

Consciousness, or an Intimacy Rightly Universal¹

1. IS THE SOUL, WITH RESPECT TO CONSCIOUSNESS, THE ACT FROM WHICH [CONSCIOUSNESS] PROCEEDS OR AN OBJECT TRANSCENDENT TO IT?

With consciousness, the I's existence to itself begins, but also the existence for it of a world that goes beyond it, which it takes [as the] object of its thought and action. Also we easily understand that we can confuse the birth and development of consciousness with the birth and development not only of our representation of the world but of the world itself; for what difference can there be for us between the world and, if not the represented, at least the totality of the representable? Such is the path [followed by] idealism, and up to a certain point by philosophy [as a whole]. If someone objected [on the grounds of] the necessarily limited character of individual consciousness, we would find no difficulty in replying that each individual consciousness is in itself capable of being enlarged to infinity, i.e. to the dimensions of universal consciousness, and that all individual consciousnesses [taken together] evoke the idea of a possible consciousness beyond which there is nothing, [a consciousness] they divide

¹ Chapter One of Book I "The Soul's Inwardness [or Intimacy]".

[among themselves] and of which they are so to speak the actualisation. Every affirmation emanates from consciousness, is produced within it and [has value] exclusively for it, such that [the] primacy of consciousness and [the] impossibility of crossing its limits [give rise to] two opposing views: the first, that consciousness closes us within a subjective sphere impossible for us to escape; the second, that within this sphere itself we are already in contact with an absolute we can penetrate more and more profoundly but beyond which there is nothing.

Now consciousness itself can now be considered in two different aspects. On the one hand *I always have consciousness of some thing*, and the same consciousness can be applied to the most diverse objects; it grants us a knowledge of these objects, and this knowledge is itself an act of consciousness. But on the other hand I can retain only *this act of having consciousness*; and as soon as I isolate this act from its object it seems that I have to deal with two domains which are in a certain sense irreducible to one another: an objective world—which does not mean a world that is beyond consciousness but a world that is ever the object of its activity—and a subjective world reduced to [that] very activity, considered independently of the objects to which it is applied, or again [regardless] of whichever objects it can be applied to. [This] is the line of demarcation we instinctively draw between the soul and things.

However we rightly feel that this analysis is too simple, or at least that it is impossible to maintain in its elementary rigour. For there is so tight a solidarity between this activity and these objects that an activity without connection to objects would cease to be activity², and the objects we would like to regard as independent of such an activity would in their turn cease to be objects. It is moreover necessary to note on the one hand that certain objects—those we precisely call states of the soul—not only provide a point of application for this activity but express its unique play; and on the other hand that there is within us an activity that exceeds the limits of consciousness—not only that [activity] which, unknown to us, modifies the objects to which consciousness is applied, whether [internal or external], but that which produces consciousness itself.³ [Should we say] that this activity from which consciousness springs, but which evades it, properly constitutes the soul's essence? But the soul is individual while this activity is perhaps trans-individual. For how could this activity be individualised and retain the character of intimacy which gives the

² This is in contrast to Indian sages like Patanjali who insist that consciousness does not necessarily imply objects. It is certainly true that consciousness is required for an experience of objects, and indeed the link between the two is so strong that the appearance of whatever object is sufficient proof of consciousness. However it is not equally clear that conscious requires objects, and later in this chapter (see section 8) Lavelle will allow that it does not. Practically it is the case that consciousness and objects occur together.

³In the first instance I assume that unconscious or automatic activity is in question. In the second I suppose Lavelle is speaking of the source of individual consciousness in the pure act, which is itself the self-producing essence of consciousness (see “The Experience of the Act”, ART. 7). Though human beings participate in consciousness they are not the authors of it.

soul its very spirituality save through the consciousness which accompanies it? However if soul and consciousness cannot be confused with one another, is not the soul a transcendent object for consciousness, and is it not of this transcendent object that we think when we speak of the soul's substance? But then again what links this object, [which is] transcendent to consciousness, with intimacy and spirituality, without which it seems the soul is no more than a thing among things? [These] are the problems of the relations between soul and consciousness, whose solution will permit us to justify the distinction between soul and body and to show how the I arises precisely from their connection.

2. CONSCIOUSNESS, OR CREATION PUT IN QUESTION

We cannot say that there is really a problem of consciousness. For [a] problem could only be a problem *for*⁴ consciousness. Consequently it seems that consciousness is the faculty of casting all-that-is [as a] problem, except itself, which in order to be turned into a problem would at the same time need to be nullified in an object and reborn as an act that wonders about this object. Consciousness is thus the totality of being cast [as a] problem: and this problem [which constitutes] the universe is the entire consciousness I have of it. Which we can justify in a twofold fashion: by showing first that if consciousness brought me no more than [a] representation of things it would be indistinguishable from those things themselves and I could not even say that it gives me a representation of them. Thus this representation is already a question I pose about the things themselves since I inevitably ask whether it is faithful or unfaithful; and we see that the awakening of consciousness is ever the awakening within me of an activity by which I try either to verify a cognizance or to regulate an action. But that lets it be understood that consciousness, for which everything is a problem, is itself beyond all problems: indeed things receive their light solely from the fact that consciousness assimilates them, or converts them into its own substance, or again reduces them to operations it is capable of performing. Moreover we can say that a thing is a problem for us in the measure that it is understood by consciousness as an object for it, or again as being in a certain fashion heterogenous with it. But to find the solution of this problem is discover how consciousness is capable of penetrating this thing and in a certain sense of producing it. The peculiarity of consciousness is therefore to make the outside of things vanish to the profit of their inside, and this inside can be encountered only when we recover within us the act through which they come to be. Consciousness therefore aspires to coincide with the very act of creation: in fact it is ever distinct from it precisely because there is between this act and its own operation all the opacity of the object. Yet it is this opacity that it

⁴ My italics.

tries to overcome. And if—owing to its limitation—the activity of consciousness produces nothing more than the mere representation of the object, still this representation is able to satisfy it only in the measure that it is its work, i.e. in the measure that consciousness, incapable of creating the world, at least creates the appearance of the world such as it is given to it; for then it gives it to itself.

