

INTERPRETATION OF THE PROPOSITION “*COGITO ERGO SUM*”¹

1. THE “*COGITO*” OR THE ACCESS TO BEING THROUGH INTIMACY.

The soul’s discovery of its own inwardness² is constitutive of the soul itself. Not that we can say this intimacy straightaway has an individual character³ and consequently allows me immediately to determine this soul as mine. For the discovery of subjectivity precedes, we might say, the discovery of *my* own subjectivity. In reality the latter is an experience [which is] not primitive and instantaneous but constantly goes on and deepens [throughout] my entire life: I have never [come to the end of] distinguishing between the absolute subjectivity and this imperfect subjectivity through which I say “me” by contrasting myself with other beings who also say “me” and are present within [the absolute subjectivity] like me and with me. Yet the relation of each subjectivity [to] the pure subjectivity, or [to] another subjectivity, cannot be reduced to the [inside-

¹ Chapter Four of Book One, “The Soul’s Inwardness [or Intimacy]”. The phrase “*cogito ergo sum*” is Latin for Descartes’ famous formula “I think therefore I am”.

² I will continue to use “intimacy” and “inwardness” interchangeably to translate a single French noun.

³ This denial of an individual character to the soul at its entry into the world is asserted in various forms throughout *Of the Human Soul*. It is not clear to me that *Of the Act* fully squares with this view. Here soul is depicted as a kind of anonymous intimacy precisely in need of an individual essence.

outside relationship]: it goes beyond it. I become more interior to the interiority of being in the measure that I become more interior to myself⁴: and the mutual exteriority of two particular beings decreases accordingly. This exteriority is explained by the presence of the body: we know that the I is always linked to the body as to its limits and that these limits are variable since the I is never completely slave [to] its body but [then again] never completely [its] master.

In this admirable formula *cogito ergo sum* Descartes presents in the form of an invincible reasoning an experience [that is] constant and implicated in all others, [one] which requires me to enter into existence by way of thinking⁵, i.e. by way of pure inwardness.⁶ Yet he expresses the incomparable grandeur of this discovery without bothering to make a distinction between the universality of this thinking and the individual being who takes it upon himself, which gives way to [divergent interpretations] that we know very well and leads [Descartes] to set up an absolute separation between the I that thinks and the body – as if it were possible for this thinking to be mine independently of its relation to the body.⁷ What we would like to try to show is how this formula defines a first beginning of the I to itself, a gnosological rather than an ontological first beginning, attested to by its necessary link with the argument we rightly call “ontological”⁸; how [the formula] envelopes the experience of participation and, through the very boldness with which it directly penetrates its source, ignores the limiting conditions that render it possible: Descartes will restore them later with much difficulty, precisely for lack of having inscribed them in that initial affirmation where he expressed the discovery of both being’s inwardness and his own inwardness to being.

In saying “I think therefore I am” there is indeed no question of passing from an immanent thinking to a transcendent existence – which allows respect for the legitimacy of the *therefore* and protects the formal validity of the argument; it is solely a question of showing that the sole access to being is through interiority, not because that interiority might be the reflection of who knows what exteriority but because [it] is the very absolute of being, such that whatever exteriority we will thereafter infer will be derived and relative. [This] is the case in particular of extent⁹, for which we know that Descartes will [later] be obliged to invoke divine veracity in order to endow it with a substantial existence comparable to that of thought. If all the great philosophies – those that rightly marked not exactly a revolution but a new beginning for philosophy, [those] of Socrates, Descartes

⁴ Readers will by now recognise this as a central theme in Lavelle’s philosophy.

⁵ The same French word can be translated as “thought”. In keeping with the active character of Lavelle’s philosophy I have generally preferred “thinking” to “thought”.

⁶ A hint is given as to what the author principally means by “thinking”: namely “inwardness”. The word “pure” suggests engagement in a subjectivity which precedes representation, i.e. thinking in the usual sense of involvement in words and concepts. More will be noted on this point later.

⁷ In recent times especially Descartes has come in for much criticism on this count.

⁸ See Section 6.

⁹ Spatiality.

[and] Kant—have been characterised by a return to the subject, it is not only because the return to the subject defined a critical attitude through which all objective affirmations were validated (though their authors might have thought so) [but] because it achieved a penetration into the very inwardness of Being whose [objective aspect gives] us no more than [an] appearance or manifestation. And *The Critique of Practical Reason*¹⁰, in which the subject is not considered as merely a legislator of phenomenal experience but as an agent who determines his own existence through his action, cannot do otherwise than to disclose in him a participation in the absolute. Likewise the activity I grasp in the *Cogito*, which seems to have a spiritual character only because it is an activity of thought, is above all an activity that produces itself, i.e. that already supposes the entering-into-play of a will; and Biranian¹¹ “*effort*” does no more than renew the Cartesian *Cogito*, though Biran was more attentive than Descartes to the limitation of our interior activity, to the resistance opposed to it and against which it constantly battles. The same exigency is at the source of the Christian philosophy [of] Saint Augustine who needs the *Cogito* in order to achieve a meeting-point between the creature’s being and the creator’s being, [and it is also] in the recent phenomenological reform of philosophy [by] Husserl¹² which proposes a return to Descartes and finds in the *Cogito* the indubitable first existence and fundament of all the affirmations that bear on essences. The primacy of the *Cogito* evinces the most profound feature of all philosophy which, instead of being constituted as an objective system, demonstrates that engagement of the I in being which makes it indivisibly a science and a wisdom.

2. CARTESIAN DOUBT AS WILL’S QUESTIONING OF BOTH KNOWLEDGE AND EXISTENCE.

It seems however that Descartes’ point of departure and essential preoccupation is primarily theoretical in nature. By [casting] in doubt all his previous affirmations the subject is affirmed as a thinking being by way of doubt itself. And one can construe the *Cogito* [as] saying that, at the moment [the subject] is affirmed as a [thinking being], the I brings to light only its strictly critical functions so that all its subsequent affirmations depend on that and find

¹⁰ An important follow-up to Kant’s monumental *Critique of Pure Reason*. It deals with ethical matters.

¹¹ Reference to the philosopher Marie-Francois-Pierre Gonthier de Biran (1766-1824).

