

From THE PRESENT AND THE INSTANT¹

In now addressing the study of time's phases we reach the [heart] of our enterprise. For it is on the form of existence we will attribute to the present in connection with the form[s] of existence we will attribute to the past and the future that will depend the significance of the idea of time and the very justification of the title we have given this work, *The Dialectic of the Eternal Present*. [Additionally] we will have to distinguish the different senses we can give to the words "present" and "instant" which always introduce the greatest confusion to a doctrine of time.

I

AMBIGUITY OF THE RELATION BETWEEN THE PRESENT AND TIME

The present almost always appears to us [as] one of the stages of time, specifically the one we contrast with the future and the past. But we know [very] well that this future will one [day] be present, that this past has once been

¹ Chapter Seven, contained in Book Three ("The Phases of Time"). Succeeding chapters deal with the future and the past but always in relation to the pivotal present.

present and that when we consider them in their own reality [as] future and past they have meaning, it is true, only for our thinking – but for a thinking that is a present thinking. Thus their original character as future and past precisely stems from the relation of present thinking to a present reality which however does not coincide with it and of which we can say that it is eventual or abolished. This preliminary description tends to show us that instead of considering the present as a stage of time it is fitting to ask if time is not a circulation set up among different forms of the present whose proper character is precisely to exclude. [. . .]

We are therefore led to this hypothesis which the rest of this analysis should confirm: there are two senses of the word “present” and we can sometimes consider the present as one of the phases of time – specifically, the one which [provides] the separation and the solder between the past and the future – and sometimes as that vaster present in which time is contained in its turn as a relation among the various aspects it is capable of assuming. Therefore it sometimes seems that the present is in time and sometimes that time is in the present. [. . .]

II

ON THE UNIVERSALITY OF PRESENCE

It is necessary to recognise that the experience of presence is a primitive experience which all particular experiences presuppose and on which [they depend]. It is the very experience we [have] of existence before it has received any determination, and as the foundation of all possible determinations.² This experience never abandons us though its content is extremely variable. In fact it would be a contradiction to imagine an experience of absence, at least of an absolute absence that would not be a presence [in] thought and the counterpart of a current presence negated.³ But all particular varieties of presence are discerned and contrasted to one another within an identical presence.

Someone will then insist that it is impossible to separate presence from its content and that presence is no more than a general idea we draw from the experience of various objects that can become present to our consciousness. But

² Note the author’s supposition that there is a common experience of presence that precedes all distinctions. Such an experience can have no date but must be in some sense constant.

³ One of the central themes in *Of Time and Eternity* is that absence (of which the past and the future are examples) is in fact a kind of presence in that it plays a role in present experience. Someone departed or something missing seems to exist all the more to the degree that an absence is felt in the current situation. Indeed the entire situation can be “negated” in favour of what is not there. Sartre mines the same territory in *Being and Nothingness*.

neither of these arguments is convincing: for even if presence always has a content this ever-varying content does not on that account make presence vary, which in its two-fold form of sensible presence and imagined presence is indifferent to all content, i.e. could be the presence of an altogether different content than this one. Consequently presence is not a general idea; and it is so little [such] that it imparts to every object of thought the character by which it becomes a particular existence. *It is therefore a grave error to think that presence begins and ends at the moment each object enters into or departs from it:* [we might say] that all objects are confronted, one after the other, with the same presence. It neither begins nor ends though the most diverse objects come to fill it so to speak.⁴

But this thesis, while it agrees with our most constant experience, nonetheless requires [justification]. At the source of presence is the consciousness we have of our own being in so far as it is party to the whole of Being. *Indeed all presence is a mutual presence which is at once the presence of the I to being and the presence of being to the I.* Not however that this rapport is [exactly reversible]⁵: for the I's presence to being [expresses] the objectivity of the I [while] being's presence to the I expresses the subjectivity of being. Above all we cannot wrench ourselves from the presence of ourselves even though the states that manifest it can be very different from each other; but we know they are ours by recognising the identical presence of the I within them. And we gain nothing by saying that the I can be carried along in the same [flux] as its states: for it is impossible for it not to separate from a content that diversifies the very act that posits this diversification. Now, it is this act which [constitutes] the I's presence to itself and confers a transitory presence on its successive states. However the presence of the I to itself cannot be [self-sufficient] for the act that posits it is an act of participation; and such an act grants presence to all the states to which it is applied only because it borrows [presence] from that unconditioned act that is the fundament of the total presence, of which we only ever have a divided and spread-out experience. *But this division, this spreading-out of presence, is time* which, measuring the interval between the pure act and the act through which the I is posited, fills it with a given presence that must be a variable presence, lacking which participation would be a fact and not an operation.

