The Act of Presence

Key Readings from the Philosophy of Louis Lavelle

translations, introduction, forewords and page-notes

by Robert Jones

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For Philippe Chinkirch

Acknowledgments

As signalled on the dedication page, main thanks go to my friend Philippe Chinkirch who introduced me to Lavelle during his stay in Australia in the early 1990's. My first translations of the philosopher, most of them brief, date back to that time and were incorporated in various articles that appeared in the United States and Japan. Later, after M. Chinkirch had returned to Paris, he continued to feed my interest by sending hard-to-get texts.

At some point I began translating entire chapters from the accumulated works. M. Chinkirch carefully read the drafts and responded to them with many useful suggestions. When a sizeable body of drafts had been produced he approached the Association Louis Lavelle in Paris on my behalf for expert comment. The Association replied with an invitation to publish the translations on its website until a suitable book publisher could be found.

In this connection special thanks go to Alain Panero, long-time Secretary of the Association, who shared the drafts with his colleagues, gave his perspective on difficult questions and put manuscripts on-line as soon revisions were made. Due to the addition of further translations, his assistance has continued over many years.

I am grateful also to Lavelle-authority Sébastien Robert who advised on a number of troublesome philosophical points and gave his permission to be quoted in a particularly important footnote (see p. xiv).

Final thanks go to the Association Louis Lavelle as a whole, which includes members of the Lavelle family. Headed by the eminent authority on Hegel and German Idealism, Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron, the Association has fought to keep Lavelle's thinking alive despite a world-wide trend toward exclusively science-based philosophies. It is largely owing to the Association that Lavelle's writings remain available in the country of their origin and are reaching new audiences abroad. My thanks are not only for the Association's support of my translations but for its dedication to a lofty vision.

I should add that none of the above parties can be held responsible for whatever errors persist in the English texts. I alone am accountable for them.

Contents

Translator's Introduction

The philosophy of Louis Lavelle came to prominence in France between the heyday of Henri Bergson, whose *Creative Evolution* was published in 1907, and the heyday of Jean-Paul Sartre, whose *Being and Nothingness* appeared in 1943. I choose these two markers, Bergson and Sartre, because they are familiar references and provide revealing contrasts.

Like Bergson, whose chair at the College of France he assumed in 1941[1], Lavelle championed a philosophy that refused to bow to the bleak materialism of the modern era. Unlike Bergson he did not launch an attack on determinism or try to show the fallibility[2] of science but devoted himself to turning ground he believed safe from materialist assaults. As a result he was able to produce a spiritual account of life where no realistic or scientific description of physical events was challenged but where being and consciousness were put off-limits to objectivism. The proper domain of science was restricted to the observable world: the third-person realm of objects as distinct from the first-person realm of subjects. The latter was held to be the proper domain of metaphysics, and it was to this, essentially internal, sphere that he directed his gaze.

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[1] Following Edouard Le Roy (1870-1954) who immediately succeeded Bergson.

[2] Bergson says he opposes only the "logical equipment" of science, which he believes congeals the "inward life of things", translating it into sterile concepts, symbols and frameworks. He insists that scientific thought, like intellect generally, has a practical role to play. Nonetheless it is clear that he is critical of intellect and favours an intuitive or experiential approach to knowledge. Indeed only the latter achieves the real or absolute. See his *An Introduction to Metaphysics*.

An inward focus was also advised by Bergson, most notably in the form of his philosophical intuition. However penetration of the interior yielded different revelations in the two thinkers: for Lavelle, the truth of being; for Bergson, the truth of becoming. Granted, Lavelle conceived of being in a *dynamic* sense, as an endless coming-to-be, which seems to agree with Bergson's *élan vital*, the life force that endlessly drives becoming. But it is impossible to overlook the fact that the former occupies an eternal present while the latter careers into an ever-creative future. Whereas the core truth is familiar and always the same according to Lavelle, it continually surprises in the case of Bergson.[3]

For all that there is a basic affinity between the two thinkers: a certain robustness; a certain faith in life; a certain idealism, in the popular sense of the word. No such affinity exists between Lavelle and Sartre, though they share a number of understandings and concerns.

Like Sartre Lavelle gave considerable attention to personal freedom. For both thinkers existence was a kind of *tabula rasa* upon which a unique essence or meaning had to be imprinted by way of personal choices. Indeed the proposition that became synonymous with Sartre's philosophy, "existence precedes essence", was explored by Lavelle before him.[4] Only, unlike Sartre, Lavelle also recognised a sense in which essence precedes existence, namely as an inward possibility commissioned by being, a special vocation each person is outfitted and challenged to fulfil—but may choose to ignore.[5] For Sartre of course all essence was created *ad lib*.

Again, both men saw a close relationship between consciousness and being but diverged with respect to their placement and import. Sartre divided them from each other, locating consciousness in the depths of the observer and casting being outside, i.e. into the world *across* from him. Because he held that consciousness can never be grasped as an object he regarded it as a nothingness[6] or a negating power confronted by the burgeoning plenum of being that surrounded and oppressed it, as depicted in his novel *Nausea*. Consequently his central work *Being and Nothingness* might well have been subtitled "The Opposition of Being and Consciousness". By contrast Lavelle saw these two as inwardly aligned and tended to regard the *world* as a kind of nothingness: alternatively a mere spectacle or appearance and an indeterminate matter akin to *hyle,* unless engaged by a consciousness that lends reality and significance to it by participation in the eternal "Act of Being".

These differences, together with the conflict between Lavelle's spirituality and Sartre's atheism, result in doctrines that are not merely incongruent but *directly* at odds. Sparks fly between them despite their common understandings and concerns.

Other revealing contrasts could be mentioned but one will suffice for this introduction. Like Bergson and Sartre, Lavelle was a leading light for an entire

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[3] To be sure, Lavelle allows for novelty within the context of sameness while Bergson allows for identity within the context of change.

[4] See for instance *Of the Act*, p.137 of the translations: "we need to posit our existence [before we can] discover our essence . . ."

[5] In *Of the Act* ("The World's Formation" ART. 14) he speaks of "the essence God proposes to me". Later, in *Of the Human Soul*, this sense of a divinely-ordained mission tends to give way to the notion of sheer possibility, which is perhaps nearer to Sartre's position—or would be if not represented in spiritual terms.

[6] The details of this theory appear in Sartre's "La Transcendence de l'ego" (1936).

generation of French thinkers. But unlike Bergson and Sartre he never really caught on in the English-speaking world.

An obvious reason for this is simply that his philosophical writings[7] (save the short *Introduction to Ontology*[8]) never appeared in English-translation. Whereas virtually every philosophical tract of Bergson and Sartre, however modest or curious, has been published in English, not even a chapter of Lavelle's magnum opus, the four-volume *Dialectic of the Eternal Present*, has been made available to English-language readers until now.

What explains the neglect? Granted, Lavelle's literary style is somewhat ornate by modern standards. However it is certainly no more ornate than Bergson's. At the same time, while Lavelle's thinking can be hard to follow at times, alternatively deep and roundabout, it is certainly no more challenging than Sartre's, especially in the early parts of *Being and Nothingness*. So again, what accounts for the neglect?

