

FREEDOM AND THE INTERVAL¹

A) THE INTERVAL AND THE PLAY OF PARTICIPATION

ART. 1: *The notion of the interval is inseparable from that of participation.*

The peculiarity of participation is to create a gap between the total act and the particular act, precisely so that the pure act [will continue] to inspire and support the particular act, which must nonetheless be somehow separate from it so as to effect a personal approach and to take upon itself an initiative of its own. What defines each domain of action is the interval [within] which our action [can] be exercised. And we understand without difficulty that [the interval] can be defined both by its extent, i.e. by the field it leaves to our initiative, and by the specific term from which it separates us, which is always in rapport with the aim of participation's activity. There is no difference between the theory of the interval and that of participation. We can say [of] this interval that there is no consciousness that does not keenly feel its reality: this is the interval we think of when we consider consciousness as a lack² which desire, will, dream and hope

¹ Chapter Twelve, contained in Part One ("The Genesis of the Interval") of Book Two ("The Interval").

² Of fullness or being. Sartre later pushes the notion to an extreme, defining consciousness as a nothingness or a kind of black hole through which negation enters a world of uniform fullness.

[all] try to fill. It is also this interval which certain modern philosophers designate by [the] terms “fissure” or “crack” so as to mark the presence, [there] at the heart of things, of a kind of ontological flaw, essential to the very existence of the universe.³ It is this interval again which is [bound up with] so many unsatisfied aspirations and which gives a secret favour to all forms of pessimism, [there] at the interior of each consciousness. Finally, it is this interval which (following from Plato, who vainly tried to deliver the thought of being from the stern chains with which Parmenides⁴ [had] constrained it) so many philosophers call for as the non-being necessary for the independence of every particular being: for its development, for its power of invention and creation.⁵ It is nonetheless plain that this interval is a lack only for *us*⁶: for it precisely expresses that plenitude of concrete being – always present, always on offer – to which we continually respond with an action fitting to us, which alone is capable of rendering [being’s] measureless superabundance ours, in accordance with [our] unique perspective on the world.

Also, meditation on the interval will not bring forth any groaning from us but only [an] emotion filled with gravity inseparable from the discovery [not only] of our dependence with respect to the creative act [but of our need to take] possession of it in order to contribute – by creating ourselves – to changing the face of the world as well. For the interval is indispensable to freedom; it is the very condition of its play. Thanks to it life [is] for us an uninterrupted initiative, an indefinite [starting-over], an [ever-green] promise – but also a series of unforeseeable trials we accept and gifts we receive. The interval is the I itself, [giving] birth to a world before its very eyes, [a world] of which it is a part yet which nonetheless belongs solely to it.

Thus, whoever follows the lessons of a master [in freedom] bases his personal freedom on that teaching. But he is not sure that this freedom can give itself all that the master’s freedom granted itself; the distance separating [disciple from master] is measured by all the aims that hark back to [the latter’s] teaching [but] have not been converted by the disciple into his own acts of freedom.

³ I am uncertain of which “modern philosophers” the author has in mind.

⁴ Parmenides (*circa* 500 B.C.) is one of the founders of Greek philosophy. The preserved fragments of his doctrine are typically taken to uphold the view that what-is constitutes a single being and that whatever appearance of division or whatever assumption of non-being leads to error and should be rejected. Hence, the “stern chains” referred to above. Lavelle’s insistence on the univocity of being harks back to Parmenides but his philosophy also makes room for the realm of manifold appearances, namely via his theory of participation and the interval.

⁵ To a remarkable degree the preceding anticipates the philosophy of Sartre.

⁶ My italics.

ART. 2: *The act leaps the absolute interval between nothingness and being by converting it, [there] at the interior of participation, into an interval between the possible and the real.*

We almost always consider the interval as primary and the role of consciousness [as that] of bringing together [its] extremities through an action we therefore naturally define as [one] of synthesis. But we should not forget that the interval first arises in being as a condition of participation, and consequently [as a condition] of all the syntheses through which each of us fills [the interval], according to his forces [and] by virtue of a free act.