There is more: this conception of consciousness allows us to penetrate the inwardness of the creative act, but the very gap that separates [consciousness] from it causes to appear for [consciousness] this world of objects we usually consider the effect of creation. However there is a created object—or appearance—only for a consciousness that cannot reduce it to its own operation, so that since there are particular consciousnesses—as our experience warrants—it must be that on the one hand each defines itself through an internal act which can only be an act of participation and on the other hand that there is in front of everyone a world of objects which defines the common limits of participation. Thus this world inevitably appears to us both as given to consciousness and produced by it.⁵

3. AN INTIMACY RIGHTLY UNIVERSAL

Consequently it must be said that consciousness, without ever abandoning its most secret intimacy, nonetheless carries within it a [universal] character, at least virtually, so that by its very definition there is nothing that can rightly escape it, provided it is applied, i.e. does not cease to grow. That is to say that the peculiarity of consciousness is to [enable] us to participate in an intimacy that is universal: therefore it straightaway goes beyond that clash we artificially create between an intimacy we [want to regard as] individual and a universality we [want to regard as] objective. But this universality is not primitive: what my consciousness aspires to equal is a universality that lies beyond, [a universality that] could not be posited independently of an act in which this [worldly] consciousness participates and of which it is the limitation.

Yet for this limitation to be effected consciousness must doubtless always be accompanied by a shadow that dims it, or again it [must be] like a hearth beyond which surrounding things will appear unequally lit depending upon [their] nearness [or] farness. That is why consciousness is always inseparable from the body, of which we can say it is at once the condition of [the] possibility [of consciousness] and [an] obstacle to its perfect transparency. At any rate it is the body that individualises consciousness; and that is why, depending on whether one is inclined to consider the obstacle or the condition, it appears to us sometimes as a thing that constantly diverts us from pure intimacy and

⁵ As I read this the world is a product of the fact that consciousness does not fully coincide with its ground. The world expresses the gap between the two.

sometimes as a means of bringing forth within us that intimacy without which the universality of consciousness would be alien to our own I.

However the body is only an instrument or sign of individuation; it expresses only its negative aspect. But [individuation has] a positive aspect through which the body is accepted and taken charge of: it finds its fundament in that internal act which, through its very limitation, requires the presence of a body with which is associated and which is the effect of this limitation rather than its cause.⁶ But this act, taken in its proper nature [as] act, has rapport only with the absolute: now, it is this which constitutes our soul.⁷ It is so closely linked to the body that one could, like Aristotle, call it the “form of the body” yet it is so distinct from it that one could, like Descartes, [regard] it as an independent substance. We understand therefore that the I can be defined [in terms of] the union of the soul with the body, as will be shown in the following chapter⁸. But [the present] analysis already shows us that consciousness can be confused neither with the I nor with the soul, that it implies this universal intimacy which must be penetrated [before there can be any question of] either the I or the soul, but which is such that, being universal in principle but limited in fact, it obliges me to posit myself as an individual I distinct from all other I’s, dependent on a unique and privileged object which is my body but in constant correlation with the absolute through an act which is my soul, whose body expresses [its] limitation.

4. ACT AND LIGHT.

However it is impossible to confuse consciousness with universal intimacy.⁹ For it is noteworthy, first of all, that this intimacy can only ever be grasped in a potential form so that consciousness seems to be for us the power and not the reality of things (and if things appear to it as representations it is precisely because it devotes itself solely to their possibility, which things—as things—always go beyond); [secondly], that this intimacy can only ever be grasped in an individual form so that [the] intimacy which is ours has need of a deepening toward the inside to become absolute intimacy (and so that the existence of external experience expresses the very interval that separates them).

⁶ In other words the true source of individuation is something inward, namely an individual act.

⁷ An important declaration: the soul is the point of connection between the absolute act and the individual or participated act; hence it constitutes both an entry to the world and an access to the divine. It is where the individual begins.

⁸ “The I, or the Fastening-Point of Consciousness in the Act of Participation”. Not included among these translations.

⁹ Lavelle tends to equate consciousness with what might be called “consciousness-of” and intimacy with an internal acquaintance that might be called “consciousness-in-the-subject” or “consciousness-in-itself”. The latter form of knowing can again be divided into universal inwardness and individual inwardness.

But there is more: when we speak of this universal intimacy to which consciousness gives us access this word “intimacy” expresses no more than an ideal coincidence with being insofar as it eternally produces itself. To say that this coincidence is only ideal is to say that it always implies a duality which does not cease to open and close¹⁰ between the act which makes us be and the being which is ours. Yet it is this duality which founds our independence, though it always supposes a unity from which it proceeds and in which it is resolved. *Consciousness is the mark of our respiration in being.* But though it is equal to being¹¹ in its inhalation we would be at a loss to identify it with [being]¹²; that is [why] we speak of a *consciousness of being* and [why] being itself ever appears, [there] in the beyond of consciousness, already to carry within it all the traits that rightly belong to consciousness, save the duality which divides it; [and that is why it can] be defined as the infinite source upon which consciousness constantly draws and as the ultimate end toward which it tends.¹³ Consciousness thus seems to dissolve as much when its activity ceases as when it surpasses its own limits, but in the first case it no longer has efficacy whereas in the second it becomes sheer efficacy.

