

THE WORLD'S FORMATION¹

A) THE WORLD, OR THE INTERVAL FILLED

ART. 1: *The world fills the interval between the pure act and the act of participation.*

The world is the interval that separates the pure act from the act of participation. But it is at the same time what fills this interval. It is an intermediary between us and it. Also we understand without difficulty that if we are attached to it, if it detains and captivates us, it effectively completes the separation of the participated act [from] the pure act. But by contrast it rejoins them if it is for us a vehicle of meanings, if it is pierced-through by thought, will and love – [and does not] focus them on itself and literally become their end.²

It is now easy to make a judgment about the degree of reality that belongs to the world. It is true to say that [the world] surpasses us and is for us the very model of all reality, and that the spirit³ which [tests] its forces on it seems sickly and unsupported without it. Yet at the same time it exists only in its connections with us: it is for us therefore always an appearance. Being [should not] be

¹ Chapter Eighteen, contained in Part Three (“The Interval Filled”) of Book Two (“The Interval”).

² The world should be seen through, its features taken as intimations of being rather than as ends in themselves.

³ Or mind.

confused with the world that attests to it, at once [dissimulating and revealing] it: and we plainly sense that in the measure our activity becomes more [nearly] perfect it cuts through [the world] and leaves [behind] the [merely] expressive form of the most secret relations between the total being and our participated being. The world therefore cannot be identified, as [it often is], with the goal of participation.

There is no longer any [question of a] world that might be posited [as primary] and that would produce within us the picture we have of it through a kind of action upon our consciousness.⁴ [Rather,] it is by inscribing ourselves in the total being through an act [of our own] that we give birth to a world which always surpasses our current representation (as realism rightly maintains) but which [exists] only by way of this representation (as idealism brings to light) and which we always strive to equal through an activity that ever remains unequal to it.

It is a wonderful thing that the world which resists us—or crushes us—is also the sphere upon which our knowledge and action shine; that, [though] there is only one world, each [of us] can take a perspective on it that is his own and that depends on the activity of his gaze; [and] finally that the same world in which an implacable necessity appears to reign provides each being with the means and proof of his free activity's exercise.

In the interval which separates us from the pure act are born all [those] liberties⁵ which [in combination] with our own express its infinite fecundity. In communicating with them we communicate with it; the world is the instrument by which it acts upon us, by which it does not cease to instruct and move us. Thus we will not be astonished that in his 38th letter Lachelier⁶ can say of the outside world that it is the hyphen between all souls. But it unites them only because it first separates them.

Can I say then that I insert myself in the world, that I inscribe myself there? I insert and inscribe myself in being without doubt but not in the world. For this world exists *for* me whereas I *am* me and not [something or someone] *for*⁷me. It is therefore for others to insert or inscribe me in a world that exists for them.

The world is only a spectacle of which I am the spectator; it is only my representation but at least I—I who [entertain] it—dominate it and am not part of it. It is forever a not-I in which I find no place. It only makes me appear; and it vanishes at my death, and even at each minute, without any damage to the I's being.

⁴ A fair characterisation of the scientific world-view.

⁵ Human beings considered with respect to their capacity for free choice..

⁶ Jules Lachelier (1832-1918), student of Ravaisson and author of *The Foundation of Induction*. I am unfamiliar with his letters.

⁷ My italics. The word “for” here implies the appearance of an object or “an *other*”.

ART. 2: *The world is eternally perishable.*

The world is the effect of participation: it has existence only in the instant [and] is therefore eminently perishable; it is like a cross-section or transverse plane within our spiritual life.⁸ It is the site where the junction [between] our activity and passivity takes place, where the potentiality that belongs to the future is constantly converted for us into an accomplishment and a possession that henceforth belongs to the past. Men have awaited the end of the world for a long time; but the world ends and begins at each instant, it has no depth. What Descartes says of our body's materiality, that it constantly flows like river-water, is true of the entire material world. It is always there but always flees. It takes shape [before men's eyes]. And the world exists *for⁹us*; we are not veritably taken into the world. Before birth, after death, there is no longer any world for us. The world always bears the traces of all the actions that have been made [and] the instruments for all those that [might be made]; but this itself [shows] that the activity which has left its trace in [the world], and which today still revives the sense of it, is a purely spiritual activity; [it shows] that whoever discovers these instruments and puts them to work surpasses the world and seeks his end in the beyond.¹⁰

This permits us to consider the world before our eyes as a thoroughfare of all instants, as a coating [on] Being which ever must be pierced for us to gain being in our turn. Therefore instead of being the reality in which we participate, as we believe, the world is in a sense created by the very act of participation, but in such a way that—since it expresses our fluid coincidence with the total being, and what we constantly receive from it so to speak—it can become ours only on the condition of having been willed ahead of being actualised, [and] then of disappearing so as to be spiritualised¹¹. When we say of the Total Being that it is beyond the phenomenal present we mean, not that it is in another world of which this world would be a replica¹², but that it [resides] in a present which is no longer a cross-section between a possible future and a completed past, i.e. [it resides in a present where] this future and past are indistinguishable. The total being is ignorant of that individual and subjective perspective which makes the world appear before our eyes and which supposes the passivity of the body and

⁸ Elsewhere (see e.g. “The Present and the Instant” in *Of Time and Eternity*) the author insists that the instant has no content and is a contact with eternity. Still, his meaning here is clear: the current world is only a slice of one's life-story.

⁹ My italics.

¹⁰ The remarks of the preceding paragraphs are in many ways consistent with the eastern view of the world as *maya*.

¹¹ A theme Lavelle expands in his later writings. The idea is that my heartfelt engagement in worldly life “spiritualises” it, turns it into a more refined essence—into what some people might dismiss as “mere memory” but what the author regards as a kind of harvesting-into-eternity. A case might be made that such a position could arise only in the context of a language where “spiritual” and “mental” are conveyed by the very same word. Indeed much of Lavelle's philosophy turns on this point.

