

THE ACT OF BEING¹

A) THE ACT, OR THE GENESIS OF BEING

ART. 1: *The Act is one with Being considered in its proper genesis.*

In placing Being at the beginning of philosophic speculation² we have not supposed an object [situated] across from the I according to which the latter would regulate all its initiatives but an All to which the I is party. Being goes beyond the I [but] at the same time sustains it. Not a single term can be affirmed by thought [that] is not included in Being and does not constitute a determination of it. Before we begin to analyse it the same Being can appear to us, not as empty, but as indeterminate, [something] that bursts into an infinite abundance of individual differences as soon as we engage our thinking and our life in it. In contrast to all other ideas, which express no more than the possibility of an object and permit [no conclusion] with respect to its reality, the idea of being gives us [a] footing in being since there is nothing outside it, so that [the

¹ Chapter Four, contained in Part Two (“Being and Act”) of Book One (“The Pure Act”). In a footnote the author refers readers to his article “Being and Act” published in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* (“Review of Metaphysics and Morals”) published in 1936.

² The author here appends a footnote referring readers to the first volume of *The Dialectic of the Eternal Present*, namely *Of Being*.

idea of it] is there and then adequate to its object³, though this object is only material for a discursive knowledge which will never succeed in exhausting it.

Moreover, being is independent of each particular object since it can equally be affirmed of every object and since, whatever its [exact] nature, the same being is always affirmed in it. By this it shows its identity with the act, as we see in the act of thinking which also is capable of positing all objects and which, in so much as it posits them, has no more definition than being itself—than the objects define. In contrast to the object, which always has a nature or a content, being has none, which suffices to show us the immaterial and, if we like, subjective character of being, [obliging] us to identify it with the act which accordingly becomes the common source of the being we rightly attribute to each object.

The identity of being and the act delivers us from agnosticism, according to which, in positing being as outside us and as heterogenous with us, we must posit it as both unknown and unknowable. But the act renders us interior to being and coextensive with it through our own operation. Being ceases to be for us a mystery since it is indistinguishable from its own genesis and since, by engendering itself, it resolves in one stroke the problems that most deeply interest us in the world, which are problems of meaning and value: for [these] are affirmed and created by the act itself at the moment it admits to being posited. Someone will perhaps tell us that we thus transfer the mystery of being to the act: he will ask us why, if the act is the ground of being, it has no need of grounds itself. But we reply that the act is indeed the mystery of mysteries if we take it as a given object that we [might] explain by some cause external to it, but that its intelligibility comes precisely from that which, having no origin, is the eternal origin of whatever has one and thus gives interiority to whoever exercises it: the disposition and possession of himself. Being at the very root of the real it brings us so much satisfaction and light that it is absurd [for us] to seek something in the beyond, i.e. a fundament at the very foundation of all that is. Whoever follows the natural movement of his thinking always seeks an act that is the principle of what he wishes to explain; the adult does not differ from the child in this respect. But when he demands [to know] the principle of this act, the routine of intellectual mechanisms begins to [take over] in him; a little as if, after

³ Lavelle reviews his arguments (detailed in *Of Being* and *The Total Presence*) in favour of the proposition that the idea of Being is adequate to Being. Reference to an “object” might seem puzzling in this context since Lavelle has already denied objectivity to Being. By my reading the object in question is whatever the idea of being might be *applied to*, i.e.. of a particular nature, such as the being of a rose or that of a brick. In this sense the idea of being is not only adequate to its object, it is much more than adequate since it applies across the board to every possible object. At the same time it might be argued that the idea of being is wholly inapplicable to objects *as objects* since they lack all interiority, primordially and universality. In spite of such difficulties I believe it is possible to follow the author’s meaning. It must be allowed that he is straddling two realms, simultaneously trying to join them while distinguishing between them. For a fuller discussion of this topic see the Translator’s Introduction.

having discovered the light that illumines all that exists in the world, we were to ask what light illumines this light.

