

Selected Chapters from

# OF THE ACT

## Translator's Foreword

*Of the Act* (1937) is without doubt Lavelle's chief work—a truth of which he was aware. As well as being the fullest and most insightful treatment of the Act of Being which is the cornerstone of his philosophy it is a skilful unification of all the themes that occupied him in his earlier writings: consciousness, participation, time, intimacy, vocation, etc. Everything is arrayed around the Act in a coherent whole so that later writings are free to explore particular issues with the confidence of a solid framework. At the same time the book gives valuable counsel on leading a spiritual existence, i.e. a life aligned with its indwelling source. For all these reasons more than half of the selections in this volume are taken from *Of the Act*.

The first five offerings are from Book One “The Pure Act” which deals with the Act in its own right as sheer self-caused being. The three remaining selections (from Book Two “The Interval”)<sup>1</sup> mainly address the act of participation whereby human beings shape their destinies and their experiences of the world by drawing upon the primordial act—with varying degrees of consciousness and understanding.

“The Experience of the Act” gives the simplest introduction to Lavelle's mature thought. It supposes an immediate knowledge-in-the-subject (hence a self-knowledge) which grounds whatever knowledge of objects, including internal ones such as states. This knowledge is primarily revealed in the process of taking initiatives: it is awakened whenever I become inwardly active—mindful, poised on an action or in the midst of

---

<sup>1</sup> No selections from Book Three “The Act of Participation” are offered.

realising it—and recognise myself as a living agent.<sup>2</sup> Yet far from disclosing that I live and act from myself alone the realisation testifies that I am dependent on a greater agency for whatever sense of liveliness and autonomy together with whatever personal power I have to be and do.

Whereas “The Discovery of Being” argued for a kind of universal body (more exactly a universal *under-body*) in which I find myself embedded—i.e. the “total presence” of being—“The Experience of the Act” asserts an even more inward acquaintance with the universal impetus at the core of this body. From this active principle arise all consciousnesses, all actions and the worldly arena in which they achieve form and expression. Though this thesis was briefly illumined in “Presence Regained” it is now brought into full relief.

Yet questions remain, particularly with respect to the chapter’s end where the author veers away from knowledge-in-the-subject toward a self-knowledge inferred through a feedback process, i.e. from the effects of worldly initiatives. Plainly Lavelle recognises *two* kinds of self-knowledge: a wholly inward one where conscious participation in the act is concerned and a peripheral one where manifestations come into play via individual players. In subsequent chapters the two possibilities will emerge as polar aspects of a single unfolding which Lavelle will depict in terms of a circle or feedback loop—the image that informs his entire dialectic.

“The Act of Being” takes its title and matter from an early essay published in 1936. Its burden is to show the identity of and difference between being and the act. The chapter’s gist is that these are different designations for the same truth but that each has a distinct meaning as well: “being” names the field of concern; “the act” names its essence and point-of-engagement. Accordingly it is through an authentic act or conscious initiative that I enter into the meaning of being.

“The Self-Caused Act” has value with respect to whatever discussion of self-causation. Typically autogenesis is conceived in terms of a circle, i.e. of a cause giving rise to an effect which again becomes a cause—agreeing with the circular pattern of Lavelle’s dialectic. But of course cause and effect must collapse into a single point within the eternal sphere. Strictly speaking the circle-image implies development over *a length of time* even though the movement returns to its start. Lavelle understands the difficulty and gives evidence of that understanding in ART. 7 where he defines the act-in-itself as “a pure initiative” which is “always cause and never effect”. The definition introduces a discussion of will or “the experience of self’s causality”. This is very much a “nuts and bolts” chapter, difficult-going in parts but well worth an investment of time.

“The Pure Self” boldly argues that the act has a personal character and is indeed the source of whatever self-awareness enjoyed by worldly beings. It is the original Self from which all others derive and to which they ultimately refer. The idea neatly resolves a problem encountered in *The Total Presence*, namely of whether the I-sense precedes or follows the sense of being: the two are effectively united. This solution supports Lavelle’s contention that self-consciousness or intimacy with self is the route to intimacy with being-as-a-whole and with the act that generates it. It also lays the foundation for an identification of the act with God, the primordial subjectivity.

---

<sup>2</sup> Though Lavelle is keen to associate this realisation with *whatever* deliberate action it is clear from the drift of his writing that one action takes precedence over all the others: that of becoming self-aware.

