

THE DISCOVERY OF BEING¹

I

THE I² RECOGNISES THE PRESENCE OF BEING

A [single] rudimentary experience is implicated in all others, [imparting] to them its gravity and depth: the experience of the presence of being. To recognise this presence is in the very same stroke to recognise the I's participation in being.

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 to us by curiosity and desire. Thus, our consciousness is dispersed; little by little it loses its force and brightness; it is

¹ Part One of *The Total Presence*.

² The phrase *le moi* (literally, “the me”), which could also be translated as “self” or “ego”, reappears throughout the writings of Lavelle. Because “self” and “ego” have more exact correlates in French and because the sense of an operative subject is usually called for (rather than the sense of self as an object, i.e. as a “me”) I have opted for the term “the I”, however unusual this might seem in English.

assailed by too many reflections; it does not succeed in gathering them together because it is too far removed from the hearth³ that generates them.

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.

Yet it is difficult to isolate the [experience so that it can be considered] in its purity: a certain innocence is required, a spirit free of every interest and indeed of every preoccupation. To know that [the experience] exists is not yet to realise its concrete plenitude, not [yet] to actualise and possess it.

Most people⁴ are carried away and absorbed by events. They do not have enough leisure to delve into [the] direct link between being and the I which founds each of our acts and gives it value: rather, they suspect they do not feel it; it is never for them the object of a direct gaze or a clear consciousness; and if sometimes their thinking makes it blossom, it is only a passing contact, quickly effaced from memory.

[By contrast,] whoever has once, in a pure contemplation and *as the very act of life*, grasped the unity of being and the I can no longer dislodge it from his thought: the recollection of this contact renews its presence, which [goes on] moving and illumining his spirit. Let us not say that this experience is obvious and should be [effected] but that it is sterile if we do not immediately [take it further]: it contains everything we can know. As soon as it is granted, our life recovers its essential seriousness by renewing its ties with the heart of the real; our thinking – instead of becoming impoverished or empty, as we fear – acquires certitude and efficiency through discovering in each of its processes the identity of its being and the being to which it is applied.

II

THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT IS A COMPLICITY WITH BEING

To describe the terms of this first experience, through which the I inscribes itself in being⁵, and to discover the rapport that unites [these two], is to follow a dialectical process which, without adding anything to [the] experience, allows its richness and fecundity to be assessed. The stages of this research do not have a

³ The central or home region of being. See Glossary of Frequently Used Terms.

⁴ Literally, men.

⁵ A favourite phrase of Lavelle. See Glossary of Frequently Used Terms.

merely speculative interest, because the I shapes its own nature in the course of this permanent debate which consciousness (in order to arise and to develop) conducts with the *absolute being*. If the enterprise succeeds, we should feel at every step [of the way] the necessary character of the intellectual initiatives we carry out: for [their necessary character to become apparent], it is sufficient that we can effect them and first of all agree to try them.

For the necessity we have in [mind] is neither an external necessity that constrains us without satisfying us nor a purely logical necessity that, having as its goal a simple accord of notions (i.e. possibilities) is not a necessity inherent in being itself and [finds no] echo in the personality because it engages neither our will nor our love. These two sorts of necessity have a limited and derivative role: the first presupposes the emergence of sensibility and the second that of reason; they are founded on a distinction of faculties. But the necessity we will encounter here is anterior and more profound. It does not command our adherence from the outside, through either the passivity of the senses or the discipline of reason. It is born within us and does not merely involve a coincidence between our thinking and the essence of things but a true complicity between our thinking and the things themselves. It has ontological value because it accompanies an operation that is at once revelatory and formative of our very being. In [that realisation] it attests to the essential identity of pure being and our participatory being.⁶ The most profound acquaintance with being we can obtain consists of *our consent to be*.

Thus, for our analysis to be vindicated, it suffices that the operations we will describe are real operations, i.e. they can be carried out: but it is necessary that they can be [carried out]; and if they are, we are assured they will bring us the constant presence of being, and through it, all the light and joy that accompanies our activity [when it is] conscious of its essence and the perfection of its working.

Each [person] must try to grasp the nature of being by verifying the reality of certain spiritual acts that no one else can carry out for him. An author can only suggest and facilitate them, and [the author] who best fulfils his task knows how to make [the reader] forget: [how to] turn the reader's thinking [away] from [the author and] leave him in the presence of [him]-self, [thereby allowing] him to recognise, [as] a kind of personal discovery, a truth he had many times anticipated and never ceased to carry in his depths. All people⁷ contemplate the same being: it falls to each of them to be awakened to the thought [of it] by another [person and] to awaken [someone else] to it in turn. They are able to communicate with each other through their communication with the same object.

