

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE PURE SELF

#### A) BEING IN-ITSELF AND THROUGH-ITSELF<sup>1</sup>

ART. 1: *Only the total being can be called being-in-itself.*

We have shown that it is contradictory to take Being as an object since the peculiarity of an object is precisely to be only for-another<sup>2</sup>, and consequently only an appearance. The peculiarity of Being however is not being for-another but only for-itself<sup>3</sup>, and if it is feared this expression betrays a duality in Being that would render it an appearance to itself it is then necessary to say that the essential character of Being is to be only *in-itself*, to be the sole term outside of which there is nothing, to be wholly interior to itself and necessarily defined as pure intimacy. It is therefore not surprising that people endlessly debate about the “thing-in-itself”<sup>4</sup> since on the one hand the mind cannot do without an “in-

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<sup>1</sup> This can also be rendered, “By-Itself”, “By Means of Itself” or “From-Itself”. In general what is implied is an agent or cause.

<sup>2</sup> This means “for another person”—therefore a public datum, an agreed-upon fact.

<sup>3</sup> I have everywhere added hyphens to these standard philosophic phrases. Jean-Paul Sartre for instance often employs terminology of this sort.

<sup>4</sup> A term made popular by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), for whom it represented the universal object of knowledge. He concluded that it was finally unknowable in itself.

itself” for it is itself living proof of the existence of this “in-itself” – from which it seems constantly on the verge of being torn precisely because it is not a pure spirit – and since on the other hand the existence of the “thing-in-itself” appears a logical monstrosity to which nobody in the world can attribute any sense. The idea of a thing-in-itself arises at the moment the object posited by a mental act is cut off by a new act on the part of the very act that posited it: yet in the negation of the initial positing the object carries a double testimony of its invincible reliance on the mind that posits it: it is both outside it and for its sake; it has no “in-itself”.<sup>5</sup>

Whatever is in-itself therefore suggests to us primarily an existence apart from everything else, closed on itself and self-sufficient. However only the All is radically separate from the rest since nothing is outside it: but this All suffices itself, closes on itself, only because there is nothing exterior to it that can enclose it, with the consequence that one can define it only by its infinitude, which is at the same time the principle of its perfect self-sufficiency.

Now one sees without difficulty that outside this All there is nothing that exists purely in-itself; and indeed we see that this expression “in-itself” is only a kind of extension of that characteristic by which we define the existence of all the objects in the world, saying precisely that they can only be in it. It is as if we said that the All is its own support, or what amounts to the same thing, that everything is contained within it but nothing contains it, so that all the determinations through which a being is constituted in its relations with whatever it is not, as expressed by active or passive verbs, can only be, as far as it is concerned, associations it maintains with itself. These are, as has been shown, expressed by reflexive verbs.<sup>6</sup>

ART. 2: *The act-in-itself is also through-itself: it is the Universal Self.*

Yet this phrase “in-itself” still conceals a certain exteriority to self in that it supposes a distinction between a containing self and a contained self. It thus evokes a kind of static and objective relation of self with self that makes sense only through images borrowed from space and sight. There is no true in-itself other than a *Self*. And there is no other self than that which is through-itself. We therefore end up replacing the idol of an absolute object, or an absolute given, with the immaterial purity of an absolute subject, or an absolute act, that carries within it the initiative of the operation through which it creates itself, and indeed with which it coincides. Whereas being still might be considered an effect of itself in the expression “in-itself” we will consider it as cause of itself in the expression “through-itself” which in the strict sense means that it is only ever cause and that

<sup>5</sup> In other words Lavelle rejects the very idea of an objective in-itself.

<sup>6</sup> The French language has an entire class of verbs called “reflexive” in that their actions refer back to their subjects, e.g. “he hurried himself”. Such verbs are dear to Lavelle because they instance the sort of self-referential activity he locates at the very heart of being. See ART. 9 of Chapter Two “The Reflexive Act”.

there is always an error in regarding it as an effect, even by adding that it is only the effect of itself.<sup>7</sup> Of the through-itself one can say that it goes beyond every chronological and logical order since there is no external term on which it could depend. It is beyond the instant and the location that condition the connections between one thing and another, or rather, it makes every instant a now and every place a here.