¹² Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), chief exponent of phenomenology and mentor of Martin Heidegger. His famous 1931 work *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge* (translated as “Cartesian Meditations”) was developed from two lectures delivered at the Sorbonne in 1929, while Lavelle was living in Paris. Whether or not he attended the lectures Lavelle is aware that his “Interpretation” stands in direct relation to Husserl as well as Descartes. Indeed the drift of Husserl’s philosophy is on several counts similar to that of Lavelle, e.g. Husserl too speaks of the I in terms of an act. Yet it is doubtful that the careful Husserl would have endorsed the adventurous metaphysics of Lavelle. Likewise Lavelle has reservations about Husserl, as will be seen later in this chapter.

their fundament in it.¹³ But this is to restrict the argument's ontological significance and perhaps to take away its conclusive force. For thinking's critical function is doubtless nothing more than an effect of that immediate penetration of thinking into being which renders it apt to validate every affirmation in which it recognises the presence of the being it always brings with it so to speak. The *Cogito* emerges from the *dubito*¹⁴ which already reveals thinking to us in its purest employment. I doubt every object of thought in order to learn that I cannot doubt the thinking which doubts. We should not forget that doubt is voluntary; it is therefore the sign of my power rather than my impotence, for with its initial step it makes me enter into the interior of being, of a being that immediately becomes mine through the act I carry out. [Where this act is concerned] doubt is so to speak the first moment, the general and conditional form, in which is contained ahead of time all the determinations I will be able to give it, among which [I will have] to choose. [Consequently] it is necessary to proceed from doubt, though doubt is already the whole of thinking, which cannot, it is true, be content with the consciousness of its act but must also determine it.

Doubt is therefore not an exclusively theoretical bearing of consciousness. For it is inseparable from the will which constantly produces and regenerates it. Moreover it is not only a questioning of knowledge but a questioning of existence. In the modern era emphasis has often been placed on the role played by anxiety in the life of our soul, as if it were in anxiety that the soul took measure of its responsibility with respect to its own destiny. And we think that anxiety is to the will what doubt is to the intellect. But there is no doubt that does not include anxiety, that does not put us in the presence of the I itself which, in as much as it learns to know itself through its own incapacity to know nothing [at all], reveals to us that very activity we dispose, which is ever hobbled, yet in such a way that the use we make of it [determines] all the being we [enjoy], i.e. that we are capable of giving ourselves.

Also there is no progression when we pass from the *dubito* to the *Cogito* since the *dubito* is already the soul itself, considered in [the context of] this active and enquiring inwardness through which it is revealed to itself as a participation (at first deficient and contingent) in being, with which it does not yet know how it will be filled. Participation is altogether present in the *dubito*—yet in its limiting and negative form, though infinity is already present in it by way of the multitude of potential affirmations doubt already contains before being broken¹⁵.

¹³ In which case “I think therefore I am” would pertain only to formal thinking processes so that for example a computer's confirmation that it is engaged in a computation might have the same value as Descartes' personal reflection. Objections to Descartes' proposition frequently take this cast. Lavelle makes it plain in the next sentence that he rejects any such an interpretation of the *Cogito*.

¹⁴ “I doubt”—referring to Descartes' method of progressively putting all things in doubt until he arrived at something he could not doubt. See Section Four of *Discourse on Method* and the first of Descartes' *Meditations*.

¹⁵ Into particular affirmations?

Consequently the sole difference between the *dubito* and the *Cogito* is that the *Cogito* lays participation bare in its positive form, so to speak, i.e. precisely in that originary infinitude of affirmation where all particular affirmations find both their possibility and their reason for being. One can say that the I is inseparable from doubt; it is the I that doubts, and doubt expresses, [there] within the I itself, its limited and individual character. But if we hold to the distinction between the *I* and the *me* defined in chapter II¹⁶, then we can say that the contrast between the *dubito* and the *Cogito* is in effect the contrast between the *me* and the *I*, or the discovery within the *me* of the *I*, there where the feeling of thinking's apparent powerlessness is immediately converted into the revelation of its limitless power. It is therefore at the moment we discover the *Cogito* in the *dubito* that we legitimately ask whether the Cartesian argument reveals to us universal thought or only the thinking of a particular being who is me. However we cannot establish any cut between the one and the other. I participate in a rightly universal thinking which, in the very measure it is truly a thinking, is coextensive with all thinking but which, in the measure that it is my thinking, is always an imperfect uncertain thinking which doubts, so that, if it is a true thinking, it seems that the I is transported beyond itself, and there where it is nothing more than its own thinking, it discovers in it only the lack of a truth it calls upon but is refused. However there is neither [a] finished thinking nor [a] separate I. The experience we have of thinking is the experience of our own thinking in so far as it affirms itself and [is] conscious of carrying within it a power of affirmation that surpasses it but to which it is obliged to consent.¹⁷

3. THINKING IN SO FAR AS [IT IS] INDIVIDUAL AND IN SO FAR AS [IT IS] UNIVERSAL.

For I can discover thinking only through the act in which I myself participate. Moreover we know the impossibility of granting a conclusive character to any argument that might take a form like "You think therefore you are" or "He thinks therefore he is".¹⁸ This would be to convert thinking into an object, i.e. to abolish it, and to evoke in order to support it a hypothetical subject [dwelling] in [an] intimacy I would not penetrate. The I of intimacy is an I beyond which we cannot go further back: which is not testimony of an existence situated in the beyond [but] an interrogation both of self and of all things, which in questioning itself gives itself the being it is: consequently the argument has value only there

¹⁶ Section 3, "DIALOGUE OF THE I AND THE ME". The distinction in question is between self as subject and self as object.

¹⁷ "In the *I think*, the I is therefore the *ego* or the particular I, the *Cartesian ego*, whereas thinking, instead of being one of its modes, is the very act in which the I participates, i.e. the *I* upon which it draws and imposes its own limitation." Author's note.

¹⁸ In other words Descartes' formula requires first-person engagement.

where we have to do with not only a present thinking but a thinking that creates itself by its very exertion.¹⁹ But in affirming itself as thinking within the I that thinks it, or again that thinks-itself, or that thinks itself thinking, we put into play this dialogue between universal thinking and individual thinking, i.e. between the I and the me, or that action of self on self [displayed] by the reflexive or pronominal verb²⁰ which is characteristic of pure intimacy considered in its very essence. We are here at the heart of the act through which consciousness is constituted. Now the most unsound interpretation one can give to the rapport between my thinking and universal thinking in the *Cogito* would consist of saying that, if my thinking is [a thinking] effected by me, or that brings me forth as me, [then] universal thinking is a thinking in general, or an abstract thinking, which would only take concrete form in the thinking of each and every particular I. In reality universal thinking is not a thinking in general to which the particular I would come along to add [its] existence as a [finishing touch]. Completely to the contrary, we could say that thinking such as it is realised in the particular I is nothing other than the universal thinking itself, which the I penetrates, though only in a partial fashion and without ever managing to equal. Because other individual consciousnesses also penetrate it, albeit according to a perspective which is their own, there is a necessary harmony among all consciousnesses, though [that harmony] can at first escape us, and much effort is often needed to bring it to light. Thus the “I think” is not an act capable of being indefinitely repeated among all [those] individuals who might remain separate from each other on islands of inwardness. We would say rather that it is plunged into an intimacy which is common to them but in which each consciousness is surrounded by certain frontiers in the measure that it is not a perfect intimacy, i.e. where it is associated with a body.