The absolute interval [could be considered] the very interval [separating] nothingness from being, but this infinite interval is in some fashion eternally crossed by the pure act in so far as it is creator of itself, and by the shared act in so far as it permits us, for our part, to pass at every instant from nothingness to an existence that is ours. But the impossibility of positing nothingness in anything but a verbal manner compels us to install within being itself [the] interval between essence and existence, which can be traversed in two different senses, if it is true that existence is the sequent of essence in God, and that, [where] we are concerned, we need to posit our existence [before we can] discover our essence⁷: for we can [rightly] say that existence pertains to our body or to our handiwork once it has been achieved, but neither our body nor our handiwork would have any true significance if they were not instruments that allowed us to put our inner activity into play so as to realise our spiritual essence by expressing it.

We [also] scoop out an interval between various possibilities and being, which is necessary for being to become our *own*⁸ being. But we know [very] well that possibility itself [resides] in being, and indeed that there is within being a plurality of possibilities, from which we must choose our own being. Yet our being is at first only the being of this possibility, and indeed of various possibilities, until the moment [a] free act will have indivisibly grounded our veritable reality in them. This interval between possible being and real being is found again in the interval that, for thinking, separates negation (which is rich in [the] plurality of possible affirmations) from real affirmation, and absence— which I also populate with possible presences— from actualised presence.

We have formerly presented under the title *The Visual Perception of Depth*⁹ the most striking illustration of the theory of the interval. It is in fact the interval that

⁷ The formula “existence precedes essence” is usually associated with Sartre but Lavelle anticipates him, both here and in Art. 3 of Chapter Six (“Existence and Essence”) where Lavelle asserts: “We need to reverse the classic connection between being and existence, and to consider existence as the means of winning my essence.” The chapter is not included in this selection of writings.

⁸ My italics.

⁹ Envisioned while Lavelle was a prisoner of war and later presented in a doctorate thesis in 1922. He gives a summary of it in the following sentences. In this connection it is worth noting that the word “*intervalle*” can be translated as “space”.

visual perception opens before us—[an] interval bathed in light which allows us to represent to ourselves all objects in the measure that they do not coincide with us, yet opens before us the path of desire and permits movement [along it] until the moment we reach the goal, i.e. the moment we can enter into contact with it and possess it.¹⁰ The depth of the visual image shows the distance separating possibility from actuality, and free movement alone converts one into the other.

It is noteworthy that the oppositions, [which have] today become almost classical, [between] the constituting reason and the constituted reason of Mr. Lalande¹¹, and in a different sense, [between] the willing will and the willed will of Mr. Blondel¹², are both meant to measure the interval [separating] the deep-seated act (upon which our initiative constantly draws) from the operation that expresses it and remains with respect to it imperfect and unachieved. No one can doubt that all our [lifelong] labours, all the works we accomplish and the very existence of the world we constantly perceive and transform, have as their goal to make [these two] coincide.

ART. 3: The identity of and difference between Being and the Act suffice to justify the interval between subject and object.

The identity of Being and the Act that we established in the second part of Book I¹³ was founded on this two-fold affirmation: [first], that the reality to which our consciousness gives us access is being and not appearance; and [second], that this reality can be interior to itself only if it is an act that creates itself. But whence [the fact] that we can indifferently employ the two terms “being” and “act” to designate it, unless from the very conditions under which participation is produced, which [demand] that I carry out a personal, temporal, abstract or intentional [and] always incomplete initiative that [stands] opposed to an object from which it is distinct, of which it seeks to take possession—either in order to represent it or to modify it—and upon which the act must always come to bear, so to speak, for [the object] to be realised?¹⁴ Yet it is this object, which seems to exist without us, that constitutes for us veritable being—though it can only emerge from our consciousness in connection with an initiative that comes

¹⁰ Lavelle’s notion of the interval can be usefully compared with Heidegger’s notion of “the Open”; see particularly Heidegger’s 1930 essay “On the Essence of Truth”.

¹¹ André Lalande (1867-1963), Lavelle’s senior at the Collège de France and author of *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie* (“Technical Vocabulary and Critique of Philosophy”), original studies 1902-1923.

¹² Maurice Blondel (1861-1949). He advocated an energetic philosophy that united pragmatism, Neo-Platonic principles and Christian ideals. Lavelle cites Blondel and Lalande in support of his contention that there is a gap between active and passive, subject-like and object-like, aspects of our life.

¹³ Specifically in Chapter Four “The Act of Being”.

¹⁴ In asking this convoluted question the author stipulates so much that the central issue—how the words “being” and “act” come to signify the same thing—tends to get lost. The answer (contained in the stipulations) is that they stand for the same reality, alternatively taken as object and subject.

from us and is never resolved into the operations we undertake to assimilate or produce it.

