

PARTICIPATION AND FREEDOM¹

A) BIRTH OF FREEDOM

ART. 1: *Freedom is the heart of participation.*

Participation is inseparable from freedom. And though it is true that we could [at the extreme] legitimately attribute to the pure act all the positive features we will discover in the activity of participation, above all freedom itself, the word “freedom” has accessible sense to us only there where participation begins to be exerted. The two notions are reciprocal: indeed, where freedom disappears, participation vanishes as well, for I am [then] only a part of the All, since what I possess is no longer the effect of an operation I accomplish. Inversely, freedom in us appears to be always expressed by a choice, i.e. by an original participation that [brings to light] a definite perspective within the totality of Being and shows that there should be as many such perspectives as there are consciousnesses.

Because we, in this work, always [take departure] from the highest point – i.e. not from a supreme principle that then suffers a series of degradations but from that source of all beings which permits them to create themselves by

¹ Chapter Eleven, contained in Part One (“The Genesis of the Interval”) of Book Two (“The Interval”).

participating in its perfection—we have to begin the study of participation [with the study] of freedom, at once showing how each liberty² borrows from the pure act the very initiative it puts into play, how it is distinguished from [the latter] through its connection with nature [and] how it necessarily supposes an infinite plurality of other liberties to sustain it.

Freedom³ is therefore the heart of participation. For we know [very] well that it exists only if I am capable of exercising and producing it through an initiative that is my own. But we also know that the only thing that pertains to it is initiative, that it supposes a possibility without which it could not enter into play, that it retains to the very end a possible character and that the efficacy it disposes is always a [borrowed] efficacy.

That being always coincides with the point at which true freedom is exercised [can] be sufficiently demonstrated by the [identity we have established between] being [and] inwardness to self. If it were not so, being would be for us only [an outward display] which might arouse our curiosity but [would remain external to us and finally bore us]. But if the encounter with being always produces an incomparable emotion in us, it is not only because it is [an] encounter with our own being at the point where it is inserted in the absolute [but] because it puts us in the presence of a being we give ourselves by virtue of a creative power we agree to accept. We will, therefore, not be astonished that no question arouses true interest in us and no problem merits [consideration] unless [it is] a question [or] problem that requires us to put our freedom into play and to engage our responsibility. The Stoics were not [deluded] in thinking that everything that [does not in some fashion depend on me leaves me indifferent—as if it did not exist.]

*ART. 2: Through the participation of its essence, the pure act gives birth to particular liberties, which have an analogical rapport with it.*⁴

Creation is nothing like an object from the hands of an artisan. The absolute being acts purely through communication of what it is, i.e. it only creates beings and not things; but the nature of a being is also to determine itself, i.e. to be up to

² As noted previously Lavelle uses the same word to refer to the ideal of freedom (the limitless efficacy of the eternal act as conceived or intuited here below, where it is usually translated into terms of possibility) and to a free being dwelling within the realm of participation. I have tried to distinguish between the two referents by using the word “freedom” in relation to the ideal and the word “liberty” in relation to free beings and their capacity for independent choice. There are of course instances where the distinction is hazy. See the Glossary of Frequently Used Terms.

³ From the human perspective, i.e. as a realm of possibility which may be engaged and brought into play through specific choices.

⁴ I.e. they are not identical with it but have a parallel or analogous meaning. In his *Louis Lavelle et le renouveau de la métaphysique de l' être au XXe siècle*, commentator Jean Ecole makes much of this “analogical rapport”. As I see matters the realm of participation is where unitary Being is shattered into particular beings whose essential traits resemble those of the original.

a certain point [self-sufficient]: for in the very measure that it is a being, it is a liberty. In order for reality not to fade into [mere] appearance, we need to rediscover, even in the simplest aspects of creation, those traits of spontaneity and totality that are like imitations or rough sketches of [a] perfect sufficiency, through which their introduction into the total being is realised. To create, for God, is to summon [an infinite number] of particular beings to [participate in] his essence. Matter is not the aim of creation: it takes rise from the very conditions of participation whose inexhaustible fecundity it expresses, i.e. in both [its] breadth and [its] limits. In the strict sense, there is [nothing but] participation in the Act and through an act. The Total Being reveals its presence to us solely by way of [an] operation that is our own and that allows us to insert our participant being into it. We do not, as some too often believe, participate in the world such as it is given to us⁵, even though this world is evoked by us as the faithful expression of the act of participation: for it indivisibly conveys [a sense of] what responds to it and what surpasses it. All the difficulty and all the mystery of the creative act resides in [the] apparently contradictory proposition that it can only create free beings, i.e. beings fit to create themselves. This is indeed the sole creation *ex nihilo*, for [such creation] has no need of a pre-existing material like potter's clay. Each created being effectively passes from nothingness into being, though it can subsist nowhere else than in the supreme act, from whose depths [it is graced to draw] the very power it has of subsisting. And if pure freedom is defined both as an absolute creation and as a limitless generosity, we understand that it manifests itself through a participation of its essence [which is] always on offer to liberties born without end.