The experience of presence is therefore nothing more than the living testimony of participation itself; for that [reason] we recognise in the one all the aspects of the other: firstly, our own presence to ourselves, which is [the presence] of the act by which our own participation in being is realised; next, the presence of Being itself, [into whose depths participation takes us], which is the presence of the Act in which we participate; finally, the presence of a given which separates and joins [these two] and in which we can distinguish two

⁴ So far this section is a straight-forward recapitulation of "The Discovery of Being".

⁵ Literally, reciprocal.

aspects: an aspect where [the given] appears to go beyond the subject (we say then that it is an object) and an aspect where it is put into rapport with [the subject] (we say then that it is a representation).⁶ Multiplicity, the infinite renewal of givens, is needed so that the pure act and the act of participation do not form the same block, i.e. that participation itself occasions: the latter is an effect of the initiative of each individual I, and for that [reason is] always unfinished and ever thrown into question. Whence the presence of the given is a precarious presence, always [subject to being] rejected or effaced. However it is always present, sometimes within the pure act as a possibility that depends on us – with the collaboration of the world-order – to bring to fruition or to actualise, sometimes within the I itself as an acquired power we carry inside us and can put into play through our lone resources so as to relive a state that no longer belongs only to us.

Such is the distinction we make between the future and the past, to both of which the word “absence” is fitting if we contrast them with the presence of the perceived object but which must also be considered as particular forms of presence, and that in two different ways since, on the one hand, where possibilities are concerned, the future and the past are present either in the absolute being or in the I’s being without needing to be actualised, and since, on the other hand, we cannot imagine actualising them, either in the world as object[s] or in consciousness as memor[ies], without giving them a fresh presence which cannot be detached from the operation that actualises them and thanks to which the very weft of our inner experience [is formed].

Though the given expresses the I’s passivity with respect to the totality of being the I is not content to submit to it at each instant, as if [the I] were without relation to it before it appeared and after it disappeared. There is between the act of participation and the pure act a profound and intimate kinship without which participation itself would be impossible: *and the distance separating them is that of the infinite and the indefinite, which is [admittedly] an infinite distance*. Consequently we can say that the act of participation, at the very moment the given limits it, already exceeds the latter in every way: it claims in advance a kind of privilege over the given it has not yet actualised, i.e. over the whole future; and from that given which deserts it, it is not entirely separated since it thereafter becomes its master and possessor by way of the very act that actualised it. Thus we see how the I goes beyond the given presence through a presence in [the form of an] idea which might be that of a future that will be turned into [a] perceived presence or

⁶ The preceding characterisation of the experience of presence should be compared with that given in Part VI of “The Discovery of Being” (pp. 12-14). There the presence of being comes first, self’s presence to being comes second and interiority to being comes last. Here presence to self comes first, presence to Being comes second and the presence of the given takes the place of interiority to being (which seems to be included in the second phase of the current schema). The evolution of Lavelle’s thought appears very much linked to his changing conception of the experience of presence. As I see it that change is always in the direction of presence to self as an initial condition. See Translator’s Introduction.

that of a past that will be turned into [a] remembered presence. Therefore whether it is a question of a possible or potential presence, either within us or within the whole of being, or of a realised presence, sometimes as an object, sometimes as a memory, we can say that each of them becomes an absence only in its relation to another presence, that this presence and that absence are converted into one another and that the order of time derives from this conversion. *Which means that the order of time is incapable of making us depart the total presence but creates among the modes of presence a succession that is the condition of the possibility of participation itself.* This act of participation is the vehicle of presence: for it can be absent neither to itself nor to the being in which it participates; moreover, though it never has the same content, it does not permit us to think of anything, even as absent, other than by giving it a particular form of presence.

