

## PRESENCE REGAINED

### I

#### PHILOSOPHY IS AN INTERNAL GENESIS OF BEING

There is a tacit accord between the pretensions of philosophers and the demands of the public with respect to them. Philosophy has [sway] over all minds solely because it promises us an explanation of the total universe. It seems that in order to fulfil [its] task philosophy necessarily ought to be able to show how the various parts of creation appear by turns according to an intelligible order. We require [philosophy] to make us assist<sup>1</sup> in the internal genesis of the real. The raillery of sceptics about such an ambition, [as well as] philosophers' [professions] of humility, should not prevail on us: the sceptic follows the constantly-renewed ventures of rationality with a defiance that does not exclude some emotion; he does not hide from himself the fact that there is within intelligence an infinite hope; but he thinks it cannot be fulfilled; his renunciation is like that of certain ascetics who quiver whenever someone around them mentions the things they have sworn off. As for the humility of philosophers, [we will be forgiven for saying] that it is a precaution [taken] in advance against

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<sup>1</sup> Here the French word is more pregnant than its English counterpart. Apart from meaning to help or assist it can also mean to witness or be present to something. This is of course the very convergence of meanings required by Lavelle's philosophy.

their own failures: despite the illusions [their] self-love can give them, they always cherish, in their inmost depths of sincerity, the conviction of having glimpsed the secret rhythm [of things], at least [in those] hours when their thinking was most lucid.

Man is a limited being, placed before a whole to which he is opposed<sup>2</sup> but [also] united. This is at once an initial and an eternal experience which is implied by all others and which [they] develop and make specific. Yet there are some common traits between man and the whole<sup>3</sup>. There are also some traits appropriate to the whole as a whole and to man as [a] distinct part of [it]. The origin and value of knowledge and action depend on the way in which communication between man and the whole [is] set up: if [a] man is opposed to the whole and looks within his individual nature for [an] independent principle of conduct, he will succumb in that effort; broken in every part by the whole that surrounds him and is infinitely greater and more powerful than [he is], he will find only ignorance and misery within his own domain; and by severing, as far as he can, the ties that join him to the whole [and] sustain his existence, he will diminish and destroy [his domain] through each of his initiatives: his destruction will necessarily be [an] effect of the laws he seeks to shrug off. If, by contrast, he nourishes his thinking and his will on the representation of the whole, with which he forms a [single] body, the laws of the whole will fight [on his behalf] rather than against him. The world will become intelligible to him. Instead of being [swallowed] by the whole, he will fulfil his particular office. In his harmony with the whole, he will find balance and force; he will establish his individual existence by ceasing to claim independence—which is a feature of the all [and] cannot pertain to a limited being—thereby acknowledging the conditions that [bring] him to participate in the all, where his development takes root and is fed.

It is not only that we discover our presence to being in discovering the presence of being, as we have said, but [that] our being is constituted solely through knowledge of the being of the all. Consequently, the being of the I would not exist without that being of the all in which it takes place and with which it maintains constant relations. What is more, the I's being contains the being of the all [as a potentiality], but for [that to be actualised the] being of the all must constantly support [the I] and furnish it with both the impetus of its operation and the material upon which it draws.

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<sup>2</sup> Primarily in the sense of standing across from something else. For Lavelle the chief instance of such opposition is the apparent discontinuity between subject and object.

<sup>3</sup> Or, the all. Though I generally favour this phrase—whatever its awkwardness and unfamiliarity—I sometimes employ the more common translation “the whole”, especially where there is much reference to parts, as in the following discussion. However what is ultimately in question is a primordial, block-like super-entity whose nature goes beyond the sum of parts usually implied by a whole. I feel that such a being is more fittingly described as “the all” and will mainly rely on that term elsewhere. See Glossary of Frequently Used Terms in my introduction.

Thus, philosophic reflection does not [give] us to know the world as a [mere] spectacle, since it makes us assist in the very formation of this spectacle. It is a knowledge interior to being. It reveals to us a supremely efficacious activity<sup>4</sup> in which our consciousness [is required] to participate. Thanks to this participation it permits us to create ourselves, to inscribe our own reality in the universe and to produce [that reality] rather than to submit to it.