Thus, [though] the pure act is [incapable of diminution or growth], it calls forth an infinity of particular beings to exist [on their own], none of whom will possess any other reality than that which he has chosen or given himself but which the pure act endlessly nourishes and supports.

The freedom of [a] particular being, therefore, cannot be defined as a fall, since it is on the contrary the very expression of the creative act's originality, whose essence is ever to produce, i.e. to be always on offer by way of participation in that ineffable and secret centre of Being where – [even in the case of] God – creation and sacrifice are one. For, on examining the nature of the act, we observe in it these two apparently contradictory features: that it is completely interior to self (we act only in ourselves and there is no other inwardness than there, where an act is accomplished) and that it is nonetheless always creative (as if it were constantly transported outside itself in order to add to itself). It is above all an inexhaustible creation of self – yet a *generous*⁶ creation which it constantly

⁵ I take it that the author is still speaking “in the strict sense”: i.e. our fundamental participation is in the Act and not in the given world. Practically speaking however we *do* participate in the given world: we respond to it, and all our worldly acts have worldly effects; indeed our vocation requires that we play a part in the world. Lavelle in fact recognises internal and external senses of participation and sometimes refers to the latter in terms of “being party to” and “partaking of” something else.

⁶ My italics.

seeks to share and which, according to its degree of power, awakens around it centres of initiative to which it communicates the creative power within it, or transforms the very matter before it⁷ so as to address other consciousnesses with a message that is also a gift of itself: which we could indeed express by saying that the act is—in God and in us—always [and] indivisibly [a] creation of self and [a] sacrifice of self. And such is doubtless the unsoundable secret of the creative act.

That the pure act is always expressed through creation—by [a] call to the being of various liberties, each of which gives being to itself—is what experience verifies, [provided] we agree to apply a method that allows us to recognise features of the pure act in every act of participation. In going from human freedom to the pure act, we will discover an analogical rapport between the two terms. Indeed, if we observe [an] action we perform, we can consider it in four successive aspects: first, it makes us be; second, it always imposes some modification upon the material world; third, it thereby creates a communication with other consciousnesses on whom it exerts an influence, which often tends to become a domination comparable to that which it exerts on things; [and] fourth, it awakens and liberates other consciousnesses, tends to multiply centres of personal initiative, propagates around it the initiative it disposes—and everyone is ready to acknowledge that [an action] is pure and perfect in the measure it is capable of ascending [this far]. Such is the form of activity of all those humanity has recognised as its masters: sages, heroes and saints. We should not be surprised, therefore, that the act—which is [sheer] act and creates itself absolutely (or again, exists eternally)—has for [its operation] no need to apply itself to a material it modifies (though it has often been considered a demiurge); that it does not try to reign over other consciousnesses through the intermediary of universal laws (though it has been considered a supreme despot); and that this eternal creation of self [is inwardly one] with the infinite liberality through which it calls other beings to share in its own power and to dispose it as it disposes it. That a feeling spreads, that an idea fructifies—this is a kind of testament or echo of that act through which a liberty is constituted, whose nature is ever to give rise to another [free being].

ART. 3: Participation founds autonomy rather than suppresses it.

In so far as our freedom makes us participate in an act that is self-caused we must say that our being and our encounter with pure being reside at the point where our freedom is exercised. However, freedom demands an independent initiative such that it always takes the form of an emancipation or a liberation: with respect to whatever it does not take upon itself it is [an act] of negation;

⁷ I.e. alters the material world.

[wherever it has a positive sense] the pure act is its source; [wherever it has a limiting character] it catches [the act] and deflects [its] course. Thus, we understand without difficulty how, [regardless of whether or not freedom is exercised and the manner in which it is exercised], nothing is changed in the pure act, though everything [else] is modified, not only in my participated being but in my rapport with other liberties and in the entire world of participation.

Human freedom, therefore, appears as the supreme mediation between the world and the Pure Act. Despite the paradox, we can say that [freedom] alone is given to us—but in such a fashion that we are nonetheless always obliged to give it to ourselves: it therefore appears as the very reverse of every given. But since the world ever appears to us as expressing the very conditions of [freedom's] employment, we can say that [freedom] ceases to be a given for us at the very moment it becomes for us the principle [behind] all givens.⁸

The secret of participation resides in this: if it is a participation in a Pure Act, in an Absolute Self, it should also render each subject an act or a self which, instead of possessing absolute interiority and freedom, indefinitely tends toward them. That is precisely the experience consciousness gives us. Hence, there is between human freedom and divine freedom both an independence and an identity: independence because wherever freedom is exercised it is a hearth of original initiative; and identity because freedom is always a creative act, such that it is within man [yet] above his nature; it is an ideal in which he participates, precisely to the degree that he delivers himself from the chains that bind him: to be free for [such] a being is not to have fulfilled conditions that permit him to seek [the ideal's] light and its goodness, it is already to have found them.

