

THE PURE SELF¹

A) BEING IN-ITSELF AND THROUGH-ITSELF²

ART. 1: *Only the total being can be [described as] being-in-itself.*

We have shown that it is contradictory to [hold] that Being is an object, since the peculiarity of an object is precisely to be only [something] for another³, and consequently only an appearance. Yet the peculiarity of Being is, on the contrary, not being-for-another but only for-itself⁴, and if it is feared that this expression bears witness to a duality in Being which would make it an appearance to itself, it is then necessary to say that the essential character of Being is to be only *in-itself*, to be the sole term outside of which there is nothing, [i.e. something] which is wholly interior to itself and necessarily defined as pure intimacy. It is, therefore, not surprising that [people talk on and on] about the “thing-in-itself”⁵, since on the one hand the mind cannot do without an “in-itself” – since it is itself living testament to the existence of this “in-itself”, from which it seems

¹ Chapter Eight, contained in Part Three (“The Self Absolute”) of Book I (“The Pure Act”).

² Alternatively, “By Itself”, “By Means of Itself” or “From Itself”.

³ I.e. another person—therefore a public datum, an agreed-upon fact.

⁴ I have added hyphens to these standard philosophic phrases. Jean-Paul Sartre for instance often employs terminology of this sort.

⁵ A term made popular by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), for whom it represented the universal object of knowledge. He concluded that it was finally unknowable in itself.

constantly on the verge of being torn, precisely because it is not a pure spirit—and since on the other hand the existence of the “thing-in-itself” appears a logical monstrosity to which nobody in the world can attribute any sense. The idea of a thing-in-itself arises at the moment the object posited by a [mental] act is cut off by a new act [on the part] of the very act that posited it: yet in the negation of the initial stance, the object brings [with it] a double testimony of its invincible reliance on the mind that posits it: it is both outside [the mind] and for it; it has no “in-itself”.

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

Now we see without difficulty that outside this All there is nothing that exists purely in-itself; and indeed we see that this expression “in-itself” is only a kind of extension of that characteristic by which we define the existence of all the objects in the world, [saying] precisely that they can be only in it. It is as if we said that the All is its own support, or what comes down to the same thing, that [everything is contained within it but nothing contains it], so that all the determinations through which a being is constituted in its associations with whatever it is not (expressed by active or passive verbs) can only be [within its sphere of concern] associations it maintains with itself—which, as we have shown, are expressed by the reflexive verb.⁶

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

Yet this phrase “in-itself” still conceals a certain exteriority to self in that it supposes a distinction between a containing self and a contained self. It thus evokes a kind of static and object-like relation of self with self that [makes] sense only through images borrowed from space and sight. There is truly nothing else in self but a *Self*. And there is no other self than that which is through-itself, so we therefore end up replacing the idol of an absolute object, or an absolute given, with the immaterial purity of an absolute subject, or an absolute act, that carries within it the initiative of the operation through which it creates itself, and indeed with which it [coincides]. Whereas being still [might be considered] an effect of itself in the expression “in-itself”, we will consider it as cause of itself in the expression “through-itself”, which in the strict sense means that it is [essentially]

⁶ The French language has an entire class of verbs called “reflexive” in that their actions refer back to their subjects, e.g. “he hurried himself”. Such verbs are dear to Lavelle because they instance the sort of self-referential activity he places at the very heart of being. ART. 9 of Chapter Two (“The Reflexive Act”—not included in this collection) deals with reflexive verbs and their philosophical import.

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

We see, therefore, how far removed we are from the thesis which considers the All as an immense object outside of which would emerge, one after another, like so many magic lanterns, all particular consciousnesses, each with the power of saying "I". On the contrary, it seems to us that only the All can be an absolute subjectivity, i.e. can never become an object, either for another being or for itself; the All is a *universal self*, completely opposed to substance, with which we almost always tend to confuse it; and instead of being unknown and remaining forbidden to us, [it is] perpetually open to us; doubtless not because it will one day become the subject of an objective cognizance but because it is offered for participation, so we [can] always penetrate it in the measure that our subjectivity is more [nearly] perfect and our act more [nearly] pure. It is because we are not the universal subject that there are objects for us.⁷

If it is therefore contradictory to want to posit as an "in-itself" a world defined at the outset as an object; the in-itself of the world should not be considered the aggrandisement of our own "in-itself", i.e. of our I; on the contrary, this I is the "in-itself" or the Self of the All, shot-through and delimited by the [processes] of participation.