Given the presuppositions of Lavelle's early philosophy the preceding seems an obvious consequence. But obvious conclusions are often the last to be drawn and the author apparently had to struggle to arrive at this "simple" idea. *Of the Act* went through several drafts, in the second of which (tentatively dated 1928) Lavelle makes a strong case for the act's impersonality. Under the heading "*The same impersonal act founds all personal existence*" he says: "It would seem sufficient, having recognised the non-temporal character of the act, to immediately deduce its impersonality. For since the act always retains an indivisible and omnipresent unity, how could it be the distinctive property of [a] person?"<sup>3</sup> As will be seen the final draft directly opposes this position. Yet interestingly one of his Lavelle's private notebooks (the same one in which he asserts, "[God] is more mine than I myself . . .") contains the cryptic remark: "The Holy Spirit or God's impersonality through the opposition of the Father to the Son."<sup>4</sup> Impersonality is not attributed to God the Father—presumably identical with the act—but associated with the Holy Spirit, suggesting that it has been relegated to a secondary station. Since the note is undated its exact place within Lavelle's thought is hard to determine. It is up to readers to decide whether Lavelle ever fully left behind the notion of the act's impersonality.

"Transcendence", the final chapter of Book One, makes the case that the transcendent (traditionally whatever resides *beyond*, usually but not always in the sense of a higher realm) and the immanent (whatever is intimate or innate in human experience) are paradoxical, interdependent and ultimately one. In terms of Lavelle's philosophy the former relates to the inward act, the latter to the human states that manifest it. Accordingly nothing could be nearer, more intimate, more here-and-now, than the self-known act that precedes all objects. The point seems to be that both immanence and transcendence have an intimate character and that their meanings can often be confused. Correctly understood they are aspects of an act that in producing itself produces a worldly outfall most immediately encountered in the form of states.

These reflections afford the author an opportunity to consider the question of faith. For him faith is an affirmation of the act ahead of all effects. It is a return to a strict knowledge-in-the-subject even though that knowledge might appear hazy and unfounded by worldly standards. The affirmation is immediately validated since it employs the very efficacy it affirms. At the same time it is true that every act is an act of faith: e.g. I do not know how I succeed in raising my arm; I form an intention and loose it in the faith that it will be realised, that an actualising power will bring it about.

"Participation and Freedom" is at once Lavelle's key discourse on participation and his central manifesto on freedom. In it he argues that "Participation is inseparable from freedom": whether or not I engage the pure act, the *way* in which I engage it and the *degree* to which I engage it—all depend upon a conscious choice.

With respect to the eternal sphere, freedom is a limitless release that expresses Being's infinite plenitude and perfection. But with respect to the temporal sphere it is translated into many as-yet unrealised *specific* options, each requiring a "yes" or "no". Foremost among them and preliminary to all others is that of participating or not participating in the unlimited act which carries the very sense of freedom. Yet by a strange paradox such participation amounts to an act of *limitation* through which I define

<sup>3</sup> In *Filosofia Oggi*, N. 96, F. IV, L'Arcipelago, Genova (2001), p. 381.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 416 and 420. Biege Notebook No. 3, undated.

myself as this or that and thereby forfeit other possibilities. In other words I approach unlimited freedom in the measure I commit myself to a chosen limitation. A sobering example of this (not mentioned by Lavelle) is tragedy where a hero rises above himself or herself in the act of embracing a bitter destiny that fixes his or her being once and for all. The chapter also has value for those who like myself suspect Jean-Paul Sartre of owing a substantial unacknowledged debt to Lavelle.

“Freedom and the Interval” continues the previous discussion but with specific reference to the gap or discontinuity between the eternal sphere of the pure act and the temporal sphere of participation. The gap plays the dual role of separating two domains and of opening a space within which the world can arise: it is therefore the fissure of creation.

I draw attention to the author’s formula in Part B according to which opposites are held to consist of active and passive components of which the former is the stand-in for a more original term containing both possibilities. As a consequence the resolution of whatever opposition must be sought in a prior rather than a sequent reality, effectively countering the thrust of time. This stands in contrast to Hegel’s dialectic which focuses on a future perfection achieved through syntheses or compromises. Since Lavelle also looks to a future perfection after death I do not see the views as irreconcilable but as vaguely complementary.

“The World’s Formation” is a *tour de force* in which the author relates the preceding insights to our ordinary experience of the world, with emphasis on vocation as a central factor both in the maturation of individual beings and in the world’s evolution. Vocation is portrayed as a worldly mission that corresponds with a person’s essence. Though given at birth as a beckoning potential this essence still needs to be realised, chosen and expressed through concrete works.

The chapter is for the most part lucidly written and requires little introduction. I suggest that readers give close attention to the author’s characterisation of matter, which in some respects harks back to the Greek notion of *hyle* (the nondescript matter from which distinct elements developed) and perhaps to the world “without form and void” of *Genesis*.