

THE SELF-CAUSED ACT¹

A) THE ETERNAL FIRST BEGINNING

ART. 1: *The act is an eternal first beginning.*

Whereas everything-that-is must be grounded, only the act grounds itself. Thinking naturally seeks, beneath the fluid forms of being which cannot satisfy it, a first term that supports them: [this] has given birth to all the [various] theories on substance, and perhaps to all the difficulties of metaphysics as well, since we obviously have no means of reaching this term which is placed in another world from the one [we live in] and [therefore] can only be the object of an unverifiable hypothesis. And [the question can always be asked]: What [is the point] of asserting this unknowable, unitary substance whose relation to phenomena [can] never be grasped? The first term is *not*² this contradictory object – which would have to be given [but] can never be [given]; it is the act that is ever the origin of itself and all the rest, that makes us assist³ in the genesis of possible objects at the very moment we accomplish it, and that is the sole reality that can be known through an intuition, since it is anterior to the distinction between knowing and the known, and necessary for grounding this distinction itself. We therefore apprehend the first term in a true experience: [namely,] that

¹ Chapter Seven, contained in Part Three (“The Self Absolute”) of Book One (“The Pure Act”). The phrase “self-caused” in the chapter’s title translates “*cause de soi*” which is literally “cause of self”.

² My italics.

³ As noted before the French word also conveys the sense of witnessing or being present to something.

perpetual renaissance within us—in every internal act—of a Being we always recognise, whose very essence is to be eternally reborn.

This suffices to show that the first term is the act and that, if it does not refer to the act, it is merely a bastard concept: that of substance [as] a [frozen] act, [with] substance borrowing its permanence from the act and its objectivity from phenomena, so to speak.

Thus, where participation takes rise, I am at the point where everything—that-is [has] its source and first beginning. The initial experience is, therefore, the experience of the first term upon which all others depend: it is [the experience] of participation—at once continuous and eternal—whose reflection determines the conditions of possibility [and] whose employment permits all beings to create and enrich themselves indefinitely.

The nature of the act is, as we have seen, to be distinguished less by the effects deriving from it than by its character of initiative: it is the [sought-for] first term, the beginning of itself and all-that-is. It is [also] noteworthy that the word “act” is always employed by us to designate an origin; but it is even more the origin of self than the origin of being, and for that [reason] we need to consider it as being *itself*⁴ rather than to seek being in its product, which is in relation to it only ever a phenomenon or a testimony. Yet to say that the first term is less what posits everything else than what posits itself is to say that it eternally is. And to say that it excludes all exteriority already suffices to warrant that it can only be a first beginning, or that it has always been, or that is eternally born from nothing.

If being is act we understand without difficulty that the world begins at each instant, for the act entails an exercise [that is] always current. It can be deduced neither from an anterior act—which would be distinguished from it purely by its limit and point of application, i.e. by the passivity with which it is mixed—nor from a state, which cannot serve as its origin since [the state] marks, rather, [a] fall from it, which is not [an] extension [of the act] but [a] rupture [with it]. We can say that the act is the cause of [it]self and of all-that-is because it amounts to the Absolute Efficacy in which every initiative [with] the least relative efficacy participates.

ART. 2: *The reflexive circle*⁵ is witness to the absolute primacy of the act.

Just as the assumption of being necessarily excludes non-being in the realm of logic, and [just as] the affirmation of the All necessarily excludes any external term from which it might be derived, similarly in the realm of metaphysics, the act we are now examining, the origin of all-that-is, is necessarily

⁴ My emphasis.

⁵ Reference to an image (i.e. of something circling round to meet itself) explored in Chapter Two: “The Reflective [or Reflexive] Act”—not included in this collection. Here the image is employed specifically with respect to an act that is its own cause.

its own origin. For whence could it be derived but another act that would suppose it and for which it would be, so to speak, the specification?