B) PURE IPSEITY⁸

ART. 3: *Being is pure ipseity.*

The essential prejudice of metaphysics is to think that being is [on] the side of the object, so that the subjective view we get of it is always unreal and to a certain [extent] illusory. But like it or not we always live in a purely subjective world; we are always interior to ourselves; we can never pass beyond our ever-

⁷ In other words a single Self resides behind all particular selves and they can gain access to it in the measure that they "penetrate" their own subjectivity. This of course is not a matter of egoism or self-importance. Penetrating subjectivity is better understood in terms of greater inwardness and closer acquaintance with the sense of being enjoyed by all. Lavelle is clear that humans fall far short of full identity with the central Self (hence the appearance of a world) but they must share at least *some* identity with it since they draw their very being and subjectivity from it.

⁸ Selfhood, personal uniqueness or identity. In what follows, Lavelle advances a possibility that apparently had not yet occurred to him in earlier writings, one he had positively rejected in a prior version of the present work: namely, that the Act is personal and the very essence of subjectivity. See Translator's Foreword.

shifting frontiers; the object itself exists only *for*⁹us and in relation to us. Hence, the coincidence of being and ourselves is produced within us only from the side of subjectivity. Metaphysics is therefore the deepening of subjectivity; true being is always subjective, in itself as in us, and the object precisely marks the gap between these two subjectivities which seek accord.¹⁰ Can we even say that consciousness seeks the object and only finds true satisfaction in it when, on the contrary, we know very well that we only ever act to change our internal being, i.e. to gain new thoughts? Everything incapable of becoming a thought for us would then be forever as if it were not. Thus, the world appears exterior to us only so that we can make it ours through a process of appropriation, though [such] appropriation still allows [the remnant of] a certain exteriority between the possessed object and ourselves. In the end [this exteriority] ceases, or rather shows us that it is not the object we possess but only the internal act which allows us to possess it, in which the object [serves as a fill-in] so to speak for [our act's] insufficiency. Nothing is therefore in-itself from the side of the object, except the completion for us and without us of an act that is begun within us and by us. To say that Being is pure ipseity is not, as we believe, to close it within the limits of the individual I, since on the contrary [individuality] is always to a certain extent objective¹¹ within us; it is [rather] to posit a universal subjectivity to which we are, so to speak, admitted and in which whatever there is of an individual in us is always surpassed by an act that is always [and] emphatically ours yet is nonetheless always an act of communication between the individual and the All from which it proceeds and towards which it tends.

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

⁹ My italics.

¹⁰ I feel the author could have placed this important sentence in bold type.

¹¹ I.e. object-like. Since there is consciousness *of* it, it must be an object, however much nearer it might be to the sense of being than worldly objects. The individual I-sense only approximates true being.

¹² Author's note: "Cf. Chapter XII, B." The reference is to Section B of "Freedom and the Interval" (included in the present volume) where Lavelle asserts that opposites are active and passive aspects of a single essence.

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

If the All is necessarily interior to itself, and if it can be interior to itself only through the very initiative that allows it to create itself, then Being can but say "I"; it is that absolute ipseity from which all particular beings draw the uncertain possibility (whose putting-into-play is left to them) of also saying "I" in their turn.¹³ For that [reason], instead of seeking, as most people do¹⁴, to travel and conquer a world that remains forever external to us and that, in the measure that it solicits us, further distances us from ourselves, we need to try to penetrate a world more and more interior to ourselves, where we will find the inwardness of all-that-is.¹⁵ We almost always believe that [ipseity] begins with the glance we cast on our individual I, through which we will remain irremediably separate from other beings and the rest of the world. But it is not so. Ipseity, [we grant], is always a first beginning; it is [such] for me at each instant, and I can lose it at each instant, and lose myself as well in the very same stroke. But I can always regain it. It is the invincible relation of myself with myself, which [decrees] that I possess myself—and even that I [exist]—only by way of the circuit of reflection; [decrees] that I can sever myself from every [worldly] object but not from that internal tie with Being which is the very act through which I inscribe myself in it by saying "I". That I cannot inscribe myself in Being [without] saying "I" [means] that Being itself [must be] an I, since there is no difference between borrowing being from it and borrowing the power to say "I".¹⁶ The grave error, it is true, would be to think that I borrow the power of constituting the I that is mine from a ready-formed Self. For there is no ready-formed Self but only a Self that eternally forms itself through the possibility it grants the particular I of forming itself by putting into play the creative efficacy at the [heart] of certain conditions which precisely determine its existence as an individual. I can be sure of having penetrated my own ipseity only when it reveals to me that world which has never begun and which is nonetheless [always beginning, a world] which infinitely surpasses me, which is always present and open in the depths of myself, which constitutes my own essence and the common essence of all beings. Ipseity is this rapport of myself with myself, and of myself with all that makes us give birth to the same initiative and the same life at [every] instant.