We are well aware that the care [shown by] the modern world to defend the mind's autonomy makes participation singularly suspect. But we will remark at the outset that participation, such as we understand it, founds autonomy rather than destroys it; and it is precisely because it is participation in the pure act (i.e. in an absolutely self-caused power that realises within [it]self the eternal passage from nothingness to being) that our freedom is possible: we can tear ourselves from nature and become the principle of our own determinations. Participation, thus conceived, is emancipation and not subordination. But participation has the further advantage of at once showing how the very activity that I exert finds a superabundant source in [an] eternal activity that never fails it, and how the world in which I take [my] place—[a world] that expresses my limitation and is given to me—cooperates with me and constantly sustains me.

⁸ The paragraph's complexity derives in part from different slants on "the given". Usually the phrase refers to the fact-world that is simply there before me. But the phrase can also refer to something that is inwardly granted. Freedom too can be a given in this sense; it can indeed be the primary given.

ART. 4: *If the Pure Act is completely participable, each liberty calls for an infinite plurality of other liberties, owing to its deficiency.*

When a limited liberty has appeared (and we mean [here], limited not in its power of choice but by the loan it [draws on] the inexhaustible power it disposes and by the hindrances to which its efficacy is subject), it calls for the existence of other liberties, [this following from the] idea that the Pure Act holds nothing back and is completely participable, in such a fashion that [the existence of] each liberty – ahead of [making its own way along] the path from nothingness to being, [all the while] remaining deficient – would constitute an unbearable privilege if whatever [was] not participated by it were not [participated] by others: since no existence exhausts participation, to posit [any] one of them is [necessarily] to posit them all.⁹ The passage from nothingness to being is realised at every point in the All [and] cannot be realised at one point without being realised at all [points], else the integrity and the eternity of the All would not be safeguarded. Thus, each liberty, at the moment it begins to exert itself, evokes all other liberties, which, through their own exertion, shape [in concert] with it a world [that is] doubly infinite: in a horizontal or extensive order and in a vertical or hierarchic order, such that God is entirely given in an inexhaustible participation [which nonetheless preserves his unity and expresses it without ever shattering it]. If one wanted to translate this exigency of the whole, which is inseparable from participation, into a [non-ontological] language [that is] no longer ontological,¹⁰ we would have to say that each particular consciousness necessarily appeals to all others because the task [to be accomplished] cannot be fully realised by any of them [alone] but only by all [of them together]. Thus, my liberty always requires around it other liberties, which it is incapable of doing without. Though it can always isolate itself, it cannot [be sufficient to] itself. Each consciousness needs all others in order to sustain itself. And if someone wanted to say that it is enough [for each consciousness to remain] in rapport with the infinity of the act upon which it draws [by way of] a solitary dialogue, we would show that other consciousnesses are for it precisely mediators thanks to which it enters into communication with [the act] in an [ever-deepening] fashion, through an indefinite series of suggestions and proofs which constantly put novel forms of participation into play.¹¹ The history of my life is the history of my relations with other beings. These [beings] confirm me [in my existence] by taking me as [an] object of their activity, and we have shown that without them I would exist only to myself, i.e. in a subjective manner, as a power or a dream; I would not

⁹ See “THERE IS A COMPENSATION AMONG ALL PARTICULAR ACTIONS” in “Presence Regained”.

¹⁰ A similar redundancy is in the original. The author speaks of a language that is “*déontologique*” and no longer “*ontologique*”.

¹¹ I am not sure of the full meaning here. At a basic level it is understandable that even religious hermits draw upon the example and inspiration of other religious hermits, and indeed upon the entire education they receive prior to seclusion.

take part in the world. [Even in] the competition and struggle they maintain with me, if I consider these in a positive light, there is [nothing] that does not compel me to realise myself and to submit myself to a world whose unity derives from the dynamic solidarity of all its parts.

Moreover, I need other liberties because my freedom can only take another liberty as [a] counterpart¹². We feel that [freedom] is truly exercised only in [the] presence of a free being and not in [the] presence of a thing. The encounter with a freedom that is not mine obliges [my own freedom] to examine itself, to deepen itself and even to actualise itself. Perhaps it can posit itself only in [the] presence of another liberty that contradicts it, so that it truly discovers itself, not through its halt before some objective resistance but through its halt in the presence of an initiative that is not its own, which consequently shows it that [the other] too [took] an initiative [and was not just another part of] the natural order. Unlike absolute freedom—which calls for the existence of particular liberties purely by way of its own positivity, in such a fashion that, being itself a gift, it is given to itself at the same time that it is given to all—each particular liberty summons all other liberties by way of both its positive *and*¹³ negative traits: through its positive character, in the measure that it too [contains] a generous and creative superabundance; through its negative character, not only in the measure that it needs other liberties to supply what it lacks—i.e. to cooperate with them in the realisation of those spiritual aims it is incapable of obtaining by itself alone—but also in the measure that, [just] as it has other liberties [as counterparts], it in turn asks to become a [counterpart] for them, to be sustained and aroused by them, as it sustains and arouses them. This reciprocity is possible only owing to the limitation within us, such that, far from disowning the individual part of our nature, each [of us] posits it as inseparable from his freedom, of which it is the vehicle so to speak. Hence, the rapport among liberties always conveys a feeling of experienced or solicited tenderness addressed to that individual in each of us who, [while] not being the same in you and in me, precisely allows a sympathy between you and me [which is] founded on the consciousness of [the] misery common to us. The very conditions under which freedom is exercised also constitute the principle from which sympathy is derived. And if someone claimed that he [could] no longer find himself amid the relations between the pure act and particular liberties, i.e. between the infinite and the finite, we would reply that here indeed reciprocity [is] broken—but not the bond of love whose perfection precisely requires that [particular liberties] constantly receive and [that] the other constantly supplies.