[This] obliges us to [return to] the circle which is characteristic of all that is first and which led us to recognise that the idea of being is adequate to being precisely because it is inseparable from the being of this idea⁶, and that the act is act only because it produces in reflection the consciousness it has of itself.⁷

The idea of this circle is the fundament of being's eternity as well as its incessant movement⁸, which constitutes the true significance of both platonic recollection and [the] affirmation (perhaps at the core of all religions) that spiritual life always consists of rebirth and resurrection. For only through reflection can we take possession of what is within us and our place in being, the peculiarity of reflection being to create that inward disposition through which we will what we are.

The circle with which we identify the first term explains why the Pure Act and participation are inseparable. In defining the act as creative we unquestionably mean, above all, that it is creative of itself rather than of the world; yet [in being] completely interior to [it]self, it is no more than [the] gift of self and [a] perfect generosity: there is nothing in it that can be held as an object capable of being possessed. Wherever it acts, i.e. in the infinite sphere of its efficacy, it is always offered for participation to a possible liberty⁹. Nature gathers in itself all the conditions for the possibility of this participation: it can happen that they remain unemployed. [Yet] freedom¹⁰ can never be constrained. [And] as soon as it exerts itself, this liberty is a return toward its source, i.e. toward [the] act that has allowed it to be born and that it¹¹ seeks to realise within itself in a more and more perfect fashion. The secret of the world, the principle of all intelligibility and joy, consists in the admirable and eternal circuit through which the pure act is given for participation to all beings so that they [can]

⁶ See the Foreword of *The Total Presence*. But practically the "idea of being" as Lavelle speaks of it can be no more than being's immediate presence. In that case there is no circle but a point, i.e. a simple identity. The question is whether the word "idea" is wanted at all save to convey that being is known.

⁷ Of course "reflection" suggests duality, as if the consciousness in question took itself as an object. Yet strictly speaking the act can never be an object, as the author affirms below. Whatever possession or knowledge pertains to it must be wholly in the subject, in accordance with ARTICLES 7 and 8 of "The Experience of the Act." I assume therefore that "reflection" here refers to an act of introspection on the part of a finite being: a letting-go of the outside (i.e. of objects) and a return to the intimacy and immediacy of the inside. Of this circling-back movement Chapter Two "The Reflective [or Reflexive] Act" says: "And there is in reflection, at the very moment it is exercised, a constant resumption of self, which is not, as we believe, the knowledge of our activity's effects . . . but the consciousness of this activity itself in its constitutive operation, which obliges us to experience and possess it."

⁸ Surely the circle motif is better suited to time and movement than to eternity; unless "eternity" here means infinite time rather than timelessness. Only with reference to what might be called "the Greater Act"—the Act *together with* its temporal counterpart in participation—does the circle-idea make full sense.

⁹ I take the word "liberties" in Lavelle's works as virtually a synonym for free human beings.

¹⁰ To accentuate a distinction (not explicit in the author's manuscript) I have used, and will continue to use, the word "liberty" in reference to free beings and "freedom" in reference to the principle, state or ideal. The French text uses the word *liberté* in all cases.

¹¹ Here *liberté* shifts in the direction of the free individual.

consent to make it living within themselves. It asks us to take it [as an] end purely so that [it can] become the source of ourselves. The ideal toward which our enthusiasm tends, [there] ahead of us, is the very [ideal] to which this enthusiasm is [attached], [there] behind [us]. The analysis of participation suffices to show that the peculiarity of the act is to be a circle that closes on itself, in which the total being is continually offered for participation precisely to receive into itself all those beings that give themselves being by putting into play a possibility it has proposed to them—yet up to the very end they retain the freedom not to realise [it]. It is this eternal circle which makes the universe a vast wheel that endlessly advances [through] time (if we consider the career of all creatures) and forever turns on itself (if we consider the movement that animates the whole).

B) ABSOLUTE ACTUALITY

ART. 3: The act has no origin in time because it is the very origin of time: within it time [is always beginning].