One sees therefore how far removed we are from the thesis which takes the All as an immense object outside of which would emerge, one after another, like so many magic lanterns, all particular consciousnesses, each with the power of saying "I". It seems to us that on the contrary only the All can be an absolute subjectivity, i.e. can never become an object either for another being or for itself; the All is a *universal self*, completely the opposite of a substance, with which we almost always tend to confuse it; and instead of being unknown and remaining forbidden to us, it is perpetually open to us, doubtless not because it will one day become an objective cognizance but because it is offered for participation so that we may always penetrate it in the measure that our subjectivity is more nearly perfect and our act more nearly pure. And it is because we are not the universal subject that there are objects for us.<sup>8</sup>

If it is therefore contradictory to try to posit as an "in-itself" a world defined primarily as an object, the in-itself of the world should not be considered the enlargement of our own "in-itself", i.e. of our I; on the contrary the I in question is the "in-itself" or the Self of the All, shot-through and delimited by the operations of participation.

## B) PURE IPSEITY<sup>9</sup>

ART. 3: *Being is pure ipseity.*

The essential prejudice of metaphysics is to think that being is on the side of the object so that the subjective view we have of it is always unreal and to a certain point illusory. But like it or not we always live in a purely subjective world; we are always interior to ourselves; we can never pass beyond our ever-shifting frontiers; the object itself exists only *for*<sup>10</sup> us and in relation to us. Hence

<sup>7</sup> This seems somewhat at variance with the concluding paragraph of ART.7 of the preceding chapter. I assume that the variance is owing to the qualification "in the strict sense".

<sup>8</sup> In other words a single Self resides behind all particular selves and they can gain access to it in the measure that they "penetrate" their own subjectivity. While Lavelle elsewhere insists that humans fall far short of identity with the central Self, they nonetheless must share *some* identity with it since they draw their very being and subjectivity from it.

<sup>9</sup> Selfhood, personal uniqueness or identity. In what follows Lavelle advances a possibility that apparently had not yet occurred to him in earlier writings, one he had positively rejected in a prior version of the present work: namely that the Act is personal and the very essence of subjectivity.

<sup>10</sup> My italics.

it is only from the side of subjectivity that the coincidence of being and ourselves occurs within us. Metaphysics is therefore the deepening of subjectivity; true being is always subjective, in itself as in us, and the object precisely marks the gap between these two subjectivities, which nonetheless try to accord.<sup>11</sup> Can one even say that consciousness seeks the object and finds true satisfaction only in it when on the contrary we know very well that we only ever act to change our inward being, i.e. to gain new thoughts? Everything incapable of becoming a thought for us would then be forever as if it were not. Thus the world appears exterior to us only so that we can make it ours through a process of appropriation, though such appropriation still leaves a certain exteriority between the possessed object and ourselves. In the end this ceases, or rather shows us that it is not the object we possess but only the internal act which allows us to possess it, where the object serves as a fill-in so to speak for our act's insufficiency. Nothing is therefore in-itself on the side of the object, except the completion for us and outside us of an act that is begun within us and by us. To say that Being is pure ipseity is not, as believed, to close it within the limits of the individual I since on the contrary the individual is always to a certain extent objective within us; it is rather to posit a universal subjectivity to which we are admitted so to speak and in which whatever there is of an individual in us is always surpassed by an act that is always emphatically ours yet always an act of communication between the individual and the All from which it proceeds and towards which it tends.

But the totality is an absolute ipseity, i.e. there is nothing that is not in it, nothing that can be said to be exterior to it, even if such exteriority existed only for it and in relation to it. In other words it is only an act, it excludes whatever is an object or a state since there can only be an object or a state by way of a limitation to this inwardness to self which resides exclusively in the coincidence of being and the operation that makes it be. And if someone claimed that interiority and exteriority form a pair, neither of whose components can be posited without the other, we would respond that here as with all couples one component has a positive character with respect to the other, which is so to speak its negation.<sup>12</sup> Here, exteriority is the negation: I am exterior neither to myself nor to being, save through my limitedness and in the measure that there is within being, beyond what I am, that which surpasses me and to which I am subject.

ART. 4: *The power to say "I" is founded on the absolute ipseity.*

If the All is necessarily interior to itself, and if it can be interior to itself only through the initiative that allows it to create itself, then Being can only say "I"; it is that absolute ipseity from which all particular beings draw the uncertain

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<sup>11</sup> I feel the author should have placed this important sentence in bold type.