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

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

The passage from nothingness into being, or from nothing to all, which is the mystery of creation and the ambition of every explanation, can only be realised by the act, that is to say, by freedom. Not that there are here two distinct terms, nothingness and being, between which the act might establish a transition. Since nothingness is not and being never ceases to be, [being] never begins. We oppose these two terms in the abstract in order to describe the nature of the act. In reality they are as two end-points of participation's working, by way of which we endlessly pass from one form of existence to another: the first [is] thus a relative nothing with respect to the second, but the one and the other are only forms that participation makes appear at the heart of condition-less being, which excludes nothingness [and] does not spring from it.⁴ And the [temporal span] in which these forms succeed each other, which is the condition of their possibility, is itself inscribed in being and possesses no generating virtue. [Time] is, we might say, both derivative and infinite. Its derivation [gives us to know] that instead of being the primary condition without which the act could not be exercised, it is engendered by the act at the moment it is [engaged]. Its infinity expresses the eternity of the act, which ever finds its beginning within itself. The act is not [set into motion] at any moment in time but [sets into motion] within itself the products of participation at every moment. It is one with the passage from nothing to everything that never ceases to be accomplished in the absolute and that, in the relative [sphere], is expressed by the indefinite passage from one form to another, i.e. by the uninterrupted cycle of births. Here is the element of truth found in pantheism; but in such a doctrine the act that founds all particular existences is one with them; in itself it is indistinguishable from pure nothingness.

The peculiarity of the act is that of never [being susceptible of] being taken as a given [datum]; it is that of being the origin and genesis of things, of being indistinct from the principle that produces them. [That] is the reason the act is

⁴ Strictly speaking the sense of something-from-nothing applies only to the human perspective.

often presented as having a negative character with respect to being; but that is because being is confounded with the given [world]. This negative character is mainly insisted upon by those who want the constitutive process of the mind to be a process of refusal, and who put methodical doubt above the *cogito*⁵. But the act denies finished being only in order to affirm that it is the agent which creates it. And doubtless it would be possible to construct on this affirmation the entire doctrine of the act which, precisely because it is always a passage from nothingness into being, must be impossible to grasp other than in its very accomplishment, [must] endlessly (in its triple form of thought, will and love) fall back on its origin, and [must] situate itself forever beyond the world before our eyes in order to affirm itself as being the interior creative principle.

The thought of nothingness is contradictory since this thought that posits it is itself a being. But if it is absurd to imagine that we could posit nothingness in an absolute fashion, we can at least posit the nothingness of our individual being and, for instance, represent to ourselves a world in which we would be absent, like the world that preceded our birth and will follow our death. The thinking in which I participate is a thinking that goes beyond me, that carries universality within it and through which I can think of myself as a present or absent object without [the thinking] undergoing any alteration, save in the operation by which I participate in it. The thought of nothingness, therefore, makes sense only in relation to me. It gives me the liveliest consciousness of that original act of will which at each instant obliges me to insert myself in being and consequently tears me from my own nothingness through a step that depends on me alone to accomplish. My will always leaves me suspended between nothingness and being, and it is, as we have noted, the thought of a nothingness from which I am ever emerging—and into which I am always in danger of falling back—which gives me this agony that is inseparable from life and from which it is the role of activity to deliver me. But it is enough that this thought of nothingness begins to make me flourish so that the world that greets me—though I can banish myself from it—appears suddenly full of beauty, hope and light.

B) THE ACT OF BEING

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

It should not be astonishing that we consider the person as expressing the deepest essence of being, i.e. the character which [decrees] that being [exists]⁶ by way of its very own act. In saying that it is act we do not diminish being and we

⁵ A reference to Descartes.

⁶ Literally, is.

do not even determine it according to one of its properties: we uncover its roots so to speak. And that would immediately [be apparent] if we reflected that when I posit being here or there it is understood that it is not being only with respect to me (otherwise it would be nothing but a phenomena for me) but, rather, that it is [being] with respect to the power I attribute to it of saying “I am.” It is therefore striking that I can consider the word *being* as a substantive only because it is first a “verb”, and a verb that is the union of active and passive [modes];⁷ it is [only] because I posit my being that I [can] posit another being; but to posit it as being is to suppose that it is capable of positing itself.