## II

### THERE IS A COMPENSATION AMONG ALL PARTICULAR ACTIONS

An all that is not a totality, an all that is given ahead of its parts so that its parts are discovered within it thanks to a participation that makes possible both the evolution of minds<sup>5</sup> and the genesis of things—can only be the act<sup>6</sup> that fecundates all participations. Doubtless it surpasses the understanding of all individual beings and the limits within which each of their faculties is exercised. These faculties are multiple and differ from each other as they differ from one individual to the next. But those differences [spring] from the object to which [the faculties] are applied or from the end they pursue, i.e. from their bounds, or again, from the conditions without which no participation would be possible: they do not come from the source from which they draw all their operations and which grants them their common efficacy. Also, nothing permits [any distinction between] this universal act [and] the entirety of its participated forms. It is superabundant with respect to each of them; it cannot be [such] with respect to [them] all. Nothing in it remains in a state of sheer potency. In each individual being, power signifies its solidarity with the whole, the possibility of shaping its own nature, the unlimited career open to its desires and the current extent of its non-participation; the latter can be [an] effect of the [stage] at which this being's evolution is halted or of the current insufficiency of its will.

But what is mere potency in one is always act in some other. This allows us to understand how each of our operations [has] the character of a choice, though its operative force does not come from us. Only owing to us does it come into us. We must content ourselves with diverting a current that, if we had not offered it an inlet, would have discharged elsewhere.

For that [reason] each of our initiatives has infinite repercussions, [even] if it adds nothing to or takes nothing away from the universe. It contributes to determining not only our essence and destiny but the very direction of all

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<sup>4</sup> A reference to the act of being which is the focus of Lavelle's mature philosophy.

<sup>5</sup> Or, spirits.

<sup>6</sup> Again, the act of being.

evolution. Thus, there reigns in the world a marvellous law of universal compensation that [has] a two-fold expression: in the determination of phenomena and in the harmony of the moral world.

Doubtless someone will claim that all action then becomes pointless because whatever we omit doing is necessarily [accomplished] elsewhere. At least it seems we [are left with] the following alternatives: either our activity [is] inspired by egotism and avarice, since it withholds from another what it grants to us, or—in order [for it] to become altruistic—it demands (in a much deeper sense than any religion has believed) not only a perpetual sacrifice of self but a transfer to [it] of all pains, all faults and even all the crimes we can conceive of, without the person who takes responsibility for it being able to hope [for] any recompense. There is in this interpretation of natural law a temptation so strong that certain ascetics have not been able to resist it. But the challenge cannot be maintained to the [very] end. And whoever agreed to enter hell in the spirit of pure sacrifice would doubtless find the most searing delight.

However, we must not forget that the participation of particular beings in the pure act cannot be expressed in terms of the simple law of competition, precisely because the treasure into which [these beings] dip is infinite and inexhaustible, because the tribute they exact from it is not lacking, because their separation is more apparent than real and because, being united to the same principle, they are united to each other so that [whoever] is enriched by it enriches all the rest. Likewise, if there is at each instant a balance in the distribution of material goods, the growth of usable resources cannot profit one [person] without profiting all. And in the same sense the equilibrium among forms of being at the [heart] of the universe is an effect of the accomplished undertakings of each of them. Thus, we can concede that, if the all is a supreme affirmation, the development of one of our powers [brings forth] in our consciousness, and in all consciousnesses, a multiplicity of correlative (and not privative) powers, just as the appearance of the blue [sky under] white light neither destroys nor impoverishes the latter but creates within it a rainbow, indivisible yet divided.

Doubtless the original character of each individuality requires it [to determine] its unique vocation through a more and more perfect participation in the universal being. But the constant relations [among] different individuals [decree] that the progress realised by each of them leaves none of the others unaffected. [That progress] is, for all [of them], a suggestion and an example. It aids them, and in a sense compels them, to discover and realise their particular destinies. Hence, it is very true to say that the lacunae in participation at a [given] point will be filled in elsewhere, because nothing can be lacking to the all. But it depends on us whether they [are filled in] sooner or later, [and] whether this is thanks to us or [in spite of] us. The all is like space: always present, indifferent to the movements that traverse it, [a region] where all possible movements will be realised sooner or later. But the realisation of a single one of them conditions [the

realisation] of all the rest. Thus, each free action calls forth an infinity of others. But in the moral world these are no longer [mere] propositions that can be welcomed or declined. If the universe is likened to a sheaf of wheat, it is up to each of us to broadcast and indefinitely multiply ears. Nonetheless a perfect and endlessly-renewed fecundity is always found in each grain.

### III

#### TIME IS AT ONCE THE BEST AND WORST OF THINGS<sup>7</sup>

If we conjectured [time's abolition], we would abolish our independence and our spiritual life in the same stroke. For time detaches us from the universe of which we are a part. It only ever allows us to coincide with [it] through the endlessly variable limit of the instant. It makes the whole of our peculiar development a sort of closed world, doubtlessly linked to the surrounding universe by the tightest bonds, yet only [as they pertain to us]. Owing to time, thought fashions an image of the future that supplies a goal for the faculty of desire; and action, as soon as it is realised, becomes an [unlimited] object of contemplation in memory.