¹² Recalling Plato.

the senses; all states are abolished in it; the past and the future are covered over; they are [subjectively] distinguished only in order to offer me, as possible, an act that [needs] to receive a kind of confirmation from the total being before being incorporated into the being of the I.

ART. 3: *The world expresses me and limits me.*

If the world must be considered the effect of participation it is then nonetheless presented in two very different guises: for on the one hand it is the expression of my participated activity; all the representations that shape it are only the culmination of certain perceptual and conceptual operations. In this regard [the world] appears as a picture formed by the extremity of all lines of attention. It is a spectacle I provide myself according to the direction of my gaze. And on the other hand this activity, this attention, this gaze, without which there would be no world for me, are not enough to create it. The world is at the same time [an] obstacle to them, what imposes a barrier on them. It is what I seize but [only] because it resists me.¹³ The world is formed at the very point where my activity, my attention, my gaze no longer penetrate. The spectacle is therefore the line of demarcation, [as well as] the point of contact, between the operation through which I give myself representation and the represented [element] that is given to me. We know that the nature of idealism is to lay stress on the operation and that the nature of realism [is to lay stress] on the given. But this suffices to show that the world is for me more than a spectacle, and indeed that the spectacle of the world is nothing more than its surface. Behind the spectacle is an immense back-world, still unknown¹⁴ to me, i.e. non-participated yet infinitely open to participation.

We understand therefore that the world grows constantly larger for me in the measure that that my participation grows and becomes more [nearly] perfect. Nonetheless, [surrounded by] this world's grandeur I do not always notice the act [whose] exercise so to speak produces this infinite growth—though the advancement of perception and science [give sufficient testimony of it].

Moreover there [arises] here a difficulty that we have already met and that at first sight seems insurmountable: [namely] that the grandeur of the universe is in my eyes the grandeur of the given. Yet the given, which belongs to the passive

¹³ Indeed most common-sense arguments in favour of the world's reality are directly or indirectly based on its hard and resisting character; consequently we speak of "hard reality". If the world were suddenly malleable and easily managed we might suspect it of being an illusion or a dream. By extension, truth tends to be defined in negative terms, i.e. in terms of limitation, without consideration of the positive term that encounters limitation and cannot be understood solely in terms of it.

¹⁴ Literally, unconscious.

order, should recede in the very measure that activity advances.¹⁵ But this [cannot] be admitted: for absolute passivity is not the given but the non-participated world which remains in [a] state of pure unconsciousness and does not become a spectacle for me, [with the consequence] that the [spectacular] world itself demands to be actualised and is always the expression of the operation which actualises it.¹⁶ However if [we must] concede something to the proposed objection we can note that when we impart to our consciousness its highest and purest form of activity the world is indeed never presented as a [mere] spectacle: every object we [catch sight of] is the occasion and the vehicle of an action, it is an idea that realises itself, an intention from or upon us, a living symbol that puts my will in rapport with yours, so that I cease to be external to the spectacle, which is transformed for me into an ensemble of spiritual movements in which I am engaged and to which I contribute. From then on participation no longer adds to the world's breadth, its horizontality, but to its depth, its verticality.¹⁷

ART 4: *My freedom is exercised by constantly giving birth to new objects outside me [and] new states within me, which gives the world its content.*¹⁸

By putting the object in rapport with me the act that I carry out makes it mine and allows me to call it a perception. I can posit no act without positing an object which is not [one with me] but set apart and pushed outside me. I exert my freedom precisely by positing it, i.e. by refusing to identify myself with it, by affirming my independence with respect to it¹⁹, my heterogeneity, my infinitude. In this [unending] process through which I ever give birth to new states within me, new objects before me, I mark out the various stages of a freedom that ever calls forth new aspects of Being, none of which is capable of exhausting or limiting it.

¹⁵ It could be argued that the outward spectacle should fade to the extent that there is participation in the act. The reverse seems to be the case: experience of the world becomes more diverse and more intense, as reported in the preceding paragraph.

¹⁶ Again, the phenomenal world appears actual or real in the measure that I am inwardly active, i.e. through my association with the act. It is vibrant and nuanced in the measure that I am intensely alive. It flourishes as a reflection or expression of my inwardness. A good statement of the same idea is given by the title of a book by G.I. Gurdjieff: *Life is Real Only Then, When 'I Am'*.

¹⁷ The nature of the concession described above is that the world's purely spectacular character does in a sense recede as consciousness increases: the world becomes less distant, less a mere show. A truly inward experience of it is granted in which subject and object begin to merge. Testimony of this sort suggests that the author is more than a thinker as the term is often understood: it shows him to be intensely engaged in experience. Yet the testimony jars somewhat with comments in the next paragraph.

¹⁸ Note that "states" are considered part of the *world's* content.

¹⁹ Whatever stands across from me is plainly at a distance. Not so obviously even my body and its states must be in some sense "at a distance" for them to appear as objects of my attention. The subject-object relation necessarily defines separate spheres. (At the same time I cannot deny that my body and its states are somehow nearer to me than other objects.)

The more my perception is enriched, the more my freedom is loosed²⁰ and purified. We see therefore how far removed we are from believing that the spirit's ambition is to realise, [through some] mysterious intuition, a kind of identification with the object.²¹ We can only ever try to identify ourselves with an ever more naked act—which compels us to [give rise] to [more] objects and [more] states, which begin to exist for us only when we have already begun to detach ourselves from them. And for that [reason] we know nothing about the state or the object except by way of this very act which, in obliging us to participate in it or construct it, holds [the state or the object] in relation to us in an internal or external world from which we always remain in a certain sense independent²² precisely because it only subsists through our consent and because it is always up to a certain point our [creation].

