The Act of Presence

Key Readings from the Philosophy of Louis Lavelle

translations, introduction, forewords and page-notes

by Robert Jones

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 as 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 science[2] 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 attention.

An inward focus was also advised by Bergson, most notably in the form of his "philosophical intuition". However inwardness yielded different revelations to the two men: for Lavelle, the truth of being; for Bergson, the truth of becoming. Granted, Lavelle

[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. At the same time 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 approach to knowledge. See his *An Introduction to Metaphysics*.

conceived of being in a *dynamic* sense, i.e. as an act rather than a substance, as a permanent 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-novel future.

For all that there is an affinity between the two thinkers: they share a robust outlook, a faith in life and a certain idealism, at least in the popular sense of that word. No such affinity exists between Lavelle and Sartre, though they too have a number of common 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, i.e. "existence precedes essence", was explored by Lavelle before him.[3] However Lavelle also recognised a sense in which essence might foreshadow existence, namely in the form of an inward possibility commissioned by being, a special vocation each person is outfitted and challenged to fulfil—but may choose to ignore.[4] 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 disposition 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[5] 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: a mere spectacle or appearance, unless engaged by a consciousness that lends density and meaning 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 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[6] (save the short *Introduction to Ontology*[7]) never appeared in English-translation. Whereas virtually every

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[3] See for instance "Freedom and the Interval", p.137 of the translations: "we need to posit our existence [before we can] discover our essence . . ."

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

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

[6] As distinct from his "moralist" writings, at least 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). See note 17 with respect to a possible third.

[7] *Introduction à l'ontologie* , Presses Universtaires de France, Paris (1947). Translated into English by Wesley Piersol Murphy, New York, Carlton Press, 1966. Excellent as the *Introduction* is, its compressed

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 readers of English 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 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".[8] Nonetheless Lavelle's insights often parallel those of Heidegger and regularly break fresh ground. They culminate in a unique metaphysics that sets forth 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 Lavelle advises an active path to realisation that is a clear alternative to the "waiting upon being" advised by Heidegger, e.g. 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".

1. Biographical Data

To my knowledge little has been written about Lavelle's life; at least nothing like 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* [9] ("Louis Lavelle and the Renewal of the Metaphysics of Being in the Twentieth Century") which must be counted as one of the principal studies of this philosopher.

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style makes it a better summary for those who are already familiar with Lavelle's ideas than an introduction for those who are not.

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

[9] Jean École, *Louis Lavelle et le renouveau de la métaphysique de l' être au XXe siècle*, untranslated, published by Georg Olms Verlag, Hildesheim, Zurich and New York (1997). The biographical material in question is given on pp.17-21.

Lavelle was born the son of a primary school teacher on the 15th of July 1883 in Saint Martin de Villeréal, a 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 immediate and inspiring 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.

There 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[10] and in his first major thesis *La dialectique du monde sensible*[11] ("The Dialectic of the Sensible World"). Following his return to civilian life in March of 1919 he was appointed to a school in Strasburg[12] where he produced his second major thesis *La perception visuelle de la profondeur*[13] ("The Visual Perception of Depth") which, together with the first, was accepted as a doctoral dissertation by the Sorbonne in 1922.[14]

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 one of

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[10] *Carnets de guerre 1915-1918* ("War Notebooks 1915-1918"), Les editions du Beffroi, Québec (1985). Untranslated.

[11] Lavelle, *La dialectique du monde sensible* , Publications de la Facultè des Lettres, Fascicle 4, Strasbourge (1921). Untranslated. École reports that this was first titled *La dialectic de la matière sensible* ("The Dialectic of Sensible Matter").

[12] Lyceé Saint Louis de Paris.

[13] Lavelle, *La perception visuelle de la profondeur* , Publications de la Facultè des Lettres, Fascicle 5, Strasbourg (1921). Untranslated. 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").

[14] In a more recent study (2001) École gives this date as 1921.

the main targets 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*[15] ("Times"). Though essentially reviews of current philosophical publications they touched on age-old questions and gave Lavelle an opportunity to air 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 big city with little more than some promising credentials! But in the same decade he also managed to write three important books: *De l' Etre*[16] ("Of Being") in 1928; *La conscience de soi*[17] ("Consciousness of Self") in 1933 and *La présence totale*[18] ("The Total Presence") 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 oversaw 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 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 the best effort to date and, in the opinion of many, 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

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[15] Between 1932 and 1940 he wrote 116 such articles.

[16] Lavelle, *De l' Etre*, Bibliothèque de philosophie contemporaine, Alcan (1928 and 1932). Third edition Aubier, Philosophie de l'esprit (1947).The first volume of his *Dialectic of the Eternal Present*. Untranslated.

[17] Lavelle, *La conscience de soi*, Grasset, Paris (1946). The first and in my estimate best of his "moralist" writings. I have seen reference to a translation but have been unable to verify its existence. In any case I do not find a translation in print.

[18] Lavelle, *La présence totale*, Aubier, Philosophie de l'esprit, Paris (1934). The first and last parts of which are translated in this selection of readings. The book is largely a simplification and recasting of points made in *Of Being*. It received the Charles Levêque prize for literature in 1934.

foundation for his subsequent reflections. But its value extends beyond thoroughness and cohesion. Though it does proceed in a careful 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*[19] ("Speech and Writing"). Thereafter a steady stream of philosophical articles and books, including the last two volumes of his *Dialectic*[20], 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 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

[19] Lavelle, *La parole et l'écriture* , Untranslated.
[20] *Du temps et de l'éternité* ("Of Time and Eternity"), Aubier, Editions Montaigne, Paris (1945) and *De l'âme humaine* ("Of the Human Soul"), Aubier, Editions Montaigne, Paris (1951). A fifth volume *De la sagesse* ("Of Wisdom") was intended but never achieved.
[21] A short biographical note at the end of the posthumously 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.
[22] *De l'Etre* ("Of Being").

introduction. Unlike Heidegger who fears the sense of being 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 must be approached inwardly through the simple self-evidence of being-here 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".

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

[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 or direct self-evidence of being. Lavelle often links presence with intuition.
[24] "The Discovery of Being", pp. 5-6 of the present volume.

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 self-same 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, 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

[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.

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 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 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

[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 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.

cosmic backdrop. 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 Being to a central principle, i.e. a kind of dynamo that generates the entire "field" of what-is. And the residuum of that refinement was an *act*: namely "the Act of Being" which is the subject of 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 as 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 what-is and thereby divine the every-minute miracle which holds it in being, 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 gives birth to itself—quite magically and without mechanism—in the mode of a self-known, self-producing 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 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

[29] *Of the Act*.
[30] It appears that only God and human beings count as true beings in Lavelle's philosophy.
[31] *Biographia Litteraria*, Chapt. XIII.