¹³ Being is the source of the I-sense. A very clear statement of the author's shift in perspective (i.e. away from the idea of an impersonal act) referred to in the Foreword and in an earlier note.

¹⁴ Literally, as most men do.

¹⁵ Throughout the author's writings, practical advice is usually delivered in gemlike statements like this.

¹⁶ An example of Lavelle's frequently giddy logic.

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

As long as we consider the act as having its end outside itself, we subordinate it to the object, [in which case it would be] contradictory to regard it as a first principle. But it is a contradiction in another sense to regard it as closed within itself and having no productive efficacy. In what [respect] would it then be distinguished from a thing? How could we say that it is self-caused? How would it be able to obtain consciousness of [it]self?¹⁷

But consciousness shows us precisely the essential character of the act, which is at once a departure from and a return to self, which is [its own] origin and end and which, in [its] trajectory from itself to itself, introduces the I and all objects. The goal of all dialectic is precisely to describe the steps of this path. But it suffices here to note the impossibility of considering whatever end towards which the act might tend as anything other than a means by which [it] exerts and takes possession of itself. Even in its humblest and crudest form, the act must return to its point of departure: it is itself that it experiences, itself that it ever seeks to [possess] through all its visible creations.¹⁸ These are indeed [only] appearances which are destined to vanish and which, instead of exhausting the act that produced them, allow it to subsist and to unfold its abundance and purity. Thus, through our experience of the world and our particular works, we pursue a perpetual dialogue with ourselves.

[So what are we to think of this] pure act of which we can say that it creates the world in order to offer all liberties who participate in its essence a mediation without which they could communicate neither with each other nor with it, but also in order to produce a mediation of self with self, i.e. a line of union between its intelligence, its will and its love¹⁹? [Precisely, that] it is this circulation, interior to the act, through which its essence is defined and which is constitutive of ipseity. It is manifest within us under a temporal form, but in time it engages only its effects and not the eternal source that produces them, of which it permits us to gather the outpouring within ourselves.

¹⁷ Consciousness within the act is affirmed—but in a curious fashion. The word “consciousness” here refers to consciousness-of, which implies *an object*, and not to consciousness-in-itself. Presumably the Pure Self knows itself directly and does not need to “obtain” self-knowledge from what is produced as an object. It seems that Lavelle is modelling the act on an absolute that interacts with its products, much as God is supposed to relate to creatures. The question then is: how can the eternal sphere preserve its integrity (i.e. its self-sufficiency, its character of being wholly in-itself) while being modified in a circular fashion by its temporal outfall? The same problem appears in reverse where Lavelle speaks of temporal beings inscribing themselves in being. See the selections from *Of Time and Eternity* for his detailed treatment of this issue.

¹⁸ Of course this suggests that it does not fully possess itself ahead of them, which contradicts earlier remarks testifying to its utter self-sufficiency and complete inwardness.

¹⁹ The three main aspects of participated being which Lavelle addresses in Book Three. No chapters from Book Three have been included in my selection of texts.

