

## THE EXPERIENCE OF THE ACT<sup>1</sup>

### A) THE ACT: INTERNAL ORIGIN OF MYSELF AND THE WORLD

*ART.<sup>2</sup> 1: Metaphysics seeks to recover the primitive act upon which both my being and that of the world depend.*

The path leading to metaphysics is particularly difficult, and few agree to climb it. For it is a question of abolishing whatever appears to sustain our existence: visible things, images and all the usual objects of interest or desire. What we seek to attain is an internal principle – always [designated] “the act” – which gives rise to everything we can see, touch or feel: [a principle] that [must be put into play rather than merely conceived] and that, according to the success or failure of our operation, explains both the experience before [us] and the destiny we can give ourselves.

In the philosopher there is always a secret reticence<sup>3</sup>. For he mounts back to the very springheads of everything-that-is. Yet all springs have a mysterious and sacred character, and the least glance is enough to trouble them. These

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter One, contained in Part One (“The Method”) of Book One (“The Pure Act”). What follows merits comparison with the “experience of the presence of being” described in “The Discovery of Being”.

<sup>2</sup> An abbreviation of “Article”.

<sup>3</sup> Modesty or shyness.

sources at once [contain] the depths of the divine will, which I tremble to interrogate, and the depths of my own will, which I tremble to engage. Obscurity [and] mysticism are often signs of such reticence. What can I grasp, what can I express, but this pure will's manifestations – which determine, individualise, limit and already corrupt it?

Philosophers have always sought the primitive fact upon which all others depend. But the primitive fact is that I can neither posit being independently of the I that grasps it nor posit the I independently of the being within which it is inscribed. The sole foothold in presence to which I always return, the sole fact which is for me primary and indubitable, is my insertion in the world.<sup>4</sup>

But where is the [actual] point of insertion? It is not in my solitary thinking, not in the obstacle that halts me ([showing]me what I am not more than what I am), [and] not in the agony which, at the moment I am ready to give myself being, makes me feel my oscillation between being and nothingness. Yet the thinking, the obstacle and the agony are [all] inseparable from the birth of consciousness, and even compel it to be endlessly reborn, since they are destined to prevent habit from forming – or to remove it from me if it is already there. The primitive fact resides in an infinitely more positive experience: my active presence to myself. This is my feeling of responsibility with respect to myself and the world.<sup>5</sup>

The experience [from] which both the emotion that life gives us and the revelation of our own being begins does not, therefore, consist of the spectacle spread before our gaze, of which we [are] a part, but of putting-into-play a movement we are able to accomplish, [one] that depends on our lone initiative, that awakens us to self-consciousness and that, in changing the state of the world, shows us the dominion at our disposal. As soon as I [note] the power I have of moving [my] little finger, I [find myself repeating] this gesture a hundred times with the same wonder.<sup>6</sup> Only [then] do I begin to take hold of the real from within, i.e. [by way of] the very activity from which it derives, which forms my very being and which I either set in motion or suppress through a simple decision that depends on me alone.

However, movement here is only the sign and witness of a more secret activity. Still, it suffices to show that instead of [being swept up] in an endless becoming in which I constantly escape myself, I [can] on the contrary take hold of what I am only in that act through which I wrench myself from becoming in order to resume being – lacking which I would not perceive becoming itself. It is

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<sup>4</sup> Contrast this to the position expressed in *The Total Presence*, where sheer being is the primary datum, and self a secondary qualification of it. The present position invites comparison with Heidegger's focus on *Dasein* ("being-in-the-world").

<sup>5</sup> In other words the second phase of the experience of being described in Section 6 of "The Discovery of Being" is now given first place.

<sup>6</sup> This is on the order of a confession or autobiographical detail. In his book *Of Spiritual Intimacy* (1955, a posthumous collection), the author cites this experience, along with his discovery that all things take place solely in the present, as early realisations that shaped his life and philosophy.

here [the question of] an act of creation which is always a consent to what I wish to think, to produce or to be.

ART. 2: *Metaphysics [hinges on] the experience of the act I dispose, which [nonetheless] goes beyond me: inwardly through the power that feeds it and outwardly through the effects it allows me to produce.*

Metaphysics rests on a privileged experience: that of the act which makes me be. Only we almost always think we can have no other experience than that of the object. For this [reason] the act itself has always seemed impossible to grasp: hence thinking<sup>7</sup>, which grasps [everything else], has always seemed ungraspable [in itself] precisely because we wanted to grasp it as an object.<sup>8</sup> It was, therefore, natural to relegate it to a world hidden from us and to make of it either a hypothetical being or a mysterious activity we called “transcendental” in order to show that it must forever escape us. Between thinking and the physical object we allotted an intermediate zone [of psyche, apprehended] by an illegitimate experience we gave the name “introspection”, where the act of thinking created for itself a kind of interior object. Yet we are not very certain that psychic states exist; and in any case, there is no state deserving this name that does not seem to express a relation between the act of thinking and [the] physical object which is our own body. But this act of thinking, though [it can] never be isolated, is not hidden from us. We attain it in a lasting experience that is indistinguishable from its accomplishment; and this experience is truly metaphysical because it goes beyond every physical experience. It is both personal and universal because, if I can verify it only within myself, it is neither a purely contingent given nor an arbitrary operation since it is the experience of a true activity that always carries within it the exigency of its own justification.