But in detaching us from the all in order to found our individuality, time is the cause of all our miseries. For as soon as [a] being<sup>8</sup> conceives of his separation from the all, [however] relative, he feels simultaneously filled with boldness and impotence. He recognises his responsibilities vis- à-vis the future; and as this future is always uncertain, he is anxious before it; most often he lets himself be seduced by the particular ends he scorns; and for that reason the memory of his past becomes oppressive. In other words, time—the medium within which our activity is loosed, [while nonetheless] remaining linked to the all—renders him sensible to the misuse he makes of that activity when, instead of seeking his support in the all, he [widens] the interval<sup>9</sup> which separates him from it. Becoming thereby the slave of [every] object, he is dissipated in the play of dream or desire and encounters a two-fold deception: [on the one hand,] having placed his confidence in himself, event thwarts his hope; [on the other hand,] in

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<sup>7</sup> Lavelle introduces the topic of time in relation to being, which will receive detailed consideration in *Of Time and Eternity*.

<sup>8</sup> I think it is no exaggeration to say that Lavelle regards all “veritable” beings, apart from the absolute, as human beings. In order to avoid giving priority to this gender or that, my translations usually favour neuter constructions in reference to beings, liberties, etc., trusting that contexts will make matters clear. However in this and a few other cases I felt that a personal construction was needed to avoid confusion. I employ the masculine gender here because it is the gender of the French word for *being*.

<sup>9</sup> Another key term in Lavelle's philosophy. See Glossary of Frequently Used Terms. The concept is addressed at length in “Freedom and the Interval” in *Of the Act*.

[giving himself over to] idleness, he asks the world-order to produce for him the miracle of an inward satisfaction to which he has not contributed.

However, if it is true to say that the individual would have no existence without time, [it is also true to say that] he can win power and joy in the use he makes of [his] independence by means of time. Instead of holding him back and dissipating him, particular objects appear to him then as [manifestations] of the all, to which he makes himself party and with which he can, thanks to [their] mediation, be associated in a manner [that is] always identical and always new. [Accordingly,] if the aim of our life is union with the all, and if this union can be produced only through our activity, it was necessary that time in some fashion effect our material separation so that, at risk of losing all, our reunion [with the all might be] for us a spiritual conquest of all instants.

Thus, we will say that we are nothing without time because except for it no distinction [could] be made between the whole and the parts that form it. Yet as soon as time appears, [two paths open] before us. We can dwell [within] the whole as one part in the midst of [others, which] are no longer for us only changing appearances: they imprison us, along with themselves, in the harshest bonds of necessity; the past crushes us with its weight; the future fascinates us with mirages. That is the first path. But time is also the means of our deliverance, and that is the second path. The insufficiency of each part, taken in itself, calls for perpetual change but also reveals a kinship and natural community among parts, and hence between each part and ourselves, [there] at the [heart] of the same all. Thus, we return to unity [in the midst of]<sup>10</sup> dispersion, not simply despite the latter but in a certain sense even [because of it].

In the same stroke, we go beyond appearances [and] enter into contact with being through a voluntary act. Our freedom is founded not on the negation of every [worldly] determination but on a [worldly] distinction between two sorts of rapport: the connections of parts with each other, ruled by the most inflexible laws, and the connections of each part with the whole, which obliges us to consider this part as an image of the all, a hearth [fed by it], a source that seems to be born from itself at the moment the whole pours into it—inexhaustibly—the power that makes it be.

Far from saying that necessity and freedom, thus conceived, remain opposed to each other, we must, on the contrary, say that they are inseparable: two names for the same reality. It is because the parts are not sufficient to themselves—whereas the all in which they occur enjoys supreme independence—that [each] part suffers (as a part) the constraint of all the rest and participates in the independence of the all as soon as it is united with it. Determinism and freedom are the material and spiritual sides of the all's very autonomy.

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<sup>10</sup> Literally, across or through—in the sense of traversing or passing through something.

[To go] one step further, we see that time [is] necessary so that we [can] transcend it by a free act. To think [of] the all is to be freed from servitude to the instant.<sup>11</sup> It is even, in a sense, to give rise to the advent of the all, [assuming] that a whole does not consist of a [mere] juxtaposition of indistinct parts<sup>12</sup> but in the completely internal thought through which a part, perceiving its own originality, recognises within itself a power present in all other parts which testifies to its [self-sameness] in each of them and can animate [them] only by demanding their collaboration.