¹² Literally “*objet*”. Since I can in fact take a thing as an object and since the word usually refers to a thing I assume the author employs the word in the sense of a counterpart. His word-choice seems unfortunate in light of the argument which follows.

¹³ My italics.

ART. 5: *The discontinuity among liberties negates neither their solidarity with respect to the Pure Act nor their mutual solidarity.*

The discontinuity among individuals appears inseparable from the very possibility of participation. For each [individual] needs to exercise an initiative that is suited to him and that is precisely marked by a kind of separation and denial with respect to actions he has not himself produced. Only at this price can being's intimacy be safeguarded within me. Only at this price can life and the world be for me a veritable new beginning at each instant.

Someone will ask whether this discontinuity through which I am separated from others does not separate me from the Pure Act as well, and thereby put an end to participation. But we will reply, firstly, that the process by which I found my own being itself supposes a power that is given to me and that I am happy to assume; [secondly], that I cannot deny [this power] without losing existence, though I can turn the [continually-supplied] force I dispose back against its source; finally, that the very process by which I separate myself from [another individual] creates only a relative separation between [us], because we are all united to each other by the common source upon which we draw and because participation does not create [worldly] parts, does not render beings separate and without communication: on the contrary, it fosters constant relations among them, and we might say that, if they are [joined to] the same principle by way of the activity they employ, they are at the same time [joined to] each other by way of their mutual passivity¹⁴. Which allows [us] to give participation its strongest and most beautiful meaning, since [participation] is possible only [by dint of] each individual [taking] upon himself responsibility for all existences, the whole universe and all history. And [indeed] everyone feels that – though the word “individual” always expresses a distinction, grounded in nature, between two beings, each of whom possesses an irreducible originality – the individual is nonetheless only an instrument of the person¹⁵ and that the person appears at the moment the individual, lifting himself above nature to a spiritual existence, and in the same stroke breaking free of his own limits to embrace the entire universe, agrees to partnership with the very act of creation, according to his forces.

Participation alone allows us to understand how beings are at once separate and united. They are separate by way of [their] personal character and free [owing to] the act they accomplish. And they are united because all these acts draw upon the same principle, whose efficacy they dispose. They are therefore interdependent owing to their common dependence and solidary in the unity of a spiritual society, where each assumes a [chosen] role he alone can fulfil.

¹⁴ Their passivity with respect to the absolute act.

¹⁵ The distinction between the individual and the person seems to be the distinction between physicality (“nature”) and spiritual essence.

However, the rapport between the Pure Act and particular liberties can be defined only by analogy with the rapport between each of these liberties and all the others. Yet our own freedom is always limited since it is linked with an individual nature that at once provides it with a limitation and an instrument. Consequently, we can say that, in the measure that our freedom participates in pure freedom, it imitates it, so that, in its most [nearly] perfect form, it seeks to summon the existence of other liberties, to aid and support them in the effort they too make in freeing themselves from their nature.

We must go further and say that [our freedom] ought to offer itself for participation, and that the sole means it has of realising itself is [by constantly awakening] other liberties to existence. Only then will it possess true creative efficacy. Which justifies the formula that [there can be] no other end for man than to become a god for men, and sufficiently demonstrates to us that we can render unto God what we have received from him only by doing for others what he has done for us.¹⁶

ART. 6: The paradox of freedom is the same as the paradox of participation.

It is not useful to ask whether the act we have described in Book One [is] a free act. If it is true that freedom is supreme independence and the power to draw from self all its reasons for acting, we must say that [the act is] freedom itself. Consequently, difficulties will [presently arise] with the study of participation. For on the one hand, nothing can be participated [in] but freedom; on the other hand, how can it be participated [in] without being destroyed?

We have been able to [shed] some light on these difficult problems only by trying to combine the results of two different methods: [the first] is deductive so to speak and [aims] to show us that the pure act can be exercised only by way of an infinite offer of participation to all particular beings, which [amounts to] a theory of creation; the other, a kind of confirmation and justification of this, [aims] to succeed in showing, [through analysis of] the very freedom that belongs to us, on the one hand, that it exerts itself by putting into play a power it has received, [and] on the other hand, that in its highest form it aspires only to create, i.e. to give rise to other beings outside itself [which tend] to be self-sufficient as well, or again, other liberties possessing and exercising the same initiative it employs and exercises itself. [Thus] the highest point freedom seeks to attain in its development must be the consummation of its union with God and the creation of a society [of] liberties, i.e. a spiritual society. We see therefore that there is a paradox in freedom but that it is one with the paradox of participation.