At least part of the answer is that, as someone principally concerned with the nature of being, Lavelle was eclipsed by that *other* delver into the nature of being, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), whose radical departure from conventional philosophy, initially by way of phenomenology, occupied centre-stage of world-thought during Lavelle's reign in France. The latter's approach to philosophy is somewhat traditional and unsurprising in comparison: it does not rely on verbal or conceptual pyrotechnics and does not look toward a total revolution in thinking such as an "overcoming of metaphysics" or an "end of philosophy".[9] Nonetheless Lavelle's insights often parallel those of Heidegger and regularly break fresh ground. They culminate in a unique metaphysics that outlines a distinctive return to the "hearth of being".

If, as Heidegger suggests, the proper task of thinking is remembrance of being then no thinker has performed his task more resolutely than Lavelle. At the same time he has proposed an active approach to realisation that is a clear alternative to the "waiting upon being" advised by Heidegger in his much-cited *Gelassenheit*.

Whatever the reasons for Lavelle's neglect in the English-speaking world, the translations at hand are intended to redress that neglect and belatedly introduce English-language readers to an important investigator of consciousness and being, as well as one of the 20th century's most profound exponents of what is sometimes called "The Perennial Philosophy".

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[7] As distinct from his "moralist" writings, two of which have been published in English: *The Meaning of Holiness* (originally *Quatre saints*, 1951) and *The Dilemma of Narcissus* (originally *L'erreur de Narcisse*, 1939).

[8] *Introduction à l'ontologie* (1947). Translated by Wesley Piersol Murphy, New York, Carlton Press, 1966. Excellent as the *Introduction* is, its compressed style makes it a better summary for those who are already familiar with Lavelle's ideas than an introduction for those who are not.

[9] See Martin Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh, Harper & Row, 1973.

1. Biographical Data

To my knowledge little has been written about Lavelle's life; at least nothing that amounts to a well-rounded biography. The information given below closely follows, with a number of expansions, an account by Lavelle-commentator Jean École in his *Louis Lavelle et le renouveau de la métaphysique de l' être au XXe siècle* ("Louis Lavelle and the Renewal of the Metaphysics of Being in the 20th Century")[10] which must be counted as one of the principal studies of this philosopher.

Lavelle was born the son of a primary school teacher on the 15th of July 1883 in Saint Martin de Villeréal, a decidedly rural community in the southwest of France, not far from Bordeaux. After gaining a position in the civil service, administering weights and measures, the father took his family first to Amiens and then to Rives de Gier. The boy obtained his leaving-certificate from the Saint-Etienne school and thereafter enrolled at the Lycée Ampère of Lyon, soon transferring to the Faculty of Letters where he obtained a scholarship.

It was here that he met the first major influence on his thinking, the exciting instructor Arthur Hannequin who specialised in Kant and managed to translate Kantian abstractions into terms that were understandable and immediate to young students. Perhaps Hannequin's most important gifts to Lavelle were the idea of an inward dimension that actively shapes the world and the example of an enquiry that focuses on the subject of experience. Both are evident in Lavelle's philosophy.

In 1909 Lavelle emerged from his studies with a bachelor's degree and a teaching commission. Having already briefly taught at schools in Laon and Neufchateau he was given posts at Vandosme and then at Limoges where he produced his first philosophical tract: *De l'existence* ("Of Existence", circa 1912) which remained unpublished until 1984.

Marrying a friend of his younger sister in 1913 Lavelle found himself looking down the barrel of the "Great War" in the very next year. Formally exempt from active service he was charged with ministering to refugees and the War's first wound victims. When hostilities worsened he waived his exempt status and was granted active service. He fought in the battles of Aisne, the Somme and finally Verdun where he was taken prisoner and sent to the Giessen Camp, north of Frankfort.

Here he remained until the end of WWI, though not in a state of inactivity or collapse. Incarcerated with other teachers he was instrumental in arranging various courses of study of which he himself conducted classes in Pascal and other major thinkers. It was at this camp that he began expanding and deepening his philosophic perspective, expressing his insights in notes[11] and in his first major thesis *La dialectique du monde sensible* ("The Dialectic of the Sensible World")[12]. Following his return to civilian life in March of 1919

[10] Hereafter referred to as LRM. Untranslated. Published by Georg Olms Verlag, Hildesheim, Zurich and New York, 1997. The biographical material in question is given on pp.17-21.
[11] *Carnets de guerre 1915-1918* ("War Notebooks 1915-1918") published in 1985. Untranslated.
[12] Untranslated. École reports in LRM that this was first titled *La dialectic de la matière sensible* ("The Dialectic of Sensible Matter").

he was appointed to a school in Strasburg[13] where he produced his second major thesis *La perception visuelle de la profondeur* ("The Visual Perception of Depth")[14] which, together with the first, was accepted as a doctoral dissertation by the Sorbonne in 1922.[15]

Between 1924 and 1932 Lavelle took up a succession of secondary teaching posts in and around Paris, some of which he filled simultaneously. But it seems clear that the main target of this Parisian campaign was a teaching post at the prestigious Sorbonne, which he secured in 1932 and held until 1934.

Apart from being successful years in terms of his teaching career they were singularly successful in creative terms as well. His philosophical articles regularly appeared in the Parisian *Le Temps* ("Times").[16] Though essentially reviews of current philosophical publications they touched on age-old questions and gave Lavelle an opportunity to give his unique slant on them. In reward for his talent and diligence as a commentator *Le Temps* employed him to produce a monthly review in 1932.

Formidable achievements for a largely unknown rural teacher arriving in the capitol city with little more than some promising credentials! But in the same decade he also managed to write three important books: *De l' être* ("Of Being")[17] in 1928; *La conscience de soi* ("Consciousness of Self")[18] in 1933 and *La présence totale ("The Total Presence")*[19] in 1934. These were not forays into philosophy but definite claims of philosophical territory, definite demands for serious attention.

Doubtless owing to Lavelle's rising popularity the publisher Fernand Aubier proposed he oversee the publication of a line of books to be included under the Montaigne imprint. Lavelle sought and obtained the assistance of the philosopher René Le Senne, and together they assembled the *Philosophie de l'Espirit* ("Philosophy of Spirit") Collection of works.

Scanning the list of authors advertised on the backs of these old publications, one immediately spots authors directly or indirectly associated with existentialism: Gabriel Marcel, Soren Kierkegaard, Nicolas Berdyaev, Martin Buber. One also notes seminal authors with idealist leanings like Fichte and Hegel. Then again one finds names infrequently mentioned in connection with either category or indeed with each other: Meister Eckhart (the Christian mystic), Franz Brentano (the early psychologist) and Alfred North Whitehead (the mathematician and philosopher). What possible links are there be between such diverse authors? The Collection's title gives a clue: *spirit*. Recognition of an inner dimension and resistance to mere worldliness or materialism—these are the threads tying the books together. Both strands contribute to a spiritual slant on life such as that proposed by Lavelle himself, whose works appear on the same list of authors. In other words the Collection is a reference library and tool-kit for thinkers

[13] Lyceé Saint Louis de Paris.
[14] Untranslated. In LRM École cites the author's observation that his thesis could just as well have been called *La perception visuelle de la lumière* ("The Visual Perception of Light").
[15] In a recent study (2001) École gives this date as 1921.
[16] Between 1932 and 1940 he wrote 116 such articles.
[17] The first volume of his *Dialectic of the Eternal Present*. Untranslated.
[18] The first, and in my estimate best, of his "moralist" writings. I have seen reference to a translation but have been unable to validate its existence. In any case I do not find a translation in print.
[19] The first and last parts of which are translated in this selection of readings. It is largely a simplification and recasting of points made in *Of Being*. The work received the Charles Levêque prize for literature in 1934.

wanting to break free from materialism in order to reach a more meaningful understanding of life.

