

Selections from

THE TOTAL PRESENCE

Translator's Foreword

The rationale of *The Total Presence* (published in 1934) is given in a brief foreword to that work:

The Total Presence is a fresh statement, conceived according to a new plan, of the essential theses contained in our book *Of Being* which constitutes the first volume of *The Dialectic of the Eternal Present*. That work seemed difficult to a certain number of readers: we will find here the same doctrine reduced to a simpler and so to speak more ideal outline, unencumbered by all the particular questions that risked dividing attention [and by] all the technical discussions that obliged [the earlier work] to become strained. We have wanted simply to identify certain elementary conditions, inseparable from every philosophical study and the very experience of life, which we often forget (though never with impunity), whose development we will pursue in the study of the *Act*, *Time*, the *Soul* and *Wisdom*.¹

¹ Subjects of the works intended to follow *Of Being*. In fact the author kept to this plan though the last work was never completed owing to his death in 1951.

For similar reasons I have decided to present the first and last parts of *The Total Presence* rather than excerpts from *Of Being*.²

That is not to say the selected parts are easy to understand, whatever the author's claims to simplicity. Many of the arguments are puzzling in the extreme. Nonetheless a central concern shines through: the need to return to the immediate sense of being as the ultimate source of knowledge, vitality and meaning.

Unfortunately the phrase "total presence" is a kind of misnomer. It suggests a tally of individual presences or beings, i.e. a summation of all that is. But Lavelle's totality refers to an "all" that resides ahead of division into parts. It is the block-like wholeness that grounds and gives rise to particular beings without itself suffering any diminishment. The total presence is therefore a synonym for absolute or pure being.

"The Discovery of Being" addresses the "initial experience" of being and attempts to characterise it in depth. The gem of the piece is the final section titled "THE PRESENCE OF BEING ILLUMINES THE MOST HUMBLE APPEARANCE" where the author argues that presence is not the specific impact of this or that object but the basic nearness within which all specific impacts and evidences occur.

From a critical perspective the problematic section "THE PRESENCE OF BEING GIVES RISE TO OUR PECULIAR INTIMACY WITH BEING" also has prominence. In it Lavelle distinguishes three phases in the experience of being: first the confused but enlivening engagement with being per se; next the realisation of our particular presence to being; and finally the recognition of our embeddedness in the totality of being.

The order of succession seems logical if being is not to become a simple manifestation of the worldly ego. Logical considerations aside however there is a question whether the actual experience of being is not simultaneously an experience of self. If our unique access to being is through our own existence (far from disputing this proposition Lavelle makes it the cornerstone of his philosophy) there can be no apprehension of being without a prior or concurrent apprehension of self.

The ideal solution to the problem is that the sense of self does not originally belong to individual beings but to their common source. In *The Total Presence* Lavelle seems to be feeling his way toward that conclusion but has not fully arrived there. As a consequence there is some wavering in his position, and I have drawn attention to instances of this in my page-notes. On the whole his numerous arguments against the priority of the I-sense only affirm it. Still, it would be a mistake to dismiss his original conviction that the experience of being, there at the moment of disclosure, precedes any clear realisation of a personal ego.

From a certain perspective "The Discovery of Being" can be viewed as an attempt to reduce all particular givens—the objects of consciousness, the various *things* of life—to a single underlying presence or immediacy. But in the course of that project a further reduction is already glimpsed whereby immediacy discloses a core-principle or act. This "act of being" becomes the focus of "Presence Regained" and indeed of Lavelle's later philosophy, making "Presence Regained" an important precursor of this central insight.

Much of "Presence Regained" is devoted to the pivotal role of the instant. The same theme will reappear in *Of Time and Eternity* where it will receive a more mature

² Lavelle never seemed fully content with *Of Being*. Originally published in 1928 it underwent substantial changes until it reached its final form in a third edition, four years before the author's death. It is basically a reworking of the first two editions to make it better accord with *Of the Act*.

and a more detailed treatment. Nonetheless “Presence Regained” provides a good foretaste of what is to come and vouches for the author’s recognition of an intimate relation between being and time at least³ circa the appearance of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* in 1927.

Readers who persevere through the difficult but rewarding first seven sections of “Presence Regained” will be pleased by the insightful clarity of the two final entries: THE SAGE IS INDIFFERENT TO STATES and JOY IS PERFECTION OF THE ACT. These little manifestos stand on their own and need no further comment from me apart from saying that they deserve a place in whatever selection of Lavelle’s writings.

I should add that the bulk of *The Total Presence* (parts two through four) revolves around a theme that only briefly emerges in the parts I have chosen. The excluded parts argue that the thought or idea of being is adequate to its object since it is a being, and indeed not just *a* being but being itself, since there are no divisions in being. Because this theme appears frequently in later writings I have not represented it here.

I should also advise that the easiest introduction to Lavelle’s philosophy is probably not *The Total Presence* but *Of the Act*. For chronological reasons selections from the former had to be presented first. As stated in the Introduction those readers who find these first offerings daunting should skip to *Of the Act* and return to them latter.

³ A 1912 manuscript titled *Of Existence* suggests that Lavelle may have preceded Heidegger in this recognition.