[The remarkable thing] however is not that the thinking discovered in the *Cogito* is a thinking that goes beyond the particular I, in which it participates only imperfectly; it is not even that thinking here embraces, as Descartes well saw, all the operations of consciousness, and specifically the pair of willing (by which it produces its own action) and intellect (by which, in producing it, [thinking] produces its own light); it is that this thinking grasped in the *Cogito* is still the thinking of *nothing*: it is a thinking that grasps itself not in a particular operation but in the possibility of all the operations it can accomplish. And it is the possibility of all these operations that is contained in the expression “the thought of thought”²¹. For here the thought-object is nothing more than the pure

¹⁹ We must actively *participate* in the process. It seems clear that the *Cogito* is less a logical demonstration than a programme to be carried out. Validation comes from the doing.

²⁰ As noted in previous chapters the French language has an entire class of verbs which refer their actions back to their subjects by way of a pronoun representing the subject. Exactly translated they take the form of e.g. “He hurries himself”. But in virtually all translations it takes the form: “He hurries.”

²¹ I gather the author trusts readers to relate this to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* A7 1072b 20-22. In any case he provides this note: “The thought of thought is the indicator of a regressive movement which logically goes to infinity: yet that proves, not that thinking always escapes us, but on the contrary that from the first step it

possibility of thinking which has become the object precisely of another thinking, which is my current thinking. Consequently I here think myself as the being of a possibility, and it is the being of this possibility which is the soul's very being, as we will try to show in chapter V²².

Therefore the liaison between the individual and the universal in the *Cogito* appears [in a new light]. For that possibility of thinking which is the object of my current thinking is adequate to universal thinking, though it is never for me merely a possibility, [or] a possibility I actualise only through particular determinate operations. Not that we must say, through a kind of idolatry, that universal thinking is a realised thinking similar to what might be an achieved science for us (as would be a real space, beyond the one we [occupy], which would be for us a possible space): it is beyond the contrast between possible and actual, which [makes] sense only in expressing its capacity for being participated. We can consider it neither as a possibility that would be still lacking something in order to be, since on the contrary it is by way of it that this possibility is actualised – nor as an actualisation or accomplishment in which the very act that makes [thinking] be would [be rendered] determinate and immobilised. The distinction between the possible and the actual, or the actualised, therefore [makes] no sense with respect to universal thinking, in which nothing is possible (the possible being no more than its universality in so far as it can be participated) [and] nothing is actualised (actualisation being no more than its own act in so far as it is effectively participated).

We now understand the sense of the connection between thinking and existence. There is no other existence than that of my own thinking in so far as it is the possibility of a universal thinking; adequate in principle to the totality of being, it is given to itself by way of this possibility in so far as it actualises it and makes it its own, an intimacy that is a penetration into the intimacy of pure being. Yet we cannot say that, just as there is a surpassing of the I by thought, and just as this thinking is delimited in the I and establishes the possibility of consciousnesses other than mine, so too there is a surpassing of being through thinking which establishes the possibility of forms of being other than thinking. Nonetheless Descartes thought so: but it is because extent²³ was for him an independent substance instead of merely [the expression of] that sort of shadow of the act of participation which requires it--in order to remain of-a-piece with the totality of being – to apprehend [being] only from the outside in the form of a pure given. But in fact there is no other being (and Descartes thought [the same] despite the concession he believed he could make in favour of the existence of things and the trans-phenomenal reality of the created world) than the very

is revealed to itself as creative of itself in that pure dialogue where it is, dare we say, at once its own subject and object.”

²² Entitled “POSSIBILITY, OR THE BEING OF A POWER-TO-BE”. Not included among these translations.

²³ Or space.

being we are capable of giving ourselves from within, which [through] our own intimacy with ourselves reveals to us the absolute intimacy. [Here] is not only the sole indubitable existence but the sole true existence which is one with me in the same act through which I constantly question myself about it and make it what it is.

4. THE “ERGO”²⁴ OF THE “COGITO” AND ITS MEANING.

The “ergo” of the *Cogito* however calls for some explanation. And too often one is led to forget it, as Descartes did, in drawing together the two propositions “I think” and “I am” to the point of identifying them; indeed so much so that their connection is less an inference than an intuition, or at least one of those immediate inferences which exclude memory and time and are by consequence veritable intuitions. We cannot contest that the “ergo” is a call to reflection, that it consequently evokes a duality of notions, doubtless wrapped up in a single experience but [in need of being joined together once distinguished]. That I conclude existence from thinking obliges me to recognise the objectivity of my own subjectivity. The argument is intended, as [is] all reasoning, to justify an evidence to another [person and to myself]. It demonstrates that an [element] of universality is implicated in an experience which is nonetheless the most personal and even the most secret of all. For not only do I prove myself to myself, i.e. prove by way of reflection the link between the two notions of thinking and existence by explaining their rapport [to myself] as if [to] another [person], but I invite others on the one hand to carry out for themselves the same personal and secret operation and on the other hand, by giving a logical form to the subjective connection between thinking and existence, to recognise that [the connection] is grounded in me as well as in them. We will find here the common goal of all demonstration, which is to permit [people] to agree by obliging them to effect internal operations through which they communicate to themselves, in verifying them so to speak, the certitude of their intuitions, i.e. the means of regaining them.

Consequently we can say that the *Cogito* is an intuition yet [one which is] always readily developed into the form of a reasoning. Descartes shows us how we learn to discover general principles in individual experience. Thus already in the intuition of our existence as [a] thinking being we glimpse evidence of [the] principle that whatever thinks *is*²⁵, which permits making the *sum*²⁶ the conclusion of a deductive reasoning, while, if we nonetheless [consider] the historical sequence of our cognitions, it is not only in the necessary connection between existence and thinking such as I experience it in myself but in their

²⁴ “Therefore”.

²⁵ My italics.

²⁶ “I am”.

original and indivisible unity that the consciousness we [have of the relatedness] of these two notions is founded as soon as we have separated them. And that is why, as soon as Descartes' psycho-metaphysical inquiry is converted into an intellectualist ontology [in] Malebranche²⁷ and Spinoza²⁸, we observe a kind of regression from the *Cogito*: either the impossibility of subtracting existence from the thinking within me becomes, as [in the case of] Malebranche, a consequence of the general proposition "nothingness has no properties" or the *Cogito* again disappears, as [in the case of] Spinoza, in that it is the personal affirmation of the I prior to being dissolved in an empirical and anonymous affirmation *Homo cogitat*²⁹. But the imperishable glory of Descartes is precisely to have introduced us to the inwardness of being by way of personal inwardness so that the *ergo* of the *Cogito* expresses nothing more than the necessity of considering as universally and ontologically valid an experience we might have at first feared to possess only subjective and individual value.