In 1937 the philosopher published *De l'Acte* ("Of the Act" or "Concerning the Act"), the second volume of his *Dialectic of the Eternal Present*. This was certainly his best effort to date and in the opinion of many, including myself, never to be surpassed by its author. Here all the elements of his previous thinking come together in a harmonious whole which serves as a foundation for his subsequent reflections. But its value extends beyond thoroughness and cohesion. Though it does proceed in a systematic, dialectical fashion—establishing principles, drawing conclusions, gradually building up a comprehensive metaphysics of being—its main strength lies in its abundance of lucid insights which convince independently of argument and architecture. Any one of them can be lifted from the main body of the work and profitably contemplated in its own right. Doubtless this explains why the book won such wide and loyal support, even among readers with little grasp of the author's total vision.

Following the start of WWII Lavelle was accorded a succession of honours. In 1940 he became Cabinet Director under the national Minister of Education. Later he was appointed Inspector General. In 1941 he was elected chair of the College of France, a prestigious position formerly occupied by Henri Bergson. In 1943 he was awarded the French Academy's Broquette-Génin literary prize for his book *La parole et l'écriture* ("Speech and Writing")[20]. Thereafter a steady stream of philosophical articles and books was produced until his death on September 1st 1951.

Few details of Lavelle's personal life have been recorded: of his character, disposition, trials as husband and father[21], friendships and associations, religious life, ambitions and disappointments. It seems as if his life was wholly taken up by his public career. But his writings reveal another dimension. They argue for a man whose day-to-day existence was largely inward and not the stuff of exciting biographies. Of course no one gains prominence by accident. It is certain that Lavelle devoted considerable energy to advancing his cause and fulfilling his many social offices. But for him achievement was perhaps more natural, less forced than for many other prominent figures. It seems the natural overflow of an inner wealth that wanted to be shared.

2. The Presence of Being

In broad terms Lavelle's philosophy can be described as an attempt to illumine being from the inside out, showing how it grounds the whole of manifestation. Such a project seems to call for a definition at the outset. For what exactly is meant by "being"? However *The Total Presence*—the book which culls and simplifies the basic theses

[20] Untranslated.

[21] A short biographical note at the end of the recently-published *Règles de la vie quotidienne* ("Rules for Everyday Life", Arfyuyen 2004) relates that his son suffered from a bone disease and that Lavelle attended to him until his own death. The son died the very next year.

developed in Volume One[22] of the *Dialectic*— begins with the assumption that readers are already acquainted with being, however obliquely or intermittently, and need no introduction. Unlike Heidegger who fears the sense of it might be lost to modern people Lavelle speaks of it as a familiar given. On that basis he immediately takes readers to the heart of his subject, referring them to the direct "experience of the presence of being"[23]:

> Surely no one consents to this elementary experience, taken in its utmost simplicity, without undergoing a kind of trembling. Each person will admit that it is primitive, or constant; that it is the substance of all our thoughts and the source of all our actions; that all the initiatives of the individual presuppose and develop it. Yet [having ascertained this], we quickly pass on: thereafter it is enough for it to remain implicit; and we allow ourselves to be [diverted] by the [narrow] ends proposed to us by curiosity and desire. Thus, our consciousness is dispersed; little by little it loses its force and brightness; it is assailed by too many reflections; it does not succeed in gathering them together because it is too far removed from the hearth that generates them.
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> The [nature] of philosophic thought is to cleave to this essential experience; [to hone it to point]; to draw it back when it is on the verge of escaping; to return to it when all grows dark and we need a landmark or touchstone; to analyse its content; and to show that all our operations depend on it—find their source in it, their reason for being and the principle of their power.[24]

Lavelle's tacit thesis is that the meaning of being is best approached inwardly, through the simple experience of being, recognised by everyone. Properly engaged it will of itself yield answers to fundamental questions. Other passages in *The Total Presence* leave no doubt that such engagement has a salubrious character: it vivifies, strengthens and uplifts those who apply themselves to it.

The central problem is that the experience can be so easily dismissed, taken for granted, ignored in favour of the mundane cares and diversions that vie for attention in everyday life. Consequently such interests—effectively amounting to "the world"—must be counted as *externals* that distance me from what is nearest and dearest. If my aim is to "cleave" to the latter and give it voice I must make an effort to turn *inward*, the basic approach to truth advised by Lavelle in all his writings, the word "inward" signifying a movement toward greater intimacy with self and its wellsprings and not necessarily a withdrawal from the world. Whenever he speaks of inwardness, intimacy or interiority he supposes this return to "elementary experience".

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[22] *De l' être* ("Of Being").

[23] The phrase seems redundant in that presence is usually considered a synonym for being. The apparent redundancy might be employed for emphasis but it is more likely that "the presence of being" intends something like the intuition of being. Lavelle often links presence with intuition.

[24] "The Discovery of Being", pp. 5-6 of the present volume.

A kind of reduction seems implied. I am here thinking of the "transcendental" or "phenomenological" reduction proposed by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) whereby the being or reality-value of experience is put out-of-play in order to gain a more or less pure vision of phenomena. In apparent[25] contrast to this Lavelle performs what might be called an "ontological reduction" which sets phenomena apart in order to arrive at the sheer sense of being that under-rides them all. The manifest world is not denied but made secondary to the intuition of being, which typically includes the intuition of an experiencing self so that being is associated with subjectivity and tends to be identified with *self-being*. The outward pole of objective experience is placed at a distance in accordance with its object-like nature, i.e. as something standing across from a subject, and the intimate pole of the subject is accentuated, with the understanding that what makes it primary is the living-quality it carries into every encounter.[26] The familiar inside-outside, near-far character of experience is thus affirmed. And what increasingly emerges is the ever-present ground of whatever manifestation: a presence I recognise as "mine" yet which also intimates something bigger and more fundamental than me.

Being is discovered as life's universal constant, a rudiment that is always present, forever right now. Indeed the freshness of perception, centred as it is in the moment, attests to the nearness of the ever-present ground. But thoughtful reflection discloses that every possible experience takes place in the selfsame now. Things might seem brighter and more variegated in perception, hazier and simpler in memory or in thoughts of the future, but I cannot deny that whatever appears, whatever is known, appears and is known right now. Being is like a movie screen upon which thousands of images are cast and an eventful drama unfolded. But if I somewhat disengage from the show it is clear that everything takes place against a backdrop whose basic nature never changes. From such a realisation Lavelle builds up his philosophy, and in particular his view of time as addressed in *Of Time and Eternity*.

To avert possible misunderstandings I should emphasise that Lavelle does not jettison or ignore the observable world. Despite its secondary character it is not detachable from the experience of being. This is less obvious in *The Total Presence*, which strongly advises an indifference to worldly responses or states, than in later writings where the world appears as both a necessary counter-pole against which inwardness can be distinguished and an indispensable arena where individual beings can try out their powers and define themselves. Practically speaking being is always revealed in relation to the world. Consequently there can be no question of jettisoning the world or putting it truly out-of-play, for whatever *is*, if only in the mode of appearance, is of-a-piece with being as a whole.[27] And every inward advance is matched by a corresponding change in outward experience so that the manifest realm, reflecting the inward movement, appears ever deeper, more meaningful and more intense. It proves an accurate gauge of the inner life,

[25] I say "apparent" because Husserl also recognised the potential of his reduction to reveal the essence of selfhood and being. Though the bulk of his writing is devoted to whatever appears as an object it perforce also delineates its counter-pole in the subject.