<sup>12</sup> Author's note: "Cf. Chapter XII, B." The reference is to Section B of "Freedom and the Interval" where Lavelle asserts that opposites are active and passive aspects of a single essence.

possibility – whose putting-into-play is left to them – of also saying “I” in turn.<sup>13</sup> For that reason, instead of seeking, as most men do, to travel and conquer a world that remains forever external to us and that in the measure it solicits us further distances us from ourselves, we need to try to penetrate a world more and more interior to ourselves where we will find the inwardness of all-that-is. We almost always believe that ipseity begins with the glance we cast on our individual I, through which we will remain irremediably separate from other beings and the rest of the world. But it is not so. Ipseity, we grant, is always a first beginning; it is such for me at each instant, and I can lose it at each instant, and myself as well in the very same stroke. But I can always regain it. It is the invincible relation of myself with myself, which requires that I possess myself, and even that I am, only by way of the circuit of reflection; requires that I can sever myself from every worldly object but not from that internal tie with Being which is the very act through which I inscribe myself in it by saying “I”. That I cannot inscribe myself in Being without saying “I” means that Being itself must be an I since there is no difference between borrowing being from it and borrowing the power to say “I”.<sup>14</sup> The grave error, it is true, would be to think I borrow the power of constituting my I from a ready-formed Self. For there is no already-formed Self but only a Self that eternally forms itself through the possibility it grants the particular I of forming itself by putting into play the creative efficacy residing at the heart of certain conditions which precisely determine its existence as an individual. I can be sure of having penetrated my own ipseity only when it reveals to me a world that has never begun and is nonetheless always beginning, a world that infinitely surpasses me, is always present and open in the depths of myself, and constitutes my own essence as well as the common essence of all beings. Ipseity is the rapport of me with me, and of me with everything, which requires us at each instant to give birth to the same initiative and the same life.

ART. 5: *The act is the creator of ipseity.*

As long as we consider the act as having its end outside itself we must subordinate it to the object, and it then becomes contradictory to regard it as a first principle. But it is a contradiction in another sense to regard it as closed within itself and having no productive efficacy. In what respect would it then be distinguished from a thing? How could we say that it is self-caused? How would it be able to obtain consciousness of itself?

But consciousness shows us precisely the essential character of the act which is at once a departure from and a return to self, which is its own origin and end and which in its trajectory from itself to itself introduces the I and all objects. The goal of all dialectic is precisely to describe the steps of this path. But it suffices

<sup>13</sup> Being is the source of the I-sense.

<sup>14</sup> An example of Lavelle’s frequently giddy logic.

here to note the impossibility of considering whatever end towards which the act might tend as anything other than a means by which it exerts and takes possession of itself. Even in its humblest and crudest form the act must return to its point of departure: it is itself it experiences, itself it ever seeks to possess through all its visible creations. These are indeed appearances which are destined to vanish and which, instead of exhausting the act that produced them, allow it to subsist and to unfold its abundance and purity. Thus through our experience of the world and our particular works we pursue a perpetual dialogue with ourselves.

So what are we to think of this pure act that creates the world in order to offer all liberties who participate in its essence a mediation without which they could communicate neither with each other nor with it, but also in order to produce a mediation of self with self, i.e. a thread uniting its intelligence, will and love<sup>15</sup>? We must think it is that circulation, interior to the act and constitutive of ipseity, through which its essence is defined. In us it is manifest in temporal form but circulation in time involves only its effects and not the eternal source that produces them, whose outpouring we are permitted to gather within us.

### C) THE INTIMACY OF THE ACT

ART. 6: *Intimacy*<sup>16</sup> resides there where I act and not where I suffer.

It is difficult to define the true nature of intimacy. I am, will we say, there where I *feel*<sup>17</sup>, and more exactly, there where I suffer: suffering is the sole worldly instance where my presence cannot be challenged. However I know very well that I am not identical with my suffering since I attribute it to myself, and even do so in the measure I experience my limits, recognise my impotence, some passivity in my will or my subjugation with respect to certain external actions over which I am not master. This suffering is not, one might say, the positive part of me; I recognise it as mine but not as me since on the contrary the I constantly pushes it away, constantly seeks to expel it. Appearances aside, intimacy is not there where I suffer but there where I act. Here, in action – if I consider what is properly act in it and not matter, an object, an effect or an end, i.e. if I consider the inward backing I give, the internal commitment I make, this secret process that exists only in and through me – I am wholly intimate with myself; there is nothing not mine, and indeed nothing not me. There is no pre-existing I that at a certain moment might produce the act by way of a mysterious trigger; there is

<sup>15</sup> The three main aspects of participated being which Lavelle addresses in Book Three.