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 (the two are ultimately indistinct for Lavelle) 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 of being. Impressive doctrines have been built on that cornerstone, including the one constructed by Lavelle. Yet only a few thinkers have tried to penetrate and assay the make-up of the stone itself. Lavelle devoted considerable attention to its internal character. Owing to this 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 and being than the one he himself paints over the course of his career. For his exact late-life stance readers should refer to the chapter "Consciousness, or an Intimacy Rightly Universal" which is included in these translations.

The prejudice in question involves the subject-object relationship. It is generally agreed that every genuine experience 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 I 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 Lavelle sometimes refers to as the "hearth" or "home" of consciousness, 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

[32] From Coleridge's *Dejection: An Ode*.

[33] The word "simpler" here does not necessarily mean "easy to understand". Readers who find the following discussion difficult might wish to return to it after they have read the translations and page notes.

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 the sense of being vanishes. Accordingly confirmation of self-being does not await some particular 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 tend to find only an array of objects which are decidedly *not* consciousness 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 matters misses their positive import. I *do* in fact realise that the things I observe are not properly *me*, i.e. not

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

my self-aware essence. 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 certainty of what I *am*. 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 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 actively present. 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-knowledge 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" is usually construed. 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, 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 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.

Confusion relating to the subject-object distinction is of course inherent in the study of consciousness. Practically speaking every increase in felt-being tends to be matched by

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[37] Lavelle's frequent ambivalences turn on these points.
[38] "Consciousness", p. 227 of the translations.
[39] *Ibid*. p. 227. The same bi-fold character applies to Lavelle's notion of "the instant".

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 provided by Lavelle. 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 seems counter-intuitive. Most people would agree that a person's consciousness and exact perspective on the world are unique to that person. My body and my personal history appear absolutely basic to my awareness. In principle however the core of consciousness may be detachable from the data of consciousness, including one's body and personal history. In that case it's permissible to ask: "To which sphere belongs the supremely intimate sense of myself which has remained the same throughout my life despite myriad changes?" As I interpret Lavelle's texts, where intimacy is concerned the essence of consciousness *includes* the quality of "mine-ness" or "I-ness" and remains distinct from the body and its personal history. At the same time it is properly a feature of *universal* consciousness and *not* of the individual! Individuals so to speak borrow it from the primary sphere.

Such an understanding is consistent with statements in *Of the Act* to the effect that whatever sense of self derives from a single Self, namely God. However it is questionable whether many readers will be prepared to accept that the self which sees through their eyes is in fact God since this bespeaks an outright identification with God. Lavelle too shies away from this prospect, repeatedly insisting on the ultimate distinctness of the Divine Person.

Further complications 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, doubtless because he believes that passivity is innate to human consciousness. I hazard that it might also constitute a kind of apriori object (akin to Kant's "pure imagination") which makes way for an experience of the world.

This of course looks like going against the grain of true apperception, consequently undermining the integrity of the subject. In apparent recognition of 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]. However 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 interval between eternal and temporal spheres so that temporal beings achieve only a measure of true being, hampered as they are by varying degrees of passivity.

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[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 of the translations.

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 central figures: 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 comprehensive original vision: a sweeping dialect that plumbed fresh depths and exhaustively spelled out the reflection of eternal Being in finite beings.

Very generally a dialectic can be described as a procedure whereby a theory is built *up* from rudimentary concepts or definitions, closely examined—or on the contrary, reduced *down* to them from more complex data. Lavelle employs both approaches.

Plato (typically speaking through his mentor Socrates) is usually credited as the author of the dialectical method, though for him a dialect basically implied an examination of questions though critical discussion. Of course logic was always a key element in dialectic, and this became especially apparent in the dialectics of the Middle Ages. Novel traits were added by the Germans after Kant. Thinkers might begin with a basic proposition such as "I am", perform an analysis of this, propose a certain dynamic or formula for development (the progression from thesis to antithesis to synthesis in the case of Hegel) and then gradually construct a vision of the entire universe and its evolution. In broad features 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 can be regarded as an idealist depends on how the term is defined. If idealism is understood in terms of high-mindedness and spirituality, or if it is taken to describe a style of philosophy much influenced by recognised idealists, then it is perhaps fair to call Lavelle an idealist. But in other respects it is also fair to regard him as an opponent of idealism. For a fuller discussion of this question see the "Unresolved Questions" section of this introduction.

[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, now 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 essences.

Though Lavelle applies the circle motif to almost every philosophic question and almost every level of meaning 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—or as a wheel continually tracing the same earthly round, or as a snake forever devouring its own tail. 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.

His doctrine with respect to time goes as follows. 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, as has been noted, 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 obliged to concede[47] that the circle-image here amounts to no more a temporal representation of an eternal truth in which beginnings and ends are indistinct. Accordingly the best representation of the Act might be a simple point. Bur since the point in this case is its own cause, a circle is once again suggested, as in the familiar representation of identity A = A.[48]

A final observation on this theme. Part of the appropriateness of a dialectic based on the circle is that it agrees with the nature of a dialogue or conversation, the original meaning of dialectic in early Greek philosophy. For Lavelle dialogues can take place on 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. In other words my temporal manifestations give valuable feedback

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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] The real question is whether causation, which implies succession, can apply at all to the timeless sphere.

with respect to my initiatives. And this exchange helps me direct my life so that it takes the shape and direction I desire.

6. Essence-Creation

Enough has been said to enable a closer look at the doctrine of "existence precedes essence" mentioned in connection with Sartre. Both Lavelle and Sartre associate the doctrine with human freedom. In the case of Sartre, liberty derives from an act of negation occurring within the perceived groundlessness or absurdity of existence. In the case of Lavelle it is a direct extension of the supremely positive Act of Being.

It is useful here to reflect that a supposed self-caused act that creates itself in perfect independence and with perfect efficacy must be perfectly free, i.e. it must be the very paradigm of freedom. Lavelle affirms this conclusion and does not shrink from identifying such freedom with God's very Being. However God's creativity is not exhausted in self-generation; rather, it also gives birth[49] to countless *analogues*: other free beings, whose lives are by contrast neither boundless nor centred in eternity but constrained by circumstance and subject to time. In other words they are *human beings*, though Lavelle often prefers the word "liberties" in reference to them.

God's perfect freedom creates nothing apart from itself and these analogues. The world arises as the counterpart of the latters' inward passivity. It is the common playing field[50] where "liberties" can exercise their powers and participate in divine self-causation through an analogous but limited power of self-determination. The situation is summed up as follows: "It is clear that God cannot create things (which are only appearances) but only beings, and he can create them only by . . . giving them the power to create themselves, as he creates himself eternally."[51]

This stepped-down "power to create" is in fact the central character of *souls*. In Lavelle's words, "It is . . . necessary to define the soul as a power-to-be rather than as a being. Or again it is necessary to say that it is the being of the power-to-be."[52] In accordance with the dictum "existence precedes essence" a soul is at first only an open possibility. Thanks to its connection with soul the embodied I is able to make selections from a multitude of possibilities and implement them—again, as permitted by physical laws and the circumstances of birth. In this fashion it will *in time* craft its own *essence*, i.e. place its distinctive mark on the world and "inscribe" itself in being.