It would be an error to think that activity is here no more than the operation by which I apprehend a state or an object which already [exists] ahead of this operation itself. Neither are the state and the thing pure creations of my separate consciousness. [They] appear as a reverberation or an echo—[there] in the receptive part of my being—of the very activity I employ: the feeling and the perception that render them present to me are mine without being me. They once again mark the distance separating my participated act from the pure act.

ART. 5: The laws of the world express the conditions needed for the play of various liberties, for their separateness and their accord.

As soon as participation begins the world appears to us as a collection of phenomenal materials; it is therefore only the manifestation and shape of that act of participation which contains their principle and meaning but cannot [do without] phenomena since they are also the instruments through which it is realised, to the extent that the very order of their assemblage constantly testifies to the operation that sustains them and throws light on both its victories and defeats.

Moreover, [looking] beyond the freedom which is mine, the action of another liberty can be grasped by me only through its effects, i.e. in an objective experience. Here again the interval between my freedom and the Pure Act [results in there being] a world for me; yet the most humble initiative of another liberty also puts me in the presence of a fact that limits the sphere of my own freedom. Freedom and fact therefore call for one another, not only as contraries but because the fact is freedom restricting freedom itself, or again, [restricting]

²⁰ This agrees with the author's position that we are inwardly freed from those things (objects) we are actively aware of. Hence acute consciousness liberates us from the world at the same time that it reveals it to us.

²¹ The comment seems directed against the kind of intuition or sympathy entertained by Henri Bergson.

²² Both internal and external domains of the world are distinct from the true inside of being, which is never an object of consciousness but always the subject. See note 19.

testimony of the free act's irreducibility²³ for whoever does not accomplish it, or no longer [does so]. Not that we wish to assert in an idolatrous fashion that every fact is the deliberate work of a liberty since the act is only ever creative of itself; we mean only what everyone would doubtless grant us, that if the fact fixes the frontiers of participation it is also testimony of an act that surpasses it, and that [the fact] measures [the gap between the two]. Thus the world expresses nothing more than the conditions and compensating effects that preside over the play of various liberties, over their separation and accord. These are the laws of the world which seem to limit the free act [but] are nothing more than the instruments of a participation always on offer. [This participation] finds dispositions within us, materials outside us, which it has to utilise. And the effects, as soon as they come into play, verify the laws of the world and in a certain sense produce them.

It is obvious that the distance between the participated act and the pure act at once explains freedom, necessity and their connection. For on the one hand whatever is of [a positive character] in participation founds our freedom but on the other hand whatever is lacking in it submits it to necessity. And from this we understand how freedom and necessity are linked since the very degrees of my freedom determine so to speak the correlative forms of necessity to which I find myself subjected. This necessity is expressed in the form of a relation among all particular terms so that if one of them is given the rest appear according to a certain order. [Here] we might say is an expression of the totality of being, which [decrees] that such positive determination calls all others nearer and nearer. But on the one hand freedom is a return to the source such that it does not introduce itself into the play of all those [conditioned factors]. On the other hand this order is itself hypothetical; it requires that a condition be posited, which is precisely the rightful role of freedom. Thus [freedom] always introduces possibility into existence, and instead of excluding the order of conditionals sets it in motion. Finally we can say with respect to this order that [freedom] is a susception by which, instead of abandoning [the order] to itself and leaving it to develop according to conditions already posited, it assumes [the role of] one of these conditions thanks to the actualisation of a power that would remain unused without it.

²³ Its primary status as something that cannot be deduced or derived from something else.

B) FROM MATTER TO LIFE

ART. 6: *Freedom seems to emerge from nature by degrees [but] only because [it] creates nature as the very condition of its development.*

It is tempting to [derive] freedom from nature by degrees through showing how, [as nature becomes more complex, it becomes more indeterminate] so that the possibility of a choice [gradually dawns. This] well-known thesis would be apparently upheld by [the] view that freedom grows in the measure we distance ourselves from those elementary aspects of being which are revealed to observation as soon [freedom turns] back toward [its] origins.

This [speculation] might seduce us and is not entirely bereft of truth. It seduces us because it seems to make us witness to a kind of genesis through which we have the illusion of seeing being enriched by degrees, starting with the simplest forms – as near as possible to nothingness – in order to discover little by little its most independent and consequently most perfect form in freedom. And [the speculation] is not bereft of truth because it is true that we can construct from being both an empirical history and a dialectical deduction showing the steps or successive conditions that mark out [being's] ascent.²⁴ But neither this history nor that deduction will show us the true link between freedom and nature. For regardless of nature's degree of complexity we [are at a loss to understand] how [whatever degree of complexity generated by necessity] could at a certain moment make indeterminacy spring forth.²⁵ From another [angle] the origin of necessity itself remains an unfathomable mystery: for whence does it come and how can it be posited? Finally we [would have a hard time] diminishing being as far as we [might] like: we [would never reach an end of it], if we consider the interval that separates it from nothingness as [a] given or [a] fact.²⁶

Yet the free act leaps this gap at each instant. [Therefore it is first.] That it can seem historically or dialectically last is [because] it must [first] create all the conditions that allow it to be exercised in order to appear. Thus is engendered nature which wholly [hinges on] a free act so that what appears as a point of arrival within the order of experience is a point of departure within the ontological order.²⁷ From that moment the necessity that reigns in nature ceases to be a pure given: like all necessity it is conditional in [the] sense that it supposes a condition without which it would not exist as necessity – which [condition] is

²⁴ I.e. by way of this or that theory of evolution such as those proposed by Herbert Spencer and Henri Bergson.

²⁵ It has been similarly argued that no amount of mechanical complexity in a computer can result in true consciousness or understanding.

²⁶ There is no middle or transitional ground between being and nothingness.

²⁷ Similarly *Of Time and Eternity* speaks of two different arrows of time.

the accomplishment of the free act. This accomplishment creates necessity as the pedestal it requires and upon which it rests.