[26] Again none of this is foreign to Husserl who recognised the same polar structure and repeatedly affirmed that being essentially belongs on the side of the subject. It was precisely over the question of the "transcendental ego" that Husserl's foremost student, Martin Heidegger, parted ways with his mentor.

[27] In this Lavelle appears to agree with Heidegger who defined human reality in terms of *Dasein* or being-there, i.e. being-in-the world.

in principle up to the level where it becomes indistinguishable from that life. Hence there is a continual dialogue or *dialectic* between inner and outer, near and far domains.

From another angle Lavelle never tires of observing that to the degree I am conscious of a state of affairs, however oppressive and limiting, I transcend it. This truth becomes a rule of freedom: by bearing faithful witness to the phenomenal sphere—*this* place, *this* time, *this* precise situation, *these* states —I both embrace and pass beyond it, find myself delivered to the quick of being from which it springs. Thus my conscious participation in the manifest world can itself be a path to transcendence and liberation.

Consequently it might be argued that nothing like a reduction pertains to Lavelle's mature philosophy. Rather a certain inward stance with respect to the entire spectrum of existence is proposed, a certain taking-to-heart of worldly manifestations, placing them in dialogue with the sense of self-being.

My view is that it is still legitimate to speak of a reduction. Though Lavelle does not cast off the objective world he does reduce experience to a hierarchy of meanings from which he maps out the architectonics of being. It is not an ontological reduction in the sense of rejecting all that is non-being (which in any case would be nothing) but in the sense of reducing all things to essences on an ontological scale of values from inmost to outmost, from near to far. In this connection it could be said that a natural reduction occurs in the simple act of becoming aware.

3. The Act of Being

Though it is clear from its inward or intimate character that Being[28] has no dimensionality and can be neither little nor big, it is hard not to attribute it a sense of

[28] From here on I will try to follow Lavelle in using the upper case for Being proper and the lower-case for (a) *particular* beings and (b) the human perspective on Being.

As will be seen Lavelle employs both upper and lower cases with respect to the words "act" and "being", tending to reserve "Act" and "Being" for the pristine or archetypal sphere. However it is not uncommon to find lower-case phrases like "the eternity of being" and "the pure act" which also seem to refer to the Absolute.

In correspondence with me (August, 2008) Lavelle-authority Sébastien Robert ventures the hypothesis (specifically in reference to the word "act") that "Act" refers to the pure domain while "act" refers to human participation in this by way of reflection. In other words it is a question of "the point of view of the Pure Self and the point of view of the I. It is as if each consciousness, through the exercise of its reflection, 'breaks away' from the Absolute so as [to be able] to return to it . . ." (my translation).

The suggestion is a certainly right-headed. But there might be a question of whether the upper-case has any legitimate use since it would seem that everything said of the Absolute is a product of human reflection. Perhaps the convention asks to be taken mainly as an expressive vehicle for reminding readers of distinct spheres. In any case it is probably safe to say that "being" is a designation for Being at the level of participation.

I should add that in recent correspondence (October 2009) Professor Robert reaffirms the essentially *reflective* character of participation, saying ". . . it is important to explain that the act of intelligence is

immensity since it grounds the whole of manifestation, from far-flung galaxies to microscopic forms of life. It seems a *gigantic* matrix, a fundamental substratum or "stuff". Yet it also seems somewhat passive, simply *there*. So it was perhaps natural for Lavelle to perform *another* refinement (already foreshadowed in *Of Being* and *The Total Presence*) which reduces the field of Being to a central principle, i.e. a kind of *engine* that generates it. And the product of that refinement was an *act*: namely "the Act of Being" which is the subject of the Volume Two of *The Dialectic*[29].

My homespun understanding of Lavelle's analysis is as follows. Each time I return to myself from my immersion in everyday concerns, each time I become present to my life, it is as if I suddenly come into being, bringing the world along with me, as it were, in that only now does it jut forth and show itself as just-so. Usually I dismiss the impression as a trick of the mind whereby my renewed attendance to life is naively conceived in terms of a universal genesis. But occasionally the impression is so compelling as to make me wonder whether more than a trick or metaphor is involved. What if, on the contrary, my experience testifies to the miraculous character of existence and to my complicity in the miracle?

To entertain this possibility I do not need to question the prior reality of things, myself included, or to yield to the suspicion that I am the unique source of whatever appears so that my life might be no more than a solitary dreaming. I can concede that the world and my life in it are facts before I take account of them: they normally go on without me so to speak. But from time to time I actively *participate* (a key word for Lavelle) in the heart of reality and thereby divine the every-minute miracle which holds the world in existence, i.e. by renewing it, by constantly bringing it forth like a rabbit from a hat.

Everything in Lavelle's mature philosophy is founded on an intense experience of being through which something dynamic is affirmed: being as an *activity* rather than a substance or static given, being as a *verb* rather than a noun. But for Lavelle that activity is also creative. First and foremost it creates itself—quite magically and without mechanism—in the mode of a self-known, self-generating flame of aliveness that is eternally beginning, forever just now. Yet as a kind of overflow or temporal echo of this the Act of Being is also productive of individual beings[30]—effective analogues of Being—and in conjunction with them the world's myriad displays. Though at one remove from the eternal source these individuals are nonetheless fed by it and can partake of its mystery.

The secret of participation is that in becoming present, in so to speak giving myself being, I perform a personal act of being that draws upon the Universal Act. By virtue of my initiative I tap the wellsprings of creation and become a knowing party to the general wonder-working.

A similar or identical notion was expressed by the English poet Coleridge with respect to the essence of imagination: "The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite

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plainly intimately connected with being since it is the heart of it. *Being is comprehensible to us only when reflection introduces the act of intelligence into it . . .*" (my translation, author's emphasis). I gather it is at this point that Being becomes being.

[29] *Of the Act*.

[30] It appears that only God and human beings count as true beings in Lavelle's philosophy.

mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."[31] Of course for him primary imagination was distinct from fancy and more nearly a matter of veridical perception illumined by the knowledge that its contents have an inward rather than an outward source: "I may not hope from outward forms to win/The passion and the life, whose fountains are within."[32] Hence the idea of "repetition" seems very close to that of participation—to the extent that Coleridge's definition can be taken as an early glimpse of the doctrine Lavelle presents in detail. I should add that there is to my knowledge no evidence that the philosopher was acquainted with the writings of the poet.

4. Problems in Representing Consciousness and Being

My guess is that the chief difficulties met by readers of Lavelle concern the nature of intimate knowledge, by which I mean the self-evidence of consciousness and being as directly realised in the subject. From the earliest days of philosophy down to the present, thinkers have recognised the existence of primary, immediate or intuitive knowledge, particularly with respect to the experience "I am". Impressive doctrines have been built on that cornerstone, including the one constructed by Lavelle. Yet few thinkers have tried to penetrate and examine the make-up of the stone itself. Lavelle devoted considerable attention to its internal character. Owing to this close scrutiny his speculations on intimate knowledge call for serious consideration, even from those who do not share his spiritual bias.

Of course nothing like a full account of his findings can be given here, much less a measured critique. What I *will* try to do is to clarify a few basic ideas by reference to a certain unhelpful prejudice in the way knowing is traditionally represented. But I should note that while my treatment cites supporting testimony from Lavelle it paints a much simpler[33] picture of consciousness than the one he himself paints over the course of his career. For his exact late-life stance readers should refer to "Consciousness, or an Intimacy Rightly Universal".