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[49] It is unclear whether this fecundity is an overflow of freedom's abundance, a super-rational gratuitousness or an integral part of God's being, i.e. a component of self-creation. See "Unresolved Questions".

[50] Though Lavelle gives considerable attention to the world's constitution his exact position is elusive. He sometimes speaks of the world as mere phenomenon or appearance. At other times he seems to allow it a more substantial underpinning. For a fuller discussion, again see "Unresolved Questions".

[51] *Giornale di metafisica*, May-June (1955), cited in École, p. 181.

[52] *De l'âme humaine*, Ch. VI, p. 140.

I emphasise the words "in time" because the progress of essence-creation follows the precise lineaments of Lavelle's reverse-flow model of time. My soul beckons from the future, where I am offered myriad possibilities. I must choose among them. Practically that means I must give them body, enact them in worldly situations, translate them into present deeds. Thereafter they will pass into my being as memories and contribute to my maturing essence, which according to Lavelle is not a mere collection of recalled images but a *spirit* distilled from my many experiences.

> Memories should not be forgotten but transfigured: dematerialised, ceasing to be images of things and leaving behind them only a power of the soul . . . The progress of the soul is therefore not a progress of accumulation but rather of stripping-away—stripping away objects, states, images—through which it draws closer and closer to that hearth of pure activity where the diversity of its powers are indivisibly gathered together."[53]

At life's end this rarefied product is what passes into eternity as a completed soul.

Remove from the account all reference to God, eternity and soul, and what is left begins to resemble the philosophy of Sartre, who acknowledges no debt to his predecessor.[54] The difference between the two thinkers in relation to essence is their disagreement about the ultimate nature and value of being.

The only major qualification needed for the above sketch is that it strictly pertains to the argument presented in *Of the Human Soul*. An earlier Lavelle (particularly circa *Of the Act*) allows that, among the possibilities open to an individual, can be found one that is directly proposed by God as the soul-ideal. Many declarations on vocation relate to this ideal, which in fact need never be elected and embodied, and which in any case can never be perfectly achieved—an uncharacteristically pessimistic conclusion from this generally optimistic thinker.[55]

7. The Idea of Being

Throughout his writings Lavelle consistently maintains that the idea of being is fully adequate to its referent. In fact he goes so far as to say that "there is no distinction between the idea of being and actual being . . ."[56] In *De l'Etre* he avows: "owing to univocity we cannot posit the idea of being without immediately apperceiving that the

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[53] *De l' âme humaine*, Ch. VII, p. 180.

[54] It is difficult for me to believe there is none. I am critical of the omission but grateful for Sartre's detailed portrayals of essence-creation in *Being and Nothingness* and in his many novels and plays.

[55] Further discussion of essence-creation is presented in the "Unresolved Questions" section.

[56] *De l'Etre*, p. 139. Cited and discussed by École, p. 131.

being of this idea is the same as the being for which it is the idea."[57] In this respect it is unique. Other ideas are representative, mere symbols of their referents, but *this* idea is not; it is a direct intuition, which in Lavelle's terms means the active presence of the thing itself. It is a dynamic "idea-source" rather than a passive "idea-object".[58] In simplest and strongest terms, it is Being.

His stance follows directly from the proposition that thinking is identical with being, which he traces to the early philosopher Parmenides.[59] Additional support is drawn from Descartes, whose classic formula "I think therefore I am" seems to imply a special relation between thinking and being. The so-called "ontological argument" is also pressed into service: Descartes' conclusion of God's infinite being from the notion of human finitude is, with some artful maneuvering, translated into the conclusion that "the idea of God is already God's being."[60] From there it is only short distance to the equivalence of the idea of Being with Being itself and to the reflection of divine thinking in human beings.[61]

Not everyone will accept the logic of such arguments. Perhaps it is best to reduce Lavelle's position to two flat declarations which may be accepted or rejected regardless of proof: (a) that the idea of being is the living presence of being itself and (b) that "there is nothing in being that the idea of being does not cover and no idea of being that being too does not cover".[62] Further consideration of this topic will be given in the "Unresolved Questions" section of the Introduction.

8. The Gist of Practice

It is fair to ask how theory translates into practice chez Lavelle. As has been seen, everything comes down to intimacy with being through a human initiative analogous to God's creative Act. That initiative is the taking of consciousness (I was tempted to add the word "sudden") but this characterisation is too general. Not every state of consciousness seems an act of creation or an awakening to being. Mere registration of the world, however extensive, is not enough. Lavelle does not for instance demand a greater awareness of perceptual or situational detail—except as a means of delivering oneself from their domination. Rather, he asks for a specific *kind* of consciousness, one that deeply resonates with the sense of being that underlies all phenomena.

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[57] *De l'Etre*, p. 222. Cited and discussed in Christiane d'Ainval, *La Philosophie de Louis Lavelle: Une doctrine de la Présence Spirituelle*, Philosophes Contemporains, Editions Nauwelaerts, Lovain, France, (1967), p. 94.
[58] See d'Ainval, p. 89. Also *De l'Etre*, p. 239.
[59] *Introduction à l'ontologie*, p. 22.
[60] *Ibid.*, p. 22.
[61] *Ibid*. pp. 21-23. I will not try to detail Lavelle's arguments on this point. For an example of his way of construing Descartes see his "Interpretation of the Proposition '*Cogito Ergo Sum*'" contained among these translations.
[62] *De l'Etre*, p. 223, cited in d'Ainval, p. 95.

Admittedly there is some equivocation on his part. In several works, e.g. *The Total Presence*, he appears to lay the foundation for a direct seizure of the being based on its all-pervading and primitive nature. I see the approach as tantamount to evoking the idea of being mentioned in the preceding section. But that is not his most consistent position. Perhaps because he recognises the possibility, if not likelihood, of latching onto some merely representational idea of being, e.g. some verbal formula, rather than the "idea-source", the type of consciousness he most often cites is *self-consciousness*[63], an awareness that directly experiences the truth of being in itself. Therefore his essential message is to come back to oneself, meaning not some self-image but the simple experience of oneself existing here and now. That approach also admits the possibility of going astray in some representation but the ideal of self-consciousness has the advantage of aligning being with the concrete and familiar sense of self. Here it is not that human beings appropriate the universal sense of being and attribute it to themselves; rather, it is that the universal sense is already shot through with self-nature: "I am that I am". This is true if only because the intuition of being seems to imply a consciousness that *knows it knows*, i.e. is self-aware. Hence Lavelle's many statements on the order of "I become more interior to the interiority of being in the measure that I become more interior to myself".[64]

Indeed his works routinely define interiority and being in terms of subjectivity.[65] Since the subject stands opposed to an object, the inward turn means a movement away from the objective world—again, not that it is cast aside but merely regarded as secondary. The primary focus is elsewhere. The world recedes as an all-consuming interest and self-being comes to the fore as an intimation of Being.