We might ask why there is a world in which there is time, and consequently beginnings. But nothing and everything begins in time, according to whether we consider objects that depend on one another or the act that, breaking [the] series, introduces into the world a fresh contact with creative power. Thus, each being's power to begin is the power-of-being [in the form of] an initiative that is appropriate to it, i.e. [the power] of creating itself. Each being begins at every instant in the absolute. These beginnings are not set apart [in] time, if [our concern is for] the source from which they are drawn: but if [our concern is for] their mutual relation [matters are quite different]: from the perspective of each particular act, all other acts are objects. And in order to be distinguished from them it must be situated among them as an instant among other instants, in the same fashion that the subject who perceives the world can define his limits only by being situated as a body within the world he perceives.

All temporal beginnings must take place in the eternal act: and the [mutual] exclusion of temporal instants [conveys], in the language of the act, the same idea as the [mutual] exclusion of places in the language of the object. Moreover, [just] as the object is always correlative to the act of participation, we understand without difficulty that these two types of exclusion are linked to each other and even interdependent, as the theory of movement shows. The nature of freedom is to [prevail over exclusion], and consequently to prevent it from enslaving us.

The act is never within time save with respect to the events we ascribe to it, of which we can say only that they limit but do not explain it. Each time it is

accomplished by us, it plunges us back into eternity; the exact moment of participation can be dated, but [only] in connection with events and not with the act itself, which (in itself as in us) escapes time, raises us above it and [on every occasion] makes efficacy descend, i.e. transcendence [descend] into the given world, i.e. into immanence.

But there is no privileged instant in time, any more than there is a privileged location in space: to choose the most remote instant [with the aim of according it] metaphysical primacy would [make] no more sense than to choose the most distant place for the same reason.¹² In every place, in every instant, we have a revelation of the first term, provided we contemplate within it the act that produces it and not its limiting conditions, i.e. the other terms upon which it depends. We therefore must be able to start from anywhere¹³, and the philosopher who seeks the first term holds it in [his] hands as soon as he begins this search, or as soon as he poses this question.

In that sense the first term can be seized at each point and at each instant, since the act is always present everywhere. To show that it is alien to objectivity, i.e. time and space, we could say that it is nowhere and never but that it is the prerequisite of what is always and everywhere brought forth, and that it is never an object that supposes another object on which it depends. On the contrary, we cannot [go back]¹⁴ further than the act, and it is absurd to imagine, for example, another act by which it could be determined. And for that [reason] each point and each instant offers the individual a vantage-point that embraces the totality of the world.

ART. 4: *The act is exercised in the instant as a perpetual reprise.*

The act is always exercised in the instant and we can neither make it spill over into the past or future, nor even say that it endures, since we can only stretch into duration whatever is not actual or [at work] in it, i.e. whatever is not act. The instant is not the same as the act itself.¹⁵ The act is [situated] in the instant precisely because the instant is without content. It is not, as we think, a cut in time. It is the generator of it. And this generation is understandable if we reflect that all we have done [in the past] and all we can do [in the future] necessarily enters time, while every act we accomplish [now] tears us away from it, which gives our life the character of an apparent discontinuity and a perpetual reprise. The dream that delivers us into passivity has a [continuous] character, and we again find this character of continuity in the chain of events once they are

¹² Interestingly modern science links the beginning of the universe with both the most remote instant and the most distant place since it regards the universe as originating in a central Big Bang, from which we are still reeling.

¹³ Literally, everywhere.

¹⁴ Literally, remount.

¹⁵ See "The Present and the Instant" in *Of Time and Eternity*.

achieved, as determinism shows. But to act is to begin again, to put everything back into question, to put freedom (which is always available but not always employed) into play, to regain contact with the timeless principle of all creation. For that [reason] the act is always manifest in the form of an interruption to the natural course of things. It is always available within us but not always realised: we can abandon ourselves to passivity. [Thus] it always appears intermittent. It seems ever in need of being reanimated [or] regenerated. Yet with respect to time it is always new [while] in its essence it is forever the same; for its effects [alone] descend into time, [more as witnesses to its limitation than to its efficacy]. Also, the nature of the instant is always ambiguous; for I can situate it in time and give it a date only by allocating it a content, only by relating it to what precedes and follows it, and I therefore legitimately speak of a plurality of instants. But if we consider that perfectly indivisible point in each of them where the act [takes place]—for example, when I say “yes” to you—then there is no more than an instant; I always discover the same [thing]. Only I do not always have the force to install myself there [at this indivisible point], for it is a breakthrough into eternity.