Again on this point, the theory of participation should allow us to justify both naturalism—since, if nature offers freedom the conditions and the means without which it could neither enter into play nor insert itself into the totality of Being, [then] these conditions and means remain left to their own play if [freedom] refuses to make use of them—and idealism, since the representation we [provide] ourselves of the world and the very way we [employ] it depend on the action of our freedom and express it with such fidelity that freedom then seems to require nature and to integrate it as an organ of its realisation.

ART. 7: *Matter is the means and the limit of participation.*

It seems that matter is the obstacle to, or at least the limit of, participation. For it marks our separation [from] the Pure Act. As well, it is always for us a resistance to overcome and a burden that oppresses us. But it is also an instrument of participation, for in supporting our action it allows us to go out of ourselves, to penetrate the interior of the real, to convert our virtuality into actuality. Moreover it gives us an image or symbol of participation since it shows us in a kind of tableau all the evidence of what we have thought and done. Finally and above all it permits us to establish that sensible frontier between the real and ourselves where we communicate with it—but with an admirable delicacy so that it only ever gives of itself what we are capable of receiving. Thus, as we have often observed, matter seems to possess the same indeterminacy as the pure act, though for converse reasons because the act is capable of creating all determinations and [matter] of receiving [them] but also [because], as [with] the pure act, [which no determination] alters, [matter] too survives everything and seems to possess a kind of eternalness which imitates [that of the pure act].²⁸

We therefore understand very well that in granting me a body matter allows me to be no longer a purely subjective power but [rather] to take [my] place in that world of exteriority where I acquire an *existence* both for myself and for everyone. For that reason the body is at once a limitation and a gift, the contrary of the act yet its testimony and its vehicle.

Matter can therefore be defined as the condition of participation's possibility: a negative gift we have received, without which we would not be separated from the pure act—but without which we would not receive from it, as recompense for our efforts, what our [lone] initiative would be insufficient to give us. [Matter] is the pure act's [negative side]²⁹, like it alien to all determination yet in such a manner that the shared act, inserting itself between [the two], introduces infinite

²⁸ Here Lavelle appears to open the door to a permanent dualism. However in what follows he argues for the existence of two poles of being instead of two separate spheres.

²⁹ Literally its "negativity".

determinations into the world through its exercise.³⁰ [This enables] us to see in them sometimes a dimming of the pure act (as in all the theories of the Fall), sometimes a progressive enrichment of matter (as in all the doctrines of evolution).

Matter should therefore not be excluded from participation: we would have to say only that it is—not the lowest degree of it (since all participation is spiritual)—but at once means and limit. In reality it plays a triple role. *Firstly* it limits our activity yet at the same time obliges it to enter into play; without it our activity would remain in [a] state of potentiality. We can indeed say that it is an obstacle; yet [it] allows our activity not to remain solitary, [allows it] to enter into rapport with [an] activity that surpasses it and upon which the entire universe depends³¹ so that there is no [instance of] human activity that can remain immaterial and so that, in being incarnated, our activity does not cease—indivisibly and at the same time—to create and receive. Thus there is no work so humble that it does not surpass even the most beautiful design.

Secondly it is very true to say that matter individualises us. There is no need to take part in the debate dividing those who defend [individuality on the basis of form] from those who support [individuality on the basis of matter]. For individuation is produced at the very point where form and matter meet, i.e. at the point where matter reveals the necessary role it plays in the very constitution of form. Matter separates individuals from each other; it [decrees] that spiritual life remains a secret for each of them [such] that [if] this screen [of matter] disappeared we would see souls dissolve into a unity of pure spirit [in which] none of them could retain within its subjective intimacy [the] stirring echo of a body that is its own and that imparts a uniqueness and absolute originality to whatever befalls it. But this individuality which seems produced by matter is itself only the condition of that individuality produced by form, though the latter seems of an altogether different nature; for the subjective intimacy in question is an intimacy and permits me to say “I” only by way of a free will that is not an absolute indeterminacy [but] *my*³² free will and that is precisely possible and can enter into play only if it meets the conditions offered to it, the propositions nature constantly puts to it, without which it [could] neither choose nor consent.

Thirdly matter—the instrument separating individuals from each other, i.e. permitting them to be individuals, or again, permitting them to *be*³³—is also the means that permits them to communicate. Which we could foresee by reflecting that we can think of separation only in connection with union and that this separation already puts the terms it separates into relation. Indeed the peculiarity

³⁰ It is tempting to conclude from the above that Lavelle conceives of matter as a kind of shapeless hyle (“alien to all determinations”) to which the participated act brings form. However matter is already a participated form. Though rudimentary and ductile it is known to be subject to certain laws. For all that, it is fair to say that it has hyle-like character.

³¹ What follows is an independent sentence in the original.

³² My italics.

³³ My italics.

of matter is not only to compel me to actualise my powers but also to compel me to continually show what I am; through it I leave my stamp on the world, become a spectacle for others. And each of these testaments is a gift of myself that I make to them. The material world is a world common to all: it is the site of all paths and all crossings. It bears all the cognizances that permit men to reach an accord and make trial of the truth; in it are realised all the works through which they put the powers of their spirit into play and give proof of their worth.

Matter is therefore for each consciousness the agency through which it expresses and gives shape to itself, and it is at the same time the agency through which different consciousnesses are separated and united. But these three features are found in the role played by our own body: it is first of all the instrument of our separate life, though also the instrument of our communication with all beings. From another [angle] it is in the service of life and for that reason it is the means for all our conquests. Finally, like life itself, it is in the service of spirit and receives its ultimate meaning only through sacrifice.

ART. 8: Taken in itself matter is only life's corpse.