Of course to focus is to concentrate, which not only implies a certain hub of regard but a certain commitment and energy. What is wanted is not a passive observation but an *active* engagement, i.e. a definite *intensity*. And the word Lavelle most frequently employs in this regard is "attention". He writes: "All must be reduced for us to an effort of attention"[66] and again "presence resides in an act of attention . . . which cannot flag without my existence flagging".[67]

Choosing, willing, acting, knowing, being: all come together in true attention. For Lavelle attention can never amount to a fascinated or captured gaze, which might after all be only a kind of trance; it involves a deliberate act, self-known in its very execution. Precisely owing to its deliberate character it has something of the flavour of the autogenesis Lavelle attributes to God.

A final refinement is provided by his advice to cleave to the sense of the present, particularly in its most acute form, i.e. that of the instant. (Hence my inclination to use the word "sudden" above.) *De l'Intimité Spirituelle* ("Of Spiritual Intimacy") flatly declares: "the instant is attention".[68] Elsewhere Lavelle writes:

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[63] This is in fact the title of one of his books.
[64] "Interpretation of the Proposition '*Cogito Ergo Sum*"', see p. 243 of this volume.
[65] See e.g. section 9 of *Introduction à l'ontologie*, p. 12.
[66] *Conduite a l'égard d'autrui*, Albin Michel, Paris (1957), p. 113; cited and discussed in d'Ainval, p. 328.
[67] *Les trois moments de la métaphysique*, in Farber, *L'activité philosophique en France et aux Etats-Unis*, vol. 4 Presses Universitaires (1950), p. 135; cited and discussed in d'Ainval, p. 350.
[68] *De l'Intimité Spirituelle*, Aubier, Editions Montaigne, Philosophie de l'esprit, Paris (1955) p. 145; passage cited and discussed in d'Ainval, p. 128.

> 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.[69]

The instant is a kind of portal. In one direction it opens onto the world of time and space, in the other it opens onto the eternity of Being. Everything depends on realising the point where these two dimensions, outer and inner, come together and diverge. Thus instantaneity too offers the possibility of a direct seizure of being. If the intuition of the present implies a general engagement in being, or the *idea* of it, then tracing that intuition to its very quick, i.e. the instant of attention, could amount to an immediate penetration of Being revealed as Act.

As I see it, all of the above-mentioned factors require each other. They circle the same centre and are practically synonymous. The idea of being *is* the intuition of presence and the sense of the present. Direct seizure *is* a return to self. Similarly, the instant "is our presence to ourselves; in it is realised the act that makes us be."[70] And as already noted the instant *is* attention. In the words of d'Ainval: "Thus [these] three go together: the instant, attention, presence".[71]

Further elaboration along these lines would probably be unproductive. What is wanted is a doing rather than a pondering. Readers who have followed this far must have more than an inkling of what is in needed.

9. Influences

In addition to the German Idealists a number of other influences should be mentioned, chief among them the Eleatic philosopher Parmenides (circa 515 B.C.) whose teaching 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 way 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 track bereft of insight.

Lavelle accords with Parmenides to the extent that he denies the applicability of states to Being and upholds Being's utter singleness and uniformity. However he stops short of dismissing the apparent world as mere error or irrelevancy. Rather it is for him an event *within* Being and must be conceded its share of truth.

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[69] "The Present and the Instant", see p.189 of these translations.
[70] *De l'Intimité spirituelle* , p. 145.
[71] See d'Ainval, p. 128.

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. Indeed his metaphysics can be viewed as a modern reworking of their ideas so as to unify the separate doctrines. Though Parmenides provides the foundation for this enterprise, the bulk of Lavelle's dialectic follows Heraclitus in addressing the realm of appearances and in describing a kind of a circulation.

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, the Interpretation takes liberties with Descartes' precise arguments but Lavelle believes—with some justification—that he is faithful to the understanding implicit in the "I think therefore I am" proposition. He agrees above all with Descartes' internal orientation and his profession of a direct link between the "I am" experience and the intuition of God.

Studies of Lavelle regularly note the importance of Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715) and Maine de Biran (1766-1824): the former a thinker in the Cartesian tradition, 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 parallels the notion of participation. As noted earlier Bergson's opposition to exclusively 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 overemphasised: 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, including Taoism.

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 that gives new voice to perennial wisdom.

A discussion of influences should include 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 entitled *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 Lavelle's 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 orientation.

Nonetheless it is impossible to mistake the lofty, even devout, character of his writings. Here is a man for whom spiritual intimations are more real than hammers and bricks. Here 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. Granted, 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.[72]

10. Glossary of Frequently Used Terms

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

(THE) ACT: Being, conceived as a living self-creating activity rather than a passive substance or static state of affairs. Written in lower case, God's Act of Being translated to the level of human initiatives.

(THE) ALL: The Absolute Being. Pure Being. The entirety of Being considered *en bloc*, i.e. as a unity that precedes and founds its parts. Because I conceive it more as a seamless plenum than a summation of components, as would be implied by the phrase "the Whole" (which is nonetheless also a valid translation of "*le Tout*") I have in most instances opted for the non-standard but more literal "All" (or "all"). I am aware of its Neoplatonic and Gnostic overtones and feel they are generally consistent with Lavelle's meaning. Confusingly, Lavelle sometimes extends the term to the world and the whole of the material universe but as École observes[73] these are doubtless instances of loose speaking and do not adequately convey Lavelle's basic idea.

BEING: When capitalised, the inward ground of existence and manifestation characterised in *De l'Etre* as (a) univocal[74], (b) universal and (c) primary. The single domain of intimacy generated by the Act. 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. In all cases Lavelle opposes those who would reduce Being to a mere abstraction. He describes it as "a concrete universality"[75], insisting that it is the very concreteness of each thing "and not a feature that can be separated from it." Elsewhere he writes that "Being is

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[72] For all that d'Ainval (p. 321) notes that Lavelle directly opposes Plotinus on several counts. Lavelle is not only critical of withdrawal from life but of the effort to raise oneself by one's own bootstraps, i.e. without reference to grace from on high.

[73] École, p. 129.

[74] For Lavelle univocity means that being is holographic so to speak, i.e. each and every instance of it carries the same sense and contains the whole. Consequently there should never be a question of more or less being.

[75] *Introduction à l'ontologie*, p. 17.

anterior to the opposition between the abstract and the concrete."[76] Again, he characterises Being as absolute interiority and absolute subjectivity. Citing Parmenides assertion of the identity of thinking and being he says "this being, which is completely interior to itself, cannot allow any objectivity to subsist in it, and this interiority, to which nothing is exterior, can only be the interiority of a thought."[77] At the same time Being is an act, and in fact "the absolute act of affirmation"[78]. Finally Being is defined as self-caused: "the peculiarity of being is to be interior to self and self-caused . . . with these two characteristics alone can being be revealed to us in its essential intimacy and thereby impart to us our own intimacy . . ."[79] By extension from self-causation Being may also be regarded as the exemplar of freedom and the foundation of individual "liberties".