#### IV

### THE INDIVIDUAL IS [A] SLAVE TO TIME AS SOON AS HIS ACTIVITY FLAGS

Time appears as the condition of all participation: of its insufficiencies and their mending. It can therefore appear only as a form of existence appropriate to particular beings. We will not be surprised to discover within it periods of progress and periods of decline, and perhaps even a kind of moment-by-moment balance among gains and losses. There [is] no room for [nursing] some [self-centred] grief in imagining that none of our acquisitions is [an acquisition] for the whole, though it might be profitable to other particular beings.

Going further, we will [offer two remarks]: *first*, each of us realises his essence only in the measure that, [after] surmounting the limits of his individual nature and renouncing every attachment, he discovers within himself an ever-present grace which, as soon as it [meets] more resistance than docility within him, looks elsewhere for other [inroads], but which, as soon as it [connects with] him, invites communion with all those who, like him, are capable of receiving it. Retaining nothing for themselves, they unite with God, letting the play of causes and effects continue among material things, to which they have in some fashion become [estranged] in the intimate part of their being.

The *second* remark expands and completes the first. For if time is the form of our experience, we allow ourselves to be carried away by it in the measure that our [inward]<sup>13</sup> activity flags or slackens; by contrast, we overcome [time] in the measure that [our inward activity] is concentrated. Thereafter, the strictness of participation compels us [in the first case] to extend the spread of duration in

<sup>11</sup> Here the instant seems to play a largely negative role. Later it becomes a point of access to eternity. See section V for a discussion of the two different senses of the instant.

<sup>12</sup> The author seeks a whole that is not simply a collection of unrelated parts but a complicity of participants in a single “power”.

<sup>13</sup> Lavelle does not make this specification but I suppose that for him the activity in question is an inward participation in the act of being.

order to embrace being, which seems to flee us at every instant, while [in the second case] duration is contracted and becomes [irrelevant] to whoever—disinterested in all [its] modes—is attached at every instant to the principle that produces them.<sup>14</sup> Hence, because time is subjective, each consciousness sets its rhythm [in accordance with] the interval [separating] it from pure being. This rhythm is infinitely varied but can be shrunk to the perfection of unity only at certain high points [in] our life, from which we constantly fall off so as to attain them anew, for the individual [is] able to come upon them only by surpassing himself, and if he discovers the operation of a pure activity that triumphs over determinism, he must never keep any of what he [believes he has gained]; he [must] indefinitely renew what he believes [he possesses] and at every moment regain everything and lose everything.

## V

## THE INSTANT IS A MEANS OF ACCESS TO THE ETERNAL PRESENT

To enter the present [one need] only depart from the instant.<sup>15</sup>

We reproach [most people]<sup>16</sup> for wanting to live only in the instant, as if the past [had] left no [trace] in their thinking [and] the future constantly surprised them owing to their inability to foresee it. To live in the instant is, therefore, [apparently] to live without care, to let oneself be carried along by the course of events, to participate in change rather than to dominate it, and to refuse to employ that essential prerogative of the mind which, rather than surrendering, like [mere] matter to the flux that carries it along, tries [as hard as it can] to embrace the whole of time: to retain the past that flees and to anticipate the future in order to shape it in advance according to our desires. Yet if, as we maintain, finite being coincides with the total being only at the evanescent limit of the instant, and if it is in this coincidence alone that we can acquire—[together] with being—power and happiness, does not the doctrine we are espousing become the very doctrine of the instant? [Do] we not [necessarily] abandon ourselves to the instability of becoming at the very moment we look for an eternal term? [Do we not] renounce the characteristic work of thinking—which is

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<sup>14</sup> The two scenarios are alternative consequences of the passivity and activity described in the preceding sentence.

<sup>15</sup> There is a kind of misdirection here. The sentence suggests a rejection of the instant when in fact the author regards it as “a means of access to the eternal present”. The departure in question is, rather, like that of a thinker who takes his departure from Hegel, meaning that he begins *by way of* that philosopher.