The classic opposition between subject and object appears as the simplest expression of the interval which separates the participated act from the pure act. For it is necessary to note that we will by turns consider the subject as an imperfect activity which struggles to envelope an object that always goes beyond it, and the object as a particular determination that limits but never exhausts the infinite power of the subject. [This] is easily explained if we reflect that, in the absolute being, there is no distinction between subject and object but that, as soon as the latter begins to come to light, the [resulting] interval can be considered in two opposing ways: either limitation appears on the side of the subject, which [becomes conscious] of its inadequacy with respect to the totality of the object, or it appears on the side of the object, which thinking circumscribes but [whose] full fecundity [thinking] never expresses. This sort of reciprocity is only an apparent contradiction if we agree to reflect that pure being, since it allows no separation between subject and object, [could] be considered by turns as an infinite subject for which the particular object represents and [taps into] one of [its] possible operations, and as an infinite object of which the individual subject seeks possession [but] which forever escapes him. We understand that [each of] these two perspectives contain[s] a share of truth, [which, when] affirmed in isolation, gives birth to the conflict [between] idealism and realism, which is such that each [set of proponents] is nonetheless assured of triumphing in its chosen view. We see then that the peculiarity of consciousness is precisely to constitute itself by opposing thinking to thought¹⁵: a gap always separates them and prevents [consciousness] from ever coinciding with the wholeness of thinking or the wholeness of thought, which are identical in the total being; this gap always seems to be produced from one side or the other, and every effort is bent on filling it. [The gap] is, so to speak, the milieu of participation, and what we have just said somewhat shows why [participation] seems sometimes to increase the internal activity we dispose and sometimes our shining upon the world of objects.

ART. 4: The whole of consciousness oscillates in the interval that separates nature from freedom, and the action I accomplish from the response made to me.

We are very wrong to seek within freedom a form of activity that would rightly belong to us and that, [despite] having a creative character, would nonetheless be ours alone. To act is to consent to an activity that is proposed to us, to [make] a choice through which [that activity] is exerted in us and becomes our own. But since our activity is participatory, it is obvious that there is both

¹⁵ I.e. the thinking subject to its object in thought.

initiative and constraint within it. Where is the initiative unless in the operations which depend on our spirit¹⁶? Where is the constraint unless in the states imposed upon us by the body? But in the very operations that depend on our spirit, it still seems that the I responds to a law it can shirk through inertia or revolt; on the other hand, when it yields to it there is no constraint since the act it accomplishes and the act by which it consents to this accomplishment are no longer distinguishable.

The I is, so to speak, caught in a choice; and consciousness is always consciousness of an oscillation between two orders that surpass us: [a spiritual order] in which we participate only by making it our ours and [a natural order] in which we participate only by submitting to it. The peculiarity of freedom is to incline us toward one or the other. Only, there is no symmetry between them, because being free to choose is [already] having access to spiritual existence, which however can become mine only if I will it, [but] in such a way that it would not be [a] participated [existence] if it could not, so to speak, turn against its own principle and be enslaved to matter. The character of free-will is to permit us to choose, [we might] say, between freedom and necessity; it is to be able to affirm or deny the freedom [free-will] disposes, to keep it or to lose it, so that it always decides between an activity it receives—on the condition that it puts it into play—and a passivity imposed on it, to which it [need only] abandon itself. Not only does my personal will always oscillate between [these two poles] but there is always in participation a [simultaneous] implication of activity and passivity: which suffices to explain, on the one hand, why I am passive even with respect to my own activity, and on the other hand, why whatever surrender I [might] effect in turn impedes my activity, distends it and obliges me to win it back.

Our consciousness, therefore, oscillates within an interval without which it would have no play. To determine the character of this interval in a more precise manner, it is enough to observe that a nature has been given to us for which we cannot say we are responsible—though heredity perhaps [argues against there being something] in the world that is a pure given and that escapes all responsibility.¹⁷ But if there were only nature within us, there would be no room for freedom. Now we are also a reason¹⁸, and if we were nothing more, we would be like spiritual automaton[s]. But we are reason *plus*¹⁹ nature, and our consciousness moves from one to the other without ever being irresistibly carried away by [either]. Our reason would remain abstract without nature, which gives it [materiality]; our nature would remain blind if our reason did not try to take charge of it. Neither one nor the other [alone] would be enough to constitute our

¹⁶ Or mind.