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

The insufficiency of the act that makes me be, the limitation of each of my actions, are correlatives of a passivity to which I remain always associated and from which I forever seek to free myself. But this very passivity attests to an activity that is [instigated] elsewhere⁸ and to which I am obliged to submit. And passivity and activity are so inseparable, indeed so indiscernible, in my being that the being I receive, instead of contradicting the being I propose, is one with it; it responds to it and even strikes me [as something] I propose, thereby imitating – thanks to the laws of participation – this act without passivity and limitation which, in positing itself, posits the whole of being in the very same stroke. We clearly see, therefore, that in its truest significance being is confounded with the act of being; and I find it present in myself both in the measure that I accomplish it and in the measure that I depend on it.

⁷ The same situation exists in English where “being” can function as either a noun or a verb.

⁸ Ultimately from the Act.

All the difficulties bearing on the word “being” stem from that which is taken in three different but inseparable senses.

First, there is the *notion of being*, the only [notion] that is plainly universal, since no term can be proposed that is not contained in it. It cannot however be considered void [or] abstract since it can be enriched (in order to obtain its particular determinations) only by dividing it rather than adding to it, and since the word “being” only ever represents a concrete and individual reality, whether it is a question of the entire universe or of such and such object in the midst of others.

Second, the notion of being, therefore, cannot rightly be separated from the *fact of being*. Now being is always such and such, in such a time and such a place. So the universality of the notion finds expression only in the exigency for every being to be just what it is [in every characteristic], i.e. in the universal fact of being always an individual.

Third, the notion of being was [at first] purely thought: it found its expression in the fact of being which is ever a fact of experience. But all experience is that of an object exterior to us.⁹ Yet the peculiarity of being is to be “for self” and not “for another”: my being cannot be affirmed by another, it can be [affirmed] only by me; which is to say that I can receive no being without at the same time giving it to myself. Thus the fact of being is nothing if it is not for an outside observer the testimony of the *act of being* which alone permits us to grasp being in its essence and at its root.

We will then easily understand that this act of being, precisely because it is in us only participated, puts us in the presence of the fact of being that always overflows it; and that the universality we ought to attribute to it is only ever that of its notion.

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

It is difficult to avoid considering being as anterior to the act, without which the act could not be posited. Just as substance is considered – no doubt, wrongly – as the foundation of qualities, so too we make being an agent different from the acts it accomplishes: either they express its nature or add to it. But [what is] this agent before starting to act? If, by logical implication, its acts are already contained in it, they are acts only in appearance and become such only from the perspective of time. If they have a novel character, what is their link with the being which produces them? They are that by which this being is surpassed, an *élan* for which we do not know how being can provide any support.

⁹ I take it the author is addressing past philosophers who equated being with the “fact of being”, i.e. the appearance of things. For *them* all experience is that of an external object. In a roundabout fashion Lavelle is refuting the view that being somehow resides “out there”.

If being is not a mere name one will exhaust oneself searching for what it could be if not the very act that makes it be, i.e. an act that coincides with its very being. But we¹⁰ believe that the same being can accomplish a plurality of acts, as if the unity of being were not always on the contrary [an] effect of the unity of the act that posits it. We also believe that every act has a particular end, as if that end were not the terminus where the act settles and breaks off, as if the act were not to itself its own beginning and end. But it is a very grave bias to regard the act as an effect of a reality that we might posit as, above all, busy. For if, in saying that it is busy, we do not trace it back to the act, we establish between it and the act a rapport similar to that between cause and effect, which always tends to become a logical or mechanical link between these two terms. Yet the act that grounds every link is not itself subordinate to any of them. We seek a principle on which it depends [or] an object it is capable of producing only [then] when we lack the force to raise [the thought of it] to the indivisible simplicity of its perfectly pure exercise.