VI

DISTINCTION [BETWEEN] THE PRESENT AND THE INSTANT

It seems that the totality of Being is spread out so to speak in the present; in the present we can distinguish all the modalities of Being from each other, allocate each of them a particular form of presence and show the rapport that unites them. Also presence interests us mainly for its content. It seems to concern the extent of being rather than its comprehension. Our entire life [could be said to be] a kind of circulation [within] the present. And we need [to make] some effort not to restrict presence to the given presence, i.e. to sensible presence, and to recognise that no other presence [is] possible than that which is the effect of an act of presence.

The notion of the instant has a purer character.⁷ But while presence appears to nullify time and while it is difficult but necessary to represent time as a rapport among different kinds of presence, the instant appears by contrast profoundly engaged in time. Must we say that *it is the indivisible element [of time], or the generating seed?* Indeed the two conceptions do not have the same meaning at all. For we can consider the instant as a constitutive element of time only by comparison with the point considered as the constitutive element of space. It is then like a point on a directed line such that we move along it in only one direction. Only, we know all the difficulties [met by] the thesis that would make of space a summation of points: they are the same ones that forbid us making of time a summation of instants. For we can constitute space [and] time with points and instants only on the condition of allowing an interval to remain between

⁷ As will be seen, the instant has the same relation to the present as the Act has to Being.

them, i.e. [itself] entirely [composed of] space and time. Which clearly shows that the point and the instant solely define situations at the interior of space and time but [do not enable us] to consider them as helping constitute the very essence of space and time. It is nonetheless fitting to remark that there is no difficulty in imagining a position at the interior of space that is the locus of all simultaneous positions⁸ whereas there is properly no position in time unless we liken it to space and consider it spread along a line.

Consequently we can ask whether we must not instead consider the instant as time's generating seed. Only, the connection we instinctively set up between time and space immediately leads us to ask ourselves whether we should not [likewise] consider the point as the generating seed of space. Then the point would engender space thanks to infinite movement (as the point that fills all of which Pascal speaks) and the instant would [similarly] engender time thanks to infinite change (of which movement itself would be a particular instance). But the comparison between space and time singularly distorts the inalienable originality of each of the two terms⁹: for the engendering of space from a point on the one hand supposes time and on the other hand evokes multi-dimensionality, which from the start already [contains] spatial simultaneity in a virtual manner; finally the point that engenders space engenders other points only by abandoning the position it occupies in order to occupy another, thereby constituting the next and the next points, so that we would have to do with a temporal rather than a spatial generation. This ostensible generation of space from a point is, when we stick to nearest ideas, nothing more than the possibility of taking whatever point as the centre of space and of envisaging the totality of space from a perspective commanded by this point. Yet this critique suffices to [show] us how one can say that time is engendered by the instant. One imagines in effect that it is engendered by the instant as a line [is engendered] by a [moving] point, which [image] has the advantage of maintaining the single dimensionality of the course. And the final difficulty we have drawn attention to, where space is concerned, does not seem to exist here because the same instant is carried along the line [in creating] time and there is no need for it, as [there is for] the point in the genesis of space, to remain behind in the measure that it advances in order not to destroy spatial simultaneity. For we know precisely that the past has no existence. Thus the argument that ruined the thesis of generation from a point, when we sought to apply it to space, fails there only because [that] thesis is suited uniquely to the relation between time and the instant since the

⁸ This together with many remarks to follow argues according to a geometry that might be regarded as fanciful by many people. Whether or not all the observations have mathematical merit they gradually unfold Lavelle's conception of the instant in a singularly graphic fashion.

⁹ Some readers might see this as a good reason for dispensing with the entire comparison of time with space. But the point is that time is usually represented in crudely spatial terms whose deficiencies with respect to time need to be spelled out for the author's idea of the instant to come clear.

instant always give birth to a new existence on the condition of constantly abolishing the preceding [instant].

