exceeds him. Consequently it is not enough to say that this infinite environment limits him while supporting him; it must be said that there in himself, in that pure interiority which precedes and grounds his manifestation, he is only a potentiality or a virtuality who in order to actualise himself requires a response from things. At the moment this response is made we do not know whether we give ourselves existence or we receive it.

My being comes to me both from myself and from my connection with the pure act. But I exist and take part in the world only by becoming an object for another person, by being perceived by him as a body, by becoming the target of his love or hate, which means that for him I count, while his ignorance of or indifference to me leaves me as the sole judge of what I am. To say that a man does not exist is doubtless to imply that he has no personal initiative but it is more the case that his initiative never succeeds in being expressed, that the world bears no trace of it and that for us it is as if the initiative never was made.

When I say "that exists" I mean that it exists not only for me but for everyone, that it merits my attention, has taken a place in the world and has left the domain of pure possibility. Curiously, to say that a being exists is to credit him with an initiative rendering him capable of taking a decision within himself. But it is also understood that to take it is to manifest it.

It is surprising that my existence needs to be posited and affirmed by another person and that this is the necessary complement of my affirmation of myself, which founds my inwardness to being. And it even seems impossible for another person to affirm my existence as anything other than a phenomenon. Yet it should not be forgotten that there is within me an element of passivity which

calls for a certain alliance between my existence as affirmed by me and my existence as affirmed by another. Moreover there is a profound correlation between these two affirmations, for the inwardness of my own being can also be affirmed by another, above and beyond the phenomenon of my existence, thanks to an act of faith with respect to me that acknowledges the act by which I posit myself as a liberty. Such faith can in a sense surpass the latter in that it affects the use of my freedom, which sometimes does not inspire as much confidence in me as it does in the other person and often leaves me in doubt. In this way I am supported by another in the affirmation not only of what I am (as both a manifest and a free being) but also of what I can and ought to do. I need the whole of humanity to encourage me to become myself. Jealousy constantly places obstacles on my path. But there is less to fear from it than from indifference in that jealousy betrays an interest in me, i.e. it already recognises my worth.

ART. 7: *In its strongest sense existence is the act through which I detach myself from being in order to find my essence in it.*

All manifest existence is due to an act by which I detach myself from pure being while nonetheless borrowing from it the power I put into play to become so to speak the origin of myself. As long as I fail to exercise the power (as before birth or during sleep or out of laziness) I remain a mere potentiality, I rest in the arms of God, or to be more precise, I do not exist. In other words to exist is to detach oneself from the total being in order to claim independence (and consequently freedom). In this respect the word "existence" is less suited to manifestation than to the principle that produces it. However these two seemingly-contradictory senses are in fact connected: for our place in being can only be realised through the phenomenal expression of our freedom.

The same act that makes our life visible and manifest establishes us at the heart of being. To this process one could alternatively apply the word "*existere*" which indicates a going-out action or the word "*insistere*" which in French has not retained its ancient meaning but rather designates the opposite of going-out, i.e. the action of adhering to or inhering in something whose being one clings to and is no longer separate from. Thus existence pertains to the action of being born, coming into the world, but is pointless if it leaves me separate or isolated rather than permits me ever to regain by way of an appropriate act the being that existence can possess only through a return that grounds my inward and participated life. Divine activity is "deadened", sacrificed in space and time yet precisely so as to render us capable of a participation which, by obliging us pass through the material world, enables us to know the continual miracle of spiritual resurrection.

In the strongest sense of the word, "to exist" means to accomplish a free and pure act that engages us in an absolute fashion. To be free is to be detached from Being yet obliged to participate in it, i.e. in becoming manifest, so as to win an

essence. Thus the act, which is the principle behind all attribution, can never itself be an attribute. And it can be seen how unhelpful it is to give it an adjectival sense, as in the word “*existentiel*” which German philosophy tends to impose on us but which our language rejects.