The prejudice in question involves the subject-object relationship. It is generally agreed that every instance of knowing entails a subject (the observer or the knower) as distinct from a target object or set of objects (the observed or the known). But then how do matters stand where intimate knowledge is concerned, i.e. where the supposed object of knowledge is myself or the sense of being or the very act of knowing? Do I in some sense occupy a position across from these? If so, am I not paradoxically at one remove, hence distinct, from them? If not, how can I have any knowledge of them whatever?

Lavelle's response is that the subject-object relation begins to unravel as soon as the intimate sphere is breached. The moment of self-consciousness—which he regards as the

[31] *Biographia Litteraria*, Chapt. XIII.
[32] From Coleridge's *Dejection: An Ode*.
[33] The word "simpler" in this case does not mean "easy". Readers who find the following discussion difficult might find it more helpful after they have read the translations and page notes.

citadel of consciousness and the repository of the sense of being—affirms this. Though self-being can be known it is primarily experienced *in the subject* and not as an object. It is therefore called a subjective rather than an objective datum. It does not stand across from me but is identical with me, realised in the mode of absolute transparency and nearness. Lavelle says: "the hearth of consciousness is not itself an object: it is *us*."[34]

The point becomes clearer when I consider that realisation of consciousness and being requires my active involvement. I must *will* and *maintain* my presence to myself. The instant I cease to do so it vanishes. Accordingly confirmation of self-being does not await some objective display: certainty is provided internally by the very act that brings it forth. In Lavelle's words: "this power of saying 'I' is not the power of discovering an object of which I could say that it is me, it is the very power of giving myself being, it is the emotion inseparable from an act of creation that depends upon me to accomplish at every instant, whose effect is not a visible work but myself."[35]

Understanding dawns as soon as I recognise that the word "consciousness" contains an essential ambiguity. The question "Are you conscious?" can mean either "Are you awake? Are you fully present?" or "Do you register this or that?" Owing to the close relation between the two meanings usually no distinction is made between them. Yet careful reflection discloses an important difference. On the one hand I can be very much conscious yet more or less free of specific observations, as in the case of meditation. On the other hand I can be engrossed in details but not very awake at all. Indeed I might appear virtually asleep to the people around me. They might ask "Are you with us?" "Yes, of course," I might reply. "Are you sure?" "Definitely." And for me there will be no doubt. But what tends to escape recognition is that a shift has occurred. A light has come on in response to their questioning. I have taken a step in the direction of consciousness as being present. Lavelle describes the situation in the following terms:

> "Now consciousness itself can be considered in two different aspects. On the one hand *I always have consciousness of some thing* . . . But on the other hand I can retain only *this act of having consciousness*; and as soon as I isolate this act from its object, it seems that I have to deal with two domains which are in a certain sense irreducible to one other . . ."[36]

The problem is that knowledge tends to be defined *exclusively* in terms of *consciousness-of*—to the extent that no other knowledge is recognised as genuine. Consciousness is then limited to an awareness of objects, many of which might be internal as in the case of pains or disturbing recollections. Therefore it is sometimes argued that there can be no direct self-knowledge for the same reason that a camera cannot take a picture of itself. And in fact when I begin to cast about for the source of my consciousness I find only an array of objects which are decidedly *not* consciousness

[34] "Consciousness, or an Intimacy Rightly Universal", p. 228 of these translations.
[35] *De l'Ame humaine*, Ch. VI, p. 143.
[36] "Consciousness", p.223. He goes on to observe that this analysis is "too simple" in that it totally isolates the two spheres and neglects their interrelation.

itself, decidedly not *me*—a truth Sartre employs in defence of his position that consciousness is a kind of nothing. But this way of stating things misses their positive import. I *do* in fact realise that the things I observe are not properly *me*, i.e. not my self-aware being. They are somehow distinct from me, even if they arise as pains that afflict my body or thoughts that torment my mind. And implied in the realisation of what I am not is the realisation of what I *am*. True, I can never locate the heart of consciousness as an object but then I never doubt my alert presence on that account. At the same time the knowledge that I am conscious is not merely a product of deduction (e.g. "If this is the case and if that is the case then there must be a subject who is distinct from the observed.") but springs from something familiar and immediate: my very self-being. Indeed it is doubtful that I could know objects as objects at all, i.e. as things distinct from me, unless I was in some sense self-aware *ahead of* every possible object. Experientially there is a good case for maintaining that there are no objects whatever until I am present to myself. Before that there is only a mindless confluence with things and events.

Two courses of action are open. In speaking of intimate knowledge I can bow to the almost universal convention of depicting knowledge solely as an object. I can talk about having a consciousness *of* myself or *of* being while at the same time insisting on the primacy and immediacy of the subject— a course Lavelle often follows. But this way of speaking runs the risk of being misunderstood, for while I may in fact have consciousness-*of* myself there remains an even more immediate self that is simply conscious: a direct knowing whose inception and appreciation do not take place in the mode of the object but without which there could be no consciousness-of objects.[37]

Alternatively I can speak of consciousness proper in different terms: I can refer to knowledge-in-the-subject or consciousness-in-itself. Lavelle regularly employs this tack as well, usually reserving the word "intimacy" for all innate or non-objective instances of knowing. Indeed he often *opposes* intimacy and consciousness—a move that strikes me as justifiable in light of how the word "consciousness" tends to be used. Moreover it is consistent with his overall message that *both* being (in the guise of intimacy) and consciousness (in the objective sense) constitute knowledge. They are essentially-related but distinct poles of knowing, with the first serving as a foundation for the second.

With the above considerations in mind it is now possible to summarise the relation between objective and intimate knowledge. The appropriate question seems to be: how should consciousness-in-general be characterised? Lavelle replies:

> It effectively has two different characters, at once conjugated and opposed: it is act and light. As act consciousness is being, considered in that operation through which it eternally produces itself.[38]

But where *objects* of knowledge are concerned "Consciousness then appears as a light which lights the world . . ."[39] In other words consciousness is one with being in its

[37] Lavelle's frequent ambivalences turn on this point.
[38] "Consciousness", p.227.
[39] *Ibid*.

inception (as act) but immediately becomes bi-fold: its arising sheds light on worldly objects, which again can include internal objects such as sensations and memories.

Problems relating to the subject-object distinction are of course inherent in the nature of consciousness, at least as it has been traditionally represented. Practically speaking every increase in felt-being tends to be matched by an increased awareness of outward objects. If I understand Lavelle correctly, the path to greater inwardness is not through a reduction of observed objects but through increased inner activity, i.e. participation in the act, which normally brings an enhancement of perception.

That said I return to my confession of painting a much simpler picture of consciousness than the one Lavelle provides. An example of one his more puzzling pronouncements (in *Of the Human Soul*) is that consciousness is essentially universal rather than individual.[40] Baldly stated the position appears counter-intuitive. Most people would agree that if anything at all belongs to me it is this specific moment of consciousness. I sympathise with the objection but also see a justification for regarding consciousness in a transpersonal or universal light, particularly when it is considered as a vehicle of understanding and impartial truth. The main difficulty concerns *intimate* consciousness, where all is revealed directly or in private and has so to speak my familiar scent. But as I interpret the texts, even here the character of "mine-ness" or uniqueness is borrowed from a more original sphere which is, like the world, common to everybody though now in an internal sense.

Such a construction is consistent with statements in *Of the Act* to the effect that whatever sense of self derives from a single source, namely God. However it is questionable whether many readers will be prepared to allow that the self at the root of their consciousness is in fact God since this suggests an outright identification with God. Lavelle too shies away from this prospect, repeatedly insisting on the unattainability of the divine person.