The unique nature of metaphysics is to describe this constitutive experience, which possesses a character of pure inwardness but through which everything that can be set in place is set in place, including the plurality of consciousnesses and the very accord they seek—which eludes them. Here, the world ceases to be for us a simple representation, though we [might] ask how it was bound to become such. It is always a question of ourselves and the way we

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<sup>7</sup> What Lavelle (following Descartes) calls “thinking” includes what most English-language readers would regard as consciousness or understanding.

<sup>8</sup> In what follows Lavelle explicitly recognises a form of self-knowledge that occurs ahead of whatever object, thus distinguishing himself from thinkers who regard knowledge as having an exclusively object-like character. Yet in common with them Lavelle often describes self-knowledge in terms of a circular movement where perceptions and states provide a kind of feedback. Apparently *two* sorts of self-knowledge are possible. Owing to this there can be the dialogue of self with self which the author frequently speaks about. See Translator’s Introduction, “Problems in Representing Consciousness and Being”.

are engaged in the world. It is ourselves we seek and, in seeking ourselves, we necessarily find [a] world that determines us and that we in turn determine.

I [exist]<sup>9</sup> only through an act I accomplish internally: [an] act [that is] always at work, even when I do not make it my own, and that is judge of itself and mediator between knowledge and desire as soon as I participate in it. It is the heart and secret of creation.

But I immediately discover two things that [have always tended to escape theorists on activity]: *first*, if the act results in a movement, the act [itself] resides in the decision that [a] movement [will take] place and not in its release, which ever remains an incomprehensible mystery. Moreover, movement here enjoys no privilege for I rediscover the same decision, which is only a pure consent, in all the initiatives of my consciousness, right up to the attention I pay to the worldly spectacle, without which [the world] would be nothing. One way or another there is an operation that we are free to accomplish, and one way or another a result is brought about for which [the operation] is the means rather than the cause: with respect to this result, science—considering it only from the outside [through] the representation it offers to [our] gaze—attempts to describe [a] mechanism, but [only] after [a result has been obtained]. Now it is this joining of interior and exterior, of an act that is realised within us and an effect that is achieved outside us, that we will try to resolve by the theory of participation.

But this theory finds further support in a *second* observation, [one] that often escapes those who consider the interior act as constituting the deepest essence of our being: for it is not enough to say that [the latter's] effects are exterior to it and follow [from] it yet [go beyond it in such a way that no one could] deduce them from it; it is also surpassed from within, so to speak, through the initiative [it contains], which in turn supposes a pure efficacy—ever present and available—which [our being] puts to work but with regard to which it remains secondary.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, experience of ourselves shows us that the act appropriate to us is surpassed by effects which [at once] depend on it, because [we] willed them, and do not depend on it, because they result from the universal order; and it is equally surpassed by the source upon which it draws—which we can define in itself as an eternal actuality and [in accordance with that] as the very power it actualises, which, in offering itself for [participation], reveals all the powers of the I and all the powers we see at play in the world

[The power to act strikes us as a miracle] solely because this act is both received and exerted, in such a fashion that, at the moment we think to give it being, it gives us [being].

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<sup>9</sup> Literally, am.

<sup>10</sup> The author distinguishes between the eternal act and its temporal deployment by individual beings.

ART. 3: *The word "act" should be preferred to the word "activity".*

One might ask why we use the word "act", which always seems to designate a particular and limited operation, rather than the word "activity", which designates the very power from which all acts derive. There is a fourfold rationale for this, very quickly [understandable to] all those who [grasp] the significance of our analysis.<sup>11</sup> [First,] the word "activity" is abstract while the word "act" is concrete (it is the essence of activity, which is only the generic name for particular acts). [Second,] the word "activity" only ever expresses a possibility while the word "act" expresses an accomplishment. [Third, an external perturbation is needed for the exercise of an activity while] the act is self-generated. [Fourth,] activity evokes its contrary [in] passivity but the act has no contrary, [with the consequence] that acts do not differ from one another as acts but precisely in the melange of activity and passivity to which we can reduce them.<sup>12</sup>

We see [from this] that to posit the act is not to resolve everything by a [mere] word, as someone [might] reproach us. To say that the act is the ultimate foundation of the real is to say that it is invisible because it is never shown to us and because it is only revealed to us through a work to be done, a task to be realised or a duty to be fulfilled.<sup>13</sup> [This] suffices to [put us forever above] all suspicion of idolatry.