But the argument's success where time is concerned [makes us wary]. For if the same instant thus progresses [through] time we can distinguish within time a plurality of instants in no other way than by implicitly introducing the schema of space once again. There are no longer any instants in the past and there are none again in the future, unless we wish to spread out the totality of time in a single stroke as a kind of spatialised present and to distinguish instants there as we distinguish points in space. In reality this instant that we think progresses is an instant that is ever the same, an instant that is not only ever-present, [as] a gathered-together [rather than a] spread-out presence, but again *that is the heart of all presences*, whose apparent mobility demands [an explanation]. For in merely asserting that it is mobile we once more assume an immobile milieu in which it moves; and this milieu would precisely be composed of juxtaposed events over which the instant would appear to shift¹⁰ in order to impart existence to each of them in turn. Yet we know very well that things are not produced in this way. But then here again we must, like Copernicus, reverse the direction of movements, i.e. we [must] consider the instant itself as immobile and as a site of insertion at the interior of which in some fashion come to unfold various events. Only in this way will we succeed in justifying our conception of time which makes of the past and the future absolutely heterogeneous terms with respect to the present of perception, but which [can] only be evoked as past or future by an original act of spirit, i.e. by memory which revives the one or by foresight which anticipates the other: yet such an act is always produced in the instant whose content is no longer that of perception but is referred to it and obliges us to imagine time in order to situate it either before or after in accordance with whether it is a possible experience or a realised experience.¹¹

Consequently we see how the problem of the connections between the instant and the present is posed. For by calling upon both reflection and experience it is not difficult to [see] that our entire life develops in a presence it has never departed and will never depart. And if it did depart, where would it go? Space itself is only a kind of image of this presence. We can say that *it is the sensible presence, as presence itself is a spiritual space*. [This] moreover is not a mere simile. For participation compels us to consider the sensible as a kind of coincidence that is produced between our I and the totality of the real, but in a passive manner so to speak, [owing to] our limits. This sensible presence – coextensive with the totality of the universe, at least in principle – is space. But it does not exhaust the whole of presence, and we need to distinguish between different forms of presence precisely because we are not simply passive with

¹⁰ Perhaps in the manner of a beam of light moving across a stationary surface.

¹¹ In other words the instant is not a point that moves along a line. It is like a stationary fountain whose spray evokes images of past, present and future. But in essence there is only the immediate fount whose character never changes.

respect to the whole of the real but also participate in that activity through which being eternally creates itself. Our relation with being always implies an indication of presence: passive presence when we are bound to submit to it, presence in some sense intentional when it is up to us to produce it, realised or possessed presence when it has become a presence to us within being itself.

Now we can say that the peculiarity of the instant [is] not to be an element of time but time's generator, at least in the measure that it is the site of [the] conjugation [of] and [the] transition between different forms of presence. In this regard meditation on the instant seems much more evocative than that on presence, which always [prompts] either a comparison with space or a kind of nullification of the difference between presence and absence as soon as we forget that absence is itself a *particular* form of presence. By contrast the instant frees us from all comparisons of this sort. Consideration of the instant should permit us to liberate the veritable essence of time, to show how the union of activity and passivity is effected in time itself and to determine the connections between time and eternity as soon as we reflect upon the unity and plurality of instants.¹²

VII

THE INSTANT, WHERE EVERYTHING PASSES [BUT] WHICH [ITSELF] DOES NOT PASS

If one gives up the idea of making the instant a constitutive element of time, or at least if time is engendered in the singleness of the instant without itself being a succession of instants then one must insist on [the instant's] perfect purity, i.e. consider it as being rigorously without dimension. One makes of it therefore a simple cut between the future and the past. But one immediately adds that this cut cannot have any existence, precisely because one considers all existence as being a temporal existence.¹³ Such a prejudice leads us, in conceiving of the instant, to consider it as in some fashion encroaching upon both the immediate past and the imminent future. Which psychology confirms in a certain manner, if it is true that we can identify the instant with the shortest [span of] time, with the minimum threshold below which it is impossible to perceive any difference in time. But we will assert that this instant of the

¹² An interesting consequence of this conception of time is that there need never have been an actual past to which memory refers since everything is totally given in the present: only the present is real. By contrast science conceives of space and time as a single block where times and places are distinguished purely by varying coordinates. Not surprisingly scientists find it difficult to assign any clear meaning to the present since there are no privileged points in space-time: effectively the present has no real existence.