⁶ Literally, "participated being." This can also be translated "shared being". In any case the idea is that our being derives from a participation in the primary being and is not that primary being itself.

⁷ Men.

III

THE POSSESSION OF BEING IS THE AIM OF EVERY PARTICULAR ACTION

When we say that being is present to the I, and that the I participates in being, we are stating the unique theme of all human meditation. It is easy to see that this theme [holds] infinite riches. It is the foundation of all our particular knowings, which are enfolded in it [ahead of time]: but they are for us only the means of realising, in a kind of nakedness, the confrontation of our own inwardness⁸ with [that] of the universe.

It is obvious that the presence of being must be the object of an intuition⁹ and not a deduction, for we [can] find no higher principle from which [to derive it]. All deductions rest upon it, are accomplished and find their verification in it. But it is at the same time the goal of all our particular processes, all the operations of thought and will. For none of them [is] sufficient in itself: they have value for us only if, through their mediation, we can gain possession of [that] being where they are undone¹⁰ and thereafter rendered useless.

Doubtless we never succeed in grasping being except through one of its individual forms. Doubtless consciousness only ever gives us one of [being's] momentary states. Doubtless as well, in admitting that consciousness is capable of entering into relation with being, [it remains to be shown that such and such a state of consciousness coincides with such and such form of being]. But each of these observations – the truth of which [cannot be ignored] – involves the solution of a greater problem, impossible to pass over in silence: the problem of knowing what permits us to assign to different beings the single name “being”; to [relegate] different states [to] the same consciousness; and, through all the relations between such and such object and such and such state, to conceive that, between what-is and what we think, there can at once be a distinction and a connection.¹¹ [Of] all the particular questions we can ask ourselves, the problem of being and the I is the only one that profoundly interests us: we [come upon] it in every sense, press against it on every side, hoping finally to encounter some privileged situation in which, [putting behind us] all the fruitless attempts that have filled our lives, we will recover [life's meaning]¹² by [becoming] conscious of both its essence and its place in the universe.

⁸ Literally, intimacy. Another key term. See Glossary of Frequently Used Terms.

⁹ For Lavelle, intuition and the “presence of being” are basically identical.

¹⁰ Or “unravelled”. Lavelle frequently uses this word in reference to the heights of being where our usual faculties come apart, replaced by the simple but ineffable truth of being.

¹¹ There seem to be several problems here, not one. The author evidently sees them as aspects of the single problem named in the next sentence.

¹² Literally, its reason for being.

Outwardly, such a study makes no progress: it can only deepen, not expand. For [our departure is] the presence of being [which is as yet] only a confused experience, [in need of analysis]; this analysis calls for a series of operations in the course of which our personality will shape itself; and when [it discovers] its true essence, it will be reunited with being, this time in an intelligible act where the initial experience [finds] its explanation and fulfilment.¹³

The individual has such confidence in himself that, when he loses his way, it is always because the whims of his imagination or his taste for abstract constructions interfere with [his] maintaining a sufficiently close contact with reality. It is therefore necessary to keep returning to this experience of being from which we draw all our [building] materials and all our proofs. Nonetheless, it is a purely spiritual¹⁴ experience: it consists of certain operations of thought that must necessarily be adequate, since we exhaust their content in the moment we carry them out, and since we can verify their truth (i.e. their efficacy) each time [we do so]. And this pure experience is at the same time a creation, since the contemplation of being is indistinguishable from the movement through which our spirit engenders itself.

IV

THE DISCOVERY OF THE I ALREADY CONTAINS THE DISCOVERY OF BEING

We will never encounter the I in an isolated experience.¹⁵ What is primitively given to us is not a pure I, anterior to and independent of being, but the very existence of the I—better still, *the existing I*—which means that the experience of the I enfolds that of being and constitutes a kind of determination of it.

Moreover, the I can have an intuition of its own thought only by applying its thinking to an object. And this object, though related to that thinking, is not confused with [the latter's] operation: it makes it possible but is distinguished from it and even opposed to it in a certain sense. The object of thought and its act are [embraced within] the same being. [Each delimits it in a characteristic fashion.] It is even a condition of all participation that these two terms are first contrasted precisely so that they might later be brought into accord.