¹⁶ Lavelle's version of the Golden Rule.

For freedom is an initiative that is nonetheless received. It is the heart of myself and the act through which I create myself, yet at the same time it requires me to go out of myself in order to incessantly create an object exterior to myself. It is [the] formation of me and [the] determination of what I want to be, yet [it is] the actualisation of powers which are already myself and which so to speak lay out [my] path. It is always a choice among [possible courses]; yet as long as it remains a choice [it has a hesitant and imperfect character] such that it is fulfilled only at the moment the choice cannot be other than it is and manifests a necessary character. It is the affirmation of my independence, such that other liberties can do no more than limit it; yet it needs those different liberties, on the one hand to support it and on the other hand to give it a fitting and worthy aim to which it [can devote] itself: hence, freedom is creative in the measure that it is loving. Finally, freedom is a demand [on the part] of the separate individual seeking to give himself all the being and all the perfection he is capable of; yet [freedom] remains pure only if it holds fast to possessing nothing and never ceases to sacrifice all it has.

B) THE PRACTICE OF FREEDOM

ART. 7: Freedom is a return to zero.

What is admirable about freedom's exercise is that the All and the Nothing are in it and that, owing to this, we feel within it the passage from nothingness to being. [Freedom] is nothing; it is indeed an incessant return to zero. From this [derives] the negative aspect of this freedom which does not allow itself [to be determined or confined] by any of the already-realised forms of being; which breaks with the past; which ever wants to be a first beginning and never an end; and which [decrees] that every being [employing it] toss aside habit and memory so as to be always situated at the origin of what he wishes to be, as if all his former life were a chain from which he could deliver himself and which he [needed only] to forget in order to do away with. The purpose of all the [various] practices of purification is, therefore, to lead us back to that pure exercise of freedom through which our being is constantly reborn. Hence, because freedom separates us from the ready-made world, because it is not an object, it vanishes before the eyes of all those who seek to grasp it: it is then natural that they find nothing. Objective observation will only ever reveal to us ready-made things and the implacable order that unites them.

It is nonetheless from this Nothing that we witness everything emerge, the representation we form of the world as well as the modifications our will imposes on it. If freedom is a return to zero, it is an active and creative zero that is nothing more than the very power of acting and creating, considered in its

absolute purity. Thus the consciousness we have of our freedom while it is being employed is the very consciousness we have of creative action, in so far as we agree to participate in it.

Freedom – which is not an object – is therefore a perpetual liberation with respect to the tutelage of the object, a return to this zero of sheer power which takes upon itself the work of creation at each instant. There is no man who does not wake up in the morning ready to start his whole life over again rather than [merely] to continue it – an illusory ambition if it makes us forget that we need to continue it as well, i.e. to accept the conditions of participation. But then it places the entire universe in our hands as something possible and available.

ART. 8: *Freedom is the disposal of “yes” and “no”.*

The disposal of “yes” and “no” constitutes for us the essence of freedom, and in this disposal also resides both our own absolute and our participation in the Absolute Act: our own absolute, since we are here in the secret recess where no-one can intrude and choose for us and where what we choose is ourselves, not the [effaced] being we were but the one we are going to be; and participation in the Absolute Act, since it is here purely a question of a choice which, through the possibility of saying “yes”, inscribes us in Being thanks to an initiative that is our own, and [which], through the possibility of saying “no”, seems to remove us from [Being], even though [the execution of] this act of saying “no” is still a way of being inscribed in it. The freedom that puts both the “yes” and the “no” into our soul is, therefore, rightly a divine power in us. Only, creative power is nothing more than the power to say “yes”, while our freedom manifests its independence solely through the power it has of refusing the being proposed to it and consequently turning against its own origin. We will not draw from this [the] conclusion that the power to say [both] “yes” and “no” is situated – [there] within the [realm] of independence and freedom – above the simple power of saying “yes”. For it is easy to see that this “no” itself is only another “yes”, a “yes” [that is] so to speak limited and restricted to [a] participation cut off from the very principle on which it depends¹⁷, and [it is easy to see] that this “no” testifies to its impotence, since it does not succeed in removing us from the being we have received and still accept in the very act that negates it. Here, the generosity of the gift always exceeds the ingratitude of refusal. Thus this power of saying “yes” or “no”, which is the power of giving or refusing assent, shows that there is a subordination in it – doubtless not with respect to the choice it is capable of making but with respect to the very object of this choice. Not that this object is already given before [the] choice is realised; [rather,] it is a possibility

¹⁷ A form of participation that is “cut off from the very principle on which it depends” immediately suggests the possibilities of evil and chosen ignorance. However Lavelle does not specifically address these possibilities in what follows.

contained in the eternal act which the choice itself frees as possible ahead of actualising it.