¹³ The neuter construction (here translated by the word "one") indicates a line of argument with which the author takes issue.

psychologist is not an atom of time and that, from the moment time's measurement began, the increasing perfection of instruments and perhaps of consciousness itself [has distinguished smaller and smaller] parts within this instant which we think cannot be divided, and in principle as small as we [might] like. Only, we can easily [see] that this is to treat time as an object and that the peculiarity of objects is to express a certain rapport between being, [in its guise as the] given, and the conditions and limits of our faculty of apprehension. Yet, as with the apprehension of space so with the apprehension of time: it calls for more or less delicacy and a sensible minimum [with respect to which there is uncertainty about whether] the refinement of organs combined with the advance of experimental technique cannot indefinitely put off [the determination of that minimum].

But that changes nothing about the peculiar nature of the instant, which is always a limit between before and after, and which is not what has the smallest possible content but what has no content [whatever] because it is the pure site of transition between what is not yet and what is no longer. Consequently one can indeed try to objectivise the instant [as] the shortest [unit of] time [but] this objectification is always artificial and chimerical because the instant is a pure transition, a simple site of passage between what we relegate to the past and what we relegate to the future. Little matter therefore whether change is produced slowly or quickly. Little matter whether the worldly spectacle or our internal state can go on without apparent change. There is no given instant. It is absurd to ask whether it can be longer or shorter according to the perspective from which we consider it (e.g. that of dream consciousness or that of a very precise chronograph). The instant is introduced solely by an act of the mind¹⁴ which makes a content-free cut in becoming and apportions opposing aspects of becoming here and there. When the mind is [not very] attentive awareness of the instant is dissipated because the future and the past seem to fuse. By contrast the mind collects itself in the awareness of the instant: it casts outside itself every particular object, which [then] immediately enters into becoming. [The instant] is, we might say, a site of passage that does not pass but where everything passes. In order to be able to seize whatever event in the instant, however sudden we might imagine it, it would be necessary to dilate the instant, to introduce into it an interval, i.e. already time [itself].

It would be therefore more fitting to [construe] the instant as a kind of centre of perspective on time, just as the point is a centre of perspective on space. Only, in space we can situate an infinite plurality of points which exist all at once. By contrast the instant always has a unique existence. And we should not say that it is endlessly born and perishing. For that is true of all that traverses it

¹⁴ Or spirit. In other words the instant has an extra-worldly source and meaning. Far from being a mere cut in time it is the source of the present, the entrance to being, the site of engagement in the act and the point where collectedness dawns.

but not of the instant itself. [The instant] is that through which everything begins and ends but which itself can neither begin nor end. Moreover it is not rightly within time, and because it is not within time it is without content. *It is a point of imminence and a point of flight.* It must be foreign to time in order to link together moments of time.

The instant is moreover the meeting-point of time and eternity. Owing to its point of attachment with eternity it is unitary¹⁵: for no form of existence merits this designation except at the moment it so to speak comes to confront it. But if one looks only from the side of those temporal forms of existence among which it effects a pure transition then one can distinguish as many instants as there are points of demarcation in becoming, and these points multiply in the measure that consciousness is refined. Yet to say that the instant is never the same would be to say of a causeway that it is never the same because the same water never flows there.¹⁶ We know [very] well however all the difficulty we experience in speaking of the past instant and the future instant. For everything that is in the future forms a kind of simultaneity of the possible which our will or the rapport of events echelons so that [the future] can be dated according to an order [of succession]. Similarly everything that falls into the past forms a kind of simultaneity of the realised which we analyse so as to evoke time-past according to the need or interest of the moment. One or the other can fill a place in the instant as desire or memory, i.e. as states involved in the indefinite becoming of our psychological existence. For the phenomenon, the object or the state has existence only in the instant, where it arises only to disappear. But the instant which seems to be the site of passage from one phenomenon to the next is rather the site of passage from the possible to the realised. Yet in order to allow this passage there must be nothing in it that impedes, i.e. it is without content. All things stir within the instant but for that [to be the case] the instant itself must never budge. In relation to it [an order is given to] becoming, i.e. what has not yet or what has already traversed it, which – while [relative] only [to] eternity as [something] possible or as [something] realised – engenders our temporal existence through the conversion of the one into the other, which the instant indefinitely repeats.¹⁷ The instant permits us to dissociate and to link them. Hence it is the site of participation. *Consequently we should not be surprised that there is nothing in the instant and that the instant itself is nothing but that there is nothing apart from what is in the instant.* In the instant is exerted not only the very act through which all phenomena [constantly come to] pass, consequently to be born and to perish, but the act that [at once] imparts to phenomena a fleeting existence and to the I an existence that is its own work and that finds in