It effectively has two different characters, at once conjugated and opposed: it is act and light. As act consciousness is being, considered in that operation through which it eternally produces itself. It is an error to think that we can represent creative power to ourselves on the model of a will that modifies the visible world and leaves behind a material work comparable to that of an artisan. For all creation is firstly a creation of self by self; and I have experience of such a creation in the genesis of my thinking, which is the genesis of myself: the work of my hands marks only my incapacity to equal pure thought. In any case all that goes beyond the act of my thinking, and borders it, should be enveloped by it¹⁴ and rightly constitute for it an object of knowledge. Also we see that every object of knowledge furnishes the act of thinking with both [a point of] application and a limit. Consciousness then appears as a light which illumines the world, i.e. which reveals it to us as that which is heterogenous to this light, which resists it and prevents [the light] from passing [through]. The world, in becoming completely transparent to the light, is no longer distinguishable from the light itself.

It is therefore not from the side of the object—insofar as it limits the act of thinking, i.e. [manifests] a negative and phenomenal character—that we must

¹⁰ I gather that it alternates between unity and difference.

¹¹ Indicating identity.

¹² Seemingly a contradiction. Certainly a contradiction in the context of a single, omnipresent being.

¹³ Lavelle speaks as if being were in some sense prior to consciousness. Nonetheless it must be the very essence of consciousness in that it contains “all the traits that rightly belong to consciousness, save the duality which divides it”. I suppose that consciousness (as intimacy) applies to the inmost sphere of being and that this is to some extent accessible to human consciousness when it is “equal to being”, i.e. is in its “inhalation” phase. A kind of to and fro movement is suggested.

¹⁴ As I read this, thinking should blanket all that is external and hold it as an object.

seek that being which consciousness allows us to penetrate and of which [the object] is for us the revelation. For such a being is present in the act [consciousness] accomplishes, and not in the given that answers to it and shows us what is lacking in it so to speak. However this light which seems to constitute consciousness, does it not imply an interval between thinking and the world which precisely allows it to encounter a dark surface it will [turn into] a lit surface? And it has often been shown that since light cannot return to its own source this source escapes all illumination. Thus the act that produces consciousness¹⁵ would be for us more obscure than the most obscure object, for the most obscure object will one day be reached by light whereas the hearth that radiates the light cannot be irradiated by it. It is therefore by virtue of a [parallel] tendency of the mind that we place the subject of thinking beyond all thought and consider God's pure essence as anterior to [whatever determination is made about it solely on the basis of negative attributes]. However we know [very] well that, through a kind of paradox, negativity pertains only to the object, which precisely renders it fit to receive illumination, and that the apparent negativity of the subject or the creative act expresses no more than [a] surplus of positivity compared with every operation we can effect, and [this] engenders each of our particular cognizances. But it also [signifies] that the activity from which this operation proceeds is on the side of being, as its product is on the side of knowing.¹⁶

5. AN ACTIVITY THAT IS EXPERIENCED IN ITS VERY EMPLOYMENT¹⁷

However the comparison between consciousness and light that has guided us up to now, which no theory of consciousness has succeeded in wholly doing without, is faulty. It is borrowed from the world of objectivity and can be regarded as viable only in the measure that consciousness is taken to exhaust itself in knowledge of the object. Yet the hearth of consciousness is not itself an object: it is *us*.¹⁸ We are at the heart of being because we are at the heart of subjectivity. [The] light we want to confound with consciousness itself is not produced, like visible light, by a sun external to the objects that it illumines and that we cannot look at without being blinded: we ourselves produce it. It does not issue from a thing that dazzles us: it is that which, ever unable to become a thing, creates the spectacle of things, i.e. an agent provided with a life of its own that it imparts to itself, [an agent] that becomes the spectator of all that is external

¹⁵ Consciousness-of.

¹⁶ The author tends to use the words "knowing" and "knowledge" almost exclusively in relation to consciousness-of. Nonetheless he also acknowledges an intimacy or acquaintance with being ahead of this which also must be considered knowledge, and indeed the primary form of it (see what follows).

¹⁷ I regard this as the "nuts-and-bolts" part of the chapter.

¹⁸ My italics.

to it but that nonetheless has rapport with it. Yet this agent cannot be reduced to the role of pure spectator, even if we concede that every spectator is still the agent of the spectacle he apprehends. His knowing is neither closed within the spectacle's domain nor limited to objects or the concepts that define and elaborate them. For he knows himself [as] agent. If he merely drew the notion of his activity purely from an inference, taking the effects of this activity as a point of departure, we would ask where the thought of such an inference could come from and what could make it seem legitimate. In order even to speak of it, it is necessary that on one [occasion] at least this activity had already been experienced. Now the activity experienced in its employment is consciousness itself.¹⁹ And the knowledge of it is only a kind of extension, precisely there where this activity receives from without a limitation against which it collides and which reflects it.²⁰

This definition of consciousness as an activity experienced in its very employment now merits a more alert examination. For we can say that, in order to be experienced, there must be within it an alliance of activity and passivity; rather, a sort of passivity with respect to its [own] activity. But is this passivity possible without the encounter of an obstacle exterior to it?²¹ Will we say then that, as long as this object appears to us as simply exterior, it is for us [an] object of knowledge but that as soon as it is interiorised in such a way as to become a hindrance to the exercise of our activity (or a means that promotes it) it then permits consciousness [to arise] from the debate instituted within it between its power and its effect? But the external object is here only a means and a testimony of a limitation the activity necessarily imposes on itself insofar as it is no more than an activity of participation. [That is why] there is no operation we can accomplish which does not in some way affect us or have its repercussion on our sensibility. It is therefore not enough to say that the initiatives by which we try to represent to ourselves an external object [whose content we are unable to exhaust] have in exchange a given that answers to them; it is [the case even with respect to] the most secret initiatives through which it seems we engage only our own being: they too are detached from us before [becoming one] with us so that we undergo them and they determine us.²²

¹⁹ The sentence would seem to affirm that while Lavelle often bows to the convention of identifying consciousness with consciousness-of he nonetheless recognises the priority of a consciousness-in-the-subject or consciousness-in-itself (i.e. "consciousness itself").