## B) THE ACT'S EFFICACY

ART. 4: *The act should be defined as sheer efficacy: it is the supreme source of every determination and all value.*

In seeking to define the act's essence we find no better expression than this: it is pure efficacy. It is in this sense that we have been able to consider it superior and foreign to all [knowable] forms of existence, [each of which] always implies some determination, i.e. some passivity. For that [reason], even though it is invisible, [the act] is omnipresent and nothing is brought forth in the world for which it is not in some sense the realising power. Consequently, given that the

<sup>11</sup> What follows is laid out very differently in the original text. I have taken the liberty of breaking a very long sentence into a number of shorter ones.

<sup>12</sup> Curiously Lavelle does not give the argument that activity suggests a span of time, whereas an act can refer to something that is instantaneous and once-and-for-all: an eternal instant, so to speak. That is a position he will explore in *Of Time and Eternity*.

<sup>13</sup> All of which suggests that the act is revealed only by way of the object, which goes against what was said in ART. 2. The apparent vacillation continues throughout the author's writings.

act always engenders some particular effect, this effect is explained by [the act] with respect to whatever [is positive in it]; and [with respect to] the limits that circumscribe it and allow it to be defined, by nature or the circumstances of participation.

Whatever work [the act] seems to produce divides it, expresses it or renders it visible yet cannot be regarded as the end to which it leads. All joy [that is] inseparable from some possession is joy in its accomplishment, for which the possession is only a figurative image. [The act itself] therefore is confined to its own peculiar play, [which accounts for the two nearly-opposed senses of the word "play"]. For it is taken in the sense of diversion when we regard all serious activity as useful activity; but then, once utility is satisfied and all our needs are met, we can still ask: "What remains for us? Only to die?" Yet what remains for us, is this not precisely the end toward which useful activity tended and already began to sketch out and prepare? Is it not a purer activity, free of every alien occupation, self-sufficient and—in plain and strong [terms]—delighted with its own play?

We could say of the act that it is absolutely undetermined; that is true, but on the condition that we [consider] this indeterminacy [a] sign of its richness and not of its poverty; [such] indeterminacy excludes all limitation, yet [only] in order to permit all beings to create themselves through a process of participation, i.e. of limitation. We could consider [the act] as an infinite possibility, and that is in a sense legitimate with respect to finite beings who indeed will never finish actualising it. But it is only ever true at the very point where this actualisation is produced, so that from [the act's] perspective these finite beings forever dwell in a state of unachieved and imperfect powers, [in contrast to itself].

Finally, we could also say that there is a total indifference to good and evil in this infinite act [where both take] their origin: in order to attribute a value to it, we would first have to subordinate it to the good, instead of [allowing it to be itself] the principle of value. [Indifference], however, is only an appearance. Evil always comes from passivity, i.e. from a limitation of the act, which at a certain moment renounces itself, flags and allows itself to be seduced. That is the sign by which we have always recognised the intervention of the demon in the world. It also is the distinctive character of passion. We say evil is victorious over us, that we give way to it. We always have a rather clear consciousness of this weakness, this defeat, each time it occurs in us. It even happens that what [little] is left to us [in the way] of activity puts itself at [evil's] service, so to speak, and becomes its accomplice: and this we rightly call perversity. By contrast, the good is the purity of the act regained at last; and this word "purity" is itself instructive: it represents for us the originary essence of the good, i.e. that transparent and innocent activity which no selfish preoccupation [can] stop [and] which no pursuit of external advantage [or] sustained pleasure [can] soil.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The presence of the moralist is everywhere apparent in this paragraph.

*ART. 5: If the act is sheer efficacy, the effect it produces is [a] testament to it and not [an] end, for the act is its own end.*

It is pointless to ask whether the act displays an efficacious character in its own right. For we understand by “act”<sup>15</sup> this very efficacy; and in contrast to the act, the object or state [is] precisely that which, being without efficacy, testifies to it. We almost always think that efficacy is recognised by its product, so to speak. Rather, this product marks its limitation; moreover, we can say that the inefficacy in it refers us back to an efficacy without which it would not [exist]<sup>16</sup>. We will gladly concede that efficacy resides in success, but success [here] is identical with the act itself, considered as a pure operation; the effect adds nothing to it, though it must always remain present. It is the medium of activity and not its end. Through it, our always-limited initiative enters into rapport with the eternal activity<sup>17</sup> and finds in it an object that answers to it. The nature of idolatry is to consider this object as having in itself an independent and self-sufficient existence; [meanwhile] the nature of impiety is to scorn it, not to see that it is only by giving it full relief and not trying to simplify it that our personal act finds union, not only with the universe in front of it but with the very source on which it constantly depends.

The act is almost always represented as creative and its creation as subsisting outside it, so to speak: [the former] might enter into repose and disappear as soon as [the latter] had been produced. We believe, on the contrary, that the nature of the act is to create itself and to have no other goal than itself. It would be, in a sense, true to say that the created [world] is for it only the instrument it uses to act<sup>18</sup>, which is why, whatever we might say, creation ever passes away while the act is eternally reborn, i.e. it has never ceased to be.