5. IS IT NECESSARY TO SAY "SOMETIMES I THINK AND SOMETIMES I AM"?

Nonetheless the value of the *ergo*, which links thinking and existence within me, the primitive experience of their indivisibility [there at the summit of] reason, has been cast into doubt. And we witness a great poet³⁰ establish between thinking and existence an opposition which seems to constitute a challenge to idealism yet which [has] an echo in common consciousness. For we are not always disposed to take thinking as a veritable existence; not only does it happen that we confound it with dream, or again with a virtual existence, but is it not always a product of reflection that then seems to isolate itself from existence in order to enter a completely different world which, far from lending existence, we constantly deny? And according to the paradox [posed by] certain of our contemporaries, the negation of being [constitutes thinking's] very being³¹. One could say that the man who thinks the most is also the furthest from existence. Far from withdrawing us from the world, as [does] thinking, existence engages us in it: but then it is necessary to say that we cease to think; there is no longer

²⁷ Frequently referred to in previous chapters.

²⁸ Baruch Spinoza (1632-77). A Dutch philosopher who like Descartes attempted to deduce a grand philosophy from self-evident propositions.

²⁹ "Man thinks".

³⁰ The author speaks as if every reader will know the unnamed poet in question. The only great poet I know who presents a "challenge" to Descartes and idealism is D. H. Lawrence. In his poem "Spiral Flame" he throws down a gauntlet with the words "Sum, ergo non cogito" (I am, therefore I do not think). Was Lavelle familiar with the writings of this English poet? Whatever the answer, the instance of Lawrence's challenge to Descartes sufficiently "fits the bill" for the present discussion. The poet's case is compelling. In most cases thinking (as commonly understood) is in fact an impediment to whatever recognition of being: it tends to be an all-consuming involvement akin to mindless immersion in outside events.

³¹ Sartre and his followers are perhaps the "contemporaries" in question.

anything virtual in us, everything is actual. *There is within us only the density of a being that coincides with itself, [and is not] distanced from itself in order to regard itself being.*³² Consequently it seems there is a kind of contradiction between thinking and existence: I constantly swing from one of these poles toward the other without succeeding in establishing myself, doubtless never being either a completely pure thinking or a completely pure existence.

Surely no one will fail to recognise either the interest or the truth of this analysis. And it should be said that it is important to interpret it correctly rather than to contest it. For we are compelled to recognise that there is an existence from which thinking separates us: the one Descartes rejects in [his method of] voluntary doubt, [the one] which is, [there] outside me, the existence of things and, [here] inside me, my own existence precisely in so far as it is passive, subjected to and determined by things. However the first is an object for thinking. And of the second we must say that in the measure it is the subject of thinking it is mine. It is this act of thinking, i.e. that which makes it mine, which the *Cogito* isolates, doubtless not in order to deny all that this thinking contain[s] so as to reduce it to a simple possibility but in order to allow me to dispose this possibility myself and thereby render my own what it contain[s]. We will therefore not be surprised that the thinking which puts existence back into question eludes existence: but this is a thinking considered in its negative and critical form, [a thinking] which does not yet go beyond interrogation and doubt and which is only a problem for itself, though we cannot deny that it precisely has access to existence at the very moment it sets out to take charge of it. For there is no existence but that which thinking penetrates and [renders intimate]³³. Up to that point I could attribute existence to myself only in a contradictory manner, by withholding the I from it and reducing it to the rank of [a] thing: yet I cannot say that there, where the universe affirms me and not my self, I am. It is therefore necessary [for me to] put in question the existence that is given me so as to acquire an existence that is mine: then this existence becomes that of a possibility whose putting-into-play is left to me.³⁴

The contrast established between thinking and existence has the advantage of showing us that, in thinking, existence is only ever present as an act that is up to us to accomplish, instead of [a] bare existence [that] could be considered as a fact or a given assimilated to the reality in which we are immersed, [and] from which, it appears, the nature of thinking is to release us. However [we could not

³² To my mind this does not address the possibility of self-awareness while one is engaged in existence. I suppose the author is referring to complete absorption in outward event. In any case the argument does not do justice to those who, like Lawrence, feel that thinking, or at least a certain kind of thinking, can be an impediment to the recognition of being, including self-being. Lavelle begins a subtler analysis in the next paragraph.

³³ Literally “intimises”

³⁴ As I read this, thinking must recognise its own existence (i.e. as an act) in order to have a meaningful relation with outward existence (i.e. as an observed datum). Support for this view is given in the next paragraph.

fail to recognise] that thinking is in some way party to the totality of the real or that it expresses the effort we make [in] replacing existence such as it is given to us with an existence we give ourselves, thereby attaining existence at its source and in its very genesis. In this sense being exceeds, doubtless not all possible thinking, but at least the thinking currently exercised: participation is produced at the interior of the interval that divides them. Consequently the margin separating thinking from being expresses nothing more than the need for thinking to exert itself so as to acquire that existence which gives it a place in the whole of being where there is nothing that is not interior to itself and creative of itself. The divorce of thinking from being is therefore the sign of our frailty and, so to speak, of the impossibility of making our interiority and exteriority come together. It is [a] sign of our defective thinking that existence [manifests] from the side of exteriority. However [thinking] relates to interiority only through an act we must carry out, which penetrates and dissolves [all] exteriority. We have no other duty than to overcome the opposition between these two terms³⁵: the nature of the *Cogito ergo sum* is to be the affirmation of a virtual existence whose essence is to actualise itself. *We could state it in the imperative rather than the indicative [mode] and say: "Think in order to be" instead of "I think therefore I am."* And without doubt here is the most profound meaning we can give to the *ergo* of the *Cogito*.

6. THE RELATION BETWEEN THE "COGITO" AND THE ONTOLOGICAL PROOF³⁶.

It is not enough to have shown that the *Cogito* considered in itself implies at once universal thought, individual thinking and the participation of the one in the other. It is now necessary to show that this participation is explicitly affirmed as soon as we recognise the connection between the *Cogito* and the ontological argument. Still it is not enough to say that the finite supposes the infinite, that I can have experience of my own thinking only as a thinking which doubts, i.e. as a finite thinking, and that it is only the limitation of a thinking which does not doubt, i.e. which is perfect and infinite. We might be tempted but we would be wrong to interpret the rapport between the finite and the infinite in [Spinoza-like] language. Doubtless when I say that the finite implies the infinite, that might mean that the idea of the finite implies the idea of the infinite, as one object

³⁵ The gist of Lavelle's reply to those who oppose thinking to being. Thinking in the inmost sense is the same as existence or being. Heidegger takes a similar stance.