ART. 5: *The act is an act of presence that gives things their actuality.*

The instant always brings us a presence; and we [plainly] see that presence is an act and not a fact: there is for us no other presence than that which we give ourselves. Where presence is lacking, being is lacking, the Absolute Being as well as the shared¹⁶ being; and [even] absence is a mental¹⁷ or ideal presence. The act as act always creates presence, which is the very character of being: and this presence does not change; what changes are its modes, i.e. those transitory perspectives on being, none of which suffices because all are finite and imperfect. I have to make an effort to show that things are absent [to] me: moreover, *I have to represent them to myself*. Thus, reflection discerns nothing but different forms of presence: it compels me constantly to pass from one to another. But in creating time, reflection also overcomes it, for it contrasts [a multiplicity] of moments, in which all aspects of becoming succeed one another, with an identical presence, in which [reflection] is set back in place each time it acts.

With respect to the object, all presence is evanescent. It is not only in time but in space as well; and it cannot be in one without also being in the other; it is, so to speak, spatiotemporal. For every present event is an event that [takes] place, and all our thoughts, all our sentiments, are actualised in connection with an event. But objective presence is only a participated presence, i.e. a penetration into a presence that is immutable because it is that of an act of which, we can say, that it is alien to time, [within] which phenomena are unfolded (i.e. the modes of

¹⁶ Or, participated.

¹⁷ Literally, thought.

being), but that it brings about each of time's moments and is in a sense the origin of time itself (which is the measure of the distance between the absolute act and the shared act). We could, therefore, say that the act is in a sense the insertion of the supra-temporal or the eternal into time—if this were not to give an independent existence to time when it is only the condition and effect of participation.

We hardly need comment on the [degree] to which language confirms this thesis by always associating the present with the actual.¹⁸ These two words have become synonyms; but we [should] not forget that the second evokes the act that makes present precisely what it actualises. Yet the experience of this act is that of eternity. In calling this act a creative act, [we mean that] its creativity can be said to be continuous with respect to its shared forms (as Descartes [had] it)¹⁹ but, if we [take reference to the] operation which makes them be, it does not itself enter time and raise each of these forms into its own eternity.

ART. 6: *In the measure that our activity is pure it abolishes consciousness of time – which reappears as soon as it flags.*²⁰

It is obvious that the first term cannot be the one at which we would be obliged to halt in the course of whatever regression. For this process of regression excludes the possibility of positing a [final] term.

But the first term is already [there] in the initial step by which I put to myself the problem of the first term: there is an idolatry in thinking I will find it on the side of the object, it is already in the act through which I posit this object which seems to be given to me first and which requires me to posit other [objects as well] because it is incapable of being enough. No object can be enough.

It is therefore impossible to [take as a] first term a *fact* to which I might succeed in analytically reducing all others and which could then become the origin of all syntheses. For it is [does not go far enough to say] that, in applying itself to itself, the spirit can engender all the rest. The important [thing] is that it engenders itself, i.e. that it is an absolute and omnipresent act—from which I am separated, it is true—but [only] in order to be able to create my own temporal development, ahead of [incorporating it in the act]²¹.

[It should not be thought] that we here replace the immutable permanence of being with a more precarious principle that might one day stop acting. The permanence of being has for [its] support an act which, being sheer act, cannot fail. It would not be thus if the act had a [separate] subject whose act could be, for

¹⁸ The association is even closer in French than in English. The French word *actuellement* means at the moment, in the present, just now.

¹⁹ Descartes claimed that things are actively held in existence from one moment to the next.

²⁰ Compare the following with Section IV of “Presence Regained”.