We do not want to confuse nature with matter which is only its corpse [and] which in a sense imitates the spirit's perennity since like spirit it remains always present—though [only] to show the perishable character of all the edifices it allows us to build, which are instruments of our participated activity and must one day collapse and return to that indeterminacy, that chaos of elements, where life finds ever-new and ever-provisional conditions that permit particular beings to constitute their spiritual essence: it is fitting that these conditions can be dissolved when they have filled their purpose and [can] lend themselves to other arrangements. We will no longer be surprised that matter, considered in itself as pure object and [as an] abstraction [derived] from its relation with the spirit it should serve, falls back under the laws of sheer mechanism where the relations among the parts are determined exclusively by their state[s], i.e. by their respective position[s] in space and time.

We now see the reasons that led Descartes to identify matter with extent: the infinitely ductile location of all the spirit's operations, an ever-present nothing, a pure multiplicity, continuous and indefinite, whose role is to lend itself to every arrangement thought can imagine: these combinations give birth to mathematics, where thought has to do solely with its own play; however [they] put us in the presence of a pure object, inert and abstract, from which life has been withdrawn. But the world has determinations the mind needs to recognise, [determinations it is] incapable of constructing: the individuality of places and instants, those assemblages of distinct elements that observation presents us, for which mathematics can only ever furnish a framework that we constantly have to rebuild. Matter [here] is therefore no longer a pure possibility offered to an

arbitrary activity. It already wears the signs of a realised participation. And henceforth we will succeed in illumining its nature only by setting it in relation to life; life is indeed that primitive and received spontaneity which gives thought, will and love, the élan of which reflection allows us to take possession. It is the means of calling individual consciousnesses into existence. Life explains the matter it produces [much] as the snail produces the [shelter of its] shell which permits and measures the stages of its development, defines its originality, separates it from other beings and regulates its associations with them. The matter studied by science [amounts to] empty shells. And whoever would like to explain the various aspects of the material world by certain arrangements of inert elements would resemble the person who, on finding [some] shells, would explain their formation [in ignorance of] the living snail[s] that formerly occupied them.

ART. 9: *Life's spontaneity is intermediary between matter's inertia and pure spirit's activity.*

Matter gives spirit both the instrument and the resistances it needs; but life permits [passage] from one to the other: it ensures their function. Time, which destroys all, does not destroy matter which like time is the expression of our limits and has the same perennity as time: but whatever [time] destroys is reduced to the state of pure matter. Life is therefore always more fragile than [matter]; it constantly borrows and returns the elements it needs to shape the body it animates. It finally gives back to the earth all of the earth it has shaped. From the indeterminacy³⁴ of matter it tries to snatch an individual composite capable of subsisting and becoming the bearer of a liberty. But this composite itself is shaped and undone in time. Living is therefore subject to [birth and death], though life continues to penetrate matter and to create new living beings within it. It is not enough to consider matter as a pure indeterminacy in which life is only dissolved: for the corruption [life] enters into is like a laboratory where all germs regain their fecundity.

Now life itself is nothing more than a spontaneity: it is an offer made to us that obtains its true meaning only at the moment it is converted into freedom. It is *we ourselves*³⁵ to the degree that we take part in nature; and it is not us to the degree that [we are what we choose to be]³⁶. Between this I of nature and that I of freedom oscillate all the initiatives of our life: they have as their aim to bring the two I's [together] but in such a fashion that the free act is ever in rapport with our nature, and that nature finds its meaning and reason for being in the free act.

³⁴ Once again the word "indeterminacy" suggests a hyle-like conception of matter.

³⁵ My italics.

³⁶ Literally, "we are not what we are without having chosen it". An example of the French toleration of double negatives.

Freedom takes charge of nature, i.e. spontaneity, which is so to speak the medium through which [freedom] gets back the very activity it employs; and thanks to that assemblage of perishable elements which constitute our body it creates our personal being, returning these elements to the indeterminacy of matter when they have served it—yet raising into the eternity of a spiritual act, by way of memory,³⁷ all the acquisitions it has obtained.

At the moment [a] being receives life he receives it only as a spontaneity [he must] put into play but which nonetheless expresses its limitation and passivity, i.e. the conditions under which his freedom is exercised, [not] his very freedom. For that [reason] this spontaneity is itself a nature [included] in the totality of nature. For that [reason] as well each being that receives life becomes in a sense the centre of the world, takes itself as an absolute and enters into competition with all other beings, each of which also considers itself an absolute. But this competition is evidence of their solidarity, which finds an expression [in] nature wherever beings sustain one another, both by engendering and devouring. There is among them, we might say, a reciprocity of existence that finds a kind a testimony in the worldly spectacle where the existence of each [person] ceases to be a subjective dream so as to be affirmed by all the others, [and] where, in the highest forms of social life, glory itself is only an existence recognised and supported by all.

C) FROM INSTINCTIVE SPONTANEITY TO SPIRITUAL SPONTANEITY

ART. 10: *The insertion of my freedom into the total being can be effected only through the intermediary of nature.*

If participation always resides in the exercise of an act of freedom, [and if] this freedom must be acquired, we understand that our insertion in the world must first be manifest in the form of passivity—though the passivity is never absolute, since it cannot suffice itself and since, as soon as it is recognised as [dependent], we already [begin] to disengage ourselves from it. This is the reason [why] man begins by receiving existence, [why] he is first submitted to all the influences emanating from the universe, the earth, the race, society, the family. Only little by little does he succeed in forming a hearth of personal independence in which he finds the inward origin of all the initiatives of his thought and conduct. [Beginning as] only a part of the universe [he] soon becomes [a] participant in the very act that creates it.

³⁷*Of Time and Eternity* will argue that the function of memory is to lift experience into eternity by spiritualising—or “mentalising”—it. See note 11.