¹⁷ I have done my best to make sense of this aside. I am guessing that the author wants to suggest that even inherited characteristics involve responsibility and choice on the part of forbears.

¹⁸ A reasoning faculty and cause.

¹⁹ My italics.

I; the sole thing that belongs to us, [according to] Descartes, is the use of our reason—yet in its associations with our nature.

A new interval then appears between the act I make mine and the response given to it. Perhaps we might recognise that all dialectic on [the theme of] thought and will consists for us in [finding] a correspondence between the action we accomplish and the result we seek to produce. Here resides the principle of all the methods we apply, all the rules we put into play. But no method, no rule ever succeeds completely.²⁰ The result escapes us at a certain point. It brings us sometimes more, sometimes less than we had hoped for; and the dialectic of consciousness is that of our successes and our failures, i.e. in a more general sense, of our trials. If [matters] were not thus, our life would run no risks. It would develop by virtue of an infallible mechanism. It would not know personal invention, voluntary good or enrichment.

But between action and result, the interval is presented in two different guises: it is first of all an interval that is the same for me and for everyone and that appears generated by the very conditions under which participation in general and the constitution of all finite being [are] realised; it is next a subjective, individual and variable interval that expresses the conditions under which my freedom is exercised and that puts the perspective I acquire on the world in rapport with, not only my own originality, but the activity I dispose, i.e. with my merit.

B) THE INTERVAL AND THE DIVERGENCE OF CONTRARIES

ART. 5: *The interval ever gives rise to pairs of contraries, one [member] of which always has a positive privilege and calls for the other only by way of its limitation, as we see in the pairs [composed] of necessity and freedom [and] of the act and the given.*²¹

We will not fail to take into account the disparity between the contraries we join together in various couples. One [member] always has a positive priority [over] the other, [which] is some respect [its] negation; [and this] is easy to prove by examples. Yet if one of these two terms always has an invincible ascendancy [over] the other, it is because their opposition is always realised at the [heart] of a

²⁰ The same consideration can be taken as a justification of Lavelle's own avoidance of a regimen for attaining more perfect intimacy with Being. Nothing like Husserl's quest for precise method applies to him, and it must be conceded that the mechanicalness of an exact method seems contrary to freedom, creativity and being.

²¹ The formulation calls to mind Hegel's dialectical scheme whereby a thesis generates an antithesis from which springs a synthesis. But whereas Hegel's dialectic looks toward future syntheses as a kind of ascent, Lavelle's looks back toward the origin from which all contraries devolve. For him ascent is always a matter of inwardly re-ascending or harking back to the source while outwardly moving forward in time.

higher term, within which is born the interval that separates them and is required for their [inter]play. In this consists the secret of participation.

Thus, we can oppose freedom to necessity, which make sense only in relation to each other; freedom being the first term, since we doubtless have an experience of freedom and since necessity can be defined only by negation, [namely,] as what can neither be nor be conceived [in any other fashion] than that it is not²². Freedom, by contrast, is always linked to choice and possibility. Now it is within the interval separating the two terms of this pair [comprised of freedom and necessity] that [our] activity is exerted. But it is obvious that this couple itself makes sense only in connection with a Supreme Act, where freedom holds all that is positive in it, though it only participates in it, which [means] that it calls for its contrary, i.e. necessity, as both [the] condition and expression of its operation. It is this limitation introduced into my very freedom that makes of it a free will, i.e. a faculty capable of choosing between a pure freedom towards which it ever seeks to lift itself and a necessity which threatens to enslave it and to which it always risks succumbing. However, the Supreme Act, of which we are speaking here, rises above both freedom and necessity: instead of being the synthesis that unites them, it is rather the principle that founds their opposition.²³ For it is a perfect freedom, which finds within itself the sole origin of what it is [and] what it does but cannot know those imperfections in knowledge and those hesitations in decision [that are] inseparable from freedom of choice: thus, instead of being opposed to necessity, it coincides with it, [there] in the indivisible unity of a spiritual spontaneity.²⁴

It is easy to see that we can in the same fashion oppose the act to the given by showing that these two terms are correlates but that the act has priority because there is no given save through it. Nonetheless, this contrast is brought about only by an Act²⁵ that admits of no limitation, to which no given corresponds and which renders possible both the participatory act and the given which is correlative to it. In the pair formed by activity and passivity, passivity is subordinate to activity, since we can say of passivity that it is a non-activity, [or] a limited and interrupted activity, but [we cannot say] of activity that it is a negation of passivity or a “least” passivity, which would be insufficient to engender activity, except in the measure that, by negating the negation which is inseparable from this passivity, we rightly give rise to the primitive affirmation

²² A way of speaking that I suspect harks back to Parmenides.