²¹ I assume this incorporation occurs at the end of one's life.

instance, an intermittent modality. [Rather,] the essence of being is the act itself, and we cannot conceive of an act that does not act. The repose of being-in-itself is one with this act, which is never finished because it is always accomplishing itself. Hence, spiritual activity is, according to Descartes, never interrupted, either in us or in God: but in us it knows a progress and degrees, and we could not establish any connection between what it is in us and what it is in God unless it became in us a power [capable] of being unevenly participated.

Time itself is void and inactive, it can only express the rule according to which the world is constantly developed. We can say that the consciousness we have of it, which is one with its very reality, expresses the rapport established in us between our passivity and our activity. When our activity is at minimum, though not yet negated, as in waiting, Being is [practically] one with time. In the measure that objects come to fill it, they hold more of our attention, and time retracts, so to speak. Only, as they impose on us, it is necessary to [separate] them from us and from each other, which obliges us to order them [consecutively]. This succession itself is effaced in the measure that our activity grows. In the perfection of the act, time not only ceases to be felt but ceases to be. We will recover it in the effects or traces the act leaves behind, so to speak, which is only possible when our activity begins to flag again. Moreover, will's effects alone enter time, not its operation. [Where the mind is concerned] only intellectual enquiry has need of time, not the proper act of thinking which contemplates truth [nor indeed] its intelligible object: each time thinking is exercised it sets out anew; it is always an origin, never a sequel. Likewise, the tribulations of love have a history but not the act of loving, which abolishes the succession of instants, not [only] in appearance but in reality. That is to say that [the act] abolishes, [together] with appearance, time itself, which is only an appearance or, rather, the condition for the possibility of all appearances.

C) WILL, OR THE EXPERIENCE OF SELF'S CAUSALITY

ART. 7: *The paradoxical duality of terms in the expression "cause de soi"²² brings to light [the] original character of the act [as] being a pure initiative, i.e. [as] being always cause and never effect.*

The expression "*cause de soi*" is plainly very difficult to analyse. For the peculiarity of [the causal nexus], so it seems, is to introduce a difference between the terms "cause" and "effect", to suppose that [a] cause is already in being in order for [an] effect to be produced.

²² Literally "cause of self" but its meaning is consistent with the English phrase "self-caused". The "duality" in question refers to the possible implication (here denied) that self derives from a cause that is prior to and distinct from it.

Let us put aside for the moment the problem of knowing whether the element of novelty [found] in the effect is not necessarily itself a creation *ex nihilo* and whether the theory of change is not limited to reducing, without abolishing, the difficulty we meet again in [going] from nothingness into being. When we say that being is *cause de soi*, do we not suppose that it exists in two ways: as creator of self and as [something] created by self? The difficulty, therefore, bears on the distinction we can make between these two [modes]; yet when we consider [being] as creator we have no right to consider it as [something] that would already exist before starting to create, or at least we do so only because we consider this creator as external to us, which [means] that it is already, up to a certain point, a [created being]²³, [if only a denizen] of our thinking: [being alone] can posit itself from within as creative. But [then we do not] have the right to proceed in an inverse sense and to set apart within it its act from its being so that its being is with respect to its act a kind of product akin to the work of an artisan. Now, what we mean is only that in [being] the act and being are one such that [it contains nothing of a created character] which differs from the act that creates it. God's being is the same as his eternal act. Only, it is natural that, [in light of] the connection we establish within time between cause and effect, we employ the expression "*cause de soi*" to designate a being that is always cause, that has no starting-point, since it is the beginning of each thing and the current efficacy that makes it be.

Not because it is void and lacks everything but because it is full and [a] perfect sufficiency, it is forever reborn. It always gives itself everything, but we would be very wrong to consider it as never an effect of itself, though it is a cause whose essence is to be only cause.²⁴ We will, therefore, say that it both obtains everything [and] never obtains anything; that it is the creator that is itself never created. There is for it neither spectacle nor possession. It is beyond. Whoever creates has no need to possess anything. But as soon as participation begins, [being] suddenly imparts sense and value to all the objects it seemed to surpass and exclude only a little while ago: now it grants us the power to behold and possess them.