Thus it happens by a sort of unforeseen twist that those who consider being as abstract criticise the act for being suspended in [a] void if being is not [already] there to uphold it. But being must be one with the act: for if I do not wish [to regard] being as an object (i.e. an image, an appearance or a spectacle), if it is wholly [a matter of] inwardness [and] initiative, i.e. both “in-itself” and cause of [it]self, it is by [recourse to] the word “act” that I must define it. Thus we are not limited to saying, [reasoning from] the universality of being, that the act necessarily *is*¹¹: we are introducing a much more profound connection between being and the act. The word “being” has so full and beautiful a meaning, it so completely dispels the opaque veil that subjectivism and phenomenism interpose between the real and ourselves, it gives our life so much gravity and simplicity, so firm a seat in the absolute, that we must not renounce it the moment we discover the interior act through which it is realised. And the word “act” must not seem to confer on the workings of the finite I a sort of pre-eminence with respect to the total being that founds its possibility and in which [it is allowed] to take part. [Rather] this total being can only be regarded as an act without limit, i.e. without passivity.

We sometimes think that being is to the act as an inert thing is to a creative stroke¹². But this stroke is only a movement, i.e. an image of the act, and not the act itself. And if we say of the act, properly so-called, that it is immobile, this [does not imply] a petrified movement but the principle that animates all possible movements. In fact language always contrasts being with the thing [and] never confuses them. When we say that our concern is with a being, it is to emphasise that it is not an object or a simple appearance in front of us but an

¹⁰ A deluded “we” is in question, not the authorial “we”. The author’s view is given in the final clauses of this and the next sentences.

¹¹ My italics.

¹² Literally, gesture or act.

individual¹³ [possessing] a peculiar intimacy, an original activity that is a hearth of initiative which takes responsibility for itself. When we say ["Being" instead of "a being"] how could we [subtract from the former] the traits that comprise the originality of each being—though each realises them only in an imperfect fashion? [Rather they are drawn] from the Being in which they participate: no one can seriously believe that this Total Being is an immense thing or an abstract name. On the contrary, there is nothing in [Being] but [that which is] in a pure state, [nothing other than] all the traits we find again [sketched out] in every particular being, which allow [the being] to be distinguished, be it from the body to which he is linked [or] from the things that threaten to enslave him. And for that [reason] we give Being the name "God", or conversely we believe that only God merits the name of Being absolutely, i.e. without any determination.

Versus this assimilation we have established between being and the act, we doubtless [raise the spectre of] the formula "*operatio sequitur esse*"¹⁴. But what we would precisely like to show is that the operation is not a sequel to being, that it would have to be put in place ahead of [a sequel] for [a sequel] to be possible; rather, it is the essence of being, the interior process by which it *is*¹⁵ at the same time that it creates itself. Also we can say both that being is nothing more than operation, i.e. efficacy, and that [it] is one with the act of being.

ART. 5. *The act is itself without support and without effect.*

It always seems we could not think of the act in isolation. We always want it to be the expression, the mode, the manifestation, the operation or the effect of a subject that [precedes it] and could do without it. But no one can say what would become of the subject when it does not act, or how it could overcome its inertia, or [what might constitute] the difference between its being and its operation at the moment it acts. For this support¹⁶ is for us only a thing, and by affirming that the act must be carried by the thing, we let it be known that, on the one hand, we attribute the greatest reality to the thing (even though it is only a phenomenon for an [indwelling] subject who thinks of it as [something] outside himself albeit in rapport with him) [and] on the other hand, we know [the thing] better than the act, even though [the former] is exterior to us and up to a certain point impermeable—whereas in the act we accomplish there is nothing but our own inwardness and indeed the measure of all we can know of the world, if it is true that we can only know what we do.

¹³ For Lavelle all genuine beings are personal, even though being itself can also be considered a principle or an act. The problem is neatly handled by French pronouns which may ambiguously refer to a "him" or a "her" and an "it". But it is not neatly handled in English translation, as will be seen in what follows. In general I prefer uniform neuter pronouns but in this case they tend to sabotage the point Lavelle is making.

¹⁴ "Operation follows being."

