

BOOK II

**THE INTERVAL**

## PART TWO

# THE GENESIS OF THE INTERVAL

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## CHAPTER X

# THE PURE ACT AND PARTICIPATION

### A) THE PROBLEM OF PARTICIPATION

*ART. 1: The particular being participates in the operation through which the world is formed.*

The primary experience is not that of the world but that of the body. It is the experience of the world of which my body is a part. That experience never leaves me: my whole life serves to deepen it. Philosophy never stops asking how I can encompass it by way of representation while illness shows me how frail and miserable my place in the world is.

However as soon as we have left behind the idea of a ready-made world, as soon as we have discovered that the world's being resides in an act that accomplishes itself eternally, it becomes impossible for us to be only a part of the world, we must cooperate with this act, with which we nevertheless cannot identify ourselves owing to the passivity in us. Instead of saying, as does common sense and perhaps materialism, that we are part of the world, we will say that we participate in the operation by which the world is made.

That the two fundamental operations of the mind are necessarily analysis and synthesis, and that they make sense only in relation to each other, is immediately clear to us in the word "participation". For while it implies the primacy of

analysis – though a singularly fecund analysis which does not recognise already-distinguished elements in the All but only their potential, since it makes them appear in the All through an act of freedom – the analysis in question becomes a synthesis, not in order to reconstitute the All but in order to construct or create our very personality within it.

The peculiarity of the pure being is to become itself eternally. This act founds the unity of the world. But one can say that the world is perpetually recreated in each act of participation. It is for this reason that the world cannot be considered the sum of its parts and that the act of participation is incapable of dividing it. For to each consciousness the world is present in its entirety; it embraces it in a perspective of its own, and one can say that the activity it employs is inseparable from the total act, since what it accepts from the act necessarily demands as its correlative a given that answers to it yet that also expresses everything lacking in it: everything consciousness is up to a certain point capable of having yet incapable of being.

In order for participation not to create an impassable abyss between the particular being and the total being, we must not only be interior to the All but it must be present to us in a personal and subjective perspective that intersects with an infinity of other subjective and personal perspectives in such a way that they can be distinguished and brought into accord with it without ever exhausting it. Thereby the self-sufficiency that appears to belong to each consciousness, without which it would lack its own initiative, is such that when it says “world” what it always means is a world seen by it and for which it is the centre. One also understands how, being present to us in its entirety, it is there less to give further extent to the representation we have of it than to give more life and depth to the interior act through which we establish our participated being in it.

Participation does not make us, as might be thought, a simple part of the All. It is not participation in a ready-made being which so to speak might allow us to appropriate a part of it for ourselves. One does not participate in a thing. One participates only in an act which is in the process of realising itself but which is realised also in us and by us thanks to an original operation that obliges us, in taking responsibility for our existence, to take responsibility also for the existence of the All. That is why the nature of the act of participation is to deter us from confusing ourselves with what we currently are, i.e. with our given nature, and to raise each being above himself, to require him always to surpass himself.

It is at once the essence of self and a departure from it. It bears within it something of the perfect interiority and absolute wholeness associated with the pure act: it can therefore only express the union of the part and the All. And that is why it is, at root, necessarily always an act of love. Every particular act we perform situates us in the creative act and affords us God’s point of view so to speak.

ART. 2: *The problem of participation resides in determining the relations between the Self and the I.*<sup>1</sup>

The peculiarity of participation is to reveal to us, in an experience that never ends, the connection between the absolute being and the particular I. We cannot think of one without the other. It could doubtless be said that there is a reciprocal dialectic between the All<sup>2</sup> and the part. But it must be feared that this dialectic remains purely verbal and does not always allow us to recognise the pre-eminence of the All with respect to the parts, for which it is the principle and not the sum.<sup>3</sup> Also, someone will perhaps claim that we ought to restrain ourselves from raising the particular I to the level of a limitless being through a process of sheer induction. But one cannot forget that this limitless being is already present within us (rather, we are present in it) and we are its limitation. And that's why the difficulty, as shown in the second book of *Ethics*<sup>4</sup>, is much less a matter of positing it than of knowing how to posit particular beings once we have posited limitless being. Participation is a fact and it is up to us to explain how it is possible. And we feel that this is the very problem of creation. But it admits of two levels: for one can ask why there are objects or givens, i.e. why there is a world; but one also knows that there can be givens, objects, only for a particular consciousness which is unequal to the totality of being, i.e. which is not a pure act. The question therefore is why there are particular consciousnesses for which there is a world.