²³ Literally, a creature.

²⁴ Strictly speaking this is contrary to the original proposition of an initiative that is "*always cause and never effect*". I gather the author wants to allow an effect-like character to being in that it is given to itself, somehow enjoys itself, even though it possesses nothing external. Despite insisting that being's "essence is to be only cause" he also seems keen to affirm the absolute unity of cause and effect in the eternal sphere. By inference time is the realm where this unity is broken into before and after.

ART. 8: *Self-causation is inseparable from infinite activity, and is found again in every finite activity.*

If there is an ambiguous character in the expression “*cause de soi*” which seems to indicate an [inconceivable] split between the being that gives itself being and the being that receives it, it is because this distinction is purely intended to evoke a form of activity that goes beyond [the distinction] and in fact nullifies it.²⁵

We can say [the same] of the definition of the act conceived as the passage from nothingness into being. For there, where this passage is eternal, as in the pure act, this expression²⁶ amounts to no more than the exclusion of nothingness and [an affirmation of] the total being’s inwardness to itself. This expression, it is true, [makes] sense with respect to [a] finite being because, on the one hand, the conditions in which he is called to give himself personal being are determined by the order of [temporal] events, so that before they arise he is a pure nothingness (though he is already [contained] in the act [as] pure potential) and because, on the other hand, the being he gives himself through an act of will is indeed for him a first beginning which grants him access to the totality of Being in which he had, until then, no distinct personal existence.

With these reservations we can say that, in God [and] in us, the exercise of self-caused activity (i.e. the passage from nothingness into being) starts again, so speak, at every instant.

In saying of the Act that is self-caused we mean that it is also the cause of all finite being.²⁷ On the one hand, in the measure that [a finite being] is self-caused, he finds within himself the very source of his operative and participating efficacy – so that the degree of his participation expresses the degree of his union with [the Act], which makes [the latter] the end [as well as] the source of his action. On the other hand, in the measure that he is not absolutely self-caused, he directly or indirectly [is subject] to the action of another being who in turn is self-caused.

It is easy to show how, if it is capable of creating the least thing, the act is also capable of creating everything, for as Descartes foresaw, the [jump] from nothing to something [is the same as] the [jump] from nothing to everything: whatever can span the one can also span the other. Consequently, there appears to be a singularly strait liaison between infinity and the power to be self-cause; and this liaison becomes obvious when we reflect that finite being cannot be cause of its own limits and that there is nothing outside of infinity upon which this infinity itself can depend; there is even between these two notions²⁸ a kind of

²⁵ See previous note.

²⁶ I.e. “the passage from nothingness into being”.

²⁷ What follows is originally part of this same sentence.

²⁸ Infinity and self-causation.

reciprocity, since infinity cannot be conceived other than as a inexhaustible power to engender itself.

But [the fact] that we can exceed our limits and even go beyond time to posit an All that includes us and that we ourselves contribute to creating— [this] is the constitutive initiative of spirit itself. It is clear indeed that the All depends solely on self, which is properly the only definition we can give for the Absolute.²⁹ This dependence [upon] the lone self or, what amounts to the same thing, this self-causality permits us, in human [terms]—by introducing a duality there, where we have to do with an inscrutable unity—to penetrate that internal genesis of Being of which the voluntary act through which we create ourselves furnishes us an imperfect image.

ART. 9. The voluntary act gives us an experience of causation of self by self.