C) THE INTIMACY OF THE ACT

ART. 6: *Intimacy resides there where I act and not there where I suffer.*

It is difficult to define the true nature of intimacy. I am, will we say, there where I *feel*²⁰, and more particularly, there where I suffer: suffering is the sole [worldly sphere] where my presence cannot be challenged. However, I know very well that I am not identical with my suffering, since I attribute it to myself and even [do so] in the measure that I experience my limits, recognise my impotence, some passivity in my will, and my subjugation with respect to certain external actions over which I am not master. This suffering is not, we might say, the positive part of me; I recognise it as mine but not as me, since on the contrary the I constantly pushes it away, constantly seeks to expel it. Appearances aside, intimacy is not there where I suffer but there where I act. Here, in the action itself – if I consider what is properly act in it and not matter, object, effect or end, that is to say, [if I consider] the interior adhesion I [provide], the internal engagement I [make], this secret initiative that exists only in and through me – I am wholly intimate with myself; there is nothing that is not mine, and indeed that is not me. There is no I that exists first and [then] at a certain moment might produce the act by way of a mysterious trigger; there is nothing before this act that merits the name “I”; and it is because [the act] makes it be and produces it that it is [indistinguishable from the I].

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

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

It too often happens that we [consider] intimacy as the effect of an impact that jars our sensibility, and we have so much relish for such shocks that we spend our lives searching for new ones, ever more unexpected and lively. But on the contrary, true intimacy excludes impact and shock: it supposes only a falling-back upon self and self's origin, [upon] a tranquillity and a silence in which we

²⁰ My emphasis.

are endlessly [re]born to ourselves and in which external events, instead of being solicitations that press us, are like responses which were almost expected in advance. Thus, [some people] demand everything from the outside; they want the outside to produce everything within them; others appear to [position the heart of] the outside within [themselves] so that it appears [to have] the same nature as the inside and so that, at the moment it manifests itself, it is only the flowering of [inwardness].

Only, I do not at the first stroke arrive at that triumphant existence which is the privilege of pure activity. I enter the world only painfully, for I am a mixture of activity and passivity. I emerge at each instant – not from nothingness but from possibility; and at each instant this possibility risks being covered over or falling back into the blind play of causes and effects. I do not command [possibility], I only convert it into a means of liberation thanks to an effort that costs me, and it is at the very point where I suffer, where I make [an] effort, that I can be tempted to locate my – always meagre, always militant – existence: but it is easy to see that what I here take for the I are the very resistances that it encounters and that keep it from being; [easy to see] that it aspires only to deliver itself from this state (rather than to take pleasure in it), that it resides wholly in that humble activity it exercises through a thousand tribulations but which is only the prelude to a more perfect activity. Pain, effort, obstacle, object – [these] are the signs of my individuality and my limitation. But it is bad policy to say that I am there, precisely where I cease to be: at the interior of those limits is a positivity that we miss by fixing on [them] a gaze filled with anxiety and tenderness. However, I penetrate being through the success of my activity and not through its failure, through the act I succeed in accomplishing and not through the barrier it has not yet succeeded in surmounting. I encounter being within myself through the exercise of an act [that is] at once intellectual and voluntary, [an act] that testifies to my freedom and that – precisely because it is capable of bending, is susceptible of degrees [and] can change in sense – is the sole [way] of accounting for the most diverse forms of participation, despite the univocity of being.

ART. 8: Life's value resides in the vigour with which we [can] distinguish the self of the act from [phenomena], which [exist] only in connection with it.

In considering oneself a pure spectator, one is liable to find being neither in the I that looks for it outside nor in that [very] outside, which is only an appearance for the I. By contrast, if we first agree to oppose the being we see with the being we are, this being that we are will immediately become not a