²⁰ This appears to subvert the thrust of the preceding sentence which argues that consciousness is its own evidence by virtue of its self-production. I take it that the word "knowledge" is here used in the objective sense (indicated by the phrase "knowledge of"); it refers to the reflection or echo of immediate self-acquaintance in consciousness-of. That is to say self-knowledge can occur in two modes.

²¹ As will be seen the answer is "yes". It looks like the author is replacing the usual subject-object distinction with the active-passive distinction in order to suit the internal sphere. Apparently for him the latter distinction implies less sense of division than the former.

²² Once again the author returns to his conception of consciousness as a circular movement, even where the inward sphere is concerned—a position in conflict with other statements that appear throughout his writings. In any case such a position can apply only to *human* inwardness, and not to awareness as it

Consequently we understand that consciousness encloses us in a kind of circle where we are both active and passive with respect to ourselves, and that it attains the outside by way of knowledge only on the condition of folding it back upon the inside which it affects. This circle circumscribes the domain of consciousness. And we clearly see how the activity that engenders it can become mine only on the condition that it is *experienced* in the two senses I can give this word: for in the first place it must, instead of spreading beyond itself, reflect back on self and constantly return toward that same hearth it constantly seems to depart. Thus passivity appears not only correlative of activity but the very condition without which this activity—ever cast further from its own centre by its very employment—would have no interiority.²³ But this observation shows [very] well that the distinction between activity and passivity which we have considered as characteristic of consciousness insofar as it is finite—which often leads us to believe that there is no other consciousness than finite consciousness—is both implicated in and surmounted by all spiritual activity, and even serves to define it as such. Thus, far from saying that a pure spiritual activity would not know this return to self which is consciousness itself, we must say that it would produce within itself this perfect reflection which is the summit of consciousness, in which is discovered the very essence of spirit in that the being it gives itself is [indistinguishable] from the knowledge it has of itself.²⁴

But when we say that in consciousness our own internal activity experiences itself, it is in another sense again: for we mean not only that it is felt as ours but that in putting its own powers to work it becomes capable of regulating their play. Consciousness therefore is both reflexive and critical, and it seems that it is reflexive only in order to become critical, not merely in [the] sense that it discerns the good and bad use activity can make of itself but in another, more profound sense: that consciousness can become a [regulator] of activity only because it is this activity in a pure state so to speak, which in its real employment is ever exposed to failing and falling off. Therefore it is here again obvious that a perfect spiritual activity, far from excluding consciousness, would be the most certain

pertains to the pure act. My understanding is that the latter is all act, all cause, with no place left over for passivity or genuine (rather than metaphorical) circularity. Only the stepped-down consciousness associated with human beings can contain elements of passivity, duality and circularity. But as will be seen, even here consciousness tends in the direction of singleness and non-circularity.

²³ In other words out-going consciousness must reach some kind of terminus in order to be turned back on itself. Again, this can only apply to human consciousness. The primordial act would presumably have no such knowledge of itself because it contains no limitation or passivity.

²⁴ The statement does not explain how “reflection” can pertain to pure activity. Presumably a self-caused spiritual activity would know itself in willing and producing itself, i.e. through its pure activity, and would not require—or be capable of—reflection. In accordance with the author’s previous writings, even human beings might be expected to possess some measure of direct self-knowledge in their intents and acts, and in fact that view finds support below. The best construction I can put on the sentence in question is that the phrase “perfect reflection” is a figure of speech by which the author intends a perfect union of active and passive.

fundament of it, which would [re-emerge] in each particular consciousness but with a gap that measures its insufficiency.

Consciousness cannot therefore be brought back to the [subject-object] relationship which reveals it to us [as being] turned only toward [the outside]; [neither] can it be brought back to [the] internal relation of the subject with an object which is itself, for one could not turn the subject into an object, even [an internal one], without abolishing it.²⁵ *Consciousness is a relation of the subject with the subject*: and this relation, far from dividing the subject, or making it an object, creates [the subject] as subject. For in such a relationship consciousness does not contemplate itself from within, as if it could [stand across from] itself. It is altogether active and passive with respect to itself, and in so perfect a reciprocity that there is nothing in it [bound to be] active or passive (at least insofar as it is not yet determined [from] the outside) and so that the power it has of suffering its own action is the very power it has of acting in that this action has a subject which is us. In reality the distinction [between] active and passive no longer applies when [these two] are so intimately joined in the same being, [a being] that is defined by their union.²⁶ We act on an object exterior to us. We suffer the action it exerts on us. But there, where active and passive appear to come together in one being, as occurs only in [the case of] consciousness, we are beyond active and passive, not in a mixed form of existence which links them but in an originary form of existence from which we can extract them [only] by analysis.²⁷ *Here is what is expressed by the reflexive or pronominal verb, which is the verb of pure interiority*. Consciousness is a self which is an action of self upon self, which is also a dialogue with self.²⁸ It is this dialogue of self with self that creates, not exteriority [to] self, but on the contrary intimacy with self. If we suppose it abolished, the factor that [remains] might be an object for another but, having no point of communication with self, it can no longer be self. It is the imperfection of the dialogue with self which creates this dialogue with the universe through which we try to enrich [the self] indefinitely. [The person] who suffices himself in solitude is [the one] who has the most relations with himself, and theologians know [very] well that he would be the unity of a thing, and not of a spirit, if he were not three-in-one, i.e. an eternal mediation not only

²⁵ Once again the author provides cogent reasons for distinguishing between direct or intimate knowledge and consciousness-of.