¹³ An important promise is made here: if readers agree to participate in such an analysis they will be fundamentally changed.

¹⁴ This may also be translated as “intellectual” or “mental”.

¹⁵ By itself, detached from being as a whole.

Also, the notion of being is very much clearer and more easily grasped than that of the I.¹⁶ For the I escapes us as soon as we try to pin it down: it is mobile and evanescent; it is constantly in progress and shapes itself only little by little; we always fear giving it too strict a definition that confuses it with one its constituents, or too large a definition that confuses it with one of the objects to which it applies itself but from which it remains distinct. Inconveniences of this sort do not arise where it is a question of being: for being is always completely present and there is not a single character or element of the real that can escape it, does not constitute an aspect of it and fall under its jurisdiction.

Let us now suppose that the experience of the I were primitive and independent. Then we are naturally invited to consider the I as the very origin of things; and [it would be required to provide the effort needed] to engender the total being from which it has, in thinking of itself, already borrowed its limited being. But that is to ask it to retrace the path it has just crossed. Now this enterprise [is] impossible: the I is henceforth condemned to remain confined within its own limits; if it has the illusion of engendering being, that is only because [being was instated] within it from the start.

It is not by [expanding] the I that we [reconnect it] with being – assuming we have [already] separated from it. [Rather,] if the I [springs] from the interior source of being, it [can] hope – by becoming more and more interior to itself – to discover the mystery of its own advent, the law according to which it must collaborate with the universal order and become the crafter of its individual destiny.

This does not prevent [those] spirits who have greater metaphysical depth than psychological affection for themselves from attaining the summit of that emotion we all feel in our encounter with being through the simple discovery of its presence more than through the consciousness of participating in it.¹⁷

¹⁶ A contestable point. It might be argued that a sense of self is preliminary to, or simultaneous with, whatever sense of being, and in fact the author himself speaks this way in later writings. Even the present document hints at the close relation of these terms.

¹⁷ Here and throughout this section Lavelle argues that the experience of being is more primordial than that of the I: the latter provides an *access* to being but remains secondary. Meanwhile, *Of the Act* affirms selfhood at the very deepest level of being; namely, in the form of an “Absolute Self” from which limited beings derive their individual egos. In that case it would be clear why the I-sense leads back to “the inmost source of being”. However, the Lavelle of *The Total Presence* seems to regard being as essentially impersonal.

V

KNOWLEDGE IS [ON THE SAME LEVEL AS] BEING

If we could encounter the I in an initial experience – simple and capable of being self-sufficient – we would understand without difficulty that the I [is] powerless to go beyond itself. Accordingly, whatever form of being would be [knowable] only in its relation to the I and being itself would necessarily become a state of the I, and consequently an appearance.

But then we implicitly suppose that the existence of every object of thought is an irradiation of the thinking subject's existence. However, if we do not forget that, for the thinking being to posit its own existence, [it must] be situated within [a] condition-less being, we will understand why the objects of thought it proposes in relation to itself will nonetheless enjoy the same plenary existence it had originally attributed to itself. We can say that it both communicates [existence] to them and is reciprocally indebted to them for its own existence, since without them its thought would find [no application]. As for the subject's manifestations, they have [as much] place within the absolute existence as the subject itself.

Indeed, in the logical order [of things], thought can appear only as a specification of being that enfolds it, [while] in the psychological order, being can reveal itself to us only by way of [a] thinking that limits it in order to put it within our reach.

It is obvious that there can be nothing in thought that is not in being, since outside of being there is nothing [whatever], and consequently no thought or any object of thought. But it is also obvious that being infinitely surpasses our thinking – if not every [possible] thought, at least our actual thought – precisely so that the latter can grow uninterruptedly rich. If it always retains a limited character, this is so as to have access to the totality of being by way of a personal initiative, [but that totality] must as a consequence constantly exceed it.

Thus, consciousness is distinguished from being, of which it expresses an aspect, only by the finite character of that very aspect it displays to us. Consciousness is interior to being and not the reverse. But if being can be attained only in connection with a consciousness, the necessity of positing the existence of this consciousness, as soon as it is revealed to us, places us straight away at the heart of being: the theory of knowledge has [the aim] of analysing this primitive fact, of disclosing [its] possibility and the conditions [relating to it]. We can already foresee that time, in which knowledge is spread out, should suffice to account for the way our thinking is related to being¹⁸, which

¹⁸ The author anticipates his book *Of Time and Eternity*. His comment also calls to mind the perspective of Heidegger's *Being and Time*.

nonetheless surpasses it: [time] obliges us to distinguish between our current thought (itself a being) and our thinking with intensity¹⁹, which differs from [the former] only through its exertion and which, if fully exerted, would coincide with pure being.