¹⁵ Literally, one.

¹⁶ Doubtless a reference to Heraclitus: “They step into the same river but different, and still different, waters flow there.”

¹⁷ The difficult sentence has been extensively reconstructed in translation.

phenomenal existence both an instrument that effects [this work] and a means that expresses it.

IX

[THE LIBERATING INSTANT]¹⁸

The instant effects our independence [from] the material world: for within the instant the material world does nothing but pass. It is therefore impossible to grasp or fix [the world, or] even to attribute it a true existence, which [neatly] explains this word “phenomenon” that we employ to designate both appearance and change, as if the two terms necessarily had the same sense. The word “phenomenon” means that which has no interiority but has existence solely for the consciousness to which it appears, and the word “change” shows the impossibility of a phenomenon being anything more than a phenomenon, precisely because its very essence is to be transitory. For if we supposed that a phenomenon or an object could cleave to our consciousness for a time-span as short as we like, consciousness and this object would be identical, at least for that time. Matter would subjugate us. But consciousness remains and the object passes: which emancipates consciousness from servitude to the object, allowing [consciousness]—as it drives [the object] back outside itself in saying that it is external to it—to eject it a second time [in] the representation it makes of it, since this representation always escapes it. Thus the instant must ever be the same and things within the instant must ever be different [from it] so that the spirit can never be confused with them and so that that their contact nonetheless constantly enriches it.¹⁹

But if the instant frees our spirit and allows it not to remain subjugated to any form of the real and never to be confused with it, that is because it supposes an act that, [considered] in relation to the states that limit it, will appear to us as indefinitely self-renewing, so that time will then be for us a succession of instants

¹⁸ Literally, “THE INSTANT WHICH LIBERATES US”.

¹⁹ Author’s note.—“If however the I has a natural tendency to confuse itself with the body it is because the body is always present in the instant and because, as it is ours and linked to the I through the feeling of appurtenance, we are less sensitive to its state-changes than to the impossibility for the I to shirk [responsibility for] its action. But when we consider our body at a rather distant moment in our life, e.g. the body we had when we were infants, then we know [very] well that it is for us no more than a memory; but it is the same with our body of yesterday, though the distinction [from] our body of today is more difficult to realise.”

without [our being able] to see either whence this series proceeds or [its connecting thread]. This sequence of instants will be comparable to the juxtaposition of points in space and will be distinguishable from it only by the necessity of always travelling in the same direction. Still, this direction itself is intelligible only through the act that determines it and produces, we might say, the order of all accomplishments: but this order begins only from the moment that the act, by virtue of its limitation, is associated with a state that always lies beyond it. [. . .]