[It cannot be] claimed that this notion of a self-caused activity is strange to us and that the nature of causation always [implies] the causation of one thing by another. That is true solely of the world of objects where there is only legality and not genuine causation. [By contrast,] interior activity, such as we observe in attention or will, is not born from nothing but remains ever present and available, always capable of being suspended or taken up again³⁰: [it] defines our initiative only because, instead of being the sequel of what we were, it on the contrary breaks with what we are and announces [a] taking-charge of what we are going to be. In [our] consciousness of willing we have within us an experience of self-causation. [Granted,] it is rather difficult for us to isolate because we are not pure will. We are always associated with a nature and we [have the self-contradictory belief] that will [arises] as an effect or an extension of nature—which is [in fact] its negation, as we see in determinism.³¹ In reality, will breaks with nature and always goes beyond it; it is whatever in our activity cannot be explained by nature, whatever augments it, whatever contradicts it. Nature evinces [will's] limitation and always remains irreducible to it; even [if the will adds nothing to nature], it is bound to ratify it; [nature] is [a] chain that links [the will] to the All by a bond of [factualness—until the will] frees itself from it to participate in this All from within, through an act of initiative; [nature] is also the trace will leaves behind when it flags and turns into habit. Nature plunges us back into those glooms of the past where the impulses and instincts that enslave us are formed [independently] of us. Hence we understand very well that the mixture of nature and will can [take very different shapes] in different beings: the will that depends on me can be renounced, though always

²⁹ A topic to be addressed in the next chapter.

³⁰ As I read this, “interior activity” is always going on, and we either mesh with it or disengage from it in somewhat the way that we work the clutch of a car.

³¹ Two sentences in the original.

freely; but then I confuse myself with my nature [and] cease to be cause of myself; everything that takes place in me is explained by a causality that I no longer govern. [But] I can, on the contrary, without ever denying my nature, subordinate or transfigure it so that it becomes a docile servant of the will. At the limit, where nature disappears and where I have to do with an infinite will, I also rediscover the pure act, i.e. a being that—limited by nothing, subservient to no action that comes from without—is the total [rather than] partial, self-cause. And particular beings draw near it, or more or less distance themselves from it, depending upon whether their will is deficient or more [nearly] perfect, with the consequence that, contrary to what we think, it is when they are most closely united with God that they become the authors of their own being.

But will always comes to light as a first beginning. It is exactly the reverse of what Schopenhauer³² made of it: [rather,] it is born when we rediscover within ourselves the first beginning of all things [through] participation in the creative act. Thus, it is the [co-existence] of nature and will within us that [allows] us to better comprehend what must be understood by [the] pure act; which we might express by saying that it is a will stripped of nature, [or] what amounts to the same thing, that it is absolute self-cause.

We are little [dismayed] by [the] objection that will doubtless be made to us, [one] that naturally comes to mind, [namely,] that we have no right to consider this pure act as an act apart since we can never observe it anywhere else than in particular wills. [In any case,] we posit it less as an act apart (which also would oblige us to regard it as a particular will) than as the interior and omnipresent principle which animates all particular wills. But each particular will compels us to affirm it [when we isolate] what is purer, more interior and more efficacious in its exercise, [when we recognise] its kinship with other wills [and when we discover] the instrument of their separation and mutual mediation in nature.

This will leads us from itself toward the pure act, provided we first agree to eliminate within it [the need] to always look outside [our] own subjectivity for the support that confirms it, the gift that completes it, the food that nourishes it, and provided we [remember] that Absolute Being has no need to be alien to itself in order to [know] what it should be and wants to be through an act of liberation and interiorisation that would depend on it to carry out, i.e. existence within it is the very existence of essence and not the means that allows it [to be discovered].

³² Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), German philosopher of Dutch parentage. His central opus, *The World as Will and Idea* (1818), parallels *Of the Act* in its assumption that the world of manifold appearances conceals a fundamental unity of being that has the character of will. Unlike the pessimistic Schopenhauer, for whom the will is an ugly and unwelcome truth, Lavelle extols its positive qualities. In the above passage he seems to be responding to Schopenhauer's sense of entrapment in the painful sameness of a will whose aim is merely to perpetuate itself. Lavelle says "the will Schopenhauer speaks about is a blind will devoid of interiority . . ." He chastises Schopenhauer for equating being with instinct and the unconscious while making thought and consciousness illusory "consolations" without any power to heal. He asks where the latter could possibly come from in such a bleak vision. See *Introduction à l'ontologie*, p. 91.