²³ Plainly in contrast to Hegel. The author is referring to the unifying thesis that *precedes* opposition instead of the unifying synthesis that *follows* it, i.e. by way of a kind of compromise. To seek this term is effectively to go against the grain of time, as *Of Time and Eternity* makes clear.

²⁴ The “spiritual spontaneity” of the Supreme Act is both “perfect freedom” (as self-determination) and perfect necessity (as a condition where conflicting alternatives do not arise). In terms of its single thrust and absolute sway perfect freedom is perfect necessity.

²⁵ Note the distinction between “act” (in the realm of participation) and “Act” as an absolute.

without which the first negation could not have [arisen].²⁶ This sufficiently demonstrates that the opposition [between] passivity and activity is produced at the [heart]²⁷ of an activity superior to the two terms of [this] pair, in which they are [simultaneously] determined and set apart. Passivity is, therefore, always second, but [only] in relation to the activity with which it forms [a] couple, [which first becomes a couple in connection with] a participable activity that surpasses participated activity. Thus, because the opposition [between] the act of participation and the given grants the first of these terms right of privilege over the second, [there] at the very interior of the pair, we can consider the Pure Act as an absolute which exhausts the totality of being, which is above participation and provides all its conditions.

ART. 6: In the pairs [comprised] of the one and the many, of the universal and the particular [and] of presence and absence, a positive privilege [is likewise given to] the one, the universal and presence.

[In a similar fashion to the above] we always posit [a] couple [comprised] of the one and the many, where the two terms determine each other. But the one has pre-eminence [over] the many, which is the not-one; the one is, if you will, the affirmation since it is the act of spirit²⁸, and the multiple [its] negation, since it continually flees us as long as the one has not recovered it, e.g. in counting it, in making it a number. But to posit this one that is the contrary of the many is, therefore, to refer to a One²⁹ which contains the two contraries; the many is obtained either by a division of the one, and [thereby] attests to its richness, or by multiplication, and [thereby] attests to its fecundity. Division discloses the many in the one as the very reality that fills it, as the infinity it holds in potential; and multiplication is the same operation but considered in its development rather than in its principle: [like] the other it does not efface the one that produces it [or] posit any new term among the many without including it (along with those that precede it) in the unity of a number, i.e. in its own unity, to which the many ever testifies, since it does not succeed in escaping it.³⁰

It is [likewise] noteworthy that knowledge itself is always presented [to us] in the form of an opposition between the universal and the particular. Here, the universal again has a kind of privilege since it expresses the very unity of our

²⁶ A double negation (e.g. “It’s not not-cold.”) amounts to an affirmation (i.e. “It’s cold.”) which has to be the starting -point of whatever related negation.

²⁷ Literally, at the breast.

²⁸ Or the mind.

²⁹ The term recalls the writings of the Platonic philosophers, e.g. Plotinus (205-270 A.D.) for whom “the One” was the preferred name for the Absolute.

³⁰ However large or small it might be, a number is only another number. Though the number system is formally open-ended or infinite, it is totally contained in, and surpassed by, the understanding of the mathematician, i.e. in a unity which is not itself a number.

spirit; also, we understand that the universal has been considered the proper object of knowledge, that the particular checks it and that we always seek to reduce [the particular to the universal]. If every act of the spirit necessarily displays a universal character, we can say that the particular is precisely its negation, i.e. the non-universal. However, in the opposition [between] the universal and the particular, the universal is always abstract and the particular [always] concrete. [But once again], we can consider [them] as the sundering of a Concrete Universal which includes both of them and which, at the very moment participation begins, precisely allows us to grasp the universal in the form of a pure power—or of a category whose simple application is insufficient to give us the presence of the real—and the concrete in the form of a particular which, it seems, can only be given, which resists the ventures of thought and constantly limits them.