ESSENCE: Core quality or meaning. 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 the soul through choices made from a range of possibilities, necessarily constrained by worldly limits.

EXISTENCE: One the three aspects under which the All may be considered, i.e. being, existence and reality. Existence is what "*makes me emerge from being*" (hence the "ex" of existence) and simultaneously "*allows me to penetrate it.*"[80] It is not so much a jutting into the world as a jutting *out* of interiority, an emergence which so to speak brings the world along with it. At the same time existence can be viewed as the locus of the little act and the little self which constitutes the human analogue of God: "*Thus the I is rooted in the self and makes of the self of being the very substance of its own I.*"[81] Otherwise stated, "existence . . . makes the interiority of being its own interiority, without being adequate to it however . . ."[82] In relation to soul, "existence is the condition that permits [the I] to acquire an essence"[83] through its choices and deeds. Accordingly it is the mode of being appropriate to liberties. Because existence refers solely to the realm of participation it cannot be said that God exists: rather, God *is*.

(THE) GIVEN: The world or a worldly datum, simply presented or stipulated as being such-and-such ahead of my action upon it. A fact. Alternatively, though rarely, whatever is made available to me inwardly 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.[84] When Lavelle speaks of the Universal or Absolute Self he typically uses the phrase "*le Soi*" but on at least one occasion he refers to it as "*le Moi*". In almost every case he takes the I as a subject rather than as an object:

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[76] *Ibid.* p. 11.
[77] *Ibid*. p. 12.
[78] *Ibid.* p. 17.
[79] *De l' âme humaine*, Ch. V, p. 130.
[80] *Introduction à l'ontologie*, p. 26.
[81] *Ibid* p. 27
[82] *Ibid.* p. 55.
[83] *Ibid.*p. 34
[84] Hence "the I" rather than "the me", though "me" is the usual translation of "*moi*".

> this power of saying 'I' is not the power of discovering an object of which I could say it is I, it is the very power of giving myself being, it is the emotion that accompanies an act of creation that depends on me to accomplish at each instant, whose effect is not a visible work but myself. And when I interrogate myself by asking "What am I?" it seems that I am in my own eyes a pure mystery. I can find no determination with which I consent to confound myself . . . I am beyond all things.[85]

IDEA: The practical counterpart of the ideal. A source-principle: "The idea is one with that inner dynamism by which it creates itself at the same time that all things are created by it."[86] Lavelle says: "we think of things . . . by way of an idea, i.e. by way of an act that allows us to engender them in our mind and by way of which we think that they themselves are also engendered." Again "The difference between the concept and the idea is . . . that the concept is only a schema of the thing, to which the latter always adds particular characteristics, while the idea is a secret efficacy, to which the visible things bear testimony without ever equalling."[87] In other words the idea is the living principle which generates the truth of what the concept only represents.

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.

(THE) INSTANT. The "most acute form of the present" and the "generating seed" of time.[88] A content-less point that gives access to both time and eternity, depending on whether one is outwardly or inwardly directed. Hence the intersection of time and timelessness. As such it is at once the connector and the divider between Pure Being and the realm of participation. A point that embraces the entirety of what-is (including the interval) as act. Indeed Lavelle declares that the act of being is "only exerted in the instant"[89]. The latter is also described as the moment of attention, which I take to mean the moment of coming-to, taking consciousness, waking up to the sense of being.

(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, spirit and matter. The issue is made even more mysterious by Lavelle's assertion that the concrete world fills and somehow is the gap. Article 1 of "Freedom and the Interval" provides this characterisation:

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[85] *De l' âme humaine*, Ch. VI, p. 143.
[86] *Introduction à l'ontologie*, p. 118.
[87] *Ibid.* p. 119 for both citations.
[88] See p. 182 of this volume.
[89] *Introduction à l'ontologie*, p. 19.

> There is no difference between the theory of the interval and that of participation. We can say of 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.[90]

Article 1 of "The World's Formation" says: "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." [91]

INTIMACY: Knowledge-in-the-subject. Consciousness of self. Consciousness-in-itself as distinct from consciousness-of an object. 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 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 pluralisations 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 the distinction

[90] See pp. 135-6 of the translations.
[91] See p. 150 of the translations.

is often unclear or non-existent since both are defined in terms of self-causation. Though particular liberties have only limited power of self-creation that power nonetheless traces back to the unlimited power of self-determination in the Pure Act, i.e. freedom as a principle or ideal.

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.

In some respects participation is, like the notion of the interval, a kind of "black box" for the relation of the one to the many. Practically however most readers will have no difficulty recognising an act or event in which they (often quite suddenly) partake of a deep sense of being.

PRESENCE: Immediately experienced being, concretely known in itself prior to all analysis and comparison. In many cases the word is used virtually as another name for intuition.

REALITY: Along with being and existence one of the three faces of the All. Reality always appears as a "given", e.g. a physical or psychological fact. It takes reference to "res", i.e. the mere object or thing as studied by science, and typically exhibits a mixed "density" and "opacity" that makes it "impermeable" to the I.[92] Basically it is a reflection of the I's passivity. Insofar as this passivity is indulged, reality tends "to annihilate the consciousness we have of our own existence . . . without which there would be for us neither object nor thing"[93] which is to say that reality tends to swallow one's attention by way of external diversions and concerns. Despite the display of density, opacity and impermeability, reality is "evanescent"[94] and "superficial"[95], a domain of mere phenomena or appearances, i.e. external shows lacking all interiority. It is so to speak being offered from without and at best only a sum of successive appearances gained from different vantage points. In many respects Lavelle's notion of reality bears comparison with Berdyaev's notion of the "objectified" world and the Hindu notion of the world as *maya*.

SOUL: The essence of a person. The product of self-creation. In *Of the Act* it is the ideal God proposes to the individual, which may or may not be chosen as a goal. In *Of the Human Soul* it is the person as a work in progress, composed of specific possibilities the

[92] *Introduction à l'ontologie*, p. 41.
[93] *Ibid.* p. 42.
[94] *Ibid*. p. 117.
[95] *Ibid.* p. 50.

individual has chosen to embody. It is sometimes also characterised as the individual's "power-to-be".

(THE) TOTAL BEING: The Absolute Being. Pure Being. A synonym for the All (or the all)—paradoxically *The Total Presence* insists that the all is not a total! Indeed both phrases, Total Being and Total Presence, are misleading in that they imply a summation and a finite quantity whereas what is intended is the unity of an infinite efficacy prior to expression in parts. A decidedly unhappy turn of phrase.

11. Unresolved Questions

Rather than attempt a thorough-going critique of Lavelle's philosophy, which is beyond the scope of an introduction in any case, I will raise a number of pivotal and highly problematic questions which readers might want to keep in mind as they study the texts. Where I can I will hazard possible answers but in all cases I see no easy or decisive conclusions.