Consequently the true grounding of participation depends on showing how that perfect liberty by way of which is inexhaustibly realised not only the passage from essence to existence but the passage from nothingness to being can be employed only by its calling into existence an infinite plurality of liberties<sup>5</sup>, each of which would have to traverse the distance separating its possibility from its reality, independently and in duration. One would then see the world being born at the same time as particular consciousnesses.

However this difficulty remains: while participation can neither logically nor ontologically do without the Act in which it participates, this act would seem to be able to do without participation. Indeed there can be nothing outside it, either as an ideal or an end, to which it could be subordinated. Moreover, considering it in its proper nature as act, we will discover no internal necessity to which it is

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<sup>1</sup> Literally, the Self and the Me ("le Soi et le Moi"). The former refers to God as the source of the self-sense; the latter to God's echo in the individual person. Because it is that person's most intimate sense of self I believe "le Moi" is best translated as "the I", i.e. as a subject rather than an object.

<sup>2</sup> Formally this could also be "the Whole" but see the next note.

<sup>3</sup> It is to distinguish this sense of entirety as a fund of unrealised possibilities rather than as a collection of manifest particulars that I have in most cases opted for the literal translation "the All" instead of "the Whole". I have relied on the unusualness of the literal translation to signal a special meaning.

<sup>4</sup> I am uncertain about whose *Ethics* is in question.

<sup>5</sup> That is to say free beings. The "perfect liberty" refers to God.

subject. It must be the case that the essence of the Act resides in a free and perfect generosity owing to which, far from creating mere things that would be inert testimonies of its power, it imparts to other beings that dignity which renders them causes of themselves in their turn – as we observe in human actions with a moral character.

If one pleads that Being is a purely abstract notion from which it is impossible to derive any form of particular existence, or that if we posit it as we have done in its concrete totality, then all problems are resolved even before they have been posed, one can assuredly not say the same about the Act. One can maintain neither that it is a general and empty notion, since it can have being only in and through its exercise, nor that in positing it one cannot depart from or pass beyond it, since it is itself this very going-out and passing-beyond; it is efficacy itself and justifies itself through its works alone.

In Book I, where we affirmed the absolute character of the Act in terms of its interiority and self-sufficiency, we did not intend to demolish the domain of the relative but only to show that, since the terms “relative” and “absolute” form a pair and must necessarily be considered together, the nature of the relative is to be grounded in the absolute. In the theory of participation it is exactly this connection and distinction between the relative and the absolute that we will endeavour to explain.

The entire problem of participation resides therefore in the relation between the individual I and the absolute Self, i.e. in determining the point within the total being – which has a plenary responsibility for itself – where I consent to take responsibility for myself and by consequence to say “I”. Also it is not surprising that the strength of the spiritual act I am able to achieve is always proportional to the strength with which I am able to enter into solitude. However this solitude opens within me a world without limits where I discover for the first time a way of communicating with all that is.

Participation consequently prevents me from taking the world as a pure spectacle; at least it cannot be that alone, for spectacular activity introduces something new to the world: the very spectacle represented. The fundamental character of participation is to define an initiative that is mine and through which I constitute my unique reality in Being thanks to an absolutely personal act. However this act is such that as soon as it is exercised it calls forth the appearance of the world as its correlative.

*ART. 3: The problem of participation is at the heart of ancient philosophy and constitutes the criterion by which differences between philosophical doctrines can be assessed.*

One can say that the problem of pure being and its relations with participated being has been discerned by ancient philosophy with admirable clarity; and all the solutions one can give for it follow the path from Parmenides to Plato. The

admiration Parmenides' work has always aroused proves the force with which—despite its stand on the uncertainty of opinion, the multiplicity of phenomena and the instability of time<sup>6</sup>—it affirms the absolute character of Being, in which the very nature of thought is set out for us: with magnificent hauteur it denies the name “being” to whatever we see and to whatever changes. Here is a philosophy which, each time it is revived, seems a challenge and elicits in common consciousness sometimes disapproval based on the evidence of the world given by the senses, sometimes respectful fear and a kind of holy terror.