being that observes but a being that [creates itself]²¹, and we will no longer take the gazed-upon object as real but only the interior operation through which it [is created]. In the course of life we never do anything more than try to distinguish, [there] within ourselves, [whatever] is self and constitutes essence from that which [exists] only in connection with self and constitutes the appearance of things or ourselves. The acuity of our life, its value, depends on the rigorousness with which we are capable of making this distinction. It [can] happen that this Self of the Act, without which we [would] have no true I and which always solicits us, finds us unresponsive, so to speak. So we spend our lives diverting ourselves from living, interesting ourselves exclusively in objects, e.g. our bodies, which instead of possessing an existence in themselves take their existence [and] significance from this Self of the universe, which they often hide from us, whereas they should rightly be instruments that permit us to penetrate it. Nothing is within self but what can say “I”, and all subjects can say [it] without being detached from the [common] Self, [just] as they can say that they [exist] without shattering the unity of the [common] being. And as they are all party to the total being, they all participate in the inwardness²² of the Absolute Self; they are never separate from it, though they are separated from each other; the more deeply they penetrate themselves, the more deeply they penetrate it. They communicate with one another in and through it, and never directly. Consequently, intimacy [with] the I separates us from intimacy [with] every other I in the measure that there is some limitation and externality in one or the other [of us], and it brings us together in the measure that [there] is a purer and more perfect intimacy. Thus, an Absolute Self is constituted in the same Act which permits each [particular] I to posit itself in that unique twofold relation it maintains with itself and other [selves]. The world appears solely as the condition and expression through which all these relations are realised. We see [this clearly] in [the case of] love, which allows us to grasp the nature of the act in its most lively and concrete form: it does not abolish matter but gives it meaning because it makes it its vehicle; it does not abolish particular beings but makes them agents of a mutual [accord] through which they ground their existence and surpass it at the same time. It renders us veritable limbs of one another – yet [a] shyness persists whereby I separate my inwardness from [that] of another less than [I separate] my externality from his inwardness, and vice versa.

From this we will easily understand that, as soon as I begin to appropriate something to myself, I [inwardly] subordinate the act to a thing: as a result, I bring about a process of separation that, shaping [my] I through the very ownership it claims, breaks its relation with the unity of the Act on which it depends [as well as] with other consciousnesses, which it excludes from this

²¹ Makes itself, grows, becomes, happens: these and many other meanings attach to the same reflexive verb (*se fait*). In line with Lavelle’s philosophy, I see the phrase in terms of initiative and coming-to-be; hence “creates itself”.

²² Or, intimacy.

same participation it has just made its own. I must have nothing, and indeed *be*²³nothing, in order to regain infinite intimacy within myself and to obtain a real communication with all other beings, in the measure that they, for their part, consent to the same divestment.

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

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

In reality only the act can be considered as introducing an essential seriousness to the course of my life; it awakens a hidden power in the very depths of being, from which it creates the substance of my I, to which it straightaway imparts ontological value and creative dignity. As soon as it is exercised, all the rest of the world is linked to me and no longer has a sense only for me. And we could say that intimacy is formed in this very power I have of attaching myself to what is not me but immediately becomes mine through the very act I accomplish.

If pure intimacy is bound up with an act accomplished in and by us, we understand without difficulty why this act founds our own existence at the same time [that it founds] that of the world, and why it introduces intelligibility and sense into the totality of the real. Indeed, in what does this act consist if not in the personal initiative by which we constantly replace what is given to us with the operation through which we give it to ourselves, so that instead of appearing as a blind and inert obstacle we hurl ourselves against, [every] object is revealed to us in the living relationship that unites it to us, or to other objects, [showing] us its ground and its value in the [very] same stroke? The act is an internal engagement through which the subject is obliged to understand things, i.e. to replace the things themselves with the reasons that make them be what they are; but these reasons obviously exist only within and for us, and we see without difficulty that whoever refuses to look for them, and to regulate his conduct [accordingly], also drives them from his life so that the world becomes for him a pure chaos ruled by an alien necessity. The peculiarity of the act is, by contrast, to be a justification of the real through which we courageously agree to take [our] place in its midst, and consequently also to assume responsibility for it; which is only possible through a constant collaboration with it that obliges us to embrace it by way of

²³ My italics.