Was Lavelle an idealist?

It can be argued that he was decidedly *against* idealism insofar as the term implies an absolute idealism like that of Octave Hamelin (1856-1907) who reduced everything to representations and the relations among them, effectively rendering being a mental construct. For Lavelle of course being is essentially *not* a concept or representation but a concrete presence, directly experienced ahead of every representation and the categories of logic. It is essentially not an object of discursive knowledge but an indwelling truth.

In other respects he might be considered an idealist, at least according to the popular use of the word. It certainly has to be allowed that a philosopher who equates being with the *idea* of being cannot be all that far from the roots of idealism. He is also aligned with idealism to the extent that idealism gives pre-eminence to the subject of experience over the object. At the same time École observes that the typical idealist focus on the subject is not the same as Lavelle's. He asserts that idealists tend to refer to the subject of *knowledge* whereas Lavelle speaks to the subject of *existence*.[96] Though Lavelle owns a connection with idealists he regards the ideal subject as "only an appearance"[97], by which I understand a perceived or thought-about object that is treated as a subject.

[96] École, p. 286.
[97] *Introduction à l'ontologie*, p. 5.

How can singleness of being be reconciled with a multiplicity of beings?

As already noted Lavelle's philosophy is inspired by Parmenides' doctrine that being is single: uniform, changeless and undifferentiated. Yet Lavelle does not follow Parmenides in declaring all evidence of separate beings a mistake. He pays respect to the doctrine of Heraclitus by embracing the notion of individual beings in continual change—albeit according to a uniform modus, i.e. that of circulation.

Of course the two visions are at odds—to the extent that Parmenides and Heraclitus are sometimes characterised as opponents. Reconciliation appears impossible. How can a block-like unity, eternally unchanging, also be the everyday realm of time, space and multiplicity? This is the central problem Lavelle faces.

He addresses it by allowing a distinction (or "interval") between the domains of time and eternity, the many and the one, while at the same time insisting that there is no veritable division in being. In the first place individual beings are like bits of a shattered mirror, each holding the same light in its entirety.[98] Thus each is an analogue of the single Act. In the second place, though disparate realms are involved, they *interpenetrate*. Timelessness does not simply define itself *against* time; it wears time's essential features, e.g. the newness associated with the future, the vividness associated with the present, the completion associated with the past. The instant is indeed the ever-present intersection of time and eternity. Moreover if temporal beings experience the eternal as an infinite possibility, as Lavelle supposes, the eternal can legitimately be regarded as the repository of the myriad actualisations that occur in time.

All of which seems to resolve age-old problems. However despite the holographic framework and the conflation of meanings Lavelle still holds to a distinction between the one and the many, eternity and time, God and mortals, without adequately explaining the exact ground of division, i.e. why an apparent duality is necessitated.

Of course Lavelle is not alone in this respect. No thinker, present-day scientists included, has adequately resolved the problem of the one and the many. It certainly seems obvious that everything comes to a whole and that the parts of the whole are fundamentally connected rather than associated by mere happenstance. But looking at the matter from the top down it is not at all clear why the one should also require a multitude. Consequently questions persist, like the one to be considered soon, "Why does God need a realm of participation?"

What categories of being does Lavelle entertain?

École reports that Lavelle speaks of three or four catagories of being[99]: (a) the Act of Being, (b) particular free beings, (c) mere things and (d) phenomena. Of these, only (a) and (b) are acts proper, possessing consciousness and volition. The others have a place in Being but not (or not obviously) in the Act. Matters are far from straightforward.

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[98] Lavelle does not speak of a shattered mirror; the figure is mine.

[99] École, pp. 82-5. Presumably categories can exist only in the realm of participation. I should add that it is unclear from Lavelle's statements whether (c) and (d) are distinct.

Of Being argues that "the existence of each object is the presence within it of the divine act without which it would be nothing"[100]. The chapter titled "The Act of Being" in *Of the Act* argues that being and act are different slants on the same thing. It would then appear that things and appearances spring directly from God and are both beings and acts, or extensions of them, though not sources of volition. There are many statements in Lavelle's philosophy to the effect that (c) and (d) are concomitants of human passivity.

Against the above Lavelle often treats things and appearances as deficient in "veritable" being, whatever the cost to the proposition that Being is everywhere the same. In other words they are not beings in the *full* sense. They are so to speak all surface without depth. Yet elsewhere Lavelle speaks of penetrating them to realise their essence and the "immense background" that lies behind them.[101]

A confusing array of stances! With ample justification École allows that Lavelle is not always consistent. As I see the question, different levels of applicability are involved. Where the absolute is concerned, being is singular and without categories. Where voluntary acts are concerned, two categories must be considered: God's eternal being and that of temporal liberties, i.e. human beings. Finally, where the realm of participation is in question, three or four kinds of being must be counted.

What is the world's genesis?

According to Lavelle God does not create "things"; he creates free beings:

> It is clear that God cannot create things (which are only appearances) but only beings, and he can create the latter only by making them participate in his essence, i.e. by giving them the power to create themselves as he creates himself eternally . . . [102]

To which École responds: "In a word, God creates only spirits."

This appears to put paid to the possibility (mentioned above) that things spring directly from God. Rather, it is through *human* agents that God indirectly shapes the world. But whence the material they shape? Perhaps there is none. Perhaps things are projections of the human mind, e.g. imaginations, mere phenomena.

Then again they might not be so "mere". According to d'Ainval, Lavelle's position is that "far from appearances being the appearances of other things, they are the things themselves, phenomena not being an illusion but an aspect of being."[103] Even so, the possibility remains that the world is a kind of psychic truth agreed upon by linked liberties.

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[100] *De l'Etre*, third edition, Aubier, Philosophie de l'esprit, Paris (1947), p. 97.
[101] *De l'Acte*, p. 314.
[102] *Giornale di metafisica*, May-June (1955), cited in École, p. 181.
[103] See d'Ainvil, p. 213.

Conclusive statements in this regard are hard to find. The nearest Lavelle comes is in declarations like "*The world's creation is the creation of different consciousnesses.*"[104] together with suggestions that the world arises, automatically so to speak, as a reflection of human passivity: "every act is limited by a certain given" which is "correlative of a certain passivity"—this owing to the fact that the participated act is "always imperfect".[105]

Other texts (which I will not cite) grant more substantiality to the world, perhaps justifying the distinction between things and appearances referred to by École. But that resurrects the question: Where did the world's basic substance come from in the first place? Here again conclusive statements are lacking. Lavelle often speaks as if the world were a kind of indeterminate stuff like hyle to which humans impart shape and meaning. But where could that stuff come from if God creates only free beings? And does primitive matter have any inherent properties at all?

Owing to the ambiguous and incomplete character of Lavelle's explanations I find it hard to form any definite idea of what he had in mind.

Why does God need a realm of participation?