Therefore we must first be exterior to being, which is none other than self³⁸, in order [to be able] to become interior to it and ourselves through an act that depends exclusively on us to perform: this exteriority to ourselves also [imparts to us] a nature from which we do not cease to liberate ourselves through a growing [intimacy with]³⁹ our own life. It is therefore also necessary to be initially exterior to self in order to become interior to self by degrees. Nature is a condition of freedom because the latter must always be conceived in terms of a liberation. Our freedom is never total; it [is attached] to nature by an umbilical cord that is only ever cut at our death. This bond is so close [because] nature must remain constantly [before] our eyes in order to provide signs of that spiritual world [which is ours] to penetrate. And indeed each of our actions ought to leave its mark on the real and demand a response from it through which consciousness is continually enriched, if we want the pure possibilities that were within us from the start to be exerted and changed into an experienced and spiritualised possession.

The peculiarity of my participated activity is to be a preferential activity that limits itself and always makes a choice among the infinite possibilities offered to it: this choice is never arbitrary but always in relation to determinations [that are] inseparable from my particular situation in the world, i.e. from my passivity or my nature. Between my nature and the choice I make is a correspondence that is mine to regulate, lacking which I miss my vocation; but in the measure that I realise it my nature itself [seems] to have been called into existence by an act of my freedom, as the condition without which it would be impossible to exert itself.⁴⁰ The pure act is not preceded by any power it actualises; all powers are in some respect posterior to it: they are this very act [as] offered for participation. But by itself it knows no division: at each instant it draws the whole of being out of nothingness⁴¹, and the choice it makes is [the] choice of Being, in which the single positivity of all powers is contained in an eminent fashion so to speak.

ART. 11: Spontaneity is the vehicle of freedom, even though it begins by limiting and imprisoning it.

Between spontaneity and freedom is the closest link; we will say at the outset that freedom presupposes spontaneity and could not be manifest without it; indeed freedom is doubtless the most profound and purest form of spontaneity. And at the same time freedom is unfolded [as something] contrary to

³⁸ An important re-affirmation. See “The Pure Self”.

³⁹ Literally “intimisation of”.

⁴⁰ In other words my precise situation appears perfectly suited to the aims of “my freedom”.

⁴¹ I assume the author is speaking metaphorically. The image of something-from-nothing is essentially a representation of my taking consciousness. Eternal Being is beyond beginnings and ends, however much it might have the character of newness and completion.

spontaneity.⁴² It puts it in question, submits it to reflection, disciplines it. In the rapport between spontaneity and freedom resides the secret of participation.⁴³ This spontaneity is a gift we have received; and this gift seems to us at first [the gift of] ourselves. But it is up to us to convert it into freedom; and that is only possible from the moment self-consciousness requires us to refuse [its natural side] by considering as ours only the consent we give it. Thus this activity always plunges into desire, but desire is at the same time the mark of our limits. To be free is not to be detached from [desire] in order to judge it in the name of a different principle whose origin we would imperfectly discern, it is to descend to its root and to confront it with the infinity in which our being no longer finds borders that restrict it but [rather] the inward *élan* that frees it.

Instinct is therefore still the pure act's spontaneity, but wrapped in a factual situation imposed on us from birth onwards. These circumstances, this situation, are determined by the world-order i.e. by conditions that require various liberties to limit one other. And we can, in another sense, believe that they are called for by a profound decision [on the part] of each of [these liberties, just] as the conditions upon which our own development depends are instigated by the very *élan* that sustains it and carries it to its highest point. But we should not be surprised that this natural spontaneity which is the support of spiritual spontaneity seems nonetheless at odds with it: it eludes personal consciousness; it seeks to assure the survival of the individual being, or at least of that vast assemblage of which it is part and to which it [eventually] sacrifices itself. Our freedom can make [natural spontaneity] its own only at the moment it becomes independent of it and seeks to regain the spiritual spontaneity of which [natural spontaneity] was only the vehicle. Thus instinctive spontaneity can be an intermediary between the spontaneity of the pure act—which it captures so to speak in putting it at our disposal—and the free spontaneity which should be grafted onto it for the pure act [to become] a participated act.

Moreover this instinctive spontaneity only ever appears [to me] retrospectively, i.e. when my spirit's activity has begun to exert itself, when it has encountered an obstacle or a support in the driving force of a body that I recognise [as] my body, which allows me to imagine that there was at first a sort of indeterminate *élan* at the [heart] of which spirit and body [confronted] one another⁴⁴. This view is not devoid interest but has the inconvenience of [casting] primitive spontaneity [in the role of] that nature to which the spirit is opposed as soon as it begins to think, and in which it then seems to implant itself so to speak. Indeed we have here a good example of those contraries we examined in the

⁴² The term has a number of meanings in philosophy, among them (a) the character of acts that spring uniquely from a given agent and (b) the character of acts that occur immediately and without reflection, i.e. *naturally*, whether or not external factors are involved. I take it Lavelle refers mainly to the second in his comments about nature but always looks to the first as a spiritual ideal.

⁴³ The phrase is almost a litany in Lavelle's opus. I note here and elsewhere: it would be illuminating to compile and examine a list of statements in which Lavelle reveals "the secret of participation".

⁴⁴ This again seems to hark back to Bergson, specifically to his notion of the "*élan vital*".

theory of the interval (Chapter XII. B)⁴⁵ where one of the terms always appears to have supremacy with respect to the other. Only, freedom is above nature since [freedom] alone can be completely self-caused; [consequently] in being opposed to itself as soon as it becomes participated [freedom] makes nature appear, which is so to speak correlative of participation's imperfection and insufficiency.

ART. 12: Neither good nor bad, nature becomes one or the other according to the use our freedom makes of it.

We have shown how the Act itself is always unsupported⁴⁶ while participation cannot be separated from a natural spontaneity, of which the world is so to speak the countenance but which is the condition without which participation could never be offered to us: the personal act of participation borrows from [the world] both its élan and its matter [while at the same time] constantly denying it and liberating us from it. We can say that for many beings the role of consciousness is to lend an ear to all the suggestions of natural spontaneity and to abandon itself to it. But the peculiarity of consciousness is to live by the spirit, i.e. to break through the limits nature closes around us, to overcome the passivity to which it subjects us, to make of it the point of departure and the means of an activity it has put within our reach so as to teach us how to uncover it and put it into play.