Further complexities arise in connection with the internal character of self-consciousness. Though the author argues strongly for an intimate knowledge that precedes knowledge of the object (as outlined above) he *also* wants to locate something of the subject-object duality *within* intimacy itself, namely in the form of a mixed activity and passivity which at once provides a foundation for *knowledge-of* self (presumably in addition to immediate self-knowledge) and the more hard-edged distinction between subject and object experienced in relation to the world. This of course looks like going against the grain of true apperception and undermining the integrity of the subject. Recognising the problem the author refers to a relation between *subject and subject* and allows that activity and passivity exist within the subject "in so perfect a reciprocity that there is nothing in it [bound to be] active or passive"[41]. But this seems an equivocation and leaves a question with respect to pure spirit where passivity supposedly plays no part at all.

In general it can be said that the complexities of his stance can be traced to his insistence on an absolute gap or division between eternal and temporal spheres so that

[40] A similar idea can be found in Sextus Empiricus' comments on Heraclitus and in Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* 8.54. In both cases consciousness (or "Mind") is regarded as a universal "atmosphere" which individuals may "breathe".

[41] "Consciousness", p.231.

temporal beings engage only a facsimile or analogue of true Being. Yet the basic thrust of intimacy and participation, as well as the central argument in *Of Time and Eternity*, i.e. that time and eternity are different readings of a single essence, seem to demand a real confluence of spheres. I take this as a basic problem in his philosophy and will refer to it at relevant points in my page notes.

Certainly Lavelle must be counted among the pioneers of consciousness theory. Of all the topics he addresses this is probably the one that receives most attention today, though it must be said that current attention tends to be directed more toward cognitive processes (e.g. recognition of external stimuli) than to the fact of consciousness itself. The search for a coherent explanation of consciousness by theorists like Francis Crick and Bernard Baars has become a kind of quest for the holy grail. Even the eminent mathematician Roger Penrose has applied his expertise to the question.

Owing to the scientific mood of the times such studies tend to draw heavily on topics like brain function, logic, computer theory and physics, including quantum mechanics. There is doubtless much to be learned by following these avenues but it must be admitted that the objective focus seems strange in relation to the most subjective domain of all: the life-moment of consciousness. Still, the dissonance may be less than (or subtler than) supposed since the objective world and our conclusions about it appear within the subjective arena. Nonetheless it would be easy to lose sight of the first-person "grail" by focussing on the third-person display, and indeed there are theorists who argue that, since the notion of consciousness adds nothing to the facts of the matter, it should be jettisoned—as if consciousness were no more than a dispensable notion, as if it were not the central fact of the matter!

In fairness it should be allowed that most theorists *do not* dismiss the first-person mystery. But even with them the tendency is to be concerned with the mechanics of cognition rather than the life-moment itself. This is less obvious in relation to perceptions and their *qualia* (specific suchness) than to the sense of self-being that is surely the crux of consciousness. The latter is regularly consigned to the "too hard basket" though I feel it is the all-important reference without which nothing can be properly understood. I suspect that while a mystery or puzzle is conceded by most students of consciousness it tends to be viewed in purely discursive terms, the implication being that the puzzle might disappear if the related physical processes were spelled out in logically consistent diagrams and equations. There seems little recognition of a greater order of mystery.

Here is where Lavelle has an important contribution to make. Doubtless his introspective, armchair style of philosophy must seem antiquated and even beside the point compared with modern approaches to the mind question. But I feel that none of those approaches has much hope of success unless the intimate dimension explored by him is kept alive and given full due. The immediate intimation of self-being, realised principally in the mode of felt-value, has to be continually consulted and allowed to provide evidence *in its own terms*, which are decidedly *not* those of current philosophy and science.

5. A Dialectic

If there is more than a similarity of views between Coleridge and Lavelle it is most likely by way of their common indebtedness to German Idealism beginning with Kant. Where Coleridge is concerned the debt involves outright literary theft from one of Idealism's leading lights: Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854), an associate of both Fichte and Hegel. Coleridge's *Biographia Litteraria* appropriates entire passages from Schelling and presents them as Coleridge's own thoughts. Nonetheless he makes the thoughts sufficiently his own to frame the aforementioned original and provocative definition of primary imagination.

In the case of Lavelle the works of Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel would have been required school reading. But he seems to have taken them very much to heart[42], doubtless encouraged by the idealist leanings of his mentor Arthur Hannequin. It is for instance difficult not to see Lavelle being strongly affected by Schelling's assertions that "The concept of self arises through the act of self-consciousness, and thus *apart* from this act the self is nothing . . ."[43] and "What the self is, we experience it only by bringing it forth . . ."[44] Lavelle's engagement in such ideas, together with his meditations on the same classical authors that inspired Coleridge, are perhaps sufficient to account for an insight parallel to that of "a repetition in the finite mind". However Lavelle's realisation resulted in a truly original vision: a sweeping dialect that plumbed fresh depths and spelled out in great detail the reflection of eternal Being in finite beings.

Very generally a dialectic can be described as a procedure whereby a theory is built up (or built down) from rudimentary concepts or definitions, closely examined. Plato gives an early example of this. Though for him the term meant a style of argument in which disagreeing parties sort out differences by way of critical discussion, the discussions he related in his dialogues tend to follow the above pattern. Of course logic was always a key element in dialectic, and this trait became especially apparent in the dialectics of the Middle Ages. Novel traits were added by the Germans after Kant, thinkers who typically began with a basic proposition such as "I am", performed an analysis of this, proposed a certain dynamic or formula for development (the progression from thesis to antithesis to synthesis in the case of Hegel) and then gradually constructed a vision of the entire universe and its evolution. Lavelle's metaphysics is a latter-day instance of this style of philosophising.

For him the basic understanding is that of being—obviously related to the intuition "I am". His analysis reveals, as already noted, an inside-outside structure in which priority is given to the internal sphere. However there is also commerce between the two domains

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[42] Whether or not Lavelle himself should be regarded as an idealist depends on how the term is defined. If idealism is understood chiefly in terms of high-mindedness and spirituality, or if it describes a style of philosophy much influenced by recognised idealists, then it is certainly fair to call Lavelle an idealist. But to the extent that idealism is taken to imply an identification of the individual with the absolute he is decidedly *not* an idealist.

[43] F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism (1800)*, trans. By Peter Heath, The University Press of Virginia (1978), p. 25. In fact very many statements by Fichte and Schelling would not seem out of place in Lavelle's texts.

[44] *Ibid.* p. 29.

such that the inner domain acts upon the outer or inferior domain while that in turn feeds back into the primary one. His dynamic or formula for development is therefore a circle running from inside to outside and back again[45]—both at every moment and extending through time so that beings are ultimately garnered back into the Act which gave them birth, though fully matured and individuated by their choices. From this circulation (reminiscent of the cosmic circulation entertained by Heraclitus)[46] is generated the familiar world which serves as a playing-field and feedback device for beings in the process of creating their souls.

Though Lavelle applies the circle motif to almost every philosophic question and almost every level of analysis he sees it as having special application to time. In this he is not unique: ancient thinkers of nearly every culture have represented time as rounding-back to its source in timelessness. What is unique to Lavelle is, firstly, his insistence that even the momentary experience of time exhibits a circular character and, secondly, that the subjective experience of time runs counter to the flow of time as it is objectively conceived.

