

From

Of the Human Soul

Translator's Foreword

Owing to its author's death in 1951, *Of the Human Soul* (published in the same year) is perforce the final volume of *The Dialectic of the Eternal Present*. A further instalment was envisaged—a study on the theme of wisdom—but never completed.

Given that Lavelle appears not to have credited the existence of any other soul than a human one the terms of his title might seem unnecessarily redundant. However the word “human” can be taken emphatically as underlining the soul's uniquely human character.

In broad terms the book's thesis follows the structure of time detailed in *Of Time and Eternity*, where time's progress “in the order of existence” runs from a future possibility to a current reality to a memory of the past. In *Of the Human Soul* this progress turns out to be the soul's history as well. That is, soul begins as a future possibility which I can choose to actualise or to ignore. To the degree that I choose it, and live by it, the soul's possibility becomes embodied in real life situations. It takes on flesh and blood so to speak and with nurture can grow into to a worldly vocation. And though the present is constantly replaced by a newer present all the events of my life pass into memory where they are not only gathered together and preserved but gradually distilled, reduced to an imageless *essence* that is the being I have forged during my earthly sojourn. At death this soul-essence passes into eternity.

The same pattern of existence-begetting-essence appeared in *Of the Act* but there special emphasis was placed on the ideal of oneself proposed by God—i.e. precisely what is missing in Sartre's borrowed version of “essence precedes existence”. But here in *Of the Human Soul* emphasis is decidedly placed on freedom and the individual's ability to

create a life-essence, much as an artist creates a work of art. Even so the sense of a guiding inspiration remains in evidence.

“The [Soul-Problem]” is in fact the book’s introduction, and as such essentially gives an overview of what is to come. Even so it can stand alone and offer substantial matter for thought. Of particular interest are the discussion of immanence in relation to transcendence (a topic also addressed by “Transcendence” in *Of the Act*) and a unique interpretation of the unconscious where this appears in two opposing guises: the lower misty regions of our origins in nature and the higher misty regions of our origins in spirit. With respect to the latter the author makes it clear that nothing of an individual character pertains and that there is indeed a single spirit for all beings.

“Consciousness, or an Intimacy Rightly Universal” presents Lavelle’s late-life reflections on the nature of knowledge and the knowing act. Given the pivotal role of consciousness in Lavelle’s philosophy the chapter must be counted as a “key reading” whatever its many tensions. Though it advances strong arguments in favour of a distinction between consciousness proper and consciousness-of, it also wants to unite these two in a total view—a formidable goal which necessarily evokes the age-old question of the relation between subject and object. Lavelle’s answer, which involves transferring the subject-object distinction to the heart of the knowing subject, specifically in the form of a mingled activity and passivity, is bold but problematic in its own right, as my page-notes indicate. Further comments on this chapter can be found in section four of the Translator’s Introduction (“Problems in Representing Consciousness and Being”).

“Interpretation of the Proposition ‘*Cogito Ergo Sum*’” targets the thinking of René Descartes. It pays homage to this important benefactor of the French Tradition, provides a distinctive slant on the classic formula “I think therefore I am” and argues for a notion of soul based on possibility. It is without question a “specialist” chapter. No concessions are made to readers unfamiliar with Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations*, or for that matter with the history of philosophy where “proofs” of God’s existence are concerned. At the same time the “Interpretation” occasions conceptual difficulties above and beyond those related to historical reference. Consequently my page-notes are even more numerous than in previous chapters.

“The Mnemonic Power” gives an example of how Lavelle treats the various “powers of the soul”, underlines the importance of memory in his later philosophy, further clarifies the transmutation of temporal experience into eternal essence, and perhaps above all explores the idea of a non-representational form of memory, i.e. *noetic memory*. I feel this notion has merit whether or not it is considered in the context of Lavelle’s philosophy. Unless it is assumed that a person has immediate access to the sweep of his or her previous life—not in explicit detail but in capsule form so to speak, as an intuited whole—it is difficult or impossible to explain the ongoing sense of self in the face of constantly changing appearances.

Of the Human Soul shows the author grappling with the logical consequences of his previous writings, attempting to give the ideas further clarity and to meld them into a more consistent whole. Almost certainly he is responding to criticisms levelled at him over many years. It is generally a more rigorous work than the preceding volumes but in many ways prompts more questions than it answers. Philosophically speaking that is perhaps no fault.