³⁶ Though the phrase is often used with respect to a proof of God offered by St. Anselm (d. 1117) it here refers to Descartes' related but distinct proof in Section Four of *Discourse on Method* and in Parts Two and Three of *Meditations*. Very briefly the argument asserts that, since no finite being could independently arrive at the idea of God, the idea must be granted from on high and therefore must attest to God's existence. However Descartes himself does not speak of an "ontological proof" or "ontological argument". The term appears in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* Book Two, Chapter Three.

of understanding implies another, but such language [tends] to destroy the power of the ontological argument and [only supports the conclusion of] an existence [as an] idea³⁷. However the Cartesian approach seems to us completely different. The nature of the *Cogito* is in effect to reveal my own existence to me in the act through which I give it to myself. Now it is this act itself which appears to me as limited; and it is such precisely in the putting-into-play of a possibility that I find within me and that is given to me, which sufficiently shows that I am a created being, i.e. created only in the being of its possibility, which is up to me to actualise. It is therefore not in the idea of myself as [something] finite that I need to participate: it is in the being of the I as it resides in the very act of its thinking; consequently the infinity it presupposes is not the infinity of an idea, since that idea would be necessarily subordinated to it as its object; it is an infinity which is in some sense homogenous with it and founds its dependant existence, i.e. the infinity of an act which, in giving itself absolute existence, permits [the I] in turn to give itself a participatory existence. In the *vis probandi*³⁸ of the ontological argument, the idea's infinity and perfection [make] sense only as a perfection and an infinity [enacted]³⁹, which alone will permit God to be considered as *causa sui*⁴⁰. And when Descartes speaks of the idea of God, a representative idea is not in question, at least [not] in the sense [that] every idea represents a being different from it⁴¹: for there is no representative idea of an act that accomplishes itself, e.g. of the *Cogito*. This idea⁴² is one with the self-accomplishing act. And consequently the idea of God, of which [the human] act is [a] limitation, is [the self-accomplishing] act itself in that it [must be] without limits in order [for me] to make it mine [within] my own limits.⁴³ The term "idea" here expresses no more than that infinite surpassing of my own act by the act which founds it, and not a simple representation I might have of the very being which realises such a surpassing. And it is because I myself exist as a finite thinking being that the infinite thinking being, without which I could not be, is necessarily an existence and not only an idea.

³⁷ In the usual sense of a representation, I suppose. For Lavelle an idea is not a mere representation. See note 41 below.

³⁸ "Convincing force". The term usually refers to an argument that, while not conclusive in itself, lends considerable weight to a line of argument.

³⁹ Literally *en acte*.

⁴⁰ Self-caused.

⁴¹ The comment reflects Lavelle's own understanding of "idea" as a presence or activity rather than as an image or schema. Only such an idea could be "adequate to being" (see e.g. *The Total Presence*.) Heidegger also has reservations with respect to representation. In a dialogue from his *Gelassenheit* (1959), Heidegger writes "If thinking is what distinguishes man's nature, then surely the essence of this nature, namely the nature of thinking, can be seen only by looking away from thinking." (From *Discourse on Thinking: A Translation of Gelassenheit* by Anderson and Freund, Harper & Row, 1966). By "thinking" in the last instance Heidegger means representational thinking as distinct from a sort of thinking that might be described as contemplative or profoundly aware.

⁴² The understanding of idea that Lavelle attributes to Descartes.

⁴³ A tortured logic seems at work here.

Also one is struck to see that when Descartes, after having established the existence of his own I, demonstrates that the finite presupposes the infinite, the existence of God, and not only the idea of it, is henceforth secured. The three proofs of God's existence are limited to developing the implications of this fundamental affirmation. Moreover there is no one who is not surprised by the deceptive rapidity with which, in [what is properly called] "the ontological argument", Descartes passes from the idea of God to God's existence: here it is a [matter of] self-evidence, a proof in plain view. The idea of the infinite [is] already the infinite *Cogito* [at work]⁴⁴, of which it was necessary to posit not only the possibility but the existence in order to support in me the passage, [there] within the act of thinking, from the thought of the possibility to existence. And perhaps we could show why the idea of the infinite and the perfect is beyond every representative idea by observing that if every idea, in so far as it is not merely an object but an act of thinking, is itself a spiritual being, [then] the idea of the infinite is the very infinity of that being for which each idea is only a determination, destined to become an object in a particular consciousness. *The ontological argument is, we might say, the Cogito on the scale of God as the Cogito is the ontological argument on the scale of man*: either way we touch on the spiritual act in so far as it is *causa sui*: in God with his absolute creative efficacy, in us in its limitative form, as the conversion of a possibility into actuality. Once the *Cogito* is grasped in an undeniable experience, which always begins anew, the divine *Cogito*—far from expressing an ulterior and hypothetical passage from the finite to the infinite—is implied by it as [a] condition. It is an argument *a fortiori*⁴⁵: if the finite presupposes the infinite of which it is [a] limitation, and [if] the passage from thinking to existence is realised in my experience, [then] with stronger reason [the same must take place] in God. From this [follows] that much picked-up formula Descartes sometimes employs: I think therefore God is. Neither the *Cogito* nor the ontological argument can be considered as simple dialectical relations among notions. Both [lead] us to plunge from the order of representation into the order of existence, and indeed of an existence in the process of creating itself. In this connection the ontological argument presents a frightening aspect: it transports us to the very source of being. [In] the genesis of ourselves a kind of genesis of God is brought down into our own experience.

We can present things [a little differently] and say that, if we [take] my thinking for my essence, the *Cogito ergo sum* effects for me the passage from essence to existence at every instant. The distinction between the two terms is necessary so that as [a] finite being I can precisely give myself being through my own act. But as happens [with] all notions [where] we are obliged to oppose one [notion] to the other in order to render participation possible, they must be not abolished but joined together in [the case of] the absolute. Which allows us to say

⁴⁴ Again *en acte*, indicating that the infinite is actively present. The idea here is not a mere representation of something but an immediate reality, what might be called a "living truth".