To summarise [the preceding discussion] with some simple concepts, we will say that being can in no degree be considered a mode of thinking, since thinking itself has to be defined, above all, as a mode of being. We too often imagine that thinking, in positing itself, posits the subjective character of whatever might be: but in order to posit itself it must first posit its existence, i.e. *the objectivity of its own subjectivity*.

Thus, knowledge participates in being yet offers us an imperfect and unfinished form of it. To explain it, [knowledge must] not fall back on a transcendent being that would remain for it decisively mysterious; [rather, it must] straightaway put itself on [being's] level by inscribing itself [in] being. In saying, as idealism does, that we know nothing but our representations, we implicitly evoke the idea of another order of reality that would be inaccessible to us: this is not, as we believe, [in order] to raise [the status of] representation; it is [in order] to constantly [humble representation] by imposing on it a radically illusory character. We can restore [representation's] true function only [by making it] a mode of being: it is competent to know [being] because it is distinguished from it by its limitation and not by its nature.

VI

THE PRESENCE OF BEING GIVES RISE TO OUR PECULIAR INTIMACY WITH BEING²⁰

If all knowledge and action [rest on] a fundamental experience that we can call an experience of presence, then the latter immediately displays a triple aspect as soon as we analyse it: it gives us, one after another²¹, the presence of being, then our presence to being, [and] finally our interiority with respect to being. By describing [the experience] in its pure form we are assured of [bringing] these three associated facets [to light].

In the first place, it grants us the *presence of being*: doubtless a still-undetermined being [as far as knowledge is concerned], i.e. not [an impoverished

¹⁹ Literally, with strength or power.

²⁰ As stated in the Foreword this important section gives Lavelle's early construction of the experience of being. Three distinct phases are identified. Later works will vary the sequence.

²¹ The phrase seems to describe not only a temporal order, from first to last, but a hierarchy of essence in which the "pure" presence of being is first in importance.

being]—since, there where it [stands], it is necessarily complete—but [an undivided [being] that makes all subsequent divisions possible. Will we say that, in order to be known, it already supposes [an] I to which it is in the first place [attached]²²? But this I is precisely discovered only through an analysis of being, where [the I can be contrasted to being] solely on the condition that it [is considered] part [of it]: indeed, the originality of the individual subject is to envelop being as a subject solely on the condition of being enveloped by it as an individual. Hence, thinking is a way for the I to recognise its insertion in being rather than [a way] to engender [it], as this thinking itself supposes. The latter [provides us constant proof] of the presence of being; only, because it is involved in time, it seems to demand at every moment that we consider its peculiar operation as an absolute beginning, a first revelation, from which the simultaneous genesis of knowledge and being again becomes possible. It is an illusion of this sort that allowed the Cartesian argument “I think, therefore I am” to be made into the foundation of idealism, whereas thinking appears [in our discussion] as a determination of existence, and [existence is not] a product of thought. Otherwise, with existence being only an idea, there would no longer be any existence of the idea. Hence, there is no truly primitive factor other than that which, wholly present through every operation of thought, permits the latter (without itself undergoing any enrichment) indefinitely to enrich the changeable I that draws its sustenance from it.²³

In a second step, the presence of being becomes *our presence to being*. And without doubt this second phase of the initial experience was [already] implicated in the first, [though] not yet distinguished in it.²⁴ Being present to being is only [a matter of positing] a reference-point without which being would not be recognised. With our presence to being, the notion of the I [enters the picture], though we do not yet know what it is. It is only what it might become. It is essentially unstable and always on the path of growth. At [its] origin, it expresses no more than a tendency and a possibility. Also, it [has] to rely on a being whose superabundant presence is for it the pledge of an indefinite development. We further understand why the discovery of the I logically precedes that of its content. As we are going to [see] in a third step, this content is the effect of a choice, and indeed of an appropriation indefinitely carried out by the I at the breast of the total being, thanks to which it endlessly and without respite constitutes and renews its peculiar nature. But from the moment we distinguish [between] the presence of being and our presence to [it], we

²² Literally, suspended—as a kind of pendant.