Parmenides' influence on Plato is enormous, and Plato has recourse to participation to avoid an absolute rupture between the world of true being and that of appearances, i.e. in order to reconcile Parmenides, who has regard only for the first, with opinion which ascribes existence only to the second.<sup>7</sup> But participation ought not to make us forget the absolute in which it has its roots. Only, there is difficulty in knowing how participation is performed, what its meaning is and what its end. The term “imitation” which Plato often substitutes for “participation” hardly illumines its true nature. Plato envisions the circle of fall and return, intending to show how two worlds oppose one another yet come together again, how the soul undertakes an ascension by which it seeks to regain its lost abode. But fall and return here testify to the act of a liberty who can retain only the being she gives herself. And the platonic comparison between the model and a copy does not sufficiently help us to grasp the nature of participation, which is righty to constitute our being in the course of a process through which, in creating our eternal essence, we suppose we do no more than regain it.

Participation is without doubt imitation, as Plato felt, but more than that it is invention. It is imitation because it is subordinated to a reality that surpasses it. But one feels that there are very different degrees of imitation. Imitation of a ready-made object is only the crudest and most obvious form; imitation of another being is singularly more subtle. Beginning as an imitation of his manifest comportment it little by little becomes imitation of his secret intentionality: in all cases it supposes an original adaptation.

But true imitation is when we try, by thought or action, to make things resemble ideas<sup>8</sup>. Above all we try to model our soul on them. But in that case we feel the word “imitation” is out of place. We are dealing with genuine participation, where the idea becomes ours, is incarnated in us, takes from us what is needed for it to exist in the world, thereby receiving from us an imperfect, manifest life. As in imitation there is an initiative by which one imitates but this imitation is never faithful. It is a choice and, up to a point, a new creation. Finally one should not forget that it actualises what was until then a pure power.

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<sup>6</sup> Each of these plays a part in Parmenides' philosophy.

<sup>7</sup> Lavelle acknowledges Plato as the source of the notion of participation.

<sup>8</sup> The “ideas” in question are less platonic archetypes than felt meanings or essences. See note 11.

Participation alone establishes a connection between the passivity of my psychological being and the metaphysical Act on which it depends, and which founds my true being. It leads me to raise myself from one toward the other. It shows me that I can propose no ideal for myself and am incapable of having any sense of responsibility – without which I could not say “I” – unless I first acquire the dignity of being cause. And it teaches me that the nature of my consciousness is not to describe my history but to make it.

The various philosophical doctrines all focus on the fundamental step by which participation in the absolute is revealed. This gives rise to all the problems concerning knowledge and action. But the doctrines oppose one another because they do not consider participation from the same perspective. The nature of theism is ever to envisage its source and end, with the distance between these two permitting each being to acquire an essence of his own through a free act, and the nature of humanism is to have regard only for the progress of participation but in such a fashion that it becomes an indefinite creativity without origin or terminus.

#### B) THE ACT: SOURCE OF ALL DETERMINATIONS

*ART. 4: The act is the non-temporal source of all temporal determinations, which are means of participation.*

If the Act is the summit of reality it is omnipresent to reality and dominates it always. It is only in an arbitrary fashion – only relative to us and only in order to adapt ourselves to the conditions of temporal existence, i.e. of participation – that we consider it either the principle on which reality depends or the end toward which it tends in a process of progressive liberation. And if we think it is both one and the other, it is because it is eternal, making it for us always both a source and an ideal. Thus we are far from setting at the foundation of things a blind will that we might transform into free consciousness through the use we make of it; rather, we believe that our consciousness, as soon as we employ it, discovers a spiritual activity in which it participates, though in an irregular fashion such that it clouds overs or grows dim owing to lapses in attention.

There is nothing in the Act but absolute efficacy, a pure operative power. But this efficacy is ever-present and the power is always exerted. And these features can appear to us naturally only in participation; but then they always testify to the connection between our particular initiatives and the All in which they are bound to take place; and it is again the Act that brings order and rhythm, correspondences and compensations, to all forms of being and that constantly lights our intelligence and instructs our will.