<sup>16</sup> The word in question (“*l’intimité*”) simultaneously connotes intimacy or closeness, privacy, secrecy, inwardness and the depths of being. No single English word suffices.

<sup>17</sup> My emphasis.

nothing before this act that merits the name "I"; and it is because the act makes it be and produces it that it is indistinguishable from the I.

When someone asserts that pain is the very heart of intimacy he does not see that it is nonetheless my pain only owing to the act that makes it mine, that it becomes mine by way of appropriation. It is the sign of a being within me that is in the process of creating itself; and the fact that I cannot deny this pain does not disprove that it demands of me an act whereby I assume it—which doubtless takes very different forms in the voluptuary and the stoic. Will it be said that the proper reality of pain underlying this act is the same in both persons? But this reality is one with the act through which I experience and feel it. And who would dare separate it from the act by which I assume it?

*ART. 7: I penetrate being's intimacy only through success and not through failure.*

It too often happens that we consider intimacy the effect of an impact that jars our sensibility, and we have so much relish for such shocks that we spend our lives searching for new ones, ever more unexpected and lively. But on the contrary true intimacy excludes impact and shock: it supposes only a falling-back upon self and self's origin, upon a tranquillity and silence in which we are endlessly born to ourselves and in which external events, instead of being solicitations that press us, are like anticipated responses. Thus some people demand everything from the outside; they want the outside to produce everything within them; others appear to take the outside into them so that it appears to be of the same nature as the inside and so that when manifests itself it seems only the flowering of inwardness.

Only, I do not at the first stroke arrive at that triumphant existence which is the privilege of pure activity. I enter the world but painfully, for I am a mixture of activity and passivity. I emerge at each instant—not from nothingness but from possibility; and at each instant this possibility risks being buried or lost amid the blind play of causes and effects. I do not command possibility, I only convert it into a means of liberation thanks to an effort that costs me, and it is at the very point where I suffer, where I make an effort, that I can be tempted to locate my—always meagre, always militant—existence: but it is easy to see that what I here take for the I are the very resistances that it encounters and that keep it from being; easy to see that the I aspires only to deliver itself from this state rather than to take pleasure in it; easy to see that it resides wholly in that humble activity it exercises throughout a thousand tribulations but which is only the prelude to a more nearly perfect activity. Pain, effort, obstacle, object—these are the signs of my individuality and my limitation. But it is bad policy to say that I am there, precisely where I cease to be: at the heart of those limits is a positivity that we miss by fixing on them a gaze filled with anxiety and tenderness. However I penetrate being through the success of my activity and not through its failure, through the act I succeed in accomplishing and not through the barrier it

has not yet overcome. I encounter being within myself through the operation of an act that is at once intellectual and voluntary, an act that testifies to my freedom and that—precisely because it is capable of flagging, because it is susceptible of degrees and can change in sense—is the sole way of accounting for the most diverse forms of participation, which arise despite the univocity of being.

ART. 8: *Life's value resides in the vigour with which one is able to distinguish the self of the act from phenomena, which are only relative to it.*

In taking oneself as a pure spectator one is liable to find being neither in the I that looks for it outside nor in that outside itself, which is only an appearance for the I. By contrast if we first agree to counterpose the being we see with the being we are, this being we are will immediately turn out to be, not a being that observes but a being that creates itself<sup>18</sup>, and we will no longer take the gazed-upon object as real; rather we will take as real only the interior operation through which it arises. In the course of life we never do anything other than try to distinguish, there within ourselves, that which is self and therefore constitutes essence from that which is only related to self and constitutes the appearance of things or ourselves. The acuity of our life, its value, depends on the rigorousness with which we are able to make this distinction. It can happen that this Self of the Act, which always calls to us and without which we would have no true I, finds us unresponsive so to speak. So we spend our lives diverting ourselves from living, interesting ourselves exclusively in objects, e.g. our bodies, which instead of possessing an existence in themselves take their existence and significance from this Self of the universe which they often hide from us, whereas they should rightly be instruments that permit us to penetrate it. Nothing is in-itself but what can say "I", and all subjects can say it without detaching themselves from the common Self, just as they can say they *are*<sup>19</sup> without shattering the unity of the common being. And as they are all party to the total being they all participate in the intimacy of the Absolute Self; they are never separate from it, though they are separated from each other; the more deeply they penetrate themselves, the more deeply they penetrate it. By way of it they communicate with one another, and never directly. Consequently the I's intimacy separates us from the intimacy of every other I in the measure there is some limitation and externality in one or the other of us, and it brings us together in the measure there is a purer and more perfect intimacy. Thus an Absolute Self is constituted in the same Act by which it permits each particular I to posit itself in that unique twofold relation it maintains with itself and others. The world arises solely as the condition and

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<sup>18</sup> The verb in question (*se fait*) is usually translated in terms of growth or becoming. However in keeping with Lavelle's reliance on reflexive verbs, the same phrase could be translated "makes itself" or "creates itself".