<sup>16</sup> Literally, most men.



to [link together] the stages of duration—at the moment in which, grasping [the essence of that thinking], we claim to push its employment to the final degree?<sup>17</sup>

However the instant can be considered in two aspects. If it is only a [thoroughfare] between two particular states, it leads us to cast into nothingness whatever is no longer or whatever is not yet, [leaving] no stable object [to take hold of] either outside or within us. [In that case] whoever wants to live in the pure instant does not succeed, since it is [endlessly] driven out of him by the mobility of time. Will we discern a continuous and infinite multiplicity of successive instants? [Such a flux would render] the stages of our life not passing possession[s] but a perpetual abandon. How then to avoid regret, which is only a disappointed hope? But the instant has yet another aspect, since it is in their liaison with the instant that perception, memory and desire alike [give evidence] of their reality. If perception seems to exhaust itself to the profit of the image, if the object of our desire is not converted into perception, our body is deceived: [then] it is true [that] the instant reveals our limits. But since [the instant] is at the same time our point-of-contact with being, [and] since within it a single act is exerted whose content is endlessly renewed, it also attests to the current eternity, if not of our own nature, at least of its spiritual fundament. In [line with] this second interpretation, it would be better to say that we depart from the instant (properly speaking) in order to enter the present. For [though] we are still tied to memory and desire, [we no longer deplore] their unreality since they appear, one after another, as elements of our current being. But in order not to be diverted by them from the present, it is instead necessary to purify them so as to reduce them to an act<sup>18</sup> that accomplishes itself. [We do this]<sup>19</sup> by taking no interest in the passivity of the states that accompany it or the objects to which it is applied, i.e. by freeing it from the idea of a lost or hoped-for perception.<sup>20</sup>

Thereafter, the present—concentrating within it images that seem to flee us into a distant past as well as [images] that draw us toward the future by way of mirages [that lie] beyond our reach—delivers us from the servitude to which they would reduce us; it permits us to taste the juice of each of them and grants us a spiritual delight. Instead of suffering from the gap that separates them from sensible reality<sup>21</sup>, we discover in them a new light to which [mere] sensation [can] not lay claim. And if the image still appears as susceptible of being projected—sometimes into the past and sometimes into the future—it is [such] only in order to furnish an identical object for our contemplation and love. But particular forms of being no longer interest us for their content, which we

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<sup>17</sup> A complex paragraph by any standard! To simplify matters somewhat I have divided a very long question into three shorter ones. Fortunately the issue becomes a little clearer in what follows.

<sup>18</sup> An act situated in the instant.

<sup>19</sup> The following sentence is originally a clause in the preceding sentence.

<sup>20</sup> As I read this the purification does not eliminate thoughts of the past and the future; it eliminates investment in them so that they can be seen only as fleeting manifestations of a permanent presence.

<sup>21</sup> I assume the author is referring to a gap that divides images of the past and future from the “sensible” present.

[formerly] sought in vain to fix or retain. Their role is to reveal to us the absolute presence of an eternal being; and they must be forever new so that they can allow us to participate in its essence by constantly enriching our nature and by making the entire course of our life an uninterrupted birth.

## VI

## [NOTHING IS OURS SAVE] THE ACT IN THE INSTANT IT IS EXERTED

Our true reality is founded on the act, and the mistake most people [make on this count] comes from [the fact] that they are more attentive to the content of the act, i.e. [its] limit, than to the act itself. It is by way of an act that we perceive, remember and desire. And in each of these acts, considered as act, our participation in being is present, perfect and indivisible. Everybody feels it clearly. But blinded by the limitation time introduces into our nature, and persuaded that the distinction between past and future is characteristic of being itself, we are led to identify the present not with the act but with the state, and consequently with the sensible. From this proceed all our woes. Thus, [people]<sup>22</sup> suffer from contemplating the past (if it was happy) because it has fled them; if it was unhappy, [they suffer] because its image haunts them in [their] possession of present well-being. In trying to guess the future they will suffer again from being deprived of the joys they hope for and [from] constantly fearing the threat of some peril. In being transported into the past or future – which they regard as [vanished] or yet-to-be-born states – they only divert themselves from present reality, taking pleasure in a dream [that is] impossible to actualise and poisoning their whole life with comparisons that only sharpen the consciousness of their limits. In contrast, by cleaving to the act we remain attached to the present of being, we regain, [along] with innocence, the very source of our power. The most miserable past becomes an element of our present force: it is the beneficent trial that nourishes and illumines it. By making our existence tally with that of the universe, the present instant somehow inscribes the actualised perfection of our essence in the infinite abundance of the latter. And the most uncertain future, by imparting to being the next subjective form of the act in opposition to the given [world], opens before us the paths upon which our freedom is embarked – which makes our progress possible, which allows us to rediscover the Concrete<sup>23</sup> from which dreaming had distanced us, and which is never lacking, either in proposing to our activity some novel employment or in promising it better fruits than all those it has tasted – if it knows how to attain them.

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<sup>22</sup> Literally, men.