Solely the opposition between non-being and being allows us to realise the nature of the act, which is so to speak an eternal passage from one to the other. In this regard it is the thought of what is not that makes us resemble God, as Eckhart maintains.<sup>9</sup> Doubtless there is a problem with taking the act as a non-temporal generation. But it must be the same with all generation: it engages time only in a succession of effects, and between these we introduce the distinction called “cause and effect” which however leaves true causality, i.e. creative efficacy, out of the picture.<sup>10</sup> That efficacy can only produce itself. Every instance of empirical succession represents only the trace this efficacy leaves behind in the measure it is participated. The distinctions we make in saying it is self-caused are linguistically necessary but do not change its perfect unity; on the contrary they express it.

The peculiarity of the act is not only to abolish consciousness of time, or to effect a transition between successive moments, it is also to compress into a timeless present—which in temporal terms is ever-beginning—the common origin of all events produced in time: these events spread it out in time, thereby shattering its original plenary and dimensionless unity.

The gravest error I might make would be to regard Being as the infinite sum of determinations when it is solely their source.

Also, whatever the abundance of determinations that might be granted me, I can never regard them as an end but only as simple means. I often have the illusion that there is nothing more to desire and will than their endless increase. But we know very well that this pursuit is deceiving: that it endlessly seeks more and more, that it receives nothing which is not taken away and that the end toward which it tends always remains at an infinite distance from it. But if determinations are only means, we suffer no loss to see them disappear after having served their purpose, for they are meant only to enable us to take possession—in an ever purer and more nearly perfect fashion—of the interior act that makes us be and that requires us ever to bring forth some new determination, without our ever dreaming of holding onto any of them.

*ART. 5: The Act can appear indifferent and insensible only because it is the supreme principle of all differences and preferences.*

The difficulty with participation resides in this—and it can be said that whoever understands the problem has already overcome it—that the act, being perfect in itself and infinite only with respect to us, being consequently incapable of undergoing any increase, diminishment or alteration, since it is the sovereign

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<sup>9</sup> I assume this is the German mystic Meister Eckhart (1260-1329?).

<sup>10</sup> Speaking in a sceptical vein David Hume argued that causes are merely stipulated or assumed since all that can be experienced are successive events. Lavelle here employs the insight in a positive fashion. Starting from it one can begin to understand his argument in Chapter VII where “true causality” is relegated to a plane of its own and the Act considered “all cause”.



*raison d'être* of all that can be, must remain identical with itself whatever the initiatives of freedom and the various modes of participation. For it should not be forgotten that all these operations not only depend on the act, they are produced in and by it while nonetheless producing no division or perturbation in it. Moreover by way of this participation each being creates not only his own development but a certain view of the world, i.e. a world which does not affect the Act that permits its arising and contains it without being subject to it. Thus all the perspectives beings have on the same object continually change yet they alter nothing in the object itself: still, it contains them within itself as the condition of their possibility and their accord.

Participation constantly multiplies and diversifies particular forms of being *ad infinitum*, i.e. through personal development and mutual enrichment, yet without adding anything to Being itself. It manifests Being's fecundity but does not guarantee it. All beings take from Being what they are; but to believe that the being we receive increases the perfection of Pure Being is to adopt an anthropomorphic point of view. Being is not a sum.

It is futile to ask us to make a distinction between what Being was before or after participation because this before and that after make sense only with respect to us. It is wrong to say it is unaware of participation for participation is completely within Being, as in its paramount condition. Being calls us to enjoy it but we are unable to restrict or increase this ever-present infinity. It is the world that constantly changes, that becomes more abundant or more deficient, more harmonious or more divided, more ordered or more chaotic, depending on our participated activity's initiatives. All such initiatives are produced at the heart of the total being. Yet time is in it, not it in time. Progress is therefore also in it but does not affect it. And the world, time, progress and particular existences are all produced in the Total Being without making a ripple in it.