We [encounter] the same traits, finally, in the [contrast between] presence and absence.³¹ For it is obvious that presence and absence can be conceived only by way of their correlation. Yet no one will doubt that presence is positive, even if it is revealed to us with particular acuity when absence suddenly ceases; and no one can cast in doubt that absence is felt as a non-presence. But it is noteworthy that every absence is necessarily [the] absence of some *thing*³². Otherwise it would be [indistinguishable] from nothingness. We could not even speak of it. Not only is the feeling of absence present but the absent object itself is present in some fashion: through the idea that represents it to us, the appeal that carries us toward it, the void it makes us experience, the need we have of it or the simple malaise this absence gives us. [The preceding] is, therefore, [indication] that this absence itself is only a particular form of presence, an insufficient and discontented presence that seeks to arouse another [presence] who lacks it.³³ We cannot have the experience of a true and absolute absence. We incessantly pass from one presence to another, and we call the first “absence” when the other is [what] we desire. But here determinations are contrasted with an Absolute Presence which does not know absence [and] at the interior of which particular presences are wholly included—though they seem to be excluded in a certain fashion, as the presence of desire excludes the presence of [a] thing and can be called an absence with respect to it.³⁴

³¹ The same theme is addressed in greater detail in *Of Time and Eternity*.

³² My italics.

³³ The author is at pains to persuade readers that absence can play an active role, even to the point of describing it as “discontented” with itself and seeking to “arouse” us. In his *Being and Nothingness* Sartre will later assert and expand upon the very same point—without reference to Lavelle.

³⁴ Indeed the whole of my present situation can be rejected in favour of what I still believe myself to lack. Then concrete presence moves in the direction of absence while the absence of the desired object becomes almost palpable. The argument throughout is that presence is primary while absence is derivative, if not delusory, in that we live in a domain of uniform presence.

C) THE INTERVAL AND THE I THAT REALISES ITSELF

ART. 7: *The I never coincides³⁵ with itself, and the interval that separates it from itself is expressed by its infinite faculty for going-beyond.*

The difficulty we [face] in defining the nature of the I and of ever grasping it as a separate object³⁶ [plainly] shows us the true nature of participation. We [encounter] the I nowhere: it is a being that forms itself but is never formed, that seeks but never finds itself. If we look on the side of objects we see nothing more than our body in the midst of the world: no one will agree to say that this body is the I.³⁷ If we look on the side of that invisible activity which is one with self-consciousness, we find in it only a mysterious potential whose [actualisation] depends on us, an ideal toward which we constantly tend [but] with which we will never coincide³⁸. The being of the I is a limited being but [it] does not wish to remain closed within its limits: that it feels them is [a] sign that it is already beyond [them]. It is, therefore, a being that ever surpasses itself but that, in the very effort it makes to surpass itself, affirms the limits within which it remains [held in check]. It is the rapport or unstable equilibrium between its limits at each instant and its infinite capacity for going beyond. This faculty for going beyond gives expression to the interval within which the I constantly moves; and we rediscover the same interval, [as well as] the same unstable equilibrium between what we are and what we want to be, in the contrast between our individual nature or character and that universal, rational legislation to which we try to submit it, [and] in the contrast between that purely external life we almost always lead (where we yield to the solicitations of the body or society) and that perfect inwardness to ourselves that we endlessly pursue and that is for us an ever-distant and ever-threatened ideal.³⁹

³⁵ This refers to the temporal person—as “the I” usually does in Lavelle’s writing—and not the Pure Self or original I (see ART. 4 of “The Pure Self”) which is always complete. Still, there is a question whether coincidence with oneself “never” occurs among mortals. So intense is Lavelle’s focus on the future in this section that he seems to short-change the possibility of a present realisation.

³⁶ I take the author’s meaning to be that the I tends to be identified with what it is not, i.e. with objects such as the body or a personal history, whereas it is rightly a subject that can never be grasped in this fashion.

³⁷ Yet on what basis can the body be rejected unless there is prior knowledge, however vague, of the I’s true nature? At least some fully-achieved sense of self is needed to preserve its identity over time.

³⁸ Again, the recognition of an ideal suggests a close connection with it. Doubtless the I-sense changes over time, draws nearer to or further away from its ideal; nonetheless something within it must remain the same, else wholly different beings would be implied and there would be no path to follow.

³⁹ Lavelle here touches on what I see as the central issue. There are very different kinds of ideals. On the one hand there are goals or projects that aim at worldly ends, including a richer self-image. In all such cases the I is reduced to an object, which it is not and never can be. On the other hand there is the ideal of more perfectly coinciding with oneself in depth or essence, i.e. as a subject, which of course already supposes some measure of coincidence. Here Lavelle’s argument might be better expressed in terms of the I never fully coinciding with itself, though even that seems an overstatement.