Besides, how could there be [any] goal beyond the act itself? The goal of an act<sup>19</sup> cannot be an object in which it would come to die, but a purer and more perfect act in which, on the contrary, it would blossom. We see [the same] in the exercise of intellectual activity which seeks the truth but, instead of breaking off when it has found it, becomes contemplative, i.e. engages in an unobstructed activity that is one with its object. No one [can doubt] that the voluntary act, instead of ceasing, reaches its peak at the moment when [the objects we have

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<sup>15</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>16</sup> Literally, subsist.

<sup>17</sup> An apparent slip. Having rejected the word “activity” with respect to the highest sphere (in ART. 3), he now uses it to refer to the eternal dimension. Perhaps he means that the act appears as an ongoing activity from a temporal perspective.

<sup>18</sup> A question remains as to why a self-sufficient being is connected with an instrument or expression.

<sup>19</sup> A *human* act, I take it, since it is “an act” and since the pure act is already perfect.

turned into obstacles] disappear and when spontaneity, at first halted by reflection, coincides with it in the end.

That the act is not the operation which produces the thing—[afterwards detaching itself from it and permitting] it to subsist on its own—we [can] demonstrate by [observing] that the thing is [actual]<sup>20</sup> precisely when it [exists]<sup>21</sup>. If there is no other real being than that which is [actual], it [exists] because being is the act itself. It [exists] in and through the operation that produces it; it *is*<sup>22</sup> that operation. There is nothing real or in-itself or for-us except [through] the act that makes [it real], and when it seems to us that this reality is achieved, it has already disappeared, or at least has—in ceasing to be the aim of the act that produced it—fallen to the rank of material for a new act. A thing can *be*<sup>23</sup> only by way of the interior act that holds it in existence, [or] at least by way of that act of apprehension which gives it [the] completely humble form of existence [known as] phenomenal or existence-for-another.

Thus, all creation [takes place] along the path that separates the shared<sup>24</sup> act from the act absolute: it measures the distance that separates them, [and does so] in such a fashion that we can say of the act itself that it both creates nothing (if we mean that, in eternally begetting itself, it is entirely self-sufficient) and that it creates everything-that-is (if we mean that it offers for participation a super-abundant possibility which [participation] constantly puts to work yet will never exhaust).

We now understand without difficulty why the act, which is always exercised in the present, has itself no other efficacy than an efficacy of presence. It suffices for it to create itself: this is its eternal essence. It does not tend towards any end exterior to itself which it [might] produce by effort, so to speak. And in creating itself it creates all the rest, i.e. all its manifestations and all its effects, which always arise from the greater or lesser perfection<sup>25</sup> with which it is [engaged].<sup>26</sup>

[But] what a mistake to think that in order to act something must be added to being! In reality, if being is efficacy itself, it is sufficient [that it be laid bare] for its activity to be exercised. Whatever action we might want to add to it

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<sup>20</sup> Literally, in act. What is meant is something already realised, hence actual.

<sup>21</sup> Literally, is. Lavelle here seems to mingle a thing's existence with the act of observing it—which agrees with the findings of modern quantum physics. In neither case is it a simple product of human imagination. The thing's arising depends not on consciousness alone but on a realm of possibility residing further down.

<sup>22</sup> My italics.

<sup>23</sup> My italics.

<sup>24</sup> Or, participated.

<sup>25</sup> The French language allows for superlative degrees, i.e. for greater and lesser perfections.

<sup>26</sup> As I understand this the world arises within consciousness as the result of a more or less imperfect appropriation of the act. Effectively it is created by observers; nonetheless its ultimate source is the act. Some of Lavelle's writings (see "The World's Formation") allude to a basic stuff or matter that is *not* a product of thought. Yet even here consciousness would impart a shape and meaning consistent with its degree of participation in the act.

would appear as an impotent labour of self-love which believes itself capable of enriching what-is, [whereas] it is a question of simply discovering it.

But though the word “act” excludes time<sup>27</sup> – since it would otherwise be necessary to introduce passivity into it with respect to the past and indeterminacy into it with respect to the future – and because there is, as everyone [supposes], a necessary link between the act and actuality, [the act] does not have that character of immobility which we generally attribute to non-temporal being. Far from this, it is instead pure movement or perfect mobility, completely interior to itself and alien to every path already run or yet to be run. It is like a self-feeding flame that, without changing place, never [has] any of its parts in repose.<sup>28</sup>

*ART. 6: Since the act is origin of itself and of all that is, it is also the creator of its own reasons.*

The peculiarity of the act is to produce its own light, to bear constant witness to itself, to clarify itself with reasons, and – if we consider it in its creative essence – to call into existence and sustain by its efficacy all the things and all the beings which fill the world. Need we ask what it is, given that it is the very origin of everything-that-is, [drawing] from itself alone even that which makes it be? Need we ask its reason [for being, given that] it engenders all reasons, i.e. contains and surpasses them all? Need we ask to be shown it, [given that] it is [the] light which allows us to see everything? When we pass from the pure act to the shared act<sup>29</sup> there is a singular reversal in perspective, which in a certain sense is the key to all the problems that embarrass philosophical thinking: if the opposition of the act to being is the very condition for the play of our thinking, [then] the Absolute Act must [contain] the supreme principle for which being is the [inexhaustible] revelation; and within our consciousness the shared act must constantly seek the total presence of Being, with which, however, it never coincides.