In the most radical “no” there is still a singularly positive will: [the] will of our particular and separate being, which would agree to nullify the world and its own existence in the world rather than [to forego positing] that existence as absolutely sufficient. [Here arises a] curious contradiction which leads us to demand the relative [to] be converted into [an] absolute, [all the while] refusing the sole means that permits this conversion, which is to regard [the relative] as participating [in the absolute].

Whatever the apparent limitation to freedom, it is enough that [freedom] puts us in the presence of an absolute [by way of] the power it has of [providing] the “yes” or the “no” so that our being, our knowledge and our happiness depend upon us, even though we might not always be able to produce what we want, i.e. make the universe conform in reality to the caprice of our desires. The power that belongs to us is at once more subtle and more profound. For the Pure Act, which is everywhere present, is also present to us. It grants our mind¹⁸ the power it has of regulating and directing our attention. And [owing to it], we never lack— [there] in the world before us—the light given to us, the call made to us, the occasion offered to us.

In so far as [human] freedom is a participation in the absolute, the absolute is present within it; and indeed it is [present] in the “yes” and the “no” it is capable of granting. But [the] very power of saying “no” shows that [human freedom] can itself be enchained, [can] introduce contradiction to itself by seeking to reject being through an act of negation, which [act] nonetheless grants it its very being—or [it can] allow itself to be seduced by appearance or passion, i.e. [can] prefer its limitation[s] to its pure exercise.

Doubtless it can be said [that freedom] is perfect inwardness, and that it is even the fundament of all inwardness, since all passivity supposes, at least in some measure, an agent external to us that limits us. However, there is [here] a great difference between the Absolute Act—for which nothing is external, such that the initiative and efficacy disposed by particular liberties still come from it—and each of these liberties, which is interior to itself only owing to the choice it makes, yet which [choice] supposes an uninterrupted oscillation either between reason and passion or between grace and necessity.

¹⁸ Or, spirit.

ART. 9: *The conditions of participation require freedom to take the form of free-will.*

We understand very well that human freedom has always encountered adversaries, despite the obvious clarity of the word, despite the constant testimony of consciousness in its favour [and] despite the constant demand for social liberty—which, through a curious paradox, often coincides with the negation of inner freedom [by] the most zealous partisans [of social liberty]. Freedom cannot be given¹⁹ but only the conditions that permit it to be manifest. These conditions can be realised even if all individuals remain slaves. Meanwhile, to deny freedom is to complain of not possessing limitless power; yet [freedom] only allows us to [invest] our action in a world that [spreads beyond] it, and consequently always compels us to reckon with necessity. It disposes certain powers it finds within us [and] certain objects it finds before us. Also, it is always manifest as a choice: we recognise it solely in the form of free-will, such that freedom in the strict sense, i.e. perfect independence, [is] the mark of the Pure Act, [while] free-will [is] the mark of a particular being engaged in the world of plurality, [a being] who is always in [the] presence of other beings from which he must distinguish himself, [and always] in [the] presence of various options, one of which will become his own.

Not that these options are so many objects, already-given before freedom is exercised, since freedom's nature is first of all to give them birth, i.e. to release their possibility through an act of thought. [Nor is it]²⁰ that free-will possesses an absolutely creative character within [its sphere of operation], since it resides purely in a consent that cannot be forced. Indeed, free-will—through its connection with certain conditions that are imposed on it, with certain motives and ends that are constantly proposed to it—clearly [displays] its participated character. And this participation shines forth all the more when we note that [free-will] never comes into play in the form of a choice between possibilities all on the same level. Choice is of-a-piece with value: it [makes sense] only in a hierarchy we have established among various values. And the peculiarity of choice is at once to create and to recognise value. Here we encounter its origin at the same time as its true criterion. For we all know that free-will does not operate according to a horizontal order of [mere]²¹ selection but according to a vertical order of preference: and each of us shapes experience from this vertical order in accordance with whether his spiritual activity is more [nearly] perfect and pure, or whether it is abandoned in favour of passivity and the body.

¹⁹ This might appear to contradict the assertion in ART. 3 that freedom “alone is given to us” but of course the full statement is: “[freedom] alone is given to us—but in such a fashion that we are nonetheless always obliged to give it to ourselves.”

²⁰ The words that follow are appended to the preceding sentence in the source-text.

²¹ My addition.

C) FREEDOM AND LIMITATION

ART. 10: *To say that freedom is the power of [self-determination] is to define it as the act of participation.*

The classic²² definition of freedom is singularly instructive: we say that it is *the power of [self-determination]*. And it is noteworthy that by “determination” we understand voluntary decision as well as the act by which we agree to give ourselves limits, i.e. the act by which we agree to create ourselves. To depart from indeterminacy is to depart from a state that was until then, at least for us, composed of an ensemble of indistinct possibilities, among which we had not chosen and none of which was ours. To determine oneself is obviously, as so often observed, to bring forth one of them and to sacrifice the others (though no choice can be excluded in [the grand context of] Being and [we are compelled] to consider sacrificed possibilities as the rungs and means²³ of reserved possibilities).