⁴⁵ "With stronger reason".

equally that existence adds nothing to essence in God, or that [existence] is the existence of essence, or again that [God] has existence itself as [his] essence. For it is impossible to take either of these notions to its limit without it coinciding with the other. An essence which is total, and not limited or prevented from being realised by anyone else, is existence considered in itself and not [with respect to] any other thing for which it would be the existence. And an existence that lacks nothing or is capable of being self-sufficient is the very fullness of essence. — Here the distance separating exteriority and interiority has disappeared. In so far as they are opposed to one another these words no longer make any sense. For whatever appears as exterior to an imperfect activity surpasses it and possesses an interiority [the other] does not manage to equal. — By the same token, in saying that we are cause of ourselves, we can distinguish within time our causal action from the effect it produces, which however is contained in the infinite. But in God the distinction is no longer possible. For there is nothing in this action that is not cause; nonetheless it is entirely cause only because it reabsorbs all its effects into itself. — However, at the level of participation, in order for it to be possible, we do not fail to oppose essence to existence, exteriority to interiority and cause to effect. Which engenders notions of effort, body and time.⁴⁶

But for us, in holding to the relation between essence and existence, it is important to observe that it is too often badly interpreted when it is a question of the *Cogito*: for we almost always imagine that the *Cogito* component affords us only the revelation of essence, to which the *sum* component adds existence. However we will show in Book II⁴⁷ that things ought to be interpreted wholly otherwise: thinking, such as it is shown in the *Cogito*, is already an existence; granted, not yet the existence of an essence but only [that] of a possibility that is up to us to actualise. One cannot say, as one too often has it, that [thinking] enters into existence by actualising itself; for it already possesses this existence before acting; but it is only in acting that it determines itself, or in other words, gives itself an essence. Consequently we see that the soul's life consists of the acquisition of an essence, or in the passage from existence into essence. And the *Cogito* therefore expresses nothing more than the introduction of the I into existence; not insofar as it already is an essence but insofar as it is a possibility whose putting-into-play will precisely allow it to acquire an essence.

The link between the *Cogito* and the ontological argument can [also] be related to the interpretation we have given for the “*ergo*” of the *Cogito*. The “*ergo*” in effect has appeared to show us the duty we have to realise ourselves through thinking; and since thinking is here an activity that encompasses willing we can say the “*ergo*” expresses less an exigency for thinking to recognise that it exists, as soon as it begins to be exercised, than an exigency for the will to put [thinking] into play in order to found my existence. The peculiarity of the

⁴⁶ The paragraph is substantially a late-life recapitulation and reaffirmation of the ideas expressed in “The Self-Caused Act” from *Of the Act*.

⁴⁷ “The Soul's Genesis”. No portions of this are included in these translations.

ontological argument, in grounding precisely this power I have of producing my own existence within the infinity of an act that is the eternal cause of itself, is to assure me that the possibility of realising and indefinitely enriching myself through thinking – [though I can always lack thought] – will never be lacking to me.⁴⁸

7. THE PROBLEM IS IN KNOWING HOW SOUL AND BODY CAN BE SEPARATED, AND NOT HOW THEY CAN BE JOINED.

We know how, by way of the *Cogito*, Descartes sets up a radical separation not only between thinking and the body but again between thinking and the world. That separation was already contained in the methodical doubt. And this caused Descartes [to be] accused of the sin of “angelism”⁴⁹. [The separation] was moreover reduced by [modern thinkers] to a putting of the world into brackets, as if they had recognised the impossibility of effecting [separation] through a real initiative of consciousness and that it [could] only [be] the outcome of a process of abstraction.⁵⁰ In reality the *Cogito* reveals to me the [naked] existence of my thinking as a pure power considered independently of both its real limits and its actual operations. In fact it is always discovered in some particular operation at the moment the I engages itself in time and the world, making this thinking a thinking it feels [as its own], and always [in application] to some object that determines it. Consequently the *Cogito*, which at first seemed to convey the immediate and constant experience we have of ourselves, is a singular purification of that experience which releases [its] essence so to speak by eliminating the concrete conditions that [occasion] it. However we cannot be restricted to saying only that there, where I think, I also know I am the one who thinks so that the revelation of the I to itself, or the “ego” of the *Cogito*, is inseparable from the *cogitatio*: for, though thinking is always inwardness itself and though the idea of an impersonal thinking is doubtless [an absurdity]⁵¹ (or a least an immersion of thinking in its object rather than in its act) it is nonetheless true that absolute inwardness can [take] an individual form which allows me to

⁴⁸ “The relation between the *Cogito* and the ontological argument brings to light the essential character of participation, which through the *Cogito* gives us access both to the infinite thought and the being of this, and through the ontological argument compels us to recognise that our I is only an individuation of one and the other.” Author’s note.

⁴⁹ Being overly pure, unworldly; refusing to accept reality. In describing this as a “sin” Lavelle seems to mock the zeal of Descartes’ many detractors. Today they have become even more numerous. In some accounts Descartes is held accountable for a number of modern woes owing to his dualism, often by authors showing little familiarity with his writings.

⁵⁰ Doubtless a reference to Edmund Husserl and his followers. The “as if” remark supposes considerations that are unlikely to have been central to these phenomenologists. For them a more important consideration was the experienced discontinuity between subject and object: a concrete rather than abstract sense of separation which is the usual accompaniment of any “real initiative of consciousness”.

⁵¹ Literally “a counter-sense”, i.e. something contrary to sense.

say “I” only through its [unbreakable] connection with a privileged body which is mine. Also it is not enough to say that I know I think; for *I feel it rather than know it*⁵², and for that reason this thinking is *my* thinking. By way of thinking I enter into an inwardness that goes beyond me yet precisely permits my body to affect me, i.e. to be so to speak the centre of this intimacy which is that of the I to itself. We will not be surprised therefore that thinking always seems to have the not-I rather than the I [as its] object, and that its act is both constitutive of the I and transcendental to [it]; but what [decrees] that this object is thought by me and that this act is [my] act is that this object, in so far as it is represented, has [for its] reference the body, inasmuch as it is both represented and felt; [and] that this act, inasmuch as it is carried out, always concerns the body inasmuch as [the body] first permits us to carry it out and then obliges us to be subjected to it.

Here again it can be said that the separation of soul and body is never effected in any other way than by abstraction. Also instead of allowing that in addition to these two substances – which we [would] be at a loss to know how to join together once we [had] defined them as independent – there is a third which is a mixture of the two (but how [could] this mixture succeed in constituting itself and how could these two substances act on each other [to] form one and the same whole?) it is on the contrary fitting to consider this apparent mixture as forming a preliminary unity which analysis dissociates into soul and body according to whether the spiritual activity we dispose or the passivity which subordinates us to the rest of the world predominates in it. And it can be said that this dissociation is never finished, that it is [our] duty to pursue [its] realisation, and that the word “duty” conveys nothing other than the consciousness we [have] of our activity itself insofar as it resides in its pure exertion. Moreover the connection between activity and passivity appears infinitely easier to understand than that between two substances; and it must even be said that we can understand neither of these two terms except in relation to the other. But there is more: if one wanted to show [the extent to which] the dualism of substances which gave Descartes so much trouble is impossible to uphold one would have to demonstrate not only that interior activity is our very being, rather than the world and the body which take part in it [and] have existence only in rapport with it, i.e. as phenomena, but that this activity cannot take place from [the side of] the world and the body, which are at once obstacles it encounters and the means by which it is realised: no activity, however interior we suppose it, can rightly take place from an effect but from a manifestation. And the peculiarity of this manifestation, in which [activity] becomes incarnated, is precisely to permit it to exercise its powers, to render itself passive with respect to itself and to create that solidarity of the I with the universe which constantly both limits and enriches it.