Will we say then that the pure act is as insensible and indifferent as the God of Aristotle? That would be a singularly inadequate view, based on a purely human analogy; the pure act is supremely impartial, not because it is insensible but because it contains all the values to which men become sensible in a preferential manner; it contains all the differences they set up between them owing to their limitations. It is the all-positive, i.e. the principle that allows all preferences to be formed, all differences to appear. And if someone asserted that it does not choose between things and that the choices individuals make in employing their freedom are non-existent for it, we would reply that such a construction transforms the act into a static and material whole which is a simple addition of particular modes and can no longer be considered a living act and the spiritual principle that grounds both their possibility and their hierarchy. We will doubtless not say that these choices affect it since that would give it traits of human passivity and consequently undermine the character we have attributed to the Pure Act: one might however exercise caution with respect to all these words so as not to break the Act's accord with the participated act, and we could

even go so far as to say that, contrary to being definable in terms of insensibility and indifference, this Act is the supreme principle that makes things sensible and differentiates them, that is to say, it is the *Supreme Interest, Supreme Choice* or *Absolute Preference*, which all the interests, all the choices, all the preferences one observes in the world can neither change nor limit, although it is not the abstract measure but the personal arbiter of their truth and efficacy. The devil's perversity and sufferings arise precisely from the effort he perpetually makes to produce sadness in God and, dare we say, some doubt and discouragement with regard to his pure creative efficacy, whereas when one speaks of God's sadness it only refers to sadness about the devil and is positive, not negative. It is one with the superabundance of his generosity in the aid he constantly renders all creatures. Each of us has experienced the similar effect of maliciousness and jealousy on a pure heart.

Let there be no more talk of the Absolute Being remaining alien to us, like the God of Aristotle, since all we are is he and what he makes in us—he who animates and loves us and is loved in us—and since, there within us, in this being we dispose, he is the being he has given us.

### C) CREATIVE PARTICIPATION

*ART. 6: Participation is not a static belonging to an All of which one is a part but dynamic cooperation with an ideal one continually promotes.*

The word "participation" is sometimes used to indicate for example belonging to a whole: the possibility of every individual to be assigned to a class or a group. Here it is a matter, one might say, of the rapport between each being and his related concept, taking the concept only in its extension; but this participation is still static and nominal. It is only a semblance of true participation which is dynamic and real. By way of it each being is considered less in connection with the understanding of a concept to which he would have to give being than in connection with an idea that goes beyond him, that is for him an ideal he will never stop engaging yet will never fully realise.<sup>11</sup>

Language rightly distinguishes between purely external and visible participation—which already seems to create obligations, though we do not always fulfil them—and real, affective, active participation which awakens our attention, emotion and movement and is a cooperating presence. There, in the choice to participate or not to participate, rather than in the alternative to be or not to be, resides the exercise of our freedom and self-determination.

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<sup>11</sup> Lavelle differentiates between a concept and an ideal in that the first is a representation and the second a living presence.

We see therefore that there are innumerable forms of participation. One could even say that they constitute a hierarchy: at the lowest degree one finds a submissive participation, which is that of nature; above that, at an intermediate degree, one finds a transmitted or taught participation, which is typical of human society; at the highest degree one finds true participation, which is participation in spirit. It ever resides in an act of freedom, is always expressed by invention and continually benefits both nature and society. These modes were originally present only as an ensemble of means furnished to me, signs addressed to me and calls made to me; but it was necessary to put the means to work, to recognise the signs, to respond to the calls. For me then everything depends less on what they were than on how I will manifest them. Regardless of the material conditions offered to us we inevitably take a place at the interior of the Absolute Being corresponding to the plane of consciousness on which we live. Nature and society signify an empirical connection with the All: it makes us part of it and seems to submit us to its law. But being a part of the All is not being a participant in it: there is no true participation except by way of spirit, which reverses our relation to nature and society and submits both to its law. At this moment value is born, introducing to the world wanted or preferred ends which give nature and society their significance and *raison d'être*.

*ART. 7: Participation ever adds to what we are without adding anything to the infinite act on which it depends.*

The miracle of participation is that it enables us to understand how, without adding anything to the infinite act which contains everything participation can grant us, it nonetheless adds to us without cease. It furrows the infinite act with the traces of all temporal futures. Participation is so to speak received back into the source of all participation without that source undergoing any growth, which is the very sign of its transcendence.