ART. 10: *Being is an act that eternally wills itself and that wills the value that justifies it.*

When we try to penetrate deeply into the nature of the Absolute Act, we glimpse that it is an act that wills itself eternally. And just as we, as subject or I, are only present when we will ourselves [to be]³³, we also find that there must be within the pure act a self-will through which “*cause de soi*” receives its true meaning and becomes no longer a logical necessity but a creative exigency whose root is indivisibly metaphysical and moral.³⁴ Thus the ancients sought the essence and very reason for Being in the Good. Being creates itself eternally, purely through [the] affirmation that being is worth more – and infinitely more – than nothingness: in creating itself, it justifies itself, it so to speak creates its own reason for being. And for us, all reason for being resides in the value of what we affirm and what we do.

We can justify our life in our own eyes only by making it such that it is preferred, wanted and loved, not only by us but by all those for whom [it might become a model]. And to act morally is not to be submitted to a mysterious law [from which our nature might rebel], it is to multiply within and around self all the reasons for preferring, wanting and loving life.

We sometimes think that the affirmation of value is superadded to the affirmation of being, and that it constantly denies what-is in order to reshape it. Even so, we must not forget that being – whenever we [think that value denies it] – is required for value to be posited [in the first place]. It is above all important to note that it is only by descending ever more deeply into being that we discover value, [and] that whoever gainsays value forfeits both the world’s being, which is dissipated in a play of appearances, and his own being, which remains on the fringe of nothingness, where it becomes incapable of preferring itself.

We can will being only because to will being is also to will value. Willing value is not wishing to escape being in order to rise above it. It is having a revelation within us of that absolute which is the very Being from which we believe that the experience of the world such as it is given to us separates us, although that experience is its manifestation (as we see in the discovery of beauty) or [its] condition (as we see in all the tasks to which duty constantly calls us).

It is remarkable that Descartes saw [so] deeply that the power of being self-cause is always associated with perfection, i.e. with the possibility of being

³³ The most literal rendering of this clause is: “we . . . are only there where we will ourselves . . .” However I feel the author’s idea is more nearly related to time than to place, i.e. I need to make an act of will in order to be fully present. I suppose his identification of being and act derives from just such a pregnant observation. The French words for “there” and “where” have nuances which allow for the translation I have given.

³⁴ A key sentence.

self-sufficient. This is the supreme quality of the Sage. Yet that supreme efficacy, which is foremost an efficacy with respect to self, can be expressed in two fashions: first negatively, in [terms] of grandeur, for a power outside of which there is nothing must engender itself eternally; then positively, in [terms] of value, for [the supreme efficacy] only succeeds in [self-creation] because it creates its [own] supreme reason for being.³⁵

³⁵ Because I regard this chapter as central to *The Dialectic of the Eternal Present*, and because its theme is a challenging one, I have decided to attach these supplemental comments.

Though the chapter begins by addressing self-causation with respect to the act and only later focuses on its counterpart in human volition, I suppose the author's thinking originally ran in the reverse direction. Specifically he observed how the act of taking consciousness—i.e. returning to (one)self, experientially coming into being—normally entails a determination to be present that is identical with its achievement, and in corresponding measure. At the same time he noted the paradox of a person effectively giving himself being, i.e. willing his own existence. I take it that the idea of self-causation in the “Absolute Act” is based on such considerations.

Given the prospect of a truly timeless dimension, as the Absolute Act requires, it might seem more fitting to speak of an “uncaused” or “uncreated” act than of one which is “*cause de soi*”. Heidegger for instance entertains the notion of uncaused being in his *Der Satz vom Grund*. But Lavelle sees being as a magical fount of newness, independently of whatever manifest novelty. Even though there can be no progression here a *sense* of something-from-nothing can apply. For him being is inwardly disclosed not as a frozen state but as a dynamic and living emergence, a permanent coming-to-be, only secondarily related to the world.

The phrase “coming-to-be” of course suggests becoming, which in turn implies time. But in felt, intuited or ideal terms being and becoming can fold together. Indeed they must originally be one in order to ground the simultaneous validity of sameness and difference, timelessness and time. These issues are given detailed treatment in *Of Time and Eternity*.