¹⁵ My italics.

¹⁶ That of a constant subject whose being precedes acting.

In [the] assertion that the act has need of a prop there is even a curious reversal of the real connections between exteriority and interiority. For we only speak like this because we [consider] this support as possessing true interiority – [that] of essence – while the act [requires] essence to go out of itself in order to enter into rapport with the outside. But we know that, on the contrary, there is an act only at the moment it is performed [and that it] is wholly interior to self; it constitutes the very reality of essence, and to wish to refer the act to a support [other than itself] is to base interiority on exteriority, which is the pretension not of metaphysics but of materialism.

Just as the act has no support, it has no effect. For effects limit it and show us neither its power nor its efficacy but the point where it stops or comes to die, so to speak. In every effect the act has become a thing. It is cut off from me in order to make itself visible to the eyes of another, and [indeed] to my own eyes.

But in the measure that the act becomes perfect, every distinction between it and its effects is abolished, as we see in [the case of] pure thought or pure love.¹⁷ Effects [are] there only as testimonies, [needed only so long as the act remains imperfect]. In the measure that it is simpler and barer, they cease to be necessary: they could only divide and corrupt it. They rush to its aid only when its frailty [requires support], when it needs to give itself proofs and to call upon [external] things to justify it. There are no beings in the world who are so alack that an act of pure presence to themselves, to another being or to God has never revealed a plenitude or an efficacy infinitely greater than all words and gestures [can express]. Then expression subtracts rather than augments. It always breaks off when the act [approaches] its peak. So the very movements by which it expresses itself measure its insufficiency, as we observe in the role played by effort¹⁸ and in the way [such movements] supply what is missing from the act as soon as the latter starts to weaken.

The impossibility of our grasping the act other than by exercising it and the tendency of knowledge to objectify everything lead us to consider the act as the relation between the [productive] agent and the effect that results from it. But the agent is not anterior to the act since the act makes it an agent and since we [cannot imagine] how the act could proceed from [something] alien to the act itself, i.e. how it could not engender itself. From another [perspective], we always regard [the act] as expressing itself through an effect, forgetting that this effect (which is exterior to it) is nothing more than its sequel or trace in the world of things and that [this trace] dissimulates more than manifests [the act]: it expresses what is not fully act in everything we do, [i.e.] whatever passivity is mingled with the act, which we take as a testimony of its fecundity.

¹⁷ The author often speaks of a possible collapse of the distinction between subject and object, and between cause and effect.

¹⁸ In other words the act in itself is effort-free. The experience of effort is external to the act and marks a falling-away from it.

[This] is doubly to diminish the value of the act of will [in that] it is subordinated to both the agent that produces it and the end it realises; whereas it is through [the act of will] that the agent becomes agent and whereas the end toward which it tends is nothing more than its phenomenon. However we easily understand that, in participation, we [can] always distinguish between the principle of the act and its end, since this principle resides precisely in an act that goes beyond us (though it penetrates us in some fashion) and since this end is a testament to both our temporal existence and the connection established (for participation to be possible) between an operation I accomplish and a given that responds to it.

We [cannot] over-insist on the impossibility of considering the act as an accidental determination of a subject that, possessing an immobile essence in advance of acting, thereby might furnish the act with a kind of fulcrum. Things only seem that way when we are dealing with multiple, different and interrupted actions that always appear associated with some passivity in which the totality of the I dwells obscurely present despite opportunities for participation. We know very well however that it is not on the side of this passivity that we look for the veritable subject but on the side of the act, whose [engagement] is nevertheless so erratic and precarious. It is only when this act is produced that we begin to say "I".¹⁹

Consequently, when we have to do with an act that is purely act and alien to all limitation and passivity, [where] is the [alleged] prop? There is no room here to suppose an agent anterior to the very act that would contain its possibility. On the contrary the act makes the agent. It comprises the self and the efflux²⁰. So we can here verify how, in breaking the continuity of the Act, every passive determination [brings] with it an element of exteriority which, even if I re-attach it to my own I, obliges me to separate what I am from what appertains to me. I therefore do not have to establish afterwards a unity among the acts I accomplish since their diversity finds a place in my consciousness only by way of my passivity, e.g. my weakness.