Participation is therefore always a “plus”, i.e. a creation with respect to all participatory modes of existence, but not with respect to the origin of all creation whose essence is precisely to eternally furnish the modes with the resources needed for their birth and growth. Each of us performs a function he alone is able to fulfil and by means of which he forms his own being. But within his perspective he envelopes and puts into play the activity of the All according to his particular capacity and vocation. In this way the selfsame All continues to suffice both itself and the existences within it, which continue to multiply and extend themselves, each expressing the All in its own way. Also, no contradiction is involved in observing that no being can take responsibility for himself without at the same time taking responsibility for all humanity and the entire world. And it can be said that participation is always total, at once in terms of the act on which it draws, which always remains indivisibly present to it; in terms of the world in which it acts, where the least of its interventions modifies the overall

structure; and in terms of its effect on the solidarity uniting it with all other consciousnesses. The world's creation resides in the possibility given to each consciousness to change the state of this perishable world. Thanks to this, a consciousness determines its eternal being and the eternal link that unites it with all other consciousnesses.

The act has a two-fold character, firstly to manifest what we are, and in such a perfect way that the act is confused with our very being, and secondly to carry us beyond what we are: in terms of appearance, toward an object or end, and in terms of reality, towards a more nearly perfect act. Thus nothing that participation offers us necessarily has to be discovered or received but that is only because it is up to us to discover or receive it. And if we sometimes think we are involved in a personal creation, whether in science, in art or in conduct, then it is fitting to be cautious, for this is a sign that this action we are so proud of is an artifice and that it has not found within Being the right insertion and that perfect equilibrium which ever give it traits of necessity and, so to speak, eternity.

*ART. 8. Participation does not have as an ideal the extinction of the part in the All but the formation of a spiritual society of parts, each related to the others and to the All.<sup>12</sup>*

All beings rather keenly feel what they lack as well as their ambition to obtain it. This shows that they agree to consider the essence of their life as residing in an act of participation that can be indefinitely pursued. But it would be a grave error to think that this participation can be limitlessly extended so as to one day embrace and equal the All in which we are situated. Can one even suggest that persons might aspire to such an ideal without hope of ever attaining it? Participation so-defined would be only a monstrous egotism in which our gaze would be fixed solely on what we can acquire, and not on a supreme Value to which we are ready to subordinate everything, even if that requires sacrifice on our part. No one could propose to us as an ideal such a desert of omnipotent solitude, where we would feel nothing but the grief of an exhausting effort devoted to a pointless success.

Participation is wholly something else. It does not eliminate the distance between the part and the All because that distance is needed for the part's free play. It maintains between the part and the All a duality and a communion of all instants. In a sense it increases their independence from one from another in order to increase their interaction, the All being inexhaustibly generous in the gift it continually makes of itself, the part being indefatigably strong in its ability to accept and cooperate. This is what pantheism has not recognised, and it is the source of its errors.<sup>13</sup> One must consider the All in terms of Freedom rather than

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<sup>12</sup> The statement plainly rejects philosophies like Hinduism and Buddhism which look toward an extinction of the individual in the Absolute.

<sup>13</sup> Lavelle himself was sometimes accused of pantheism.

in terms of Substance, so that participation implies the birth of another liberty<sup>14</sup>, so that the relation between the All and the part becomes the relation between divine freedom and human freedom and so that in drawing nearer and nearer to God each being, instead of being reduced to nothing, feels his initiative grow even more than his wealth.

Participation establishes my autonomy rather than abolishes it because it is always a participation in God's perfect autonomy. But this autonomy makes sense only if, though it is the same everywhere, it is nonetheless not an abstraction, i.e. only if it is put into play by distinct persons who are affirmed as both distinct and united by way of the same indivisible act. And if the secret of each particular being resides in the internal dialogue he maintains with God through a personal act of faith, the secret of God consists in the creative internal dialogue through which he continually calls forth the existence of other beings who, instead of limiting his power, bear witness to it.

The peculiarity of participation is that it permits us not only to conceive of but to experience and put into play a relation among all instants which joins the I as an already-created reality with the I that holds a small parcel of creative activity.

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<sup>14</sup> Again, "liberty" tends to be used as a synonym for the flesh and blood analogue of the free Act.