<sup>19</sup> My italics.



expression through which all these relations are realised. One sees this clearly in the case of love, which enables us to grasp the nature of the act in its most lively and concrete form: it does not abolish matter but gives it meaning because it makes it its vehicle; it does not abolish particular beings but makes them agents of a mutual accord through which they ground their existence and surpass it at the same time. It renders us veritable limbs of one another—yet a shyness persists whereby I separate my intimacy from that of another less than I separate my externality from his intimacy, and vice versa.

From this we will easily understand that as soon as I begin to appropriate something to myself I inwardly subordinate the act to a thing: as a result I bring about a process of separation which, while constituting the I through the ownership it claims, severs relations with the unity of the Act on which it depends as well as with other consciousnesses, excluding them from the participation it has just made its own. I must have nothing and indeed be nothing in order to regain the infinite intimacy within myself and to obtain a real communication with all other beings, in the measure that they consent to the same divestment.

We can say that philosophic and spiritual life begin at the moment I accomplish the difficult but necessary conversion by which, ceasing to call being that which I expel from myself as an object, I recognise as something within me in which I participate i.e. that subjectivity which permits me to say "I". And the univocity of being compels me to posit the existence of a universal subjectivity without which I would be nothing.

*ART. 9: In the intimacy of the act we discover the reasons for things and we make what we are coincide with what we will.*

In reality only the act can be said to introduce an essential gravity to the course of my life; it awakens a power hidden in the depths of being, from which it creates the substance of my I and then straightaway gives it ontological value and creative dignity. As soon as the act is exercised the whole world is joined to me and no longer has meaning only for me. And one could say that intimacy arises in this power I have of attaching myself to what is not me yet immediately becomes mine through the act I perform.

If pure intimacy is indistinct from an act performed within and by us one understands without difficulty why this act founds our own existence at the same time that it founds the world, and why it introduces intelligibility and meaning into the totality of the real. Indeed, in what does the act consist if not in the personal process by which we constantly replace what is given to us with the operation through which we give it to ourselves, so that every object, instead of seeming a blind and inert obstacle we hurl ourselves against, is revealed in a living relationship that unites it to us, or to other objects, and in the same stroke shows us its foundation and its value? The act is an internal engagement through

which the subject is obliged to understand things, i.e. to replace the things themselves with the reasons that make them what they are; but these reasons obviously exist only within and for us, and one sees without difficulty that whoever refuses to look for them, and to regulate his conduct accordingly, also drives them from his life so that the world becomes for him a sheer chaos ruled by an alien necessity. The peculiarity of the act is on the contrary to be a justification of the real through which we courageously agree to take our place in its midst, and consequently assume responsibility for it; which is only possible through a constant collaboration with it that obliges us to embrace it by way of the conjoint operations of understanding and will, i.e. to explain all we are given, even evil, but devoting all our powers to augmenting and reforming it. This joint operation is subordinated to a prior consent-to-be which instead of being an abdication or an abandon is always a load we shoulder: it is in the intimacy of the act that being reveals to us the depths of its perpetually-nascent essence, both as a demand and as a call we often leave unanswered; to accomplish this act through which we give ourselves being is indivisibly to understand, to love, to will and to do. These terms designate different aspects of the same act but cannot be separated from each other; and we have chosen from among them, as custom allows, the term "will" to represent the totality of the act, since there is no true will unless we understand, love and put into play what we will; also, we have shown that we apprehend being only at the moment we will it, that we have to will things to be what they are, that the order prevailing among them is the very order we observe and that this order is the product of our mind. Thus it can become the instrument we require to change the state of the world by realising the destiny appropriate to us. There is a strict solidarity between being and the should-be: it is not by turning our back on being but by plunging to its root that we discover the role we play in it, which is always presented to us in the double aspect of the should-be and the duty to be. And one can say that all those who refuse their ratification of the real thereby reject the conditions without which neither this refusal nor their own desire for something else would be possible; one fears they confound being with appearance and only regard should-be as an unreal and impotent dream. They have not yet achieved that conversion which, by compelling us to recognise the solidarity of the entirety of being and to accept it entirely so as to engage our life in it, leads us to discover its presence in the completely intimate act in which we participate and which, according to the various modes of participation, produces all the worldly aspects that we are constantly given and that we constantly modify.