There is a great naivety in wanting to derive Being from certain reasons that ground and justify it. For these reasons themselves can only be interior to Being. We are sure they cannot be missing from it; and since Being *is*<sup>30</sup>, it carries its own reasons within itself, it produces them in producing itself. Since there is no heterogeneity between being and intelligence – which has no other aim than to know being and is competent to realise this knowledge precisely because it

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<sup>27</sup> See Note 12.

<sup>28</sup> The author is plainly referring to one of the fragments of Heraclitus: “This kosmos, which is the same for all, was made by no god or man but was, is and always will be everliving fire, with measures kindling and going out.”

<sup>29</sup> Or, participated act.

<sup>30</sup> My italics.

[exists]<sup>31</sup> and because there is a consubstantiality between being and itself—there is nothing in being that can rightly escape [intelligence] or spurn its jurisdiction. To say that Being engenders intelligence is to say that it engenders its reasons for being. Everything-that-is must, therefore, be susceptible of being thought possible and necessary. And in the measure that there is within being a will-to-be and that the will-to-be, like the thought of being, rightly applies also to the indivisible totality of being, it introduces a value into [being] that saves it, [just] as thought introduces an intelligibility into it that explains it.

To say that the act is creator of its own reasons is to say that it perpetually offers itself to us under the aspects of intelligibility and value, which are the springs of participation and its effects. There is no act that does not have as its aim [the increase of worldly] motives to understand and to love.

In the world of participation my own being depends on my will; as for the being of the world, I can only think it: it is only an idea within me. But this will and this idea are in mutual accord, for the idea of the world would not exist without my will, which sustains it, and my will would not exist without this idea, which nourishes it. Through this will, through this idea, through their rapport, the world is continually put back into the crucible: it is [made] to provide itself with its own justification. And depending on the attitude I [take] toward it, it will appear intelligible or unreasonable, deserving of horror or admiration. Always, freedom must take [the world] in hand and, according to the part [freedom plays], it can always show itself [as] divine or demonic.

### C) CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE SELF-ACCOMPLISHING ACT

ART. 7: *The act, far from escaping consciousness, constitutes the very essence of it.*

We always [wonder] how the act could be accompanied by consciousness [since] we believe there is consciousness only of [objects]. But apart from the fact that there is consciousness of the object only through the very act that perceives it, why would we hark back to such an act—which no one avoids [doing], either those who [hold that] the world depends on a divine act, those who [hold that] representation depends on a transcendental act or those who [hold that] experience such as it is given to them depends on an act of attention—if that act did not set consciousness in motion at the moment it arises, if it did not invite us to seek in its very employment the *raison d'être* for all the effects it produces and all the [facts]<sup>32</sup> it puts before our eyes?

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<sup>31</sup> Literally, is.

<sup>32</sup> Literally, givens.

But there is more: not only does the word “act” necessarily imply consciousness, since without it we would be dealing with a blind force that hardly merited this name to any degree, but it must also be said that by way of it consciousness is constituted, i.e. [by way of] this interior initiative through which [a] person takes possession of herself<sup>33</sup> by engaging in undertakings she has chosen and for which she has assumed responsibility. The act is not, as we often believe, an operation deduced from its effects (what right would we have then to call it an act?), it is an operation we exercise in order to become what we wish to be.

We are, therefore, wrong in wanting to identify consciousness with the light that illumines an object. For it is the act that produces this light. The object [the light] enfolds is [an] object of knowledge; but consciousness is the generation of this light through the very act that makes me be. Hence, there is [nothing but] the act that we can have consciousness of, though we must affirm that whenever the act is exercised it is always inseparable from the knowledge of some object. It is the awakening of subjectivity, it remains always the hearth<sup>34</sup> of it. Far from excluding consciousness, it expresses its originary and ever-nascent purity. [To place the act outside of consciousness would be to banish from it all] intimacy, subjectivity [and] appurtenance, i.e. whatever takes its essence from act. [The act] is the initiative by which the being who makes it makes himself in thinking he makes it. It is, therefore, the source and essence of consciousness, as Descartes [saw], in contrast to all those who [hold that] only states take place in our consciousness and reject the very freedom that produces them—a tragic mystery whereby [freedom] escapes us.