the [conjoint operations] of understanding and will, i.e. to explain all we are given, even evil, by consecrating all our powers to adding to and reforming it. This double [-faceted] operation is subordinated to a prior consent-to-be which, instead of being an abdication or an abandon, is always a load we [shoulder]: it is in the intimacy of the act that being reveals to us the profundity of its perpetually-nascent essence, both as an exigency and as a call we often leave unanswered; to accomplish this act through which we give ourselves being is indivisibly to understand, to love, to will and to do. These terms designate different aspects of the same act but cannot be separated from one another; and we have chosen from among them (as custom allows us) the term "will" to represent the totality of the act, since there is no true will unless we understand, unless we love and unless we put into play what we will²⁴; also, we have shown that we apprehend being only at the very moment we will it, that we have to will things to be what they are, that [will] dictates the very order we observe [in] them, and that this order is the product of our mind, so that it can become the instrument we require to change the state of the world by realising the destiny appropriate to us. There is a strict solidarity between being and duty²⁵: it is not by turning our back on being but by [plunging] to its root that we discover the role we play in it, which is always presented to us in the double aspect of duty-being²⁶ and the duty to be. And we can say that all those who refuse their ratification of the real not only reject the conditions without which neither this refusal nor their own desire for something else would be possible; we fear they confound being with appearance and only consider duty an unreal and impotent dream. They have still not made that conversion which, in compelling us to recognise the solidarity of being-as-a-whole and to accept it as a whole so as to engage our life in it, leads us to discover its presence in that completely intimate act in which we participate and which, according to the various modes of participation, produces all the worldly aspects that are constantly granted us and that we constantly modify.

To seek being is, therefore, to seek within self this exercise of an inexhaustible activity that is at once desire of itself and [a] gushing light, which instead of being completely undetermined is the principle of all those determinations through which it is endlessly realised and possessed. True, those determinations [render] each being a limited being: only, rather than limiting the total being, they precisely express its essence, [namely, that] of being the act through which [each being] forms itself thanks to the infinite and generous gift of itself, which permits all beings to create themselves in their turn through a personal operation, but which can be [such] only in the measure that each recognises, in the very power it wields, a gift that is made to it and that it agrees

²⁴ The argument is not especially compelling since any of the other terms could be taken as central; the reasons that follow are more convincing but they circle about what seems to be the real point: self = will.

²⁵ Literally, "duty-being". There is to my knowledge no English equivalent.

²⁶ See preceding note.

to put into play. That is to say the I is impelled to constantly go beyond whatever [pertains to] acquisition and nature within it, that it constantly puts back into question everything it has, that it creates itself and becomes a person solely by way of an inward asceticism that requires it to coincide, [there] in the inwardness of the Pure Self, with the act through which the Absolute Being wills itself eternally. [In other words,] I can obtain that personal existence which permits me to be myself only by penetrating [the] perfect intimacy of a being beyond which there is nothing and whose very essence is—in giving itself existence—to allow me also to give it to myself. We know very well that there is for us no other metaphysical ambition than to attain [a] point devoid of all [breadth] where no distinction [remains] between being and acting, between what we will and what we are.

D) THE PERSONAL ACT

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

If the Act evinces the character of an [unfailing] initiative, and if it always [remains] a perfect unity because it possesses this initiative, then we easily understand that we must attach to it the very traits by which we define [a] person, since it is that by which we can attribute everything to ourselves, and which [itself] can be attributed to nothing.²⁷ In this sense we can say that it unites in itself all the properties we relegate to the various senses of the word “subject”: grammatical subject, logical subject, psychological subject, metaphysical subject.

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

By contrast, the Act is not only a person but the hearth of all personal existence. Let us not say that this hearth of personal existence excludes the traits of the true person, who should be distinguished from all other persons and [who] is constituted throughout the living relations [this person] constantly maintains with [them]. For it is the nature of the pure act not to be confused with any participated act precisely because it is present to it and continually renders it possible—but in such a fashion that there is between [these two] a going-and-coming, an uninterrupted circuit [in which] one constantly offers its efficacy and the other draws upon it and puts it to work. If we more easily grant personal

²⁷ The curious argument seems to be that as the source of all personal attributions the Act must be the original person or subject.

existence to other limited beings like ourselves than to Being, [which is] completely interior to itself [and] founds the inwardness of each and all of them, it is because these other beings resemble us, because we can represent them to ourselves [and] because they are, like us, linked to a body, so that we suppose in them an experience comparable to our own, whereas in our own experience, we forget that the act which makes us *be* precisely expresses the purity and perfection of that personal being to which we ourselves never completely [have access].

We will not accept [the] thesis, [which has sometimes been credited]²⁸, that this being which is capable of founding the autonomous reality of all persons is itself not one, and is so to speak a super-person²⁹, for apart from the barely intelligible character of this term, we fear there is more negation than affirmation to it.