¹⁹ From these comments I gather that a very specific experience is in question, that it is only irregularly and fleetingly achieved and that it yields a distinctive sense of self.

²⁰ In the sense of what is worn-out and expelled, like exhaust.

B) IDENTITY OF AND DISTINCTION BETWEEN BEING AND THE ACT

ART. 6: *The identity of being and the act renders being [subject to participation]*²¹.

To posit being as a first term to which all others are party, [and on which they depend], is still only a defence against the attitude of sceptics and agnostics who want to deny thought and life their connection with the absolute, i.e. their seriousness and gravity. But straight-away [arises] this question: What is this being within which I posit myself? Will I say that I can posit it only by [defining] it, by contrasting its various aspects with one another?²² But how [is it] that [it contains] aspects that differ? After having affirmed its universality, its univocity, which we discerned throughout all these very differences, will we be embarrassed by our victory? How [can] we explain [the appearance of] these differences? Is there not a feature in being that, in opposing itself so to speak, permits us to engender the infinite multitude of its forms? Now we propose to show: that being reveals its peculiar intimacy to us in the act; that we [cannot] reproach the act (as we do being) for being a purely abstract designation common to everything that is; that this act is justified by [its own self-positing]; and that in describing the conditions of its exercise we are obliged to retrace all the limitations and determinations that constitute for us the richness of the world, all the continually-offered forms of participation through which living beings, all thinking beings, continually constitute their nature and destiny.

The unity of being does not permit us to resolve the problem of participation. For if there is an absolute break between nothingness and being, if we [cannot] pass from one to the other, and if nothingness is a contradictory notion, [namely that of] an existing thought of a non-existence, then there are no degrees of Being, and participation seems impossible to comprehend.²³ By contrast, where the Act is concerned, there is no difficulty in admitting that it remains always the same Act and that, without dividing itself, it furnishes each particular being with all the efficacy and power it needs to become what it is.²⁴

²¹ Literally, participable.

²² By working out its various logical ramifications, i.e. the relationships among appearances.

²³ Lavelle concedes that if Being is absolutely uniform and without degrees there seems to be no way to explain the existence of different beings or the appearance of various forms.

²⁴ The author proposes to show how the problem of unity and difference can be resolved by contrasting Being and the Act. Though these two name the same truth they also diverge. While Being has no legitimate converse and can only be conceived as a unity, the Act immediately suggests a possible converse in passivity. Also, while Being allows of no degrees or differences the Act naturally evokes a multitude of acting beings to which it confers "efficacy and power". However questions arise as to whether the Pure Act can logically contain any seeds of passivity and whether the notion of the Act really does naturally lead to the prospect of many actors. Some of the arguments seem to work backwards from a multitude of actors already in existence to an act that must ground their possibility, whereas what is ideally wanted is an insight

For the reverse of activity is not nothingness but passivity: yet the passivity which is in us is always activity in some other [being] such that the various degrees of participated activity, instead of shattering the unity of the Pure Act, presuppose it and testify to it.

As Descartes asked after being revealed to himself as a thinking being: “Who am I—I who think?” so too we enquire what is this being which we can do no more than posit and which can be posited by us only because it posits itself and because it thereby gives us the power to posit ourselves and [it as well]. But [just] as Descartes replied that this being who thinks is also a being whose total essence is to think, we too see that it is [precisely] the most profound character of being that we need to examine now in asserting that it is the sheer power of positing itself. And the difficulty we encounter here [is] the same as that which is at the bottom of [Cartesian philosophy]. For if Descartes, after having said “I think therefore I am”, is compelled to find why there are particular thoughts, so we too need to show how this act, in order to posit itself, breaks its own unity so to speak and seems to explode into particular actions which—taking on a passive character with respect to each other—somehow introduce to the act an [internal] opposition to itself that can be compared to [the opposition] we have [always] recognised between being and its appearance.