The impossibility of isolating existence, which is always indiscernible from the existing *thing*, is singularly instructive; being invisible and confused with the thing it has been denied or considered abstract as soon as one has wanted to designate it as something apart. But in reality this confirms that existence is *realised participation*: it is one with the absolute in which it participates and which is rigorously the same in the most varied referents, which differ only in what they lack yet enter into being only by way of existence.

We therefore see clearly that the word “existence” has three different senses: it first of all means being posited as a phenomenon, i.e. in space and time; it also means being posited as a being by another being whose activity affects mine and is affected by it, supports mine and is supported by it; and it finally means to posit oneself, or at least to have the possibility of positing oneself, i.e. acquiring an essence. The close relation between these three senses can be seen without difficulty: because I can posit myself by way of a free act I can be posited by another person as a phenomenon (insofar as my freedom is manifest) and as an independent being (insofar as he recognises behind manifestation the presence of the liberty¹¹ who produces it).

But in reality existence gives us exteriority to ourselves only in order to introduce us to the interiority of being. Doubtless the world can superficially appear as composed solely of objects but objects are only vehicles through which beings manifest their presence to one another in reciprocal relations which confirm them in their mutual existence; all objects are mediators of the most subtle spiritual relations. They are instruments that permit the individual consciousness to realise itself and a plurality of consciousnesses to communicate with one another.

C) THE QUEST FOR ESSENCE

ART. 8: *Essence is what gives each thing¹² its inwardness and perfection.*

We would like to restore to the word “essence” its deepest philosophical meaning which is, dare we say, also its popular meaning. Existence is given to us only in order to win essence. The essences of things and ourselves are hidden

¹¹ That is, the free being.

¹² The use of “thing” rather than “being” is curious. For Lavelle, only beings, i.e. human beings and God, possess inwardness. Most often he speaks of the thing as a mere phenomenon or object, an appearance deficient in being. Here he seems to accord it inwardness insofar as it has an “absolute” character.

from us – but only so that we might discover them. The word “essence” can only be understood to represent the deepest, most precious element of reality; it is hidden behind appearances but then again they also enable a sufficiently penetrating eye to discover it. If one can use the expression “the absolute of the thing” – whose contradictory character we have already observed – this “absolute” leaves off being a thing in order to become a being interior to itself, one that produces its peculiar appearance instead of being identical with it. Therefore we always seek the essence of a thing, and when it is revealed to us it proves so simple that we are astonished by its fecundity; it gives its appearance so much relief that we are amazed to have spent so long trying to discover what was always before our eyes; it has so profound an affinity with our own essence that on engaging it we seem to repeat within ourselves the movement by which it produces itself.¹³ Thus the essence of a thing is the thing in its purity, stripped of all that distorts and corrupts it. It is also its generating principle. So it is curious to observe that essence is always obtained by a stripping-away process that separates it from what is alien to it as well as what manifests it (but how could it be manifest except by entering a world alien to it?), obliging it to be confounded with the movement by which all its properties come to expression.

Spiritual life is my essence regained, it is the ensemble of processes whereby I tear myself away from existence in order to discover the inwardness of all that is, together with my own veritable inwardness. Not that the world of objects is then abolished, not that I enter into a world of new objects, which would pointlessly multiply worlds – rather, I effectively attain the self-realising acts that are objectified in appearances; these appearances change in meaning as soon as the act ceases to be the same. What best testifies to the fundamental identity of being and act is that the essence, which is the ground of our being and seems to be constantly rediscovered by us, is at that same time the act by which we create it. It seems to precede the act that seeks it as an ideal object yet also follows it since it is so to speak the fullness and perfection of this act. Our need to consider it both anterior and posterior to our operation, to see in it both aim and end, both the root and its yield so to speak, amounts to saying it is eternal. Thus is justified our sojourn on earth, which is nothing more than the place where each being acquires an essence, i.e. chooses it and owns it.

In restoring the dignity of essence as we have done we above all align ourselves with the habitual, almost banal, meaning of the word. We can say that that essence is not only the possibility of existence, or its content, but what valorises it. The nature of value is to mark, beginning with external phenomena, the various degrees to which I can internalise¹⁴ myself and gradually draw

¹³ I take this as Lavelle’s version of the philosophic intuition described by Henri Bergson in his famous essay *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903).