<sup>23</sup> My addition of upper case.

In pursuit of fleeting novelties the I [cannot help but] be dissolved. But each particular object—the one there before us, present in the instant, forever new even if it seems completely familiar to us—nonetheless suffices to give us contact with the absolute being; for it must occur within the all which it implies and conveys in its fashion. Owing to this, [the object] acquires a relief and a sufficiency that somehow set it free from the relativity in which [it was held fast solely by way of its limits with respect to us and other objects]. However, for this result [to occur], being must cease to be for us an immense given that we unsuccessfully [try] to embrace.<sup>24</sup> Indifferent to the content of each given, we must be able to unite ourselves with the universal act in each of them, which founds it and all the rest. Only through this will we be able to ensure our connection with *the absolute and omnipresent being* and to secure a fixed point from which we will henceforth be able to assist and collaborate in the limitless development of our limited being without desire, fear or regret.

Thus, [we can no longer be reproached] for halting and imprisoning the I's development in advance by inscribing within an unchanging whole its origin, its end and the very interval that separates them and allows [the I] to blossom. If someone would like to open before himself a mysterious and indefinite career but [rejects] the idea of an all [that feeds him], he would be hard pressed to explain [how] he could grow rich and only move himself. On the contrary, we see very well how, through a continually renewed contact with a fixed being, our empirical I is increased without, so to speak, [taking any thought of it] by integrating in its nature all the successive aspects that its various encounters with being have revealed to it. In order to avoid idolatry—which would consist of positing a whole in which all the manifestations of being would be realised at once, ahead of the appearance of individuals—it is enough to concede that these manifestations effectively exist only for individuals but that, under penalty of excluding [the manifestations] from being and rendering them unintelligible, it is necessary to posit them in play at the interior of the totality of things, [together] with all the individuals who actualise them through their autonomous operations. The whole, such as we have defined it, is not separate from its parts: it is the principle that not only contains in itself all possibilities in an indivisible fashion but requires and brings about the passage from each of them to the act, according to definite conditions which permit all the parts, at the moment they appear, to establish their participated being.

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<sup>24</sup> The same “immense given”, purified of particular forms and considered as a sweeping all or total presence, was the focus of “The Discovery of Being”. Now Lavelle is concerned with a further purification whereby the experience of the total presence is reduced to the intuition of a single act that generates, and effectively *is*, the whole or all.

## VII

## THE ACT IS ONE AND NON-TEMPORAL

Since the act [has] to be exerted in order to *be*<sup>25</sup> it is always situated in the instant and always new. It therefore seems that acts differ from each other according to time, place, circumstance, the material they shape [and] the pattern they follow. But that is to say they differ according to their limits or the obstacles they encounter, not according to their nature or essence. Among the acts [people]<sup>26</sup> [can accomplish], only those [they have] entrusted [internally] to habit, [externally] to a machine, are imprisoned in rigid and specialised forms. But if we consider the hand's activity in [the case of] a skilful worker, we find this so supple that we are unable to foresee all the movements it can make: nonetheless, they depend on its structure and the resistances opposing it. When [its] activity turns artistic, it infinitely increases their prestige: and the shapes it [settles on] make [us] forget the trouble it [has taken to ensure that] only signs of ease and freedom [will show through]. If we [consider] the hero and the saint, does not the perfection of their activity come from that which, instead of expressing itself through acts known in advance, is spontaneously adapted to the most varied circumstances so that, after having evoked our surprise, it immediately [strikes us as exactly] right and natural? And is it not principally [here] that we [observe] the true operation of activity, which is exerted through presence alone? It acts all the more that it appears to act less. It acts by way of its being rather than by way of movement. And its motionless influence suffices to effortlessly summon all those [who are under its sway] to [a] consciousness of their own nature and office.

Doubtless someone will insist that an act can only be carried out in time, that it entails a point of departure and a point of arrival, that it possesses an interior becoming, that it produces a visible transformation of the universe and that it, so to speak, converts power into a thing. But these features in fact pertain only to action<sup>27</sup>, and this is mixed with materiality and passivity. In [the realm of]

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<sup>25</sup> My italics.

<sup>26</sup> Man.

<sup>27</sup> Here as later, in *Of the Act*, Lavelle makes a distinction between "act" and "action": worldly actions are carefully distinguished from the pure and transcendent act, though of course they remain closely related to it.

becoming it [provides] a symbol of the act. It is as if it allowed itself to be drawn toward and penetrated by the act in seeking to imitate its manner.