Objectively the past generates the present which in turn gives rise to the future in an infinite linear progression. But subjectively all modes of time are variations of the present: the past is a present memory, the instant a present perception, the future a present anticipation. Yet these modes too have a certain order— in the *reverse* direction of objective time and in a *closed* or circular fashion rather than an infinitely linear one. Subjectively speaking everything begins as a future possibility which gets actualised as a current reality which then enters into memory as a ground for further possibility. However, given that there is experientially nothing but a continual present, the sense of progress from future to past must occur as a continuous circulation within the present.

Of course the prototype for whatever kind of circulation seems to be the self-caused Act which is its own beginning and end. Lavelle is attracted by this idea but is obliged to concede[47] that it is only a temporal representation of an eternal truth in which beginnings and ends dovetail into a single point.

One final observation. Part of the appropriateness of choosing a circle as the model of a dialectic is that it suggests a dialogue or conversation, the original meaning of a dialectic in early Greek philosophy. For Lavelle, dialogues can take place at all levels of life but most importantly within the individual consciousness. My existence is a constant dialogue between myself as subject and myself as object, myself as agent and myself as effect.[48] In other words my temporal manifestations give valuable feedback with respect to my initiatives. And this exchange informs the course of my entire life.

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[45] An additional (though related) dynamic is presented in "Freedom and the Interval" where contraries are divided into active and passive components, the active member of which has priority over the other and points back to a higher unity that grounds both.

[46] Heraclitus (circa 500 B.C.) was among the first to propose a model of universal circulation. For a "thumbnail" reconstruction of Heraclitus' teaching see my monograph *Philosophic Fire: Unifying the Fragments of Heraclitus*, Holmes Publishing Group (1998).

[47] See "The Self-Caused Act".

[48] Lavelle's understanding of self implies a kind of doubleness. There is on the one hand an active observing and initiating self (the subject or "I") and on the other hand its worldly manifestation (the self as object or "me").

6. Influences

In addition to the German Idealists a number of other influences deserve mention, among them the Eleatic philosopher Parmenides (circa 515 B.C.) whose doctrine opposes the path of "is" (usually interpreted as "being") to that of "is not" (usually interpreted as "appearance"). According to him only the former path has validity: it is the road to the One and Only, in which there are no distinctions. The latter path, recognisable as the everyday round, falls away from or dissimulates the lone Truth by manifesting a multitude of fleeting displays. To subscribe to their testimony of diversity and change is to pursue a path bereft of insight.

Lavelle accords with this vision to the extent that he denies the applicability of "states" to Being and upholds its "univocity" or single meaning. However he stops short of dismissing the apparent world as mere error or irrelevancy. Rather it is for him an event *within* Being which must be accorded a share of truth. Whereas Parmenides (the apostle of unity) is often depicted as being at odds with his contemporary Heraclitus (typically considered the apostle of change) Lavelle like Heidegger regards the two as complementary thinkers.

Descartes (1596-1650) also must be reckoned as a major influence, and on that basis I have provided a translation of Lavelle's "Interpretation of the Proposition "*Cogito Ergo Sum*". As will be seen he endorses Descartes' approach to universal truth with declarations like "I become more interior to the interiority of being in the measure that I become more interior to myself . . ."[49] The statements do not follow Descartes' precise argument but Lavelle believes—with some justification—that he is faithful to the understanding implicit in the "I think therefore I am" proposition. He addresses Descartes' proof of God in a similarly free fashion. Above all he agrees with the drift of Descartes' thinking in that it calls for an internal orientation and asserts a direct link between the "I am" experience and the intuition of God—a link also affirmed by Saint Augustine.

Studies of Lavelle regularly note the importance of Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715) and Maine de Biran (1766-1824): the former a thinker in the tradition of Descartes, the latter an early forerunner of French existentialism. Further information about these philosophers can be found in the page notes to the translations.

Doubtless a short-list of creditors must also include the name Henri Bergson whose "*élan vital*" or life force merits comparison with the "Act of Being", and whose philosophic intuition in some respects parallels the notion of participation. Bergson's opposition to purely mechanistic descriptions of reality is also shared by Lavelle.

Rather than go on in this vein I will make a general point I feel cannot be overly emphasised: Lavelle's thinking grows out of an engagement with virtually the *whole* of philosophy. I was about to write "western philosophy" but quickly recalled his many reflections on eastern thought, particularly Taoism.

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[49] "Interpretation", Section One. See p. 243 of these translations.

An unsympathetic critic, failing to appreciate the depth of his engagements, the single thrust of his probing and the uniqueness of his perspective on topics like time, might argue that Lavelle's philosophy is little more than a patchwork of favourite bits from other philosophers. But it is a question of *which* bits and of how they are modified and brought together in a satisfying whole which gives new voice to perennial wisdom.

A discussion of influences would not be complete without mention of Lavelle's religious background, particularly since the word "God" and the phrase "Holy Spirit" appear in his writings. Given that he received a Catholic education, was versed in the writings of Christian thinkers and wrote a popular book titled *Quatre saints* ("Four Saints") it understandable that he is frequently regarded as a Christian philosopher. Nonetheless Christian readers will be disappointed in their search for direct references to Jesus. In some respects his orientation might be Jewish or Islamic—though probably not Hindu or Buddhist owing to his rejection of quietism and the possibility that individuals might enjoy complete identity with the Absolute. Consequently, despite its Christian references, his doctrine asks to be assessed on its own merits, independently of any particular religious perspective.

Nonetheless it is impossible to mistake the lofty, even devout, character of his writings. This is a man for whom spiritual intimations are more real than bricks. This is a dweller of the heights. If he has a counterpart in western philosophy it is perhaps the Egyptian-born thinker Plotinus (205?-270? A.D.), an innovator in the school of Plato. True, Plotinus advises a more exclusively contemplative approach to life than does Lavelle and conceives of a "One" that surpasses Being but in his determination to draw nearer life's core and to give a systematic account of the internal sphere he has no parallel in the modern world apart from Lavelle.

7. A Brief Glossary of Terms

Enough general information has been supplied to get readers under way. All that might be lacking is a glossary of frequently-used terms. I place it here rather than at the end of the book because it is a helpful guide to what follows and perhaps gives less impression of finality than a rear placement might give. Many of the terms are matters of debate among experts in the field. Consequently the definitions should be taken as indicative rather than precise or exhaustive.

(THE) ABSOLUTE: Complete, pure and unconditioned Being. The essence of Being. The Act. The Act-in-itself. The fundamental Self. God.

(THE) ACT: The heart or essence of Being conceived as a living agent rather than a passive substance or static state of affairs. God's efficacy. The reflection of God's efficacy in human beings.

(THE) ALL: In some contexts this seems to intend the combined realms of Being and appearance, in others the *inward* plenum of Being, the single sphere of intimacy divined at the heart of every individual being. Because it usually suggests a block-like unity rather than a collection of parts, as might be implied by "the Whole", I have in most instances opted for the non-standard but more literal translation "the All" (or "the all"). I am aware of its Neoplatonic and Gnostic overtones and feel they are generally consistent with Lavelle's meaning.

BEING: When capitalised, the inward ground of existence and manifestation. The single field of intimacy generated by the Act. The Absolute. The All. In *Of the Human Soul* it is finally identified with Spirit, which seems to be the definition Lavelle had at the back of his mind from the start. When presented in lower case it signifies human beings and their understanding of Being. In broadest terms "being" is a designation for Being at the level of participation. (See note 27.)