The secret of the act is, therefore, to create this relation of self-with-self that is consciousness; it is the possibility — *ahead of being applied to whatever object*<sup>35</sup>, which is always a phenomenon—of making self a being which, [in] being one with this very act, is opposed to<sup>36</sup> all phenomena and precisely permits [thought of them]. Far from being opposed [to one another, the act through which I produce what I am and the act by which I produce the consciousness of what I am] are indistinguishable. Maine de Biran<sup>37</sup> perceived this fundamental truth which is the key to metaphysics; he affirmed it even more clearly than Descartes, for whom it was so obvious he did not think it could be gainsaid. The I for Biran is identical with will; and the I knows itself through that very act which makes it enter into existence. Nobody could establish any other distinction than a

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<sup>33</sup> Here again I follow the gender of the French construction, which in this case revolves around *personne*, a feminine noun.

<sup>34</sup> See Glossary of Frequently Used Terms.

<sup>35</sup> I have taken the liberty of emphasising these words because the author’s assertions with respect to consciousness are often equivocal.

<sup>36</sup> In the sense of preceding or standing across from.

<sup>37</sup> Marie-Francois-Pierre Gonthier de Biran (1766-1824), an important influence on Lavelle. He emphasised inwardness over external experience and drew attention to the role of will in bodily movements. Many regard him as a forerunner of French existentialism.

distinction [in principle]<sup>38</sup> between the will-to-be and the will-to-be-conscious, between his being conscious and his very being. The coincidence of these two wills, which is revealed again in every act of participation, is the secret of the Pure Act, which precedes the possibility of their dissociation. This [possibility] can be shown only when we contrast a being that is not ours and that surpasses our own being with a knowledge that is ours but that— [while] adding nothing to what-is—nonetheless adds to what we are. But [the possibility] cannot occur with respect to the act [that grounds] our personal being or the act [that grounds] the being of the All.

ART. 8: *Consciousness is one with the intuition of the self-accomplishing act.*

This rapport between the act and consciousness always appears obscure because we imagine that the act is posited first and that a consciousness comes [along] later [and] applies itself to [the act] from the outside in order to illumine it. But the act engenders consciousness of everything else at the same time [that it engenders consciousness] of itself.

It is odd that in taking consciousness we are most often disposed to [focus on] the object [to the exclusion of] the act that grasps it, [thereby] considering consciousness as effectively pertaining to the object but not to the act that posits it, [and this] on the pretext that we cannot make an object of this act. But apart from the fact that the word “consciousness” pertains in a privileged fashion to the light that illumines this act when we accomplish it (without which it would not be an act), and [apart from the fact] that the word “knowledge” [is] better suited to the representation of an object, it is obvious that we would never have [any] idea of that act if the world were reduced to an objective display [such as that entertained by empiricists for example]. Moreover, if we tried to turn the act into an object, the act would immediately flee us in the direction of the operation that posits this new object and permits us to grasp it. Thus, we [can] explain [why] Kant preferred to place the act beyond consciousness rather than to make it an object for consciousness. But consciousness is not knowledge, though it cannot be separated from it.<sup>39</sup> It is the internal experience of the act in its initiative and its accomplishment. That we have such an experience is [without doubt sufficiently verified by an examination] of the will. It is [there] we best grasp the act in a pure state, independently of every image. Who would venture to say that the will is known *only*<sup>40</sup> through its effects, [even] though it is always known [together] with them? Who would venture to push empiricism so far as to

<sup>38</sup> Literally, in reason.

<sup>39</sup> This strikes me as a key insight. Consciousness is not knowledge in the usual sense of the word, which seems to be concerned only with objects. Nonetheless Lavelle would agree that *something* is known within consciousness alone, and he makes that clear in what follows. See Translator’s Introduction, “Problems in Representing Consciousness and Being.”

<sup>40</sup> My italics.

maintain that [the will] can only be inferred? Yet the nature of consciousness is precisely to accompany and to interpret the initiatives of the will, which is born, bends, changes sense and succumbs in me and with me according to the options of internal consent. It is doubtless in [will] that we meet, in the most direct and liveliest manner, the essence of the act of participation, considered at once as received and assumed, as founding our own inwardness, as infinite in principle though limited in fact. And we can say that it is through their rapport with will that thought and love [in their turn] merit the name “act”: firstly because both are implicated in will, if it is true that we can only will what we think and what we love; next because, if thought gives us [a] virtual representation of a world that surpasses our will, love is a kind of appeal to the will of another—the expectation, the request and the hope that it is turned toward us, as our [will] is turned toward him, and that he [will be] our support in being as we seek to be his.<sup>41</sup>

There is nothing more beautiful, and doubtless more difficult to realise and express, than this consciousness of the self-accomplishing act which, through a sort of purity and shyness of itself, draws from darkness and nothingness all the objects to which it is applied in order to know [and] produce them, without ever becoming itself an object susceptible of taking [its] place amid all the others: in this [respect it is] like the light that envelopes everything we see [but] that is seen in turn only by a gaze that is pure enough and disinterested enough to discern in objects [all] the various ways it is reflected, refracted and divided.