⁵² Most readers will allow that feeling is a kind of knowing but the author apparently wants to distinguish between intellectual knowledge and something more intimate which he here associates with the body.

From the moment the body is reduced to [a] phenomenon, and the phenomenon to [a] manifestation⁵³, the liaison between the phenomenon and being is in some sense experienced by us. And we can even divine how a distinction is necessarily brought about in the phenomenon between a zone that affects us in “phenomenalising”⁵⁴ our own limits and a purely represented zone that “phenomenalises” all that extends beyond them. Thus this conception of the *Cogito* will permit us to understand how the *Cogito*, instead of enclosing us in the depths of a subjective and impassable solitude, is on the contrary the revelation of our own participation in the whole of being: for it is not enough to say that the *Cogito* reveals thinking to us in its twofold, universal-and-individual, form with the participation of the second in the first, it is still necessary to recognise that they can be separated and united only by way of that opposition within me between activity and passivity which requires me to grasp my thinking in its very operation yet as correlative of a body that affects me and an object I represent to myself. So the *Cogito* does not give me consciousness of myself as a separate existence. Indeed I can dissociate my existence neither from pure spirit nor from the body and the world: according to whether my activity has more or less perfection I constantly oscillate from one of these extremes to the other. And my connections with the body and the world trace out, in a kind of cast-shadow, my relations with pure spirit.

8. KNOWLEDGE OF THE SOUL THROUGH ITSELF.

It is easy now to give a verdict on Descartes’ affirmation that the soul knows itself better than everything else and that every other cognizance contains and presupposes it. For: firstly, if it is true that I know only what I detach myself from, I cannot know my soul since it is that from which I cannot detach myself without ceasing to be me—indeed intimacy with self is [imparted by the soul to the I and not by the I to the soul]; secondly, if I know nothing save by [turning it into an object] I cannot know my soul for I cannot [turn it into] a spiritual or transcendent object without contradiction, i.e. without unwittingly materialising it; thirdly, if I know only ready-made things I cannot know my soul which is not only a self-creating act but the act through which all the representations I can have of things come to be. Such arguments would suffice to justify and strengthen the critique that has been made of the “transcendental paralogism”⁵⁵. —Only, if there is a paralogism in wanting to convert the soul into an object of

⁵³ In common parlance there is little distinction between a phenomenon and a manifestation. I am uncertain of what the author intends by the distinction he makes. I hazard that a manifestation is a willed phenomenon as distinct from a purely observed one.

⁵⁴ My quotation marks.

⁵⁵ Apparently a reference to Kant. The paralogism or fallacious reasoning in question refers to demonstrations of the soul’s existence based on inferences from worldly data.

knowledge, the paralogism is greater still in wanting to dissociate the soul from consciousness and to confound consciousness with knowledge, which is only a derivative and divided mode of it. Indeed knowledge, which is only ever realised through [a] separation of the object and the subject, drives the object outside the I and makes it a phenomenon. But in the measure that the interval separating the object from the subject is diminished and abolished, the subject seeks to reach [the object] within its own [sphere of] intimacy, i.e. in the act that produces it, instead of intuiting the object as a simple spectacle.⁵⁶ This is [something already observed in relation to] the concept, which is an act of intellect that becomes a cognizance only through the object it is capable of embracing. But conceptual activity expresses, we might say, the consciousness of this knowledge. However there, where there is no external object to grasp, where our activity closes on itself, or on the passivity inherent to it which renders each of its operations correlative to a state, we witness this activity we exert, and this state we feel, form a kind of dialogue of the I with itself, which is characteristic of both of consciousness and of that continuous initiative which makes the soul creative of itself at every instant.

But consciousness cannot be isolated from cognizance⁵⁷. How could it be otherwise, since it is indiscernible from the relations that join it to all that it is not but that it casts outside itself only in [the sense of] objectivising it, i.e. in “phenomenalising” it? It therefore contains at once all it knows and all it does. And what it knows is in a certain fashion only the limit, the projection and the spectacle of what it does. Consequently it is true that in turning aside cognizance of the object in order to send it back towards the subject we abolish it as cognizance. But to know oneself is to have consciousness: and there is no consciousness of self which is not, up to a certain point, cognizance of the world, for without this rapport with the world the I would never depart from pure virtuality. Hence the eyes does not see itself, for it is itself the instrument of the act of vision; but there is sight only of an object that is seen; and cognizance of this object is inseparable from the consciousness I have of seeing it.

From this we easily understand why Malebranche⁵⁸, dissociating the act of knowing from its object [in accordance with his doctrine of] vision in God, could not accept that the soul is known better than the body. There is no idea of it, as [there is none] of God himself. It is an existence we apprehend in itself, and not through representation. Also it is attained by feeling and not by knowledge⁵⁹. For existence is ever encompassed [by] feeling. It is therefore not enough to account for the privileged role of feeling in the consciousness I have of myself by saying

⁵⁶ The drift of the convoluted argument seems to be that there is an internal knowledge which is adequate to the soul because it is indistinct from it. Such knowledge is not an inference from objective data.

⁵⁷ Knowledge in the objective sense. Consciousness cannot be isolated from what it is conscious of.

⁵⁸ See note 29 of “Participation and Freedom”. The doctrine of “vision in God” holds that all knowledge is in God and therefore directly realised or unmediated.

⁵⁹ Here knowing is aligned with intellect rather than feeling. Nonetheless a revelatory capacity is attributed to feeling.

that I then apprehend the I in its connection with the body; for feeling then would be nothing more than a confused knowledge. Moreover, if it were uniquely a question of my own states, I could nonetheless detach myself from them in some fashion even though their presence was felt; and one could conceive of a certain knowledge of it, as the very make-up of psychology shows. But the feeling I have of my existence penetrates the soul's inwardness much ahead [of this]: it is inseparable from the act I accomplish at the moment I accomplish it; and though that can never become an object it is like the light in which every object is perceived. Only it is never pure. And what makes me be is the interior operation through which (thanks to the intermediary of the world and the body) I am both active and passive with respect to myself, in which whatever I accomplish finds an echo within me. In this consists the consciousness I have of myself in its complexity and in its unity.