If the Act is complete in itself and eternally self-sufficing what need is there for a temporal domain? It certainly cannot be required as a reflection of God's passivity since God is *all* act. Nonetheless there are occasional hints of some deficiency in the primary sphere.

In a very early text Lavelle suggests that by itself the absolute has an "abstract and empty" character that wants filling out.[106] In a very late text he says that without the realm of participation pure being would be frozen in "the inertia and immobility of a thing".[107] In *Introduction to Ontology* he avows that "the profound life of being would doubtless be only an abstraction if it did not burst into an existence that creates reality around it as its horizon."[108]

Still, I gather that these must be determinations from the side of participation alone. In itself the absolute is complete and self-sufficient life which acquires the abstract and empty character of possibility only when translated into the realm of participation. That granted, the realm of participation can be considered only as an overflow of the primary sphere, an expression of God's generosity or a manifestation of sheer freedom.

But that leaves unanswered the original question of why God needs the realm of participation. From the side of freedom there is perhaps no insurmountable problem. If God's self-creation is conceived as a gratuitous act then there should be no difficulty in conceiving of the world as a foundation-less accompaniment of that Act. God does not *need* the world; it just *is* as God just is. The same explanation (or lack of explanation)

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[104] *Manuel de Méthodolgie dialectique*, P.U.F, Bibliothèque de philosophie contemporaine, Paris (1965), p. 106.
[105] *Introduction à l'ontologie*, p. 105. He adds that the given which appears corresponds to "the level of the act we have accomplished."
[106] *La dialectique du monde sensible*, Publications de la Faculté des Lettres, Strasbourg (1921), pp. 260-1.
[107] *De l' âme humaine*, p. 435.
[108] *Introduction à l'ontologie*, p. 6.

could be applied to the questions preceding this one, only I am unaware of Lavelle's ever advancing an argument in these precise terms, which seem more appropriate to the thinking of Berdyaev. At times Lavelle merely stipulates that God's being implies temporal beings as the one implies the many. More often he evokes the sense of a primordial exuberance, generosity and love that manifests as the temporal sphere.

Are there degrees of being?

Consistent with Parmenides' doctrine Lavelle holds that there are no degrees of being. There can be no more or less, no hierarchy. Nonetheless he does admit to degrees of consciousness, an axiological hierarchy and a deficiency of being in mere things, objects and phenomena. Once again it must be conceded that these levels apply only to the realm of participation. Lavelle regularly refers to different "modes" of participation[109] all of which seem to figure in a hierarchy. Indeed he says "the right to existence of each being is proportional to its degree of perfection"[110]. With respect to deficiencies he speaks most plainly in: "The need for existence to be expressed in terms of space and time precisely testifies to its lack of being, at least of that purely interior being to which existence is never adequate."[111]

The explanation sits awkwardly beside the doctrine of univocity. Since being is defined in terms of universality *as well as* interiority there can nowhere be any true lack of "interior being", only an apparent deficiency.

Does essence in some sense prefigure embodiment?

Lavelle holds that existence precedes essence, that the soul can be understood only in terms of possibility and that it is up to each individual to create a unique essence through his or her life-choices. However (especially before *Of the Human Soul*) he also speaks of the ideal God proposes to me, of a call from on high and of the vocation a person needs to fulfil to achieve his or her destiny. Indeed he defines vocation as "a personal word" that God "addresses to me, calling me by name"[112].

This surely sounds like a prefigured model of oneself, i.e. a matter of essence preceding existence. Of course it might be argued that no narrow or portentous interpretation need be given such passages. A simpler understanding is that I am given certain genetic predispositions and certain circumstances of birth, which impart a certain direction to my life; these might be loosely described as pre-existing shapers of my destiny—which nonetheless afford great latitude of choice. That is basically the argument offered in *Of the Human Soul*. But the early Lavelle seems to be talking about something higher and much less naturalistic: a kind of spiritual preordination that I can elect either to embody or to ignore. Failing its election my entire life is forfeit.

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[109] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
[110] *Ibid.*, p. 70.
[111] *Ibid.*, p. 31.
[112] *Le Moi et son Destin*, Aubier, Paris (1936), p. 85.

Says d'Ainval: "One can speak, as Lavelle often does, of missing one's essence (or one's soul), which means that one does not have the courage to spiritualise oneself, but this expression has the defect of giving rise to the belief that our essence pre-exists its actualisation . . . "[113] However I see no defect in the expression: rather, it is an accurate statement of Lavelle's position circa 1937.

If *Of the Act* did not rise like a mountain above the rest of Lavelle's works, if it were not obviously central to them, the later and more naturalistic stance of *Of the Human Soul* could be considered the more authoritative view. It certainly is the one that most closely accords with the dictum "existence precedes essence". That concession notwithstanding I feel something is lost in *Of the Human Soul*, i.e. the intimate, individual relation with God found in *Of the Act*, where a specific destiny is proposed to each person. Hints of destiny can still be found in *Of the Human Soul* but mainly in watered-down or ambiguous terms that fall far short of Lavelle's earlier declarations.

Is the idea of being really adequate to being?

None of the Lavelle's arguments on this count seems very convincing. Often it is hard to understand just what he is getting at. I gather it has something to do with the observation that the idea of being brings me face to face with the truth of being. But that is not the same as saying that the idea is adequate to the fact, much less identical with it. The notion of the idea of being as an "idea-source", as distinct from a mere concept or representation, is attractive but here Lavelle is speaking of the direct presence of being, i.e. being itself, rather than anything resembling an idea in normal parlance.

A more exact characterisation of the relation of being to thought might be that I begin with a representative idea, i.e. a recollection of the being-experience, which then delivers me to the fact in the same way that the thought of waking up while I am asleep delivers me to waking reality. In other words the idea falls away in favour of the fact. Such a progression from possibility to realisation is consistent with Lavelle's conception of time and his notion of self-creation.

Plainly Lavelle wants a close relation between the idea of being and being itself[114] but that close relation need not be one of identity—except in the trivial sense that an idea is also a being or that the direct disclosure of presence, e.g. my presence to myself, can be figuratively likened to an idea . At the same time the proposition that an idea-source is different from a merely representative idea calls for more precise explanation of why both are still called ideas. What is the exact ground of their identity and difference?

In all it seems Lavelle regards the identity of idea and being as a subset of the identity of thinking and being which he upholds in Parmenides. But adherence to that doctrine demands many qualifications and concessions. Superficially Descartes' "I think therefore I am" formula lends support but closer examination shows that the formula's conclusive force does not come from thinking per se but from the *experienc*e of oneself thinking. At best it can be said to derive from a particular *kind* of thinking, namely self-aware thought. But of course not all cogitation is effectively experienced or self-aware. For the most part

[113] See d'Ainval, p. 153.