The I's own activity necessarily evokes the idea of an interval [within] which it plays. This interval measures the field where it exerts itself [and] permits it to chart the paths to which it is committed and to reconcile the initiative it puts into play with a constraint that limits it and that it endures. Within this interval are interwoven all the relations it has with the world, which shape the very world in which it lives. The concrete reality of this interval is defined within us by the gap separating what we desire from what we have. And we can say that being becomes present to us not at the moment desire ceases but at the moment desire coincides with the object of desire. In this encounter is produced the act that gives us being. Finally, this interval is measured by time, i.e. by the very path that is given to us between the two limits of birth and death and that permits us to make a certain use of the being we have received by impressing upon it the stamp of all we have chosen. It is time that, by introducing delay into our life, clears this three-fold distance—between the finite and the infinite, [between] idea and being, and [between] absence and presence—which is the very condition of all participation.

ART. 8: The quantitative interval [separating] the individual from the All [attains] concrete value only owing to the qualitative interval [separating] each individual from his essence or his vocation.

There is in the problem of participation an essential ambiguity, important to clear up. For we almost always think that the interval [separating] the Pure Act from the shared act [belongs to an] exclusively quantitative order. Consequently, it seems to us that the peculiarity of participation is to define our limits, though also constantly to push them back: for [participation] to be ever-growing it is sufficient that it should be engaged in a progress that goes to infinity. [Here] is an aspect of participation we do not want to ignore but which nonetheless has an abstract, schematic character that expresses, so to speak, only the possibility of participation such as it is, rightly speaking, offered to everyone. It offers various consciousnesses a field of comparison that allows [the establishment of] ranks between them—which gives it a kind of allure. But quantitative participation evokes only the expansion of our phenomenal action across space and time. Yet we know very well that the metaphysical value of participation consists not in its breadth but its depth. Each of us feels that there is much vanity in [the] indefinite growth of our power over things or ideas, which risks distancing us ever further from our true essence. [Such] continuous expansion of participation makes sense only if it is an occasion to effect [that] falling-back upon self which delivers us to ourselves.⁴⁰ In this [respect], our capacity for inwardness is proportional to [the] risk of diversion. The end[s] men pursue [are] not the same for all: each

⁴⁰ The preceding comments affirm the existence of an essential self-nature that must in some sense be known, or at least intimated, at every stage of development.

individual seeks an absolutely original possession of himself that is the expression of his spiritual vocation.⁴¹ We are right to want always to surpass our limits. But it is necessary to distinguish between the limits of existence which are given to us and those of the essence we seek to acquire. It is within the interval [separating] them that our activity possesses true efficacy. As it happens, our life is [alack for our not having recognised] the destiny to which we were called, [for not] having known how to close ourselves firmly enough within the limits of our powers and [for not] having realised all the being they encompass.⁴²

The absolute is revealed to us neither in the dream of infinity nor in the vague aspiration that carries us toward it, but in the way we circumscribe the being we are and push the vocation assigned to us to the last degree: in this sense, restriction is often true wealth, and fidelity to self is often true fidelity to God. We understand, therefore, why our union with the Total Being is best realised by grasping [self's] particular determinations, and why our participation in the Pure Act is most [nearly] perfect in the exact accomplishment of our limited tasks. Our communication with the infinite is shown by the perfection of our action at each point. The infinite engages us in a series of trials that have no end, but these trials, as we see in the work of art, ever tend toward the present possession of an object that integrates them all, that grants us a final satisfaction and that, without arresting the [flow] of imagination, [provides it with] inexhaustible nourishment [within] its own bounds. Quantitative participation opens before us the common paths that permit each of us to obtain a unique and qualitative coincidence with Being, from which all difference[s] in magnitude [have] been removed. Which is sufficiently proven by the interval [separating] mathematical thought from sensible reality, movement from its result and—in artistic creation—the most sage technique from the most humble success.

Thus, the veritable mark of participation does not reside in the appearance of a quantitative infinity [in which] our spirit would be engaged in obtaining a measureless growth. For quantitative infinity expresses very well, in symbolic form, the law of participation which, by joining my particular being to the Total Being, puts me in rapport with a reality that is constantly supplied me; but [considered on its own], it seems [to compel] me less to seek myself than to flee myself, [to prevent] me from possessing anything by always leaving me remote from a good that I pursue [but] that always escapes me. It expresses the progress of participation but not its concrete, individual value: the latter is realised only by quality, which is correlative to quantity and gives it a content and a meaning.