²⁶ I take this as Lavelle's resolution of the difficulties encountered earlier. Intimate knowledge is indeed prior to knowledge in the subject-object mode but activity and passivity (which I construe as internal prototypes of subject and object) are so thoroughly fused in it as to amount to a unitary knowledge. Nonetheless it must be admitted that a sense of duality persists. Even "*a relation of the subject with the subject*" suggests it. In sum the movement toward inwardness describes a narrowing spiral: the subject-object relation tightens into the relation between activity and passivity, which again tightens into the relation of the subject with the subject. The logical terminus is a point—which I suppose is the pure act.

²⁷ Once again it is useful to recall the terms of Lavelle's dialectic where opposites are reconciled in a prior unity. See note 22.

²⁸ The "dialogue" of course implies two-ness. In the next chapter Lavelle speaks of a dialogue between the I ("*le je*") and the me ("*le moi*"), i.e. the self as subject and the self as object.

[between] himself [and] the world but [between] himself [and] himself, which shatters his unity only in order to give rise to it.

6. THE DIALOGUE OF SELF WITH SELF.

It is now [time] to describe this internal dialogue which is characteristic of consciousness. It will readily be admitted that being [a] self is being in rapport with self; it is to produce that consciousness of self in which the very act that produces me returns towards self in order to take possession of [it]. Therefore it could indeed be said that consciousness is born of a division into two; and this thesis is often presented in such a way that [division] would be the very sign of our imperfection, the rupture of a unity that consciousness would then vainly seek to re-establish. Thus when we consider consciousness as an effect of activity's reflection on an obstacle that halts it we let it be understood that this activity would have no need of consciousness if it had limitless power. Which is obviously true of that instinctive and spontaneous activity which does not yet have any spiritual character: but it is doubtless contradictory to imagine that such an activity could be without limits; for it is itself only the limitation of a properly spiritual activity toward which it flows back as soon as it takes consciousness of its own limitation. To take consciousness of its limitation is to go beyond it, to appeal to a limitless activity which can only be an activity of thought. The advantage of the obstacle is to allow, not the spirit to be born, but the body to feel its own bounds, i.e. to discover beyond [itself] the power of spirit which [the bounds] would be [unable] to retain or imprison. Thus the obstacle the body cannot surmount teaches me that spirit overcomes it and invites me to make myself spirit. It is not [usually] noticed that if consciousness is born of reflection, all reflection turns me back upon an absence which is the very presence of idea. This idea appears to the body to be [even] less than [a] thing, which is an obstacle that resists it and [shares the same nature] with it, whereas the idea escapes its clutches; but it is also more than the thing, which never succeeds in completely embodying it. And the idea is neither independent of nor identical with spirit: it is the dialogue of spirit with itself.

In each of us consciousness—finite in its current employment and infinite in its possible employment—can be defined as a dialogue between its act and its state. In the measure that this state implies an action that [consciousness] undergoes, [consciousness] is a dialogue with its object (in that this object expresses only what lies beyond it) or with another consciousness (in that this lying-beyond is traced back to an initiative comparable to that which [consciousness] attributes to itself and with which it is capable of communicating). And there is in it a dialogue with the body which individualises it but [also] mediates its relation with other objects and other consciousnesses. Finally there is a dialogue

[between] the act it accomplishes, always imperfect and incomplete, and the infinite act from which it proceeds and which it vainly strives to equal.

But insofar as it is constitutive of the I itself – [that] abstraction [consisting] of its relation with a term opposed to it – consciousness involves time as the relation between what is ahead of it, [revealing] its unique possibility, and what is behind it, [defining] at every moment what it has become. Perhaps it is even necessary to say that this rapport [between] the past and the future shapes both the essence of our consciousness [and] the means by which the I is realised, as we will establish in Chapter VII²⁹ of [Book Two]. However it is important to note that this separation of past and future – which is creative of time and, through the intermediary of time, of consciousness and the I itself – also delivers us from time, for this conversion of future into past which is constantly effected by way of the instant makes the instant appear evanescent but [in fact] takes place in an eternity which, having been the eternity of the possible, becomes the eternity of the fulfilled. We understand therefore how consciousness could have been so often reduced to retrospection: and [some people] have wanted to reduce the possible itself to a retrospection in relation to the present that realises it. But this is only [a] sign that consciousness is ever reflexive and that the expression “spontaneous consciousness” is devoid of meaning: it serves only to characterise the first degree of reflection. [That] is also the reason why consciousness could have been defined as the idea of idea. Only, this expression itself conceals a misunderstanding: for there cannot be an idea which is not also the idea of idea [for] it is this splitting-in-two which makes it [exist] as idea. Consequently it is a vain enterprise to ask if there is also an idea of the idea of idea and whether the regression should halt there or continue indefinitely. For that is to suppose that in the first splitting the idea itself becomes an object for which there can be a new idea so that the idea of idea becomes another object for which there is again an idea, etc. Rather, the idea can never be turned into an object: it is straightaway an act of consciousness, i.e. the idea of [an] idea beyond which we cannot regress without finding the same consciousness enacted, already completely present in its initial step. Infinite regression is therefore only [a] sign that one cannot go back beyond consciousness, and that one cannot turn any of its operations into [an] object without indefinitely [re-evoking] it as creative of itself and as [the] eternal first-beginning of itself.

The duality characteristic of consciousness therefore expresses the act of a thinking which “thinks”³⁰ itself, i.e. in the measure that consciousness is a being, the act of a being that comes to be. Thus consciousness is not only the fundamental condition without which we would be unable to know either the I or the soul, it appears to us as the internal condition that allows us to assist in³¹

²⁹ “THE CREATION OF TIME AS THE CONDITION OF THE AUTOCREATION OF SOUL BY ITSELF”. Not included in these translations

³⁰ My quotation marks, indicating a self-creative thinking.