To seek being is therefore to seek within self the operation of an inexhaustible activity that is at once a desire for itself and a gushing light which instead of being absolutely undetermined is the principle of all those determinations through which it is endlessly realised and possessed. True, those determinations render each being a limited being: only, rather than limiting the total being they precisely express its essence, namely, that of being the act through which each

being forms itself thanks to the infinite and generous gift that permits all beings to create themselves in their turn through their personal initiatives. But this can be the case only in the measure that each being recognises, there in the power it wields, a gift it agrees to put into play. That is to say the I is constantly impelled to go beyond everything in it that is acquired or given by nature, to put in question everything it has, to create itself and to become a person solely by way of an inward asceticism that requires it to coincide, there in the intimacy of the Pure Self, with the act through which the Absolute Being wills itself. In other words, I can obtain a personal existence that permits me to be myself only by penetrating the perfect intimacy of a being beyond which there is nothing and whose very essence, in giving itself existence, is to allow me also to give existence to myself. We know very well that there is for us no other metaphysical ambition than to attain a point devoid of breadth where no distinction remains between being and acting, between what we will and what we are.

#### D) THE PERSONAL ACT

ART. 10: *The Act is at once a person and the hearth of all personal existence.*

If the Act evinces the character of an unfailing initiative, and if it always remains a perfect unity because of this initiative, we easily understand that we must attach to it the very traits by which we define a person, since everything we can attribute to ourselves arises by way of it and since the Act itself can be attributed to nothing.<sup>20</sup> In this sense we can say that it joins in itself all the properties we relegate to the various senses of the word "subject", e.g. grammatical subject, logical subject, psychological subject, metaphysical subject.

Yet it is in a sense the reverse of a force, which is always blind and which—according to the amplitude of effects ascribed to it—always remains testimony of what escapes the spiritual dimension at every instant in the world. The act has no force; it makes all force unnecessary precisely because it gives itself all that it is at every instant; force is, if one likes, the act sundered from itself, depersonalised and productive of one of the visible changes that constitute exteriority for us.

By contrast the Act is not only a person but the hearth of all personal existence. Let us not say that this hearth of personal existence excludes the traits of the Veritable Person<sup>21</sup>, who should be distinguished from all other persons and is constituted through all the living relations this person constantly maintains with them. For it is the nature of the pure act not to be confused with

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<sup>20</sup> The curious argument seems to be that, as the source of all personal attributions, the Act must be the original person or subject.

<sup>21</sup> My capitalisations. I assume God is meant.

any participated act<sup>22</sup> precisely because it is present to it and continually renders it possible—but in such a fashion that there is between these two a departing-and-returning, an uninterrupted circuit where one constantly offers its efficacy and the other draws upon it and puts it to work. If we more easily grant personal existence to other limited beings like ourselves than to Being, which is completely interior to itself and founds the inwardness of each and all of them, it is because these other beings resemble us, because we can represent them to ourselves and because like us they are linked to a body. So we suppose in them an experience comparable to our own whereas we forget that within our own experience the act that makes us *be*<sup>23</sup> precisely expresses the purity and perfection of that personal being to whom we ourselves never have complete access.

We will not accept the thesis that has sometimes been credited<sup>24</sup>, namely, that this being who is capable of founding the autonomous reality of all persons is himself not one and is so to speak a super-person<sup>25</sup>, for apart from the barely intelligible character of this term, we fear there is more negation than affirmation in it.

Neither will we allow ourselves to be seduced by the alternative thesis that the pure act has no personal character but is realised by the infinite plurality of persons, for the nature of every person, even when imperfect and limited, is to be constituted—not by shutting herself<sup>26</sup> up within herself but by calling upon the existence, outside of and around her, of other persons with whom she forms a spiritual society: an uninterrupted creation in which no one grows weary of giving and receiving.<sup>27</sup>

ART. 11: *The individual receives the dignity of personhood from the universal act that grants it to him.*

One is tempted to say that the act is at once essentially personal and radically impersonal. We say it is personal because as soon as it comes into play we witness that unity, interiority, initiative, responsibility and assumption of self by self that are the defining characteristics of the act; and we say it is impersonal, not only because its wholeness and perfection seem to abolish all particular determinations—which, because they are inseparable from individual existence, are for us the foundation of personhood itself—but again because we often

<sup>22</sup> Here the phrase “participated act” appears to be a synonym for the human being.