Every particular act, therefore, supposes on the one hand a negative idea, i.e. a limitation or negation of the pure act, and on the other hand a positive idea that signals [our taking charge of] this very act, at least to a certain point – which is precisely expressed by the word “participation.” Yet participation – which, shall we say, never [comes] without a limitation – can only give me [a] sense of my imperfection and misery.²⁴ But for a particular being, to be limited is to inscribe its own being in Being, [and] therefore to consent to be. In this consent resides the act of participation: it is the affirmation not only of the value of the total being but of the determination that makes me be. And we must not merely consider what is [lacking in that determination] and what outstrips it but what is interior to it and what it allows me to possess. [Neither] should we forget that I determine myself through a choice, and indeed through a series of choices: first, between being and nothingness, then between positive [or] affirmative determinations and other determinations [that are] negative and destructive, [and] finally between certain ways of acting that [accord] with my individual nature and correspond with my vocation and other [ways of acting] that I exclude because they awaken no power in me and solicit no interest. We understand, therefore, that I shape myself by limiting myself and that this limitation itself becomes the trademark of the personal operation by which I

²² Literally, the *most* classic.

²³ I gather the idea the author is getting at is that abandoned possibilities grow in potential and eventually become “rungs” of a ladder to realisations “reserved” for later climbers.

²⁴ In other contexts the author represents participation as a source of joy.

engage my responsibility and by which I will to be [such-and-such] and not something else.²⁵

But when we consider this choice that engages us as a limitation, it always seems that it makes us lose some good we already possessed. Only, until then no good was really possessed by us. Determination is, therefore, not merely limiting. There is in it the affirmation of a preference, the will to an order, [and] the aim of a perfection we must create in order to be able to take hold of [each of these]. In the Absolute Being these limits are only a sheer possibility; but that is because they can be isolated only by us; and at the moment we isolate them so as to actualise them, we precisely carry out that primordial operation which makes us participate in the pure act. We would, therefore, [be at a loss] to consider this operation as [limiting us], since it brings into being the original initiative that makes us be. We can, therefore, affirm without fear of error that it is not only through the abundance and richness of the determinations but even through the harshness and [the toil of completing] each of them that our participation in the perfection of Being is best realised.

ART. 11: *[Since] human freedom is only participation, the necessity that reigns in the world marks the limits of its efficacy.*

Until [now] no one has [tried] to examine in depth the problem of the connections between divine freedom and our own. Moreover, God's freedom, together with his omnipotence, has almost always been considered an obstacle to our freedom. [People] have sought to reconcile [the two freedoms] without succeeding. [They] believed it was necessary either [to construe] divine freedom and human freedom [as] two independent and antagonistic principles or to consider human freedom as a pure illusion, as a simple mode of divine activity. It seems, therefore, that we have [a]choice between pluralism and a monism like that of Spinoza. However, it strikes us that the doctrine of participation cuts a path between these two extremes. In the solution we will bring to the problem of the connections between divine freedom and human freedom [arises] the most [ticklish] point but at the same time the touchstone of this doctrine. Here it must [offer] proof of its truth and consequently triumph or fail. For if the act is self-caused, [then] either there is a real participation and the act can offer for participation only what it has, or rather what it *is*²⁶, so that all beings participating in it possess the same property of being self-caused; or particular beings [must be] considered as created by God in the manner of objects crafted

²⁵ Sartre provides a thorough excursus on the same theme in Part Four of *Being and Nothingness*. Briefly stated a mountain is not an obstacle unless there is an aim to reach the other side of it. So in a sense the obstacle defines the person. Indeed many of Lavelle's arguments in *Of the Act* closely resemble arguments later employed by Sartre.

²⁶ My italics.

by an artisan or as modes that [express] divine freedom without themselves possessing any initiative or autonomy—and in [these latter] two cases participation is an illusion.

We [find] a confirmation of such a view²⁷ in this observation: thinkers who affirm the existence of God [or] that of human freedom are always the same ones who negate one [or] the other. The first, however, [must] always defend themselves against both the reproach and the danger of absorbing human freedom into divine freedom, though they have the feeling that, whatever the dialectical difficulties, the second [affirmation] founds the first so that it is at the very point where our [personal] freedom is exercised in the purest fashion that our union with God is most [nearly] perfect. Which in a sense confirms the truth of material determinism, since it is [necessarily the case] that in separating ourselves from God we precisely become slaves of the passions, i.e. of the body.