³¹ Or be present to, witness.

their two-fold genesis. It will remain then to define that very being whose development it penetrates and illumines, which [being] we call "the I" when we consider the psychological experience we have of it and "the soul" when we consider the ontological substance it implies.

7. A PERFECT CLOSURE AND A PERFECT OPENING.

In the internal dialogue which defines it, consciousness is at once perfect closure and perfect opening. But it is the first feature which has most strongly struck all those who have analysed the nature of consciousness. They have above all [focussed on] this intimacy, this secret, which sets it opposed to the world of objects, [the] public and manifest world. We need to close [our] eyes and refuse the spectacle of things which constantly diverts us in order to regain within us that reality which is ourselves and in which things are transformed into ideas [so] as to reveal to us their [unique] essence within the very act through which they are created. Consciousness separates us from the world: no being penetrates it but ourselves. Within it the I aspires to self-sufficiency. It is like the inside of a shell, a shelter that gives refuge to the person who, wounded by all sights, refuses to allow himself to be diverted by phenomena and consents to take responsibility only in a world where nothing alien comes to obscure or alter his own transparency to himself. Not that the universe seems to him bereft of light: but it is [accepted] on the condition that it remains before him as a pure show in which he himself occupies no place, [a spectacle] upon which his action remains without effect and from which he seems isolated by a glass screen.³²

However it is not possible to reduce consciousness to the lone contemplation of my internal movements or of a [mere] image the world gives me. For these movements are not shut within me: far from allowing me to do without it, this image requires the world. There is nothing in consciousness that does not express its communication with what goes beyond it and in principle with all-that-is. For that reason we say it is perfect opening at the same time that it is perfect closure: it [can be considered] perfect opening, and nothing more, because it has no other content than the universe and because whatever progress it might make consists precisely in penetrating a region of the universe it has not yet penetrated. On this count, and recalling the two [factors] that constitute it which we have expressed by the words "act" and "given" [*sic*]³³, [consciousness] is both *pure welcome* to all it is capable of receiving and [a] *pure élan* which constantly proceeds ahead of everything that might be offered to it, which it always seems to anticipate. Yet it [can] at the same time [be considered] perfect closure, and nothing more, because all that it apprehends it apprehends in itself

³² The pejorative terms of this characterisation show that the author favours a more open view.

³³ For strict parallelism in relation to the next clause these terms should be reversed.

in a perspective it alone knows and no other consciousness can replace with its own. And there is between this openness and that closure a mysterious identity, for it is when I am most interior to myself that I am furthest from those frontiers of myself beyond which everything remains external and strange to me, and nearest to that being which, [as] the common source of myself and all-that- is, teaches me that it is for me a single thing to know myself and to go beyond myself.

Our consciousness is interior to pure being, which can be defined only as absolute interiority: and this interiority is realised only thanks to a relation with self that renders it both present to self and creator of self in an equation of itself with itself to which each particular self constantly tries to raise itself.³⁴ Absolute interiority is moreover absolute closure because there is nothing which is not within it, or because it has no outside, and [it is] absolute opening owing to its inherent infinitude which is never lacking and which gives it a kind of eternal newness. Each particular consciousness participates in this double nature, for it can never depart from its own interiority insofar as it participates in [that] being which is itself absolute interiority; and it opens onto what surpasses it only as onto an apparent exteriority through which it seeks only to increase its own interiority.

8. CONSCIOUSNESS, TRANSCENDENT BY ITS ACT AND IMMANENT BY ITS CONTENT.

The content of consciousness rightly defines what we call “immanence”, i.e. what pertains to our experience and is at the level of our apprehension or of our action. We call transcendence whatever is beyond. But we can conceive of transcendence only through its relation with the present content of consciousness, i.e. with the immanence that enfolds the content of every possible consciousness. Moreover if transcendence resides in what exceeds the content of consciousness this in no way means it is the negation of consciousness but on the contrary the origin and undivided essence of it. It seems to be almost unanimously recognised that the inadequation³⁵ of its act and its object is constitutive of consciousness. Now, that is surely the rightful character of knowledge, which is consciousness insofar as it undergoes an action that comes from without and limits it. But insofar as it is consciousness proper³⁶ the duality in it is that duality of self [and] self which is the very unity of self. Consciousness does not shatter an unconscious activity in order to produce light from its shards:

³⁴ A roundabout restatement of the position that self is grounded in (and virtually another name for) pure being and that the individual I draws its sense of identity from it.

³⁵ The word exists in English but is little used today. It implies the priority of one member of a pair and the insufficiency, or in this case the secondary character, of the other member with respect to it.

³⁶ Consciousness-in-itself as distinct from “knowledge” or consciousness-of.

to have consciousness is on the contrary to participate in an activity which surpasses us but which we constantly make our own; and what marks our separation is not the light we receive but the darkness we meet there, [which the light] never succeeds in dissipating. If the content of consciousness comprises for us the world of immanence, the act of consciousness resides at the point where transcendence constantly descends into immanence; the rapport between these two terms constitutes participation's originality and imparts [a] stirring sense to existence. It is impossible to [separate] them. Thus consciousness, instead of being considered, in terms of elementary psychology, as an epiphenomenon of the real, or in the more rigorous language of ontology, as the interval [separating] us from the unity of being (or the pure act), [should] on the contrary mark our degree of penetration in being, the degree of inwardness and depth we can impart to our being by participating in the unity of being (or the pure act). Thus we should not say that the transcendent surpasses consciousness but that, since consciousness lives only in its own surpassing, the union of the immanent and the transcendent is realised in consciousness. The immanent resides in its content or states, and the transcendent in the act it accomplishes or in which it participates.