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

There is [in] being and the act a common trait: neither can be demonstrated; we can only grasp them in an experience. But the being in which I participate is one with the act I accomplish. Consequently, if we ask [how] we can designate [the totality of] the real [with the two names] “Being” and “Act” without [thereby] equating them, it is necessary to reply that this opposition and this identity appear precisely as inseparable from the participation through which my life is constituted and of which they are the conditions. Being is not before me as an immovable object I try to reach. It is within me by way of the operation which [demands] that I give myself [being] and which, by permitting me to penetrate it, obliges me to think of the totality of the real as a possible object of participation. Participation therefore obliges me to admit that there is at once homogeneity and heterogeneity, not only between the participating and the participated but also between the participated and the participable.²⁵ Most [people] are disposed to call Being the totality of the participable. Then the act would be destined only to sustain and explain the participated. But this act, in

into the ground of multiplicity within the Act itself. Even if it were supplied there would remain an unexplained difference between the potentially multiple Act and the always-singular Being.

²⁵ As I read the sentence “the participating” refers to the one who participates, “the participated” to that in which one participates and “the participable” to that in which one has not yet participated

rendering it participated, precisely reveals to us the essence of the participable. So we can now regard it as being, or regard the participable as a limitless act. The opposition between a being that goes beyond us and an act that belongs only to us was necessary to make participation possible; but it justifies their identification from the moment we see that the act that gives us our being, in place of being exterior to being, is on the contrary interior to it and allows us to penetrate it.

[It will not be astonishing] therefore that there [are two kinds of] priority: [that] of being with respect to the act and [that] of the act with respect to being, which suffices to prove their reciprocity and their fundamental identity. From one [perspective] it seems that the act presupposes being, if we have begun by positing being as universal; then the act would be a modality of it. But inversely the act seems to be the source of being, which, as soon as the two terms are distinguished, takes on a static character and seems capable of being – apart from the moment we put the categories into play – only an effect and not a cause. If we grasp the act first in ourselves, [this] path leads us to being, as we see in idealism, and if it is the limitation [of our act] that strikes us, then it seems to depend on the Total Being, where it has its inception, as we see in ontology. If we consider ourselves as finite being[s] rather than as an act that accomplishes itself, then we think [we] depend on a creative act, so that with respect to the All, Being sometimes has priority (if we see it as the support of our act) and the Act sometimes has priority (if we see [it as] the creator of our being).

Just as Plato in *The Sophist* is disturbed that the same [thing] can be called “being” and “[the] one” so that it then seems to cease to be one [and] to become two, we are also disturbed that the same [thing] can be called by turns “being” and “act”, as if in saying that it is act we in a single stroke cast from being all that the act is precisely charged to produce. But just as being and the one differ only in accordance with the perspective from which we consider them, and [just as] the one is the seizure of being, so too the act is neither anterior to nor heterogeneous with being: it is the operation by which being eternally establishes itself. And [while] they coincide in the absolute, we have been led to distinguish one from the other solely because, with respect to finite consciousness, there is only a complex correspondence between the being it is given and the act it accomplishes.

Thus is confirmed the thesis that the act is nothing more than being in so far as it produces itself or in so far as it expresses its self-sufficiency.

ART. 8: *We are interior to Being only through the act that permits us to cooperate with it.*²⁶

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

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

There is no other inside than the act by which, through consenting to be, I create my own being and inscribe within the totality of being a mark that eternally endures. Every object of thought is a realised act. Every state of sensibility is the reverberation of an act inside a consciousness that becomes receptive to it. In the act alone all distinction between subject and object is necessarily abolished. There is nothing in it that we can see or feel. It is [lost in] its pure exercise. It is [nothing but] initiative and a first beginning, at once being and a reason for being. Within it is solely what is ours: of all the things in the world it is the only one free of exteriority. [It is] the most personal [thing] that is, and [it] can never be [anything] but personal.

²⁶ I see this section as the practical heart of the chapter.