[The only real act is an act] carried out by such-and-such [an] individual in such-and-such [a] place and at such-and-such [a]moment. But then it always

⁴¹ Here again Lavelle introduces the theme of vocation which occupies a central place in his overall vision.

⁴² Note the implication of a kind of ordainment. It suggests a pre-given essence like soul and is consistent with other statements in *Of the Act*. However the author will later (see *Of the Human Soul*) shy away from any suggestion of a pre-given essence. Of course it is possible that the ordainment in question refers merely to the life-situation into which one is thrown. However that does not jibe with the words “true essence” used earlier in this paragraph.

brings forth from the real a unique and incomparable form of participation which ought not to be evaluated merely according to magnitude but according to proportion, measure and justice. There are perhaps peaks in our life that cannot be surpassed. Quality is, within the objective order, what vocation is within the subjective order. There exists an absolute of individuality, a final term in the actualisation of its own powers, which is, so to speak, its perfection. Each of our real undertakings remains separated from it by an interval that precisely gives it its élan and its play.

ART. 9: *Each being tries to bridge the interval between being and having-- without ever completely succeeding.*

In recent years people have often tried—as much in Germany as in France—to penetrate the relation between being and having.⁴³ These two auxiliaries that govern our language and thought perhaps express all the ends we can claim. And we have no difficulty in showing that the most profound men are preoccupied solely with being, and the flightiest solely with having. Why—unless, for this first reason, I am nothing except what I am capable of making myself, [in which case] *being* is supremely exacting in that it requires me to put all my activity into play [whereas] *having* is what I receive, what permits me to dispose of certain goods, through which I constantly increase my likelihood of being affected, which [in turn] limits my ambition to the study of an object capable of acting upon me; and [unless], for this second reason, my being is invisible and reduces me to my associations with myself and with God, whereas my having is an appearance that I can flash before everyone's eyes and through which the reality of what I am becomes manifest to all those who surround me, even if it inwardly escapes me?

However, participation prevents the relations between being and having from being purely [oppositional]. For what I am, i.e. the act by which I am constantly completing myself, would be indistinguishable from the divine act if it did not encounter a [limiting] materiality within which I determine out my own attributes. But will I say of these attributes that I am them or that I possess them? Further, we indeed feel that the relation of possession with what surrounds us is capable of being stretched and becoming more and more loose but there is rightly nothing that escapes it. Yet far from being able to dissociate what I am from what I have, is it not necessary to say that, if the act through which I create myself is a participated act, [the consequence is] that my being is precisely my having? However, this would be a fresh trap⁴⁴ into which it is important not to fall. I am not truly what I have but the [longing] look and the operation of consent through which I attribute it to myself. We never possess anything but

⁴³ Cf. Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*. [Author's note]

⁴⁴ Literally, illusion.

self, i.e. the act we perform; and the thing is not the aim of possession but the means that makes possible the very act of possession. [This] explains why it is so difficult to possess [anything] and why the richest [people] often possess nothing, why I do not truly possess any material good but only the use I make of it. For that reason too, I choose what I possess and [possession] is not [exclusion], since it is never [a] question of the thing but only of an act I carry out, which can neither hinder your [act] nor take the place of it. Finally, for [the same] reason, the spiritual [person] who renounces all goods becomes master of all, i.e. of the very operation that produces them: consequently, we see very well that for him possession and being go together: just as everything seems to be given to him at the moment he deigns to keep nothing, the being of the All is joined to him at the moment he realises the personal sacrifice of the being of the I⁴⁵.

My being resides solely in the act I accomplish. And God, who is [sheer] being, is likewise without having. But having is inseparable from the [finite] I which never succeeds in becoming a true self⁴⁶; therefore it turns back toward its finite being, which is always up to a certain point an object it wants to [own]; it maintains with the entire world relations that are up to a certain point [external] and that allow it to make this world its property.

⁴⁵ The author's use of "*le Moi*" in place of "*le moi*" makes it clear that he intends a sacrifice on the part of the Pure Self or God. Lavelle does not spell out what this "personal sacrifice" entails.

⁴⁶ Again this gloomy streak in the otherwise positive philosopher. It is as if he sees any perfection in the individual as usurping God's place rather than affirming it.