¹⁴ Lavelle here coins the word “*m’intimiser*” based on the noun “*l’intimité*” which can be alternatively translated as “intimacy” or “inwardness”. The phrase “internalise myself” seems the nearest English equivalent to “*m’intimiser*”.

nearer to my essence, which far from separating me from the rest of the world puts me in contact with the inwardness of all beings. The process seemingly divides me from objects or phenomena but in fact gives them their relief and true meaning. The goal of my interior life is to discover and enter into my essence; and I succeed only by traversing the world of existence; it is at once a path, an instrument and a test. All who are apprenticed to the inward life affirm that in this interior world one does not find mysterious objects that are more transparent and more subtle than those of the visible world; every object fades and reality becomes indistinct from certain self-sufficing acts in which is exerted a right judgement, a firm will and a disinterested love. Consciousness, which *is* us and which knows what it lacks, is continually on the lookout for this or that object but the object can only be possessed by an act that has to be performed. It is this act that is sought in the presence of every object and not the reverse, as usually thought. By itself the object offers no stability, no constancy; it is always destined to disappear. Within it and by way of it what consciousness seeks is the unspeakably perfect act on which it depends and with which—beyond the object and by way of it—it obtains the fullest yet sparest participation.

ART. 9: *Our essence is the best part of us; it is inseparable from the act through which we try to correspond with it.*

One always hesitates when trying to define essence. For on the one hand we know very well it must reside in an act through which I make myself what I am; it is the very heart of my being. And we would have no difficulty recognising this if the act did not strike us as superior to essence, indeed as the generator of all essences since it is, when considered in itself, the pure act rather than the participated act. This consideration immediately leads us to regard God as the veritable essence of all beings and, as often said, more interior to me than I am to myself. Besides, in speaking of a plurality of essences we must attribute some determination to each of them; accordingly essence is naturally distinct from the act that thinks it, making it either an object for an intellectual faculty or an ideal for the will.

On the other hand we know very well that we cannot be content to reduce what we are to what we will. For while it is true that the I dwells exclusively at the point where our will is engaged in a characteristic initiative, we have the impression that we are capable of willing against ourselves. And this entails on the one hand that a divided, artificial and perverse will must be possible in order for us to be free and on the other hand that there must be within us a self that is distinct from our will so that it is not entirely undetermined and so that the self in question is simultaneously our eternal essence and the regained product of our will. Yet we feel our will wants nothing serious or profound; it knows only misery and defeat unless it accords with the demands of our nature or the sense

of our vocation, depending on whether attention is fixed on what we are or on what we should be.

The problem is in knowing how we can recognise our essence and in understanding how it could be lacking. For if it is chosen by us it is not true to say that it can be recognised. And if it is the effect of our choice, in the sense that it precedes existence in pure being as an infinite availability which we need to define before we can appropriate it, how can we lack it?

There seems to be something wrong with insisting that being must endlessly surpass itself in order to be engaged in a movement that goes to infinity. It must be feared that where there is very much ambition there would also be a temptation to leave self behind and become lost in indeterminacy. In that case one could not help taking movement as the sole thing that counts so that particular determinations would become mistakes and their multiplication occasions for further unhappiness. The object of life is plainly not this perpetual evasion of self along a pointless and distracting path; it is on the contrary a matter of discovering, through a deepening of self, the centre of self that constitutes our unique and personal essence, which we always risk missing as long as we remain on the surface of being, thinking only of how to aggrandise ourselves. Each essence enfolds the totality of the real in a privileged perspective; but if each being resides in what is most intimate to it, its true grandeur consists knowing how to find its essence, from which its true force has never departed. We discover our essence at the same time we discover our true I. Essence is therefore a matter of the best part of ourselves, which we can attain only through purification.¹⁵

With respect to this rehabilitation we can say that essence is neither given nor created but both at once. It is not given before our act has begun; but neither is it created in the sense of depending solely on our free will. Affirmation of one option throws us back on the other, lacking which there would be no choice between them. Is it possible to reconcile them? Yes, without doubt, if we allow that essence is above all one with the powers inside us, which are always in accord with the universal order (i.e. the conditions of participation) and which are up to us to actualise. Thus one can say that to know is necessarily to do and that to do is necessarily to know. Essence implies that our powers are recognised, put to work and spiritualised. But it must first be found and, since it can only be realised through its discovery and through the exercise of our powers, one can understand that it is also easily missed.