By contrast, if we consider the act in its purity, it has no existence outside the present in which it is exerted. The past can only be a state, and because we can no longer modify it we must submit to it: as soon as we try to think back on it through a [new] act it becomes present in a new form. Similarly, the future is only [an] object of desire: and the will is applied to it in order to test its limits and the distance [separating] realisation from design. But whoever could think of the future by way of an act devoid of passivity would no longer need to wish for it to come to pass in order to know and enjoy it.

Someone will claim it is impossible not to involve [the] act in time, that it does not always have the same stress and that it undergoes internal transformations in the measure that the anticipated effect is fulfilled. But the act has no effect. [If it did] it would necessarily cease to be, [it would] be transmuted into a state, fall to the rank of [a mere] thing. It would necessarily [forfeit] the totality of its perfection. Doubtless the effect depends on it but [no less than] the cause since the cause itself is only the condition or the given whose connection with the effect expresses the act's reality, though [in relation to] certain definite circumstances such that it is manifest to the eyes of a spectator who ceases to experience inwardly [its] inalterable presence and inexhaustible fullness.<sup>28</sup>

From the moment we try to seize the act in time we replace the act with the wake it has left in our memory. Is this not to say that we cease to perform it in order to consider from the outside the interval left by its trace? But what helps to prove that time, instead of being a primitive condition of being, is only a means of [gearing] the knowledge of being to our finite nature, is that, if we need to grasp the nature of pure being [as] an ever-present act—but as a presence superior to time, which grounds the possibility of the latter instead of being renewed within it—[then] becoming (after elapsing in time, from which it is obviously inseparable) cannot avoid being embraced in its turn by an act of contemplation that is itself non-temporal.

## VIII

### THE SAGE IS INDIFFERENT TO STATES

[It will] doubtless [be agreed] that each of us lives in a purely represented world and that this world is his creation,<sup>29</sup> that it differs from one individual to

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<sup>28</sup> I feel the words here do not adequately support the weight of intended meaning. Nonetheless a subtle and important point is made: in the temporal sphere both cause and effect are sequents of the eternal sphere.

<sup>29</sup> I.e. we fashion personal versions of it.

the next in richness and depth and that it, so to speak, measures the quality and power of our participation in the total being. But [our devotion should not be] to the multiplicity of our contacts with the all. For such an increase has its toll: no particular form of being can satisfy us; [we must], therefore, not be attached to [any of them]; they engage us in an infinite pursuit whose goal always escapes us. They involve us in conflicts where the I is torn apart.

Indeed, we are always divided against ourselves so long as we have not released within ourselves the simplicity of the pure act. We become the plaything of passions; we come up against our limits [on every side]; our interminable wishes—constantly more numerous—continue to be always frustrated; our impotence, which we thought healed, only grows [worse]. None of our acquisitions has worth in itself: [each] is only a means that should permit us open access within ourselves to an operation that comes from higher up, that engenders and contains yet surpasses all [acquisitions]. The activity does not have states [as its] end: it is itself principle and end; states express it but [only] as shadows that accompany it and make it sensible. It is only when we detach ourselves from each particular state that we discover the superabundant source from which all emanate. Thereafter, we should not be surprised if we have the impression of receiving [a] grace and force inseparable from primitive innocence, [as well as] a constantly-renewed contact with being, as if our soul seems to have become like [a] blank page [upon which] no character is inscribed ahead of inspiration's dictates, [or like an empty mirror reflecting] the light's purity, [or like] spontaneous movement that [flows] with ease amid a placid, even accommodating, environment where no obstacle delays or stops it.

[Similarly,] sages and saints—experts in employing all the soul's resources to obtain power and joy—regard as the first condition of spiritual initiation that negative virtue whereby [a] being, first renouncing all the external images with which [it has been preoccupied] until then, finally dwells alone with itself and therefore face to face with the act that makes it be. To this virtue we can give the name of purification, asceticism or indifference.

Yet we gain all when we believe all lost: for if we purify ourselves, it is only of the miseries of self-love; if we deprive ourselves, it is only of the objects that imprison [self-love]; if we are indifferent, it is only to all the separate enjoyments [self-love] vainly sought to hold onto. Thus, believing [we] give up what belongs to us, we give up only what limits us. We discover the identity of the being that fills [us to the brim] and the being that overflows [us]. The various forms of being<sup>30</sup> no longer oppose one another, though each of them can secure his connection with the all only by exactly fulfilling his vocation and particular destiny.