Neither will we allow ourselves to be seduced by [the] alternative thesis that the pure act has no personal character but is realised by the infinite plurality of persons, for the nature of every person, [however] imperfect and limited, is to be constituted—not by shutting herself³⁰ up within herself but by calling upon the existence, outside and around her, of other persons with whom she forms a spiritual society that is an uninterrupted creation in which no one grows weary of giving and receiving.³¹

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

We are tempted to say of the act that it is at once essentially personal and radically impersonal. We say that it is personal because, as soon as it enters into play, we witness that unity, interiority, initiative, responsibility and assumption of self by self that are the [defining characteristics of the act]; and[we say] that it is impersonal, not only because its wholeness and its perfection seem to abolish all particular determinations—which, being inseparable from individual existence, constitute the support within us of personality itself—but again because we often believe that, [there] in [our] experience of the act at the moment we exercise it, we deal purely with an anonymous efficacy that becomes precisely personal only within us and by way of the consent we give it.³²

²⁸ Indeed by the author himself in an earlier draft of this work. See Translator's Foreword. The comment could be taken as a concession of this but seems to refer to other people.

²⁹ A reference to Nietzsche? Perhaps, but in the context of this discussion what appears intended is a being that is somehow more than a person.

³⁰ To assist the author's point I have dispensed with neuter constructions and conformed the gender of pronouns to their French originals. The French referent "*personne*" is a feminine noun, hence the feminine pronouns that follow.

³¹ I am not at all clear how this argument refutes the seductive thesis.

³² In this the author perhaps reveals his own reasons for originally regarding the act as impersonal.

But this contradiction—between the ideal conditions of personal existence, which the act alone is capable of supplying, and its strictly empirical conditions, which we find only within us—should be overcome. For the Act cannot found our personal life and at the same time be beneath it.³³ Individual existence can be a condition of the person; it is not an element of her since the person appears within us only when the individual is surpassed.³⁴ And it is not true to say that we confer the dignity of [personhood] upon [an originally] impersonal act at the moment we render it ours; for to render it ours is to raise ourselves above all the properties of our nature, all our momentary states; it is to render ourselves [over to the person]. [Thus], though the person always appears to us [as] inseparable from the limitations amidst which she³⁵ is realised within us, we nonetheless forget that she does not [arise] as a person [by way] of these limitations but, on the contrary, [by way] of their surpassing, i.e. [by way] of this act to which, when we consider it [as something apart], we refuse that personal character it would, by a strange paradox, need to be able to confer without [itself] possessing. An act can be grasped only by the one who accomplishes it; we therefore grasp it only in ourselves. Thus, we are led to enclose it within our own limits, [not understanding] that we are a person only at the point where we identify ourselves with it and not at the point where we oppose it with barriers. For that [reason] none of us is fully *a person*.

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

The peculiarity of the person is, far from coinciding with the individual, to join the individual to the universal: either the individual himself is submitted to a universal law or, what amounts to the same thing, he assumes responsibility for the universal. The liaison between the individual and the personal can only be

³³ Given that a foundation is necessarily *beneath*, Lavelle's choice of words is unfortunate. I assume that what is meant is "something less than it".

³⁴ The author distinguishes between the individual—which I take to be the biologic, worldly, social entity that is manifest in bodily form and in the roles it plays—and the genuine person it might become. If I understand him correctly Lavelle is suggesting that personhood remains unrealised until mere individuality is surpassed through participation (in varying manners and degrees) in the Pure Self.

³⁵ The confusing gender shifts throughout this section accord with the issue Lavelle is addressing: whether being and act should be considered in impersonal terms, as they traditionally have been, or in personal terms, as proposed here. The issue is glaringly clear in the above translation where an impersonal "it" is juxtaposed with a personal "she". Since French pronouns and possessives are masculine or feminine regardless of their personal or impersonal referents, the situation is *not* so plainly depicted in the original text. At the same time Lavelle's point, i.e. that the Act is a person, might actually be facilitated by the mandatory use of personal pronouns and possessives. However a question can then be raised about whether personhood is necessarily connected with sex.

formed through the intermediary of morality: we have also been able to show that [this] is the very expression of duty within us. Consequently, if the individual becomes a person only in the measure that he renders living within himself a principle he accepts—but which surpasses him—it is because this principle is [nothing] abstract but a life in which the [individual] I participates.

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