Consciousness of the self-accomplishing act goes beyond time, not because it flees to a mysterious world where time no longer has [a] place but because it is exercised in a present it cannot depart. Yet this present is not a punctual present since, on the contrary, it is realised through an incessant superposition of the thought of what has just been and the thought of what is going to be. It is this exact superposition which constitutes consciousness of the self-accomplishing act. This consciousness [is the same as] existence itself, always intermediate between the two nothings of what is not yet and what is no longer, but [it] contains them within itself [as] the indivisible unity of a possibility that realises itself.

Only, if we reflect that no mental<sup>42</sup> activity is beyond consciousness and that consciousness is indistinct from its pure exercise, then we can enlarge the sense of the word “experience” to make it signify that creative experience by which we assist in producing the advent of ourselves and the world such as it is given to us.<sup>43</sup> To describe this activity will also be to explain it to ourselves.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The author regards the above faculties as closely related but distinct “powers of the I” which he treats at length in Book Three.

<sup>42</sup> Or, spiritual.

<sup>43</sup> Traditionally the word “experience” refers to whatever is encountered as an object. Lavelle wants to “enlarge” the meaning of the word so that it can refer to something given purely within the subject. Without this enlargement he cannot legitimately speak of an “experience of the act”.

<sup>44</sup> Lavelle is looking ahead to topics he will address in subsequent chapters.

This will reveal the end it pursues, the limits that restrict it, the [target] it aims at and the one it [hits], the possession it has been given [and] the convergence or divergence between what it seeks and what it obtains. In describing it as an activity of participation, inseparable from creative power and drawing upon it in a measure fitting to it, we will show that the totality of experience is formed for it and thanks to it; for our apparent passivity with respect to the given world is the presence to us of whatever in the pure act surpasses our own operation but is nonetheless evoked by and [responsive to] it. Matter then ceases to be an unintelligible term, irreducible to and heterogeneous with thinking. Likewise, the act ceases to be a transcendental condition of experience, [producing it while remaining] alien to it: it accompanies consciousness and even establishes it in its two essential traits: attention to self and mastery of self. There is no longer anything in self or behind the world<sup>45</sup>, since our thinking is coextensive with being [in] both its power and its essence, though being exceeds [thinking] in two ways: [in] the eternal act that inspires it and [in] the infinity of appearances spread before it. Finally, we see [an end to] the mystery of the correspondence between our thinking and [outward] things, since they have the same origin and since things [only] arise before thought in order to express its power and its limits: what it is capable of merely evoking (yet co-achieves) and what is for it – always and indivisibly – a product, an obstacle and a gift.

ART. 9. *When our activity is purest our consciousness is most perfect.*<sup>46</sup>

We will, above all, not allow consciousness to be identified with doubt or [mere] research. Consciousness reaches its highest point in discovery, i.e. when its operation reaches completion by coinciding exactly with its object. We will add that, in its most perfect exercise, consciousness abolishes that duality which persists within it as long as there is still [some] slackness in its activity. We know that every true act captures us entirely, the intellectual act as all others; if then self-consciousness diminishes, will we say that the [abbreviated] consciousness diminishes as well and that, under this excessive pressure, the act vanishes, as we can say of certain states of inspiration where our activity seems carried away? Will we say that it is only through insufficiency, abandon [and] lack of mastery that we cease to think of ourselves? And if consciousness ceases to be attentive to the individual and passive part of ourselves, to our states, is it not because, instead of losing itself in its object, as we believe, it is completely concentrated in the act it performs and no longer distinguishes itself from it? Hence, it is in an act that occupies us completely that we need to look for evidence in some way approaching that identification of the pure act with perfect consciousness which

<sup>45</sup> The point seems to be that there is nothing beyond thinking (or consciousness) which has access to both inward and outward spheres. But note the important qualification of the final clause.

<sup>46</sup> As noted before the French language allows superlative degrees.

is the very definition of spirit. Our consciousness, in which it seems we [can] always distinguish an interior act from the state to which it pertains, is only a participated form of [the act]: it introduces a shadow to that pure light, and it is this contrast between shadow and light that constitutes our very experience of the world.<sup>47</sup>

We are perhaps wrong to consider as secure [the] thesis that the imperfection of consciousness—its inadequacy, the presence in it of an object which is an obstacle it [vainly] seeks to assimilate—are fundamental laws of its operation, and that it is nullified in obtaining what it seeks. We have [personal] experience of certain acts of pure consciousness where self-love is silent, effort vanishes [and] the object ceases to resist us and is one with the operation that penetrates, comprehends and utilises it. There, where consciousness is always active, it is [nothing but] light. It enjoys self-sufficiency in an uninterrupted circulation where, from its own act, it creates a being [in] which the act is forever reborn. The pure act would be only a blind spontaneity or a [mere] thing, i.e. would never be an act, if it did not pursue this astonishing dialogue with self that [constitutes] its inwardness and very spirituality. What is there to say of [an] act of finite consciousness that, in its most perfect form, turns away from the object [before] it, but does not cease to nourish itself on the pure act through a double movement, both received and given back, which constitutes its proper essence?