ESSENCE: Core meaning or principle. In *Of the Act* it appears as the individual's guiding inspiration or ideal which needs to be completed by worldly actualisations or deeds. In *Of the Human Soul* it appears as the precise shape an individual gives to an infinite possibility necessarily constrained by worldly limits.

(THE) GIVEN: The world as simply presented or stipulated as being such-and-such ahead of my action upon it. Alternatively whatever is made available to me from within as a possibility, truth or power. The central idea is that whatever is "given" does not originate from me.

(THE) I: Self or ego as signified by the phrase "*le moi*". The sense of a *worldly* initiator or acting subject is implied[50] though Lavelle also speaks of a Universal Self—usually signified by "*le Soi*" but on at least one occasion by "*le Moi*". In every case he takes the I as a subject rather than as an object, i.e. as a "me".

(THE) INTERVAL: A felt, perceived or merely conceived distance between one thing and another. A distinction between this and that, often expressed in terms of a mystery or imponderable gap. In general the term is used as a kind of "black box" for the necessary but unexplained relation between disparate truths or realities such as the One and the Many. Other examples of the interval include the distinctions between subject and object, inside and outside, being and appearance, past and future, the Act and Being, spirit and matter. The issue is made even more mysterious by Lavelle's assertion that the concrete world fills and somehow represents the gap.

Article 1 of "Freedom and the Interval" provides this characterisation: "There is no difference between the theory of the interval and that of participation. We can say [of]

[50] Hence the translation "the I" rather than "the me".

this interval that there is no consciousness that does not keenly feel its reality: this is the interval we think of when we consider consciousness as a lack which desire, will, dream and hope [all] try to fill. It is also this interval which certain modern philosophers designate by [the] terms "fissure" or "crack" so as to mark the presence, [there] at the heart of things, of a kind of ontological flaw, essential to the very existence of the universe. It is this interval again which is [bound up with] so many unsatisfied aspirations and which gives a secret favour to all forms of pessimism, [there] at the interior of each consciousness. Finally, it is this interval which (following from Plato, who vainly tried to deliver the thought of being from the stern chains with which Parmenides had bound it) so many philosophers call for as the non-being necessary for the independence of every particular being: for its development, for its power of invention and creation. It is nonetheless plain that this interval is a lack only for *us*: for it precisely expresses that plenitude of concrete being—always present, always on offer—to which we continually respond with an action fitting to us which alone is capable of rendering [being's] measureless superabundance ours, in accordance with [our] unique perspective on the world."[51]

Article 1 of "The World's Formation" adds: "The world is the interval that separates the pure act from the act of participation. But it is at the same time what fills this interval. It is an intermediary between us and it." [52]

INSCRIPTION: The process whereby an individual being carves out or "inscribes" an indelible meaning or essence within Being through worldly choices and acts. See ESSENCE.

INTIMACY: Knowledge-in-the-subject. Consciousness of self. Consciousness-in-itself as distinct from consciousness-of. Intuition. The felt sense of being. Identity or coincidence with what is known. An inward engagement in life. Depending on context I have sometimes translated the term as "inwardness".

HEARTH: Literally, foyer. More especially the fireplace at the centre of such a gathering place. Connotations of warmth, light and being at home or at ease apply. For Lavelle it is a useful symbol for the heart of being where all particular beings are gathered together before a radiant source.

LIBERTY: In these translations, an individual being with free-choice and the power of self-determination. Lavelle uses the same word in reference to freedom in a general or ideal sense but it is clear from his frequent pluralisation of the term that he distinguishes between the universal ideal and its embodiment in a multitude of free agents. In aid of this distinction I have tried to use the word "freedom" exclusively in relation to the former and the word "liberty" exclusively in relation to the latter. However there are cases where the distinction is unclear or non-existent.

[51] See pp. 135-6 of the translations.
[52] See p. 150 of the translations.

PARTICIPATION: No simple explanation can be given of this key term. Its exact definition tended to elude Lavelle himself. In a sense his entire philosophy is an attempt to clarify it. From a top-down perspective participation refers to the translation of the Act into worldly actors, deeds and realities. From a bottom-up perspective it describes a counter-flow whereby worldly beings may draw upon the seminal Act to shape an essence that is "inscribed" in Being. A kind of intercourse, dialogue or circulation is implied. However not all beings hark back to their source. Full participation requires an act of consciousness that turns back on itself and consents to be fully penetrated by the inward life.

Technically, participation is, like the notion of the interval, a kind of black box for the relation of the One to the Many and vice versa. Practically, most readers will have no difficulty in recognising an act or event in which they, often quite suddenly, partake of the sense of being.

PRESENCE: Intimacy. Immediately felt, intuited or experienced being as distinct from a formal concept. Hence the validity of Lavelle's phrase "the presence of being" (*The Total Presence*) which might otherwise seem a redundancy.

(THE) TOTAL BEING: As I see it this stands in direct contrast to the All (or the all). Whereas the latter refers to a block-like unity, the total being refers to a whole that is a collection of parts. It is therefore the One as conceived from the perspective of the Many. It is Being conceived in terms of entities. It is the sum of participation. The phrase also appears as the title of one of Lavelle's books.

8. The Texts

The texts presented in these translations are drawn from four central books:

La Présence Totale, Aubier, Editions Montaigne, Paris (1934).
De l'Acte, Aubier, Aubier, Editions Montaigne, Paris (1937).
Du temps et de l'éternité, Aubier, Editions Montaigne, Paris (1945).
De l'*âme humaine*, Aubier, Editions Montaigne, Paris (1951).

My original plan was to offer roughly equal portions of each of the four volumes of *The Dialectic of the Eternal Present*, beginning with *Of Being*. In the end I decided to replace *Of Being* with *The Total Presence* which Lavelle describes as "a fresh statement, conceived according to a new plan, of the essential theses contained in our book *Of Being"*. It seemed the better work for a collection designed as an introduction.

I also decided against offering "roughly equal portions" of each volume. There is no question in my mind that *Of the Act* is the author's central study and therefore deserves greater space.

The texts are arranged chronologically but some readers might want to begin with chapters from *Of the Act*. These strike me as being more immediately accessible than the rest.

9. The Translations

The translations in this collection are close rather loose or free. My position is that where few or no translations of a given text exist initial translations should be as scrupulous as possible if only as a basis for whatever interpretive or impressionistic translations in the future.

Departures from the texts have been indicated by square brackets [ ]. Most of these involve simple substitutions of different forms of the original verbs but occasionally complete reconstructions and surmises. The latter often nominate meanings for detached pronouns whose exact referents are conjectural. If an error in translation or interpretation is suspected the problem can most likely be resolved by consulting the original texts at the passage where brackets have been used.

The principal liberties I have taken concern rearrangements of phrases within a sentence and occasional re-punctuations of long or confusing sentences. It is not unusual for the author to compose a meandering sentence that fills half the length of a closely-typed page. In the interest of readability I have sometimes broken sentences into smaller units. I should note however that these liberties are not inconsequential or merely a concession to the fact that English declarations tend to be shorter than French declarations. If my translations were rendered back into French they would generally produce a more clipped and straight-forward Lavelle. From a certain point of view they might be more understandable—but of course they would not be Lavelle, i.e. would not give the exact flavour of his circling about a topic as a means of teasing out its meaning. Even so I am confident that much of the original flavour survives.

Perfect translations do not exist. Especially where difficult texts are concerned there will be errors and misappraisals. Nonetheless I am happy with these results. My view is that for most purposes, including most academic purposes, the translations presented here are reliable.

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