Let us set aside matter, properly so-called, which is only a nature life has not yet penetrated, or has already abandoned, and which, though it separates one consciousness from another, also forms an objective spectacle that serves them [all] as a common anonymous language, as science demonstrates. Let us consider nature proper in its associations with freedom. Then we clearly see that nature is the very being of the life we have received, which some admire and others decry, which in its grandeur and beauty infinitely surpasses the power of will but which is surpassed by the latter in the measure that it entails a spiritual action that depends on us and frees us from servitude [to the former]. Consequently there is no question of demeaning nature or exalting it. It is the very means by which the pure act is placed in our reach, and [it] grants us the management of a spontaneity which is such that we will sometimes (by yielding to it) live caught in its net like plants and animals, [and] sometimes (by taking it upon ourselves through reflection) make it the vehicle of our spiritual emancipation.

Nature is in a sense the inverse of freedom; it expresses [participation's passive aspect] which closes within its limits the use we make of our freedom. And we understand very well that we can laud nature which subordinates us to a magnificent order that sustains and surpasses us—and curse freedom which puts us back into the hands of an activity we can always [turn to] bad use. But if

⁴⁵ See Section B of the preceding text.

⁴⁶ I.e. it is self-supporting. See "The Self-Caused Act".

that use is what counts, nature is by itself neither good nor bad: it is nothing more than the living spontaneity that grants freedom the very forces it disposes, which this freedom ought to turn toward spiritual ends. Nature can prove cruel but as long as freedom has not appeared it is always innocent. Good and evil are not in nature but in the relation established between nature and freedom: as soon as the spirit seeks an enjoyment in which it [revels] the spirit is degraded; as soon as nature becomes for the life of the spirit an instrument, a goad or a symbol it is transfigured.

Though nature by itself is neither good nor bad, and though good and evil only ever stem from a free choice, we understand without difficulty that all the movements of nature can be regarded as good or bad [given that] they would effectively have this character if they were accomplished by a free act.

But it is important not to curse nature for [taking on] the meaning of freedom, which cannot [dispense with nature] without remaining an abstract possibility, or without descending into caprice and artifice. Nature already has a divine character: there is a perpetual fecundity in it; it furnishes freedom with a spontaneity it renews and forever reanimates; as soon as the spirit turns toward [nature] it grants it [a] revelation of beauty. [A] liberty⁴⁷ is wrong to regard it as its enemy; it is the theatre in which it realises itself; there is not a single free act that does not find in nature an instrument, a rough sketch and sometimes a model.

D) FROM SPIRITUAL SPONTANEITY TO VOCATION AND ESSENCE

ART. 13: *The role of vocation is to reconcile nature with freedom.*

There is no higher aim than that of “being oneself”. But to be oneself is to be so-and-so and not another – yet also to be free. Which becomes possible not, as we often believe, through a simple ratification of our nature but through a liaison we establish between the natural I (without which we would have no place in existence) and the infinity of a spiritual power upon which we constantly draw and which [decrees] that the universe itself depends on us – but within a perspective and in accordance with an exigency that are precisely characteristic of our vocation. The latter itself is in keeping with the conditions of possibility provided us by nature, without which we would have no individual existence and would be [hard put] to derive freedom from indeterminacy and caprice. Hence all those elements that come to us from nature – character, circumstances, time and place – strike us as so many appeals addressed to us which, depending on how we respond to them, allow us to realise a [personal vocation]. We

⁴⁷ A free being. I am presuming that an individual being is in question even though the author speaks only of “liberty”.

understand how our life can remain consigned to nature; it is up to us to raise ourselves above it through a choice that utilises it by giving it a spiritual meaning. This choice, instead of rendering the vocation unnecessary or destroying it, gives birth to it as the [inner] goal of that permanent will to be what we have chosen to be; yet this choice can be brought forth only among the possibilities provided us by nature, to which [we must] consent before [they can be actualised]. What [we need] to do is to release our deep being, i.e. the one which best answers to what we are and what we can be, or which draws from the powers within it the greatest efficacy and greatest value: time is indispensable for that. But there is no room [for fearing], as we too often do when it is [a] question of this two-fold process of going and returning [described] in the theory of reflection⁴⁸, that we might come back to the interior of the total being in the very form we had on leaving it, since in the interval we have actualised—not in [being] itself (for there is no possibility in eternal being) but in us and through the intermediary of nature—what was until then only an eternal possibility for us.

The peculiarity of freedom is not to surpass nature but to transform it: to ennoble or demean it, depending on the use [freedom] makes of it. And for that [reason] there is never [any] correspondence (at best [a] coincidence) between the hierarchies founded on nature—which depend on the number, the magnitude and the refinement of the resources it places at our disposal—and the hierarchies founded on freedom, which depend on [our] purity of intention in the employment we can make of it, however humble those resources might be.

ART. 14: *Vocation is the quest for a coincidence of self with self, i.e. with self's best part.*

The rapport we can establish between vocation and freedom resides entirely in the analysis of that experience which is the foundation of consciousness: that [a] being is obliged to seek himself in order to obtain a coincidence with self which seems always denied it. In what then consists this coincidence with self? And what is the difference between the self one seeks and the self that seeks it? We know very well that it is time that separates them.⁴⁹ But if self already is, before we seek it, what is the point of that search? And what is the difference between the I before it is found and the I that is found? It is clear that this interval which seems to [yawn wide] only to be undone must [contain] the entire secret of participation⁵⁰: for it shows both that our essence can become ours only through

⁴⁸ Introduced in Chapter Two, “The Reflective Act” (not included in this selection of texts).