We [tend]<sup>48</sup> to exclude consciousness from the pure act because we think [the latter] too high above it. However, it grounds, illumines and animates consciousness: it is at once the principle of self-consciousness and the principle of inter-communication between all consciousnesses. And if consciousness is always the summit of our life, how [could we imagine it being] abolished, there where only the act [remains], the summit of consciousness itself? It is in the purest and highest moments of our life, where our inner unity is most perfect, that consciousness has the most transparency: within it all objects let forth from themselves only the light that illumines them.

We can say, if we wish, that this act, which is the clarity of everything else, remains obscure to us. But this is only in the measure that it blinds us if we want to regard it as we regard an object, for the object always takes shape in that shadow-zone where our gaze seeks less the light than what halts and divides it.

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<sup>47</sup> The preceding analysis neglects moments of torpid confluence where a passive consciousness fails to distinguish itself from things and events. Here too is a coincidence of subject and object but not the one Lavelle has in mind. From what follows I gather that the latter does not exclude self-awareness but raises it to a higher pitch which leaves the everyday self behind and subsumes all objects. Certainly a lofty awareness is implied.

<sup>48</sup> Literally, want.

ART. 10: *Consciousness of the act is realised by a return to self, which leads us to an analysis of reflection.*

Someone [might] say it is hard to grasp the act in that perfect indeterminacy characteristic of the pure act. But this indeterminacy is not negative: it is in a sense the point where all determinations find their source and confluence: they have their fundament in it, and not it in them. Also, though it makes us blink, we must not forgo embracing within our depths this originary act upon which all that we think and all that we are depends, and which—though never offered to us independently of determinations—is the principle that sustains them all.

But to want to grasp it is already to grasp it, doubtless not as an initial determination, but [by way of] that will which is placed above all determinations and which gives birth to itself and reflects on itself, [seemingly in an absolutely unfruitful fashion]. It is inevitable that the mind's constitutive act appears to make of itself a kind of first object in this eternally-resumed return to self which Aristotle has defined once and for all with [the] expression "thought of thought" —without which it would not be an act and could not in some fashion be attributed to itself. In this seemingly fruitless redoubling is a limitless fecundity: for if the creation of self by self is perfectly realised only in the pure act, we ourselves can seek to obtain it only through the intermediary of the world we give ourselves [in representation] and upon which we constantly act.<sup>49</sup> Only the pure act, with [its] perfect interiority, realises perfect self-consciousness. We search for it without ever attaining it; the consciousness we have of ourselves is always imperfect; it is of-a-piece with the consciousness we have of the world; and grows with it.

This consciousness is inseparable from the exercise of our activity; but that activity is always broken into distinct actions, each a correlative of a particular form of passivity. [Each] is realised through various functions, such as understanding and will, through which I represent reality to myself or modify it, which [functions] never coincide with but oppose, sustain and complement one another, allowing me to bring into reality that original intervention through which my personality itself is constituted.

Self-consciousness is never realised without the accomplishment of some action. It endlessly oscillates between the thought of an action I have accomplished and the aim of an action I should accomplish, which [terminals] correspond rather well with the operations of intelligence and will. Thus, [perfect consciousness of the self-accomplishing act] is divided within me [owing to] a

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<sup>49</sup> This contradicts earlier arguments to the effect that there is an immediate acquaintance with the act, especially where the will is concerned. Here Lavelle appears to side with those who maintain that human knowledge is always dependent on some object. The most generous interpretation of the sentence is that, from a *practical* perspective, our immediate acquaintance with being tends to be mixed up with worldly objects so that our approach to self is normally in terms of them. In any case this is an example of the kind of equivocation referred to in note 35.

perpetual coming and going. There, where this act surpasses time, where it is sufficient to itself, independently of whatever support and whatever effect, I must reunite in the same hearth [the] two processes of retrospection and anticipation—[between] which my finite consciousness constantly oscillates and by way of which it attempts both to possess and to surpass itself. But consciousness in me extends [to] the act I am capable of accomplishing and making my own; it measures the amplitude of my participation. The unconscious is for it the non-participated. But that non-participated [remains] possible consciousness which still supports my real consciousness; and, rather than limiting it, it summons it to venture beyond its limits. It is, therefore, solely through [an analysis of] the act of reflection that we must now try to penetrate the very essence of the act, [and] at the same time, the nature of participation.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The comments form a bridge to Chapter Two, “The Reflexive [or Reflective] Act” (not included in these translations) where Lavelle focuses on the circular character of self-knowledge and participation.