We see therefore whence proceeds the peculiar difficulty encountered [in applying] the rule: "know thyself"⁶⁰. It would first be necessary to realise that it is not a question here of a knowledge having the same form as knowledge of an object. But it is not enough to affirm that I am too near myself to make an object of myself or that I am [both] judge and party [to what is being judged] and that the knowledge I have of myself cannot have a [neutral] character. It is a question of seeing that consciousness of the I is consciousness of an activity, i.e. of a power that is up to me both to discover and to put into play. It is therefore the consciousness of the power I have of making myself. However if we realise that the consciousness I have of myself is not consciousness of an indeterminate power but an individualised power, i.e. which resides in particular powers of which we must say both that they solicit me and that I govern them, then we take the measure of all the difficulties of "know thyself". The distance separating this knowledge from knowledge of the object is the distance separating the exercise of a power I wield from the grasp of a reality that is given to me. Here we are at the very source of [a] being considered in his very virtuality, in that it depends on his actualising it. Whereas everything that is [an] object of experience is [a] means of communication and proof, here everything is in suspense and delivered to the secret initiative of the very one who seeks to know himself yet must make himself in order to know himself. Also one can say that self-consciousness goes in the reverse direction of introspection, properly so-called: for the latter consists of making a spectacle of self. It is the attitude of Narcissus.⁶¹ In seeking what I am, I in effect turn toward my own past: i.e. toward a being I am no longer. Instead, self-consciousness has regard only for the powers that are within me but that are nothing [save when] put into play, which means that [self-

⁶⁰ Motto of Socrates associated with an inscription at Delphi.

⁶¹ The two senses of "self-consciousness" in English agree with Lavelle's point: on the one hand it can mean awareness that one is conscious; on the other hand it can mean dwelling on one's self-image. Lavelle in fact wrote a book employing the myth of Narcissus to spell out the difference: *L'erreur de Narcisse* (1939). It exists in English translation.

consciousness] is completely turned toward a being that I am not yet and that I become at each instant, on the condition of willing it. Thus, through a kind of paradox, it can be said that knowing oneself is making oneself and consequently changing and becoming other than one was. But this is to say that self-consciousness is, of all the acts of thinking, the only [one] that allows us to attain being itself at its source. Self-consciousness therefore reveals [the self-genesis] of soul. But that does not suffice. The soul properly resides in this genesis of self; yet precisely because it is a participatory being it has need, in order to realise itself, of the world and the body through which it is constantly manifest in a phenomenal form. So *the peculiarity of self-consciousness is also to show us how being constantly produces the appearance or phenomenon of itself.*

9. CONCLUSION: THE MORAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE “COGITO”.

Because Descartes tried to isolate the soul from both the world and the body, i.e. from the very conditions that permit it to actualise itself, the Cartesian soul is a purely intellectual soul. As pure thinking it is [deprived of an individual character]⁶² and reduced to its absolute possibility. That is [why] the transition from the *Cogito* to the ontological argument is so speak immediate. Also Spinoza experienced no difficulty immediately installing himself in the infinite substance, which can be only an “in-itself” or an inwardness considered in its universal form, i.e. stripped of every relation with the “ego” of the *Cogito*. But Descartes never wished to make a cut between the thinking of a finite imperfect I that doubts and an infinite perfect thinking not subject to doubt. The former is a participation in the latter. But by trying to define it only as thinking, by supposing the world and the body abolished [from it], Descartes abolished—in order to preserve its ontological inwardness—the conditions which alone would permit it to be individualised. Consequently it was necessary to [attach] it to the body, as Descartes naturally needed to do, [both] in the theory of the passions [and] in the examination of its properly moral action, which frees it from slavery [to] the body, though without being able to repudiate its presence. It tends then, though not to become a pure thinking, nonetheless to exercise its dominion over the body instead of forever yielding to it. Thereby the *Cogito* recovers its moral significance: it is a duty for us to fill becoming with a pure thinking; but in also obliging us to become master[s] of the passions and the body, the soul is defined by the affirmation of value, which means that it recognises itself as the supreme value. So we are without doubt far from the Aristotelian conception which, in making the soul the form of the body, seemed to chain it there but which nonetheless had the advantage of rendering it inseparable from its limiting

⁶² A more exact translation is “dis-individualised”.

conditions, of engaging it in the world and of confronting it *hic et nunc*⁶³ in space and time with its everyday tasks. It will not be contested any more that the *Cogito* of Biran⁶⁴ responded to the same preoccupations and that, instead of explaining only our relation with the universal, like the *Cogito* of Descartes, it taught us to experience the soul's existence at the very moment it is incarnated in the body and is individualised. But [in] a new paradox Descartes' thought is separated from the object and the world only in order to become at first the thought of the object and the world, whereas the Biranian will is exerted only in the encounter [with] the object and the world, though it has as its true end only freeing itself from the object and the world. Thus these different doctrines show the outline of the same fundamental experience: but if participation [has] two faces it is normal that some [thinkers] prefer to describe the universal source upon which it draws and others the limiting conditions under which it is accomplished.

We have thus [paved the way] for the description we are now going to attempt of the soul's genesis by way of itself⁶⁵, by showing how it is first a possibility that gives itself existence; how the transition from possibility to existence resides in the exigency of value, which is so to speak the soul's secret life; [and] finally how, though its activity is ever inseparable from it, the soul needs time in order to fulfil itself, i.e. in order to produce its own essence.⁶⁶

⁶³ Here and now.

⁶⁴ Maine de Biran

⁶⁵ An introduction to Book Two "The Soul's Genesis".

⁶⁶ "In Descartes there is no distinction between the I and consciousness save in [the] sense that consciousness is the *Cogito* of the "ego" *cogito*, i.e. it is that thinking capable of containing everything in which the I participates as an ever limited and shackled power. It is indeed noteworthy that the thinking in question in the *Cogito* is no more than a sheer power: the power of thinking everything, but not [as] applied to any object, i.e. not yet [as] an actualised thinking. And it is perhaps more by [reason of] that than by [reason of] its dissociation [from] the body that thinking is grasped in its pure essence. It is also [for that reason] that the thinking of the particular I is distinguished from God's thinking: in the first there is nothing that it is not in [potential], whereas in God's thinking there is nothing that is not in play [*en acte*]. Which shows rather well how man's thinking and God's thinking are at once identical [in] their essence and heterogeneous [in] their exercise. [Here] too is the fundament of the inference of time considered as the transition from [potential] to act. Finally we understand without difficulty why Descartes, after having defined the I by way of the experience we have of it, i.e. by way of its relation with a thinking that is logically adequate to the All, still feels the necessity of saying that the soul is a substance. For beyond the psychological experience the I has of itself and the affirmation of a transcendental activity through which it is affirmed as a thinking [ability], it is necessary, in so far as it is a power of thinking everything, that it is inscribed as such in the very absolute of Being, which the term "substance" is precisely intended to express." Author's note.