²³ The complex paragraph gives further reasons for supposing that the I is subsidiary to the primordial sense of being. The author is clearly determined to show that, while the I-sense is intimately related to being, the individual ego cannot be the source of being.

²⁴ An important qualification. For Lavelle the experience of the presence of being is like a moment of awakening in which nothing is clear as yet. Then gradually I come to myself. Nonetheless I must have been in some sense there from the start.

understand very well that being can be constantly present to us without [our being] constantly present to it.

The same experience includes a third degree: for after having recognised our presence to being, we still need to recognise *our interiority with respect to being*, and for that [to occur we need] to realise that the two preceding observations are one with it – or again, that the being whose total presence we had discovered and the being we have just attributed to ourselves are single, indeed, [are] being considered in two different aspects – or finally, that the very notion of being is univocal²⁵. Indeed, our interiority to being can only be a participation, and the latter is only possible if the I is a thinking [which is] homogeneous with the very being it ponders.²⁶ As a consequence, things must take place as if it were first necessary to posit thinking in general (i.e. the reality of everything thinkable) under the [heading] of “being”, and to immediately grasp within it, under the [heading] of “I”, the current [situation] – without which it would be impossible for us to employ this thinking in an individual and limited form. An entirety that is present to us and to which we are present, [albeit] unable to actualise its formless presence [in] distinct states except through stages – because this reciprocal act of presence must be the work of our finite nature – such are the terms of the problem, which [can only be resolved] by ensuring our intimacy with being through a thought that is in fact always contained in being, and rightly always contains it.

Without doubt the three steps we have just distinguished are [of-a-piece]: being is first revealed to the I which, discovering itself, must perforce inscribe itself in being. But it is necessary [that each step retain] its original character if we want the formation of personality – instead of appearing as an autonomous creation – [to appear in] its true sense, which is always experienced as a participation.

VII

INTIMACY WITH BEING DOES NOT DIFFER FROM INTIMACY WITH SELF

The I's presence to itself, or intimacy, is not different from presence to being. In fact the I has no [innate] content that is not [a] content of being; rather, this content is precisely a perspective on the total being, such that the two

²⁵ Has the same meaning in every instance, so that the being of God for example is not essentially different from our own.

²⁶ Much of *The Total Presence* is devoted to the proposition that the thought of being is adequate to its object.

operations – [that] by which the I is contrasted with being and [that by which it is] included within it – [become identical].²⁷

It is, therefore, an error to think that I impart an illusory character to being by [considering] it to penetrate my own inwardness. For the acquisition of intimacy, or the discovery of the I, consists precisely in its [plumbing the depths] of being itself. Being cannot be distinguished from universal intimacy. If [nothing can be] exterior to it, nothing can be a simple spectacle for it. Also, it must be [indistinct from] the exertion of a pure activity: and the I has opportunities to encounter [this] only when, instead of allowing itself to be dissipated by the play of appearances, it concentrates its reflection on the secret invisible principle that simultaneously gives itself both movement and repose.²⁸

Though the I's interiority is an adequate expression of its interiority to being, and [is] consequently a participation in the total interiority of being, it is clear that [participation] cannot exhaust the latter. For our consciousness expresses only one of the possibilities for development contained in the total being – yet they all give birth to [this or that] consciousness. Nonetheless, in each consciousness, the experience of being is by nature exclusively spiritual²⁹: and [the fact] that this consciousness is obliged to attribute being to itself [qualifies] it – [in] deploying its action on the terrain of being – [to discover being] and at the same time [to demonstrate] its competence to know it. [Hence follow] these apparently contradictory conclusions, which nonetheless [amount] to the same idea: that no consciousness can pass beyond its individual horizon (though it can indefinitely push it back) and that all consciousnesses can nonetheless enter into relation with one another by borrowing symbols from their common experience and by deepening the feeling of their common origin through an internal conversion.

But being's universal intimacy imparts its true meaning to that presence through which being is first revealed to us, and allows [the resolution] of a problem [raised by it]. For we could claim that there is nothing more to the presence of being than the presence of the subject to itself; or again, the presence of the subject to its peculiar states. But then why does the subject attribute limits to itself?³⁰ Why, in other words, can it not straightaway actualise and become conscious of its peculiar presence to all that is? [From another perspective], why [is it unable] to conceive of what surpasses it except in the form of presence for another [being], i.e. a presence [that is] like [the presence] it grants itself but [that] is nonetheless refused to it? The very experience of perception's spreading-out in time, without which it would be impossible for us to represent our I as distinct from the total being, already suggests to us a possible presence [that is]

²⁷ In other words the I and being are one, but in a mysterious fashion whereby the I appears to diverge from being.