⁴⁹ A debatable point. It might be argued that there can be an immediate realisation of self that does not look toward the future. Indeed there must be some stable sense of identity for whatever relation between self and self. The issue seems to be that of creating an object-self or persona that truly corresponds with my inmost being. The question then becomes: Can *any* object truly correspond?

⁵⁰ A further candidate for the “secret of participation”.

an act that is up to us to accomplish and that it nonetheless supposes powers that can remain unemployed. Thus, to coincide with self is precisely to actualise these powers and thereby find within being a place and a reality that answers to them.⁵¹ This being that is thus proposed to us is also our good. We can say moreover that our essence is in God, as the best [part] of us, but we can always fall short of it and prove ourselves unfaithful.⁵²

[The answer to] every problem of vocation therefore consists in knowing the distinction I should make between the essence God proposes to me—which is always [there] in my depths as the best and most ideal part of myself so to speak⁵³—and the essence I manage to realise and succeed in making an effective possession. An interval is needed [here] so that I can give myself my own being, which is always in rapport with my merit. I can never exactly coincide with myself, otherwise I would one day cease to take my reality from an act of participation; I would then come to identify myself with God, i.e. with the design God has for me, which amounts to the same [thing]⁵⁴: it is the very sign of humility to say that I always tend toward [that goal] without ever arriving at it. And my life consists in trying to find myself at last, which rightly means creating myself. That is possible only if I constantly purge myself of all the ill-considered actions I have performed, which were so many deviations [from] the vocation to which I have been called [and] which have left their taint in me [because] a certain materialisation of the past joined with a certain mistrust with respect to God's bounty, i.e. its sovereign positiveness, have [succeeded] in making me think that [those ill-considered actions are] ineffaceable.

ART. 15: *The idea of vocation leads us from the problem of the relations [between] our nature [and] our freedom to the problem of the relations [between] our freedom [and] our spiritual essence.*

There are two seemingly-opposed interpretations of essence which are singularly instructive. For on the one hand it seems that essence is the profound unity of our being [which precedes] its development and conditions it, so that it would only be a question of our consciousness discovering it and, through a

⁵¹ Again this places an emphasis on the external sphere which does not sit easily beside the author's call for greater inwardness or intimacy. See note 49. Certainly a person's outward role might be expected to match his or her essence but there is a great difference between whether this role is a focus of attention or the natural outfall of an inwardness whose focus is essence or being.

⁵² Further evidence that, at least in *Of the Act*, Lavelle assumes a pre-given essence or soul for the individual being—though he also asserts it must be won. See ART. 15.

⁵³ I take this to mean that my "essence in God" is inwardly known to me—however vaguely—ahead of my worldly engagements. An important point in light of Lavelle's position with respect to essence in his later works. See note 55.

⁵⁴ It is not clear to me that this amounts to the same thing. In any case the bold suggestion is that I am distinct from God only owing to my failure to live up to God's ideal for me. The next clause argues the merit of embracing such failure.

process of purification, recognising it behind the external appearances which hide and dissimulate it; and on the other hand it seems that essence is the product of our action, that it is created in us through successive steps and that it is only [fully] constituted at death, which integrates them all. Only, these are not two contrary conceptions between which we are obliged to choose: together they admirably express the most profound character of the real, which is [that] of being an eternal act, [an] act we must accomplish in order to be and which can never be reduced to the rank of a thing, so that it always appears to be exerted in time yet so that, within time, it seems at once—as the characteristic circle of reflection shows—always ahead of each of our movements as the origin which founds them and nonetheless posterior to them as the end toward which [the act] tends. Time is nothing more than the perspective through which we represent participation to ourselves—less when we put [participation] to work (since this putting-to-work is always present) than when we look back at the curve it traces [within] the eternal being. For our essence is in it, though without our being able to say whether it is in it ahead of our action as its source or after it as its end.⁵⁵ Nonetheless in what concerns us we distinguish this source from that end precisely so that this essence can be realised by us and consequently become ours. Time is thus only the means through which, in joining [these two], we constitute our eternal essence in God by way of a participation in the divine act. It therefore seems absurd to say that we can fall short of our essence, and yet this [must be so] if the source and the end are no longer set apart in appearance but in reality, if time is consequently well founded [and] if there always subsists some distance between what we have made of ourselves and [God's will with respect to us], constantly expressed by the circumstances in which we have been placed by him and to which we have not always known how to respond. [Thus even] in the closest union with God we nonetheless remain distinct from him because we are never completely ourselves, i.e. completely [aligned with] the eternal model of ourselves that eternally exists in him and that he has never ceased to propose to our will.⁵⁶

The subordination of time to eternity—rather, the necessity of [our] situating it within eternity⁵⁷—[seems] to permit us to resolve the problem of essence, concerning which it is true that we can only discover it but at the same time that we must will it. It is obvious that will makes sense only in relation to us: it makes us be; it is therefore exerted in time. Even if essence is a discovery it is initially for us a quest albeit [one] that can have no other goal than our eternal possibility in

⁵⁵ In *Of the Human Soul* Lavelle will attempt to resolve these issues by making a distinction between soul and essence whereby soul provides a pre-given disposition or possibility which the I can elect to fill out or actualise in varying degrees through its choices. In this way it provides the soul with a specific essence.

⁵⁶ The practical import is that I can never live up to God's model of me, that I have been given a goal that is forever beyond me—a decidedly gloomy assessment, profoundly at odds with the author's exuberance with respect to self-determination. At the same time it is understandable in a philosopher who is keen to shut the door on whatever identification with God.

⁵⁷ The central proposition addressed in *Of Time and Eternity*.

God, which however becomes our eternal reality only in the measure that we have desired, sought and found it. And all the arduous effort of our temporal life has as [its] end to [allow] us to penetrate eternity, where the desire we have for God is purified but not abolished.