The distinction between consciousness and knowledge is particularly important here: everything becomes mixed up as soon as they are confounded. Knowledge presupposes consciousness but not the reverse.³⁷ Knowledge arises from the limitation of consciousness, which requires an object across from it as [in the case of] vision where one perceives nothing but what halts the gaze. But that does not mean that, lacking an object, consciousness is abolished. For it is present in knowledge of the object, not as the knowledge of that knowledge, which would turn the latter into an object, but as the act within this knowledge that makes it a knowing.³⁸ It [amounts to] little to say that that this act produces the light of knowledge: if it did not know itself [as] light this light would be the light of nothing. Consequently even if consciousness could be exercised solely in knowledge of an object it could not be confused with it, for it would be that which, enfolding all possible cognizances, is within each of them "knowing" in the pure state. It is not enough to say that it is transcendental: it is transcendent to all known things and renders them knowable. It is an act which can never become an object: but to complain of this would be to complain that sight [in itself] cannot be seen; it would be to fail to recognise that it only makes the things viewed participate in a quality it possesses in a supremely eminent fashion, of which it finds in them only [a] reflection. It is a grave perversion, from which

³⁷ Consciousness does not necessarily suppose knowledge of objects. See note 2.

³⁸ Here and below is reaffirmed a knowledge-in-the-subject. The entire paragraph is important in that it counters the notion that self-consciousness involves no more than feedback from objects. Apparently Lavelle does not allow that similar arguments can be applied to the circularity of activity and passivity and the reflexive relation between self with self, both of which he attributes to consciousness-in-the-subject. Doubtless he envisages a very close proximity (approaching identity) between elements in those cases .

philosophy suffers, to consider the model of existence as that provided by things and to forget or deny that activity which meets its limitation in them, without which they would not be things; [the] same perversion [has it] that this activity escapes consciousness and that there is no other consciousness than that evidenced in the knowledge of things. But in knowledge itself consciousness of the operation cannot be identified with the representation of its object nor in the absence of this object does consciousness vanish: it is when it bears within it no more than the infinity of possible objects, before any of them becomes present to it, that it is exerted and experiences its free-play in a perfect fashion—[an] analysis which again confirms the concept of a consciousness that is ever-transcendent through its act and ever-immanent through its content, i.e. through the states it undergoes or the objects to which it is applied.

Finally it is consciousness alone which constitutes that renowned sphere whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere. The centre is everywhere because each particular consciousness, however humble, is itself a hearth of light around which glows a perspective [embracing] the entire world. And the circumference is nowhere since, if it marks the horizon of each consciousness, the latter can be constantly surpassed by it, and since at the horizon of one [consciousness] is the hearth of another. Yet these hearths are independent only in appearance: they only grant various perspectives on the same world; but they shine with the same light, so that transcendence and immanence here again show their solidarity, since transcendence refers to the various hearths and to the common source that feeds them, and immanence to the various perspectives and the convergence that joins them.

9. THAT CONSCIOUSNESS CANNOT BE CONFOUNDED WITH EITHER THE I OR THE SOUL.

We cannot define consciousness other than in connection with the I, for it is ever the I that has consciousness and consciousness of self. [Hence] we confuse the I with consciousness. But this coincidence is impossible to uphold if we [recall] on the one hand that the I [contains] dark and subterranean [regions] which consciousness learns to penetrate and on the other hand that by means of knowledge consciousness spreads well beyond the I's limits, and [indeed] that no object of consciousness as such is rightly a property of the I. We can identify the I with neither the act from which consciousness proceeds—since it surpasses the I, which only participates in it—nor the light [the act] produces, since this light envelopes both the I and the world. (We will try to demarcate the frontiers of consciousness and the I in Chapter Two³⁹.) It is obvious not only that, without consciousness, we could not speak of the I but that there would truly be no I.

³⁹ See note 8.

[However] the I which implies consciousness [cannot be] reduced to it. [On the one hand] it seems above it, as if consciousness were only a property of the I: that is why it is said that *the I has consciousness or takes consciousness* of something. And [on the other hand] the I seems below [consciousness], as if it signalled a deficiency with respect to it, as if it constantly sought to draw near that total consciousness which, if it succeeded in reaching it, would nullify it as [a] particular I. Consciousness is therefore with respect to the I the means of its formation, i.e. the very instrument through which, by participating in being's inwardness, [the I] also acquires [a] being of its own. [This is again why] it is necessary to say that consciousness never seems capable of sufficing itself⁴⁰: for we [can] ask whence it [becomes] conscious, so that we sometimes consider it as a purely *formal* being and [then look for] the content of this form, which is always for us an object of knowledge, [and] sometimes [consider it] as the very act that moulds this form and renders it apt to receive all objects within it. We find the same idea even more strongly enunciated in the affirmation that consciousness is purely intentional⁴¹, which also can be understood in two different ways according to whether this intention is directed toward an object which fulfils its expectation or toward that very act which produces it, which it only ever realises in an imperfect fashion but which would, at its limit abolish the interval separating] it from its object.

As a consequence we divine what is superficial in that purely introspective stance where consciousness, attentive only to its own content, would hope to discover within it, through an inward gaze, a pre-existent and ready-made I. Consciousness is nothing except by way of the very activity from which it springs, whose play it regulates. It is not a question of pondering the nature of consciousness but of interrogating consciousness on the nature of [everything else], in particular the I itself whose responsibility it grounds. Whence the profundity and haleness of this remark from Goethe to Schiller: "I never think about thinking."⁴² Introspection has not only the defect, as it is believed, of turning the I into an object; it has above all the defect of not understanding that *the I is not given but engaged* and that it is nothing except by way of the relations it maintains with beings and things, which render it of-a-piece with the entire universe.