²⁸ The author here touches on the inmost *act* of being which will become the focus of his later philosophy.

²⁹ Subtle, intellectual, inward.

³⁰ To my knowledge Lavelle never addresses the possibility that such limits might be an avoidance of the solipsist's aloneness.

infinitely vaster than the portion of reality to which our consciousness is actually present. This sweeping possible presence would become a real and simultaneous presence for a thinking much more powerful than our own. And one would then be able to conceive of the total being's presence as indistinguishable from [an] infinite thought.

In recognising the ideal possibility of giving itself whatever presence is [currently denied it], the I claims right-of-access to the entire domain of being. Thereafter we gain nothing by claiming that absolute presence is only an extension of subjective presence, for that comes down to considering the latter as a limitation on the universal presence. [It is the same as maintaining] that presence does not naturally change when its content grows. Thus, instead of [conceding, along] with subjectivism, that we cannot go out of ourselves, it is legitimate to affirm that *we can penetrate everywhere*, precisely because, being interior to being, we somehow have access to all portions of its immensity.

VIII

CONSCIOUSNESS IS A DIALOGUE³¹ WITH BEING

Being must be defined as the absolute presence. [To deny this] absolute presence would be [to place] the total being, as well as finite being, in [the realm of] time³², which [is] doubtless an illegitimate step, at least if time is a determination of being, and if as a result we [concede] that time is interior to being and not [the reverse]: time is merely the condition without which [a] finite being could not [exercise] its independence, fix its limits and become the crafter of its nature.

Furthermore, being's total presence is already implicated in the simple experience the I [has] of its own existence. For despite the spreading-out of its states in time, the I is always present to itself, or in other words, acquires existence only by inscribing itself, so to speak, at [every] instant in an identical presence.

But we will insist that all presence is mutual and therefore supposes a distinction between two pre-given forms of existence which [are then reunited] in a relationship. However, if we try to conceive of each of these forms in isolation and ahead of the idea of an absolute presence, [we will not] succeed. The absolute presence [is] precisely the universal foundation of all those separate existences which will become mutual, actual and possible presences within it. Because [a] finite being can only represent things under the aspect of diversity, the absolute presence must necessarily become for it [an] omnipresence, or *the*

³¹ In accordance with Lavelle's dialectical approach to philosophy.

³² As may be gathered, the author regards the total being as eternal.

unanimous presence — [a fitting phrase to express] the spiritual collaboration of all particular beings in the maintenance of the total being, though the activity they put into play for that, far from emanating from each of them [alone], is bound to [trace] back to the source that gave it birth.

Since presence [manifests itself in the form of duality], we [can] say that the I is present to itself, i.e. that its states must be present to it. Thus, the life of the I is incessantly divided from and reunited with itself.³³ But we can establish between being and its different forms the same rapport [that exists] between the I and its various states. [Accordingly,] we will also be able to say that being as a whole is in a certain sense present to itself, i.e. [if we consider] this being as made up of parts, the parts are always present to the all, and the all — though always present to the parts — can be only virtually [present] to the consciousness of each of them. Whoever will meditate on the sense of these formulations will see in them [a concordance between] the exigencies of logic and the givens of psychological experience.

If, without better determining the nature of present being, someone [has a qualm] about claiming that the wholly pure presence can be only a simple relationship, we will respond that the finite subject is indeed shaped [by a] relation that must place within [its] reach the nature of a being it otherwise cannot know: yet the presence of the latter gives the relation its very fundament. If someone insists in maintaining that the idea of [an] absolute presence cannot be different from the idea of universal relationship, we will indeed concede that being is indistinguishable from the sum of all the relations that will ever be established within it: but to posit [the sum's] absolute presence is to hold that the living acts through which all these relations are created must demand from it, on the one hand, the principle of their efficacy and their accord, and on the other hand, the condition that renders them possible and requires that they never remain in a state of mere [possibility].