We will not be taken to task for considering it an object of pure contemplation. Here, as with everything else, contemplation is an effect of action.

¹⁵ From the tenor of these reflections it is clear that essence is not simply invented, as Sartre has it: a “true I” is proposed by God for each person and it is up to that person to discover and embody it to whatever degree he or she is willing and able to do so. By the time Lavelle arrives at the fourth volume of his *Dialectic*, i.e. *Of the Human Soul*, Sartre’s influence seems to have made itself felt. There Lavelle often appears to move in the direction of sheer self-invention.

We truly contemplate only what we have produced; and the object our attention embraces is no more than the trace of all the movements we have carried out or need to carry out in order to grasp it. There is consequently only essence to contemplate, i.e. the act in its eternal unfolding.

ART. 10: *God is sheer essence; he is so to speak the very existence of essence.*

In the principal sense we have given it the Pure Act has no existence since it has no exteriority, either in relation to itself or otherwise.¹⁶ It simply *is*; and it is even the being of all things. In this sense we can say – though it might outrage some people because it is usual to take existence as superior to essence – that being is pure essence and that, if nothing *is* except in relation to it, this relation determines what belongs to each thing, i.e. it gives each thing its essence. Whoever turns himself toward existence turns toward manifestation but whoever turns himself toward the act turns toward essence, that is, toward the inner principle of all that is. And it can be said that for the latter person alone, i.e. the one who looks toward God, whatever is real has an essence. For everyone else reality is composed of mere phenomena. Now, while all phenomena are subject to time and are therefore fleeting and fading, essence is inward and permanent. It is not a mysterious frozen object situated in another world where we might live by intellect and imagination alone; rather, it is what never becomes an object, namely the ever-possible act which we nonetheless do not always carry out. Through it we recognise in each thing the invisible ground that enables us to understand, will and love it.

In keeping with the sense of the word “existence” we want to give it here, in showing how it always implies an exteriority, a going-out and so to speak jutting-forth from Pure Being, there is no impediment to saying that God is all essence and that existence pertains only to the world.

However if essence arises only through an analysis of Being one could also say that Pure Being has no essence (meaning particular essence, distinct from everything else), or again that it indivisibly contains all essences in the unity of its existence, or again that its essence is one with its existence, which explains very well why God gives rise to the existence of all things, why essence appears always as a possibility and why God is the one who actualises it.

It must then be simultaneously legitimate to say that God is only essence and that he is only existence: he is only existence since everything in him is actual

¹⁶ To the extent that existence is understood in terms of exteriority “the Pure Act has no existence” and indeed no reality. In a later work, *Introduction to Ontology* (1947), Lavelle outlines three different perspectives on what-is. It can be considered from the vantage-point of being, existence or reality. In the case of being it is the Pure Act, which is wholly interior to itself. In the case of existence it is the meeting of inwardness and exteriority, which constitutes participation. In the case of reality it is pure exteriority, i.e. sheer appearance without any inwardness.

and since he actualises everything that is, and he is only essence because there is nothing outside him and because he gives everything-that-is its inwardness.

Because the two notions are indistinct in the pure act one could equally say that it is neither existence, in the sense that existence is always exterior to the one who apprehends it, nor essence, in the sense that essence is always particular and the result of participation. The pure act supports but surpasses the distinction between essence and existence so that we can consider it either as the pure principle of existence, since all beings take their actuality from it, and as the site of essences, since it is by participating in its efficacy that each being determines and acquires the essence appropriate to it. In the will, an action is always manifest, which makes us think that essence is changed into existence. But in reality this manifestation is only a means by which our freedom, which posits the possibility of our independent existence, chooses our eternal essence.