We can no more confuse consciousness with soul than with the I. The [problematic] connections [between] soul and consciousness [are what] make the soul a problem. If soul were identical with consciousness [it] could not be denied. But [the fact] that it can be, and by way of consciousness itself, is doubtless one of the essential features that distinguishes it from [the latter] as we have suggested

⁴⁰ I presume that this and the following comments refer to a consciousness engaged in objects and not to the roots of consciousness where it is indistinct from being and the act.

⁴¹ The reference is to a notion set forth by Brentano and taken up by Husserl, namely that consciousness is always consciousness-of this or that object, i.e. it *intends* an object.

⁴² I do not know the source or context of this remark.

in sections four and five of the introduction⁴³ where we showed that the soul [depends on] an act of consciousness but [one] which surpasses consciousness itself because it is an act of faith which puts in question not only the I's future but the very essence of the being the I is capable of giving itself. Consequently, if consciousness is the light in which the I acts, the I is the agent responsible for its soul, doubtless not [because] it is its creator but [because] it disposes the very powers which constitute it and which, according to the use it makes of them, gives them that actuality through which it determines its own relation with the absolute.⁴⁴ Consciousness precisely allows us on the one hand to participate from within in that pure activity which becomes ours by way of it [and] on the other hand to oppose, in participation, the I's creative freedom to the powers that determine it so as to reveal within our soul an [ever-ready] vocation that the I [may or may not] recognise and put into play.

10. CONSCIOUSNESS AND FREEDOM.

No one can imagine divorcing consciousness from freedom, not only because there, where consciousness ceases, we have to do with a blind force which is freedom's negation, but also because consciousness seems to be born [together] with freedom and from the very freedom to which it offers representations and as a consequence points of application without which [freedom] could not be exercised. Consciousness is stretched between freedom and representation: and if we could here set up distinctions in an act that is indivisible we would have to say that freedom is generative of consciousness, even as consciousness is generative of representation. However we could confuse it neither with freedom nor with representation; rather, it is sometimes turned toward the one as its source and sometimes toward the other as its product. It is therefore a link not only between the inside and the outside but between the engendering and the engendered. That is why consciousness always appears to oscillate between an act which is above it and a given which is below: it tries to resolve itself sometimes in the one, sometimes in the other; nonetheless the act is like the summit of consciousness while the given is, we might say, its point of fall. That is why freedom vanishes if we try to make a representation of it, i.e. an object, and why the representation or object vanishes if we regain the internal act which is expressed and [made phenomenal] by means of [the object]. On the one side we have to do with the spring from which our existence constantly draws and on the other with what also comes from it but which exceeds our capacity and which we can only endure. Thus consciousness permits us both to deepen ourselves by

⁴³ See "The [Soul-Problem]".

⁴⁴ See note 9 of "The [Soul-Problem]" where the soul is depicted as lacking a specific essence which can only be provided by the I through its choices.

way of the inside, i.e. through the employment of our freedom, and to extend ourselves by way of the outside, through the increment in our cognizances. However these two functions of consciousness cannot be placed on the same level. For it is doubtless an error to think that the nature of consciousness is to dilate itself infinitely so as to contain at [its] limit the All as an object. The All can never be an object since every object precisely expresses the interval separating the act of creation from the act of participation. Also the peculiarity of consciousness is to be turned not toward the object, which it seeks on the contrary to abolish in the perfection of the act that apprehends it, but toward that freedom which makes it be, with which it never coincides [yet] whose purest play it seeks to regain by gradually stripping it of the hindrances that paralyse it.

Doubtless it is impossible for us to mount beyond freedom, which is ever an absolute first beginning and the very act that introduces us to existence. Yet it is because it is a first beginning that we ourselves have *the freedom to be free*. And it is because consciousness is inseparable from freedom's employment that consciousness is also our soul's means of formation. It can, it is true, be uninterested in [its soul], absorbed in the contemplation of objects that divert it and [given to taking pleasure] in submitting rather than in acting. But it above all expresses the duty I have of "becoming what I am", i.e. being all that I can be; and provided it does not forget that, through its origin, it penetrates being's inwardness, it will teach us to recognise the powers that the I disposes and that are up to us to actualise. In asserting of the I that it is conscious, I do not mean merely that there is a light in it which illumines itself as a thing but that there is an initiative in it through which it is revealed as a possibility it can possess only [on the condition of making that possibility real]. My consciousness fills the entire interval [separating] my I from my soul: it considers the path that will bring them together; that is why [consciousness] is indivisibly psychological and moral: [the] knowledge of what I am and the demand for what I should be. It carries within it an infinity which permits the finite I to determine its own relation to the absolute and its own place in [it], i.e. to shape its soul. How [could] my soul be mine if it were not my own work? Though it is created it is *created [as] creative of itself*, i.e. as a potentiality that consciousness is [fit] to recognise, precisely so as to put it into play. Hence there is a duality between our consciousness and our soul: yet that is a [necessary] condition for our soul to be ours. Our consciousness, which employs all its resources, must be able to squander them and contribute to its ruin instead of edifying it. The nature of the study of consciousness consists precisely in the comparison we make between our possibilities and their employment. But if consciousness and soul must always be separate from each other [in order for us to] retain responsibility for our soul, they must nonetheless coincide in the end. For consciousness does not [shrink away] from the soul, whose destiny it determines; if *the soul is the expression of my absolute relation with the absolute*, it can be realised only by way of the consciousness which makes it mine – which we might translate into different

[terms] by saying the soul is the idea of myself, which can change into me only by way of consciousness, which alone is capable of recognising [the idea] and allowing me to take responsibility for it.