We almost always consider the subordination of particular beings to the absolute as [entailing] the negation of freedom, [as] we see in [the philosophy of Spinoza]. But that inference cannot be granted. For if perfect independence, which is the character of the absolute, is realised in an inward and positive fashion only by freedom, i.e. by the power of being self-cause, then we see that it is precisely through freedom that participation is accomplished and that necessity expresses, rather, what escapes participation in each of the [various] forms of being yet derives from the solidarity of them all. Our participation in the absolute resides, therefore, always in consent, which cannot be forced and which, regardless of the causes that bear upon it, ever retains the disposition of the “yes” and the “no”. The inner activity of every particular being comes from God but becomes the activity of its own self through a compliance that constitutes the I of this being. Freedom, therefore, remains forever absolute in its form, and Descartes [correctly discerned] that it is equal in God and in us, though the efficacy it disposes is singularly unequal in him and in us—or even that the efficacy is *completely*²⁸ in God while the disposition is left solely to us, as Malebranche [had] it.²⁹ And we can say, in another sense, that divine freedom is rigorously [non-material] since matter always signals the gap that separates it from human freedom, or that measures the power it puts into play. Also, we should not be astonished that matter always appears to contradict freedom [and] that the most rigorous determinism reigns within it. [This] does not allow us to think either that it truly puts freedom in check, as if it proceeded from another principle, or that it requires us [to make] an arduous compromise with it, since it is always the expression of freedom, [its] negative aspect so to speak, and since,

²⁷ Presumably that there is “a real participation” in freedom.

²⁸ My italics. The author’s vacillation here is important since different conceptions of God are involved.

²⁹ Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715), a major thinker in the Cartesian school and another key influence in Lavelle’s philosophy. Malebranche argued that all knowledge, whether internal or external, is in God so that objectivity in the scientific sense is undercut: knowledge does not originally come from things but from God. Our relations therefore are solely with him—to the extent that all efficacy or power resides with him and humans are limited to its employment.

[in constantly defining freedom's limits], it also [and] always provides [freedom] with [a] point of application for [passing beyond]. We can go so far as to maintain that the very adventures in which each individual finds himself involved, far from depending on a calamity that is imposed on him and that begins by restricting his exercise of freedom, are on the contrary like a kind of reflection of that original determination of our freedom as compared with the absolute act. Which is, as we see without difficulty, just the reverse of the position taken by classical determinism, and doubtless the sole means of reconciling freedom with necessity, if it is true that freedom [could] never be drawn from necessity, whereas there is no difficulty in considering necessity as the product of freedom: the trace it leaves behind it and the history of its failures, so to speak.³⁰ Moreover, here is a view that experience would easily confirm for all those who fix [attention] on the inner act through which they constitute their secret personal life and consider the events of existence only in relation to it, instead of first attaching themselves to those events, [all the while] wondering how freedom could be inserted into them and become capable of modifying them.

ART. 12: *We have received all that we are yet give it to ourselves.*

Freedom is participation itself in so far as it is participation in an act that is self-caused and cannot be present in my being—however humbly it is conceived—without rendering it self-caused as well. And we can say that the originality of each being consists precisely in the circumscribed sphere where the power it has of effectively being self-cause is exercised.

But this power is a power we have received: it is available in us even before we employ it. The seizure we make of it is ours but we can leave it unemployed. Through this seizure [the power has its inception] in us and veritably renders each being cause of itself; yet it surpasses us, both in its possibility, which we are restricted in actualising, and in its efficacy, which we are pleased to behold as a perpetual miracle.

We witness thought hesitate between these two contrary assertions: that everything we are [and] everything we have [is received] and that it is we who give it to ourselves. But they are both true and false at the same time. For in one sense everything is received, but what is received is freedom³¹, i.e. the dignity of being cause. Yet the peculiarity of this freedom is to borrow from the pure act both its operative virtue and the matter it disposes, matter always expressing what is lacking in the operation and must be supplied from the outside, so to

³⁰ Of course the argument assumes the existence of both freedom and necessity whereas a strict determinism would deny the former. Here the argument of William James is perhaps relevant: how in a world of strict necessity could the notion of freedom ever arise?

³¹ Again the affirmation that freedom is a given. See note 19.

speak: nonetheless, this matter itself is not exclusively received, for it can be [received] only by way of the very initiative that takes possession of it. In this fashion, everything is given to us, but on the condition that we agree to take it and that there is no other act in us but usage [and no] other possession than [what is] usufructuary³².

Freedom can still be regarded as the passage from nothingness into being, and this definition is just, at least to a certain point, since whatever freedom brings forth is new to the free being.³³ But this novelty is not absolute. It brings forth our being from the total being within which it will take [its] place, which [being] furnishes it with both the efficacy through which it is realised and the stuff of all its acquisitions: this being that creates itself eternally permits us – at the point where we can say “I” – to welcome into ourselves the acting power. We pause here and [feel] the truth of participation so acutely that freedom itself strikes us as [being] limited [through and through]. It is, so to speak, [limited] in three different ways:

1. because it is a power that we have received and that depends on us to put into play through a consent we can give or refuse;
2. because it is always associated in us with an individual nature that carries within it certain determined powers we are capable of actualising or of leaving in a state of pure [potentiality], and among which [powers] we make a choice through which we contribute to the constitution of our being;
3. because this liberty is, consequently, never manifest in the form of a *creation* but always in the form of a *choice* -- whether we consider the powers that make up the originality of each I, the very objects offered to it and to which its activity is applied, [or] the proportion that should be set up between those powers and objects, through which we succeed in realising an accord between our vocation and our destiny.

³² A legal term: the right to use and profit from another's property.

³³ The author concedes that creation *ex nihilo* has experiential validity with respect to temporal beings but only figurative significance with respect to the Act itself.