Consequently, no one [should] think that the soul, in withdrawing its attention and love from all objects, must in fact become like a desert and can

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<sup>30</sup> Again, only *human* beings are intended.

banish their sensible presence within it. How [is it possible] to concede that a finite being could—without being annihilated—behold all states vanish within him? In a sense, each of these states will be, on the contrary, singularly strengthened: appearing as it must and in the place where it must, it will become a unique and absolute term in its [sphere]. But for that [to be the case], the I precisely must cease to be interested in it as an end it [can] modify, retain or even produce, since it is assured of recovering in all states, no matter which, the supremely intelligible act—at once identical and always new—on which both its spiritual power and its inward joy depend.

## IX

### JOY IS PERFECTION OF THE ACT

Everyone<sup>31</sup> seeks knowledge, power and joy.

But joy is the supreme good. It is sufficient to itself. It contains and surpasses knowledge and power.

It brushes aside and forgets particular cognizances. It gives off a peculiar light that vindicates it. It reveals [a] vocation to the being who experiences it. It gives direction to the universe. This universe has allowed it to be born: but [joy] now envelops it with its radiance.

Similarly, joy is neither an effect of power nor a testament we pay to it; it is neither [a] sign nor [a] sequel of [power]; it is beyond. It is indifferent to its successes: it draws no advantage from its exercise or its effects. It has no regard for its diverse forms, it realises their unity; it grants us infinitely more than [any] of them had promised [or] could contain. It does not place its confidence in them. It at once gathers them together and surmounts them.

There is a light in it, an ease, a serenity, encountered in power and knowledge only when they have attained their object and consequently [come to an end]. In joy both find [their] culmination and safe haven. But then they forget the particular objects they had pursued, [which] were only obstacles they needed to triumph over. Joy's perfection prevents it from being imprisoned by any object. The latter would be for it not a reason for being but a limitation. It unites us with a principle capable of engendering all particular truths, with the source from which all actions, all victories and all the conquests of power derive. And we might even say that, in joy, the principle of knowledge is identical with the principle of action.<sup>32</sup> [Accordingly], success in one or the other of these two

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<sup>31</sup> Literally, all men.

<sup>32</sup> That is, in joy, the ultimate object ("the principle of knowledge") comes together with the ultimate subject ("the principle of action"). But joy is usually considered a state. It would seem that Lavelle rejects

domains is only a means of our going further. In joy, activity – indifferent to all particular ends, forgetful that it branches into distinct faculties – is fed by its sheer exertion.

Knowledge and power [can be] means of producing joy. Doubtless they grant us a clean joy which is like the accompaniment of their play. But in the end they must come undone and be lost in [that joy]. At that moment thought and action give birth to a new and incomparable emotion in us: that [emotion] which accompanies the annihilation of their peculiar and separate operations [there] in the consciousness they have, in vanishing, of [arriving at their goal].

Joy does not differ from the very presence of the act.<sup>33</sup> The act cannot know defeat since it does not reside in its effect but in the principle that makes it be. It is indistinguishable from the personality that accomplishes it, whose living and dematerialised essence it expresses. Rather, matter yields to it as willpower [does] to grace. Nobody could imagine it otherwise: yet it is supremely free as it is supremely easy. We can only conceive of it as achieved – but in a natural manner that excludes effort.

[The act] knows neither dispersion nor obstacle: before our eyes it conveys the success of a personality that, in accomplishing it, experiences the joy of fulfilling itself through an operation [resembling] both deliverance and a creation. [The act] displays an internal unity that time's passing cannot alter. Despite the variety of circumstances in which it is exercised, we always find it [identical]<sup>34</sup>: it is always the same act, [showing] us that it [never] ceased to be present. No application of force changes it, no end surpasses it. Whenever we accomplish it, it shows the same familiar face to us. It seems to take birth above will, which produces only actions. It is the object of a kind of contemplation, as an inaccessible ideal until the moment when, seeing it reappear, we recognise it, [spreading] calmness and certainty around it, unravelling seemingly insurmountable difficulties and making visible an order we are astonished to have lost as soon as it is restored.<sup>35</sup>

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this understanding and regards joy as a fundamental feature of being rather than a mere state among states. This has a parallel in the Hindu equation of consciousness (*chit*), being (*sat*) and bliss (*ananda*).

<sup>33</sup> A bold reiteration of joy's identity with the act.

<sup>34</sup> Literally, like itself.

<sup>35</sup> Such statements make it clear that Lavelle is a mystic first and a thinker second. He does not start from a theory and arrive at a revelation: he starts with a revelation and tries to find a theory to match. Consequently whatever shortcomings in the latter do not necessarily subvert the former. I suspect that most Lavelle enthusiasts are less interested in structural flaws than in evidence of inspired vision.