[114] I often suspect that Lavelle is harking back to the Platonic notion of *anamnesis*, i.e. the recollection of primordial Ideas.

thinking is an automatic activity that occasions no significant intimation of being. On the contrary it can be argued (as do many yoga experts) that thinking is if anything an obstacle to the experience of being!

Lavelle is alert to these problems and tries to skirt them by proposing various qualifications of what veritable thinking entails. Heidegger does the same but in the end readers like myself wonder why so much energy is spent defending such a problem-infested doctrine. If I understand matters correctly what is in question is a pure flash of realisation—precisely *before* it is translated into an idea or thought. In any case I feel that neither Lavelle nor Heidegger has shown sufficient justification for supposing that thought includes more than representation.

What is the initial stage of the being-experience?

At various points in his career Lavelle outlined what he took to be the stages of the being-experience. However the descriptions are by no means uniform. A step-by-step comparison of the accounts would be illuminating but I am particularly interested in the very first step since it directly relates to the essence of practice.

Of Being maintains that "Being appears firstly as present to the I . . ."[115] In *The Total Presence* however the sheer presence of being comes first—although in a confused experience which a later work characterises by the words "there is something"[116]. Then in *Of Time and Eternity* the being-experience again demands "first our own presence to ourselves"[117]. *Les trois moments de la métaphysique* ("The Three Moments of Metaphysics") reaffirms: "being is revealed first of all through the power I have of saying 'I'"[118]. Likewise the unpublished *Système de la participation ("System of Participation")* affirms the cogito as the start. But the late-life works *Of the Human Soul* and the third edition of *Of Being* again assert the priority of sheer being.[119]

My own view (see "The Gist of Practice") is that, while there may be good reasons for speaking of a direct participation in the heart of being, Lavelle almost always advises a return to self-being as a bridge to the greater Being. This is of course the approach of Descartes, with whom Lavelle has so much in common. In sum I regard the following statement in the *Introduction to Ontology* as both definitive and representative of Lavelle's central position over many works: "our most primitive and most constant experience is that of participation through which, in discovering the being of the I, we discover the total being without which the being of the I could not be sustained: thus, the being of the I makes us penetrate the interiority of being".[120]

At the same time I recognise grounds for asserting a direct return to the sheer sense of being. It might be argued for instance that whatever return implies a prior, perhaps split-

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[115] *De l'Etre*, first edition, pp. 191-193. Cited in École, p. 99.

[116] "Analyse de l'être et dissociation de l'essence et de l'existence" reprinted in *De l'Intimité Spirituelle*, p. 169. Like École I have difficulty allowing that the initial confused experience mentioned in *The Total Presence* is a definite recognition of being. See École, p. 109

[117] See p. 180 of the present translations.

[118] *Les trois moments de la métaphysique*, in Farber, *L'activité philosophique*, vol. II, p.132.

[119] See École, p. 100-101 for all of the preceding. Interestingly Lavelle never cites the recollection of the idea of being as a first step.

[120] *Introduction à l'ontologie*, p. 20.

second, awakening to the fundamental undifferentiated sense of being (the idea of being?)[121] which is then immediately translated into matter-of-fact being-here, in this precise worldly situation. Along with this there might be some more or less extended experiences of sheer presence seemingly granted from "on high". But I suppose that as far as human will is concerned the usual target is an experience of self-being that (one trusts) will lead to an *enduring* intimation of the very heart of being, i.e. an abidance in the stopped instant of awakening. That Lavelle addressed an entire book to consciousness of self, i.e. *La conscience de soi*, is certainly pertinent.

Is the being-experience really "primitive" and "constant"?

It may be legitimately questioned[122] whether the being-experience is "primitive" and "constant" as *The Total Presence* [123] and the *Introduction to Ontology*[124] maintain. Being is certainly not fully and constantly *recognised*. If it were there would be no point to Lavelle's appeals for greater inwardness. The very fact that there is an initial stage of the being-experience (see above) guarantees that recognition is effectively *not* constant. But then neither is it necessarily primitive in character. Both self-consciousness and participation in the sheer sense of being imply high levels of awareness such as those laboriously cultivated by yogis and mystics. It might be argued that a very refined level of experience is involved, one that becomes constant only after long practice.

That is not to deny that the being-experience reveals a truth which is *in-itself* both primitive and constant. It is to question whether it is simply and constantly realised.

Is there an experience of participation?

École cogently observes that while I certainly may have an experience of the act by which I take consciousness it is not at all certain that this is simultaneously participation in a greater Act.[125] One could go further and ask whether the word "participation" is really demanded by a situation in which one simply takes consciousness.

I believe École has correctly located the lynch-pin of Lavelle's philosophy. Everything depends on whether readers experience a sense of connection with a higher source.

Mystics such as Plotinus and St. Augustine have answered in the affirmative. Clement of Alexandria writes "if a man knows himself, he shall know God"[126]. Similarly Nicephorus the Solitary vouches:

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[121] In line with this Lavelle writes "when we think [the idea of being], far from giving it existence, it gives existence to us." *Traité des valeurs*, vol. I, Presses Universitaires de France (1950), p. 48.
[122] See École, p. 105.
[123] See p. 5 of these translations.
[124] *Introduction à l'ontologie*, p. 20.
[125] École, pp. 110-11.
[126] Source quoted as *Paed*. iii.1, in *The Enneads*, Plotinus, trans. by Stephen MacKenna, abridged with an introduction and notes by John Dillon, Penguin Books, England (1991), p. lxxvii.

> it is impossible for us to become reconciled and united with God, if we do not first return to ourselves, as far as it lies in our power, or if we do not enter within ourselves, tearing ourselves—what a wonder it is!—from the whirl of the world with its multitudinous vain cares and striving constantly to keep attention on the kingdom of heaven which is within us.[127]

For his part Lavelle says:

> *God is our interior beyond*, that is, he is more interior to us than ourselves. This kind of surpassing of ourselves towards the inside allows us to render the two notions of presence and transcendence as inseparable rather than in opposition."[128]

And again, "to find oneself is to find God".[129]

The word "God" of course is very loaded. There might be many readers who confirm a lofty sense of participation without confirming a belief in the Judeo-Christian deity, or any deity at all. Nonetheless I believe they can accord with the basic principle of Lavelle's doctrine. At the same time it must be allowed that those who have no sense of participating in something higher or deeper are justified in challenging the universality and truth of participation. For that reason the issue remains unresolved.

12. 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, Editions Montaigne, Paris (1937).
> *Du temps et de l'éternité*, Aubier, Editions Montaigne, Paris (1945).
> *De* l'*âme humaine*, Aubier, Editions Montaigne, Paris (1951).

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[127] *Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart*, trans by E. Kadloubovsky and G.E. H. Palmer, Faber and Faber, London, 1992, p. 23.
[128] *Préface* for M. F. Sciacca's *L'existence de Dieu*, Aubier, Paris (1951), p. 11; cited in d"Ainval, p. 247.
[129] *Dieu, Carnet beige*, p. 54; cited in École, p. 277.

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.

13. 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.

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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