If we are attentive within the instant solely to the act that seems to be continually resurrected, while the object does no more than pass, it is because this act produces time, far from being inserted into it. Within the same non-temporal instant is constantly effected the conversion of one form of particular existence into another. [The instant] does not escape being since nothing enters into being except through it, even the fleetingness of appearance. The instant constantly gives us access to eternity. But within it we can either regain this act – perfectly one and infinitely fecund – which founds both our presence to ourselves and the perpetually-new flux of phenomena or on the contrary forget it and allow ourselves to be carried away by that flux within which the instant [seems to be] divided and multiplied.²⁰ However the illusion [that has always been] denounced in the traditional conception of becoming is here met again – if it is true that becoming does not reside in the mere passage of one phenomenon to another, which would effectively require it to be spread along the time-line, but in the passage from a possibility to its accomplishment by means of an instant that remains always the same and is capable of joining them simply because it is indifferent to their content. Here, the instant can no longer be distinguished from the act of participation. *Its actuality*²¹ *resides precisely in the impossibility of [our] detaching it from the pure act and its omnipresent eternity.* But precisely because it is an act of participation it always evokes some particular given that answers to it, with which it refuses to be identified because [the given] is incapable of sufficing it. Thus it ever instigates some new appearance, in such a fashion that, residing [as it does] at the transition-point between one [appearance] and another, it constantly engenders time, without however [being able] to introduce itself into time. From this [arises] that ambiguity which appears in the nature of the instant: depending on whether we contemplate the act within it that makes it be or the appearance that traverses it we regard it as non-temporal or as evanescent. It founds becoming within eternity by requiring the I – in order to create itself – to seek within being a possibility it succeeds in

²⁰ From the above it would seem that the ultimate “secret of participation” is to cleave to the instant, the heart of the present, the quick of the moment. That conclusion is reinforced by the comments below.

²¹ The author appears to use the word “*actualité*” in much the same sense as the English word “actuality”, even though the two are not exact cognates. I take it that what is meant is the instant’s immediacy and poignancy, its *living* quality, or more exactly still, its *active* character.

making its own only by testing it in contact with a given that actualises it, and immediately escapes it.

It is now permissible to [draw conclusions] about the connections [between] the present and the instant, and [between these two and] time.²² We can say of the present that it contains time [rather than the reverse]. Time is a certain relation among different types of presence. The instant is that in which time, i.e. the different forms of presence, constantly passes. Thus neither the present nor the instant belongs to time, *one is so to speak the milieu in which it unfolds [and] the other is the act that unfolds it.*²³ It seems that the present immerses us in being and that the instant shrinks [this] into the operation that produces it. Time makes us depart from the instant: it does not cease to be born and to die; phenomena appear and disappear in an evanescent present [situated] between the present of possibility and the present of memory, of which the first is the effect of that analysis of being through which the I is constituted and the other the result of the analysis of the I itself, once it is constituted. The distinction between the past and the future measures the interval needed by the I to incarnate a being of its own within the total being. In eternity there is no opposition between past and future. To live is to overcome this opposition and to convert future into past, i.e. not [convert], as one might think, what is not yet into what is no longer, nor a living activity into an immobile representation, but an uncertain and incomplete power into a power I possess and dispose. Needed for that is the collaboration of the given through which this power is manifested and finds, across from the efficacy that belongs to it, a contribution that comes to it from outside and actualises it within the whole of the real. The instant admirably explains how the world continually passes while the act that makes it be, without itself being engaged in time, always calls for new existences in time. The instant constantly creates phenomenal existence and brings it to nothing. And since it is a meeting-point of the future and the past, whose separation is the condition not only of all finite existence but of the very action that produces it, we can say that it allows us to penetrate the eternity of being, which is nearer to instantaneity than to becoming, and even duration. The instant of man is only a shadow but it is also a participation in the instant of God.²⁴

²² Owing to the pivotal roles of the present and the instant in his philosophy what follows effectively gives the author's entire vision of time in capsule form.

²³ In other words the present corresponds with being and the instant corresponds with the act.

²⁴ The instant appears as a strange kind of aperture. It simultaneously opens onto the world of time and gives inward access to eternity and the act that makes one *be*. Returning to the instant is therefore truly "the secret of participation." *De l'Intimité spirituelle* (Editions Montaigne, 1955, p. 145) states that the instant "is our presence to ourselves; in it is realised the act that makes us be." Elsewhere, e.g. in *Le Moi et son Destin* (Editions Montaigne, 1936, p.186), it is clear that the instant is identical with the act of attention. In citing these texts Christiane d'Ainval concludes that the instant, attention and presence belong together in

Lavelle's thinking (*La Philosophie de Louis Lavelle: Une doctrine de la Présence Spirituelle*, Louvain, Paris, 1967, p. 128.)

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