Therefore, instead of defining consciousness according to the opposition between subject and object — which risks inviting us sometimes, as in realism, to make the object (contradictorily) a reality exterior to consciousness, and sometimes, as in idealism, to make it (paradoxically) a simple state of the I — we must define it as a debate, a continual yet infinitely varied dialogue between [what is] individual and [what is] universal [in] our nature. Through this dialogue, being reveals its presence to the I; [beyond that] the dialogue gives birth to two interlocutors, simultaneously opposing them to each other and uniting them; they do not exist ahead of [the dialogue] but only in and through it. And though there is an inequality between them, and though one is like a

³³ Lavelle here regards self-knowledge as a kind of feedback—hence his insistence on the circular and dialogic character of self-knowledge. Yet there must be some stable centre to which feedback refers, as well as some innate awareness of it, however dim. And indeed many statements in *Of the Act* affirm a knowledge-in-the-subject which precedes the knowledge of objects, states and events, particularly where volition is concerned. I take it that self-knowledge can occur on two levels: as worldly feedback and as consciousness-in-the-act.

master and the other like a disciple, the science of the disciple is not different from that of the master: it is both borrowed and personal. It differs from the master's only in its lesser extent. In a sense the disciple even creates the master, and the infinity of real and possible disciples make this science universal: the latter is realised only in the totality of minds, though each mind is in some sense interior to it.

IX

THE PRESENCE OF BEING ILLUMINES THE MOST HUMBLE APPEARANCE

No thought can surpass in force, no sentiment attain in profundity, that perfect experience where thought, sentiment and being cease to be [distinguishable] because we are faced with a real presence. When this presence is granted, the effort of knowing has reached its final [degree], our life has found its essence and meaning: outside this presence everything resides in [a state of] suspense for us; in the end everything blames us for our spirit's feebleness and the poverty of our condition. And if someone maintains that what interests us is not this sheer presence but the nature of the present object, we will call upon the testimony of all those for whom this essential metaphysical experience is familiar to [affirm] that presence alone [brings into relief] the character of every object; that outside of presence the object is only a shadow, a dream or a wish; that by contrast all objects share [a single] dignity within it, because each of them reveals its participation in being and because, by way of this participation, we communicate with the entirety of being in its indivisible plenitude. Now how could this communication not have infinitely more value than the possession of all particular objects? How could it not impart to the latter its inimitable peak of perfection?

It is true: someone could argue that, if the experience we describe is both universal and constant, if it is involved in the apprehension of every object, and if it is inseparable from the operation of every subject, it is useless to insist with so much force and so much [well-meaning] on an initiative [that is] so common, so primitive and so inevitable. Moreover, is it not [natural] to think that the differences between men with respect to knowledge, action or happiness depend on the particular content of [their] experience rather than on the identity of its form? We believe [its content] is nothing. For, here as throughout, it is a question of the use we need to make of our naturally mobile and dispersed attention. Nonetheless, though the experience in question is always current, it is most often in some way confused and implicit: it constantly tends to escape us; and it is precisely up to us to render it distinct and to hold it fast.

However, we can say that people³⁴ generally do the exact opposite. They are chiefly preoccupied with filling-in presence as if it were an empty frame. Thus, they attach themselves to the present object rather than to this object's presence. Yet if that object [becomes] for us purely the means of enjoying the presence of being, it grants us, no matter what, the reality of the all, since it is detached from it only [as] one of its aspects. By contrast, if presence is only a means of gaining possession of such an object, nothing will ever satisfy us: for in becoming an end for us this particular and fleeting object cannot fail to deceive us: also, it immediately turns us toward other particular fleeting objects like itself and makes us relentlessly oscillate between impatient desire and bitter regret.

It is a familiar observation: there is no situation, however humble, that does not permit [a person]³⁵ to provide himself with the highest spiritual destiny; on the other hand, regardless of the expanse upon which his actions shine, regardless of [how long he lives], he can remain inwardly confused and impotent. Neither the greatness nor the smallness of the visible events in which he is involved contributes to [the growth or diminishment] of his true [well-being], which resides in the intimacy of his contact with being. Moreover, [such] events [are] large or small only according to the scale of our ambition: they leave us equally discontent if we are merely [concerned with] what distinguishes them – i.e. with their apparent reality – [or] if we are unfit to grasp in them the presence of the all, whose interior [is everywhere accessible]. But [these events] must, therefore, cease to be [mere] things for us in order to become instruments of an operation that permits us indefinitely to sharpen and deepen the feeling of our communion with being and of our filiation, so to speak, with respect to it. Thus, we see by way of a kind of paradox that indifference to every