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

Someone will say that there is a contradiction between being and the act. For the act is the disposition of the possible. It is essentially malleable and can be turned in every direction. By contrast, being seems almost always to be confused with resistance. And we might even say that being appears all the more full as resistance [increases]. Among things, visual representations have less reality to us than tactile representations because the latter offer a more solid barrier to the body's movements. Also, visual impressions participate in being only in the measure that, when present, they do not lend themselves to the modifications of our fantasy as [do] the representations of imagination. For that [same reason] ideas which appear to depend directly on the activity of thought have only a virtual existence to most people. If, on the contrary, we discover in them an essential immutability, if like Malebranche²⁷ we recognise that the peculiarity of a true idea is to resist me, to render vain all the efforts I could [make] to modify it, [then] the idea is immediately indistinguishable from being itself, and sensible becoming²⁸ is blurred and escapes us like a dream. Finally, if we [shift] attention to Value and the Good as soon as consciousness [realises] it receives them; if these notions are imposed on us in spite of ourselves; if we cannot change them at will; if we are compelled to want them and to love them as soon as we glimpse them; if, far from being forever uncertain, these are the criteria [by which] we judge our actions; and if we are uncertain only in knowing whether our actions can conform to them – then we are inclined to think that what we formerly called “being” was [no more than] pure appearance and that genuine Being is now one with this Value, with this Good – which appearance imitates, though always in an imperfect fashion. And we will say that [appearance] participates in Being to the degree that it participates in the Good, which thus becomes the living essence of all that is.

But this last remark merits [pause]. For to say that Being is what resists us is to say that it is an obstacle [opposing] us. Now it is true indeed that being always seems exterior to us, as if its role were to limit and bring a halt to the élan of individual consciousness. But where might this élan lead to? By itself it is pure indeterminacy; and with respect to us this indeterminacy is only a sign of our weakness and impotence. It asks never to end. It is a troublesome sign that abandons itself and takes pleasure in doing so. For it is the mark of an internal void we are incapable of filling by ourselves. Looking, thinking, willing – [all] need [an] object in order to ground themselves, i.e. in order to be: until then they are [no more than] sheer virtualities. The object weds their form so to speak and [supplies] precisely what they lack. Also, far from [taking] being as the converse

²⁷ Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715), a major thinker in the Cartesian school and another key influence in Lavelle's philosophy.

²⁸ The world of change.

of the act, as [something] outside it [that] resists it, we need to regard it as equal in perfection to the act: to what realises it, to what achieves it. Precisely because it is achieved it becomes impossible for us to change, as we note in [the case of] the visual object which, [while] present, fills the gaze, and instead of leaving it unsatisfied supplies it with more than it can encompass; [or] in the intelligible object that abolishes every hypothesis and finally grants the intellect its play; [or] lastly in the Good that is the object of pure will and that, far from limiting it, is intermingled with its full operation. Thus we could indeed oppose the act to being, in the abstract, by considering the first as an undetermined power and the second a fixed reality that forms an obstacle which paralyses it. But then the act [would be] merely possible and not real, and being [would be] regarded as exterior to a subject and not interior to itself: if the act begins to accomplish itself and if being interiorises itself, then they approach each other [and] their deep identity is revealed to us. The indeterminacy of the act is abolished: and being, instead of being an obstacle to it, expresses nothing more than its accomplishment and, so to speak, the possession it has of itself.

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

There is between the act and being an apparent contradiction that shows their fundamental identity.²⁹ For the peculiarity of being is never to begin and the peculiarity of the act is [to be] forever [beginning]. But in coming together these two precisely define eternity. Which shows us: that the act and being both outstrip time; that in this very outstripping the past and the future begin to converge, so to speak; that [the latter] are opposed to each other only when the act and being are newly set against each other, i.e. are no longer taken in their totality; and that each of them calls to the other for help in providing what is missing in it.

²⁹ The statement should perhaps be considered in the light of the essential relatedness of opposing terms and of their subsumption in a more original third term, i.e. “eternity”, as Lavelle spells out in Part B of “Freedom and the Interval”.