<sup>23</sup> My italics.

<sup>24</sup> Indeed the author himself entertained the idea of an impersonal Act in an earlier draft of this work! The comment could be taken as a concession of this but doubtless refers to other people.

<sup>25</sup> A reference to Nietzsche? Perhaps, but in the context of this discussion what appears intended is a being that is somehow more than a person, e.g. a higher consciousness void of human-like traits.

<sup>26</sup> To assist the author’s meaning in this section I have gradually dispensed with neuter constructions (which imply a thing rather than a person) and conformed the gender of pronouns to their French originals. The French referent “*personne*” is a feminine noun, hence the feminine pronouns that follow.

<sup>27</sup> I am not clear how this argument refutes the seductive thesis.

believe that, there in our experience of the act at the moment we employ it, we deal purely with an anonymous efficacy that becomes personal only within us and by way of the consent we give it.<sup>28</sup>

But this contradiction between the ideal conditions of personal existence, which the act alone is capable of fulfilling, and the strictly empirical conditions which apply only to us, should be overcome. For the Act cannot found our personal life and at the same time fall short of it. Individual existence can be a condition but not an element of the person since personhood arises within us only when the individual is surpassed.<sup>29</sup> And it is not true to say that we confer the dignity of personhood on an originally impersonal act at the moment we make it ours; for to make it ours is to raise ourselves above all the properties of our nature, all our momentary states; it is to give ourselves to the act. Thus though personhood always appears inseparable from the limitations amid which it is realised in us we nonetheless forget that it does not arise by way of these limitations but on the contrary by way of their surpassing, i.e. by way of the act to which, when we consider it something apart, we refuse that personal character it would paradoxically need to have in order to be able to confer it. An act can be grasped only by the one who performs it; we therefore grasp it only in ourselves. Thus we are led to enclose it within our own limits, not understanding that someone is a person only at the point where one identifies one's self with the act and not at the point where one opposes it with barriers. For that reason none of us is fully a person.

It would be paradoxical to accord a personal character to the individual at the moment he raises himself to the universal but to deny a personal character to the universal which precisely imparts it to him. And if someone claims that personality is formed by way of the very rapport that unites these two, we will respond that this is no doubt true but on the condition that in this rapport the personality shines forth no less in the offered participation than in the consented one.

Far from coinciding with the individual, the nature of the person is to join the individual to the universal: either the individual submits himself to a universal law or, what amounts to the same thing, he takes responsibility for the universal. The link between the individual and the personal can only be made through the intermediary of morality: we have also been able to show that for us this becomes the very essence of duty. Consequently, if the individual becomes a person only in the measure he accepts a principle that resides above him and that comes alive within him, it is because this principle is nothing abstract but a life in which the I participates.

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<sup>28</sup> In this the author perhaps reveals his own reasons for originally regarding the act as impersonal.

<sup>29</sup> Lavelle distinguishes between the individual—which I take to be the biologic, worldly, social entity manifest in bodily form and in the roles it plays—and the unique person it might become. If I understand him correctly Lavelle is suggesting that personhood remains unrealised until mere individuality is surpassed through participation in the Pure Self.

And if one observes that every activity our personal existence is based on is a received activity which we need to employ as our own, one has only two alternatives to choose from: either we impart the character of personality to it at the moment the activity is received by us, which assumes we were already a person beforehand, or the activity introduces us to personal existence by making us party to the power of self-creation it eternally exercises. And this second thesis can be confirmed in two ways: first, through the observation that at the moment we recognise ourselves as persons, instead of severing ourselves from the profound intimacy upon which the world depends, we begin to discover it (as if we heard a voice from the depths of Being respond to us and call us by name); secondly, through the impossibility of establishing ourselves as persons other than by encountering other persons and trying to form with them a spiritual society, outside of which perhaps no particular person could pass beyond the limits of individual nature that support her; thus persons can communicate with one another only in the measure that each is capable of becoming for another person the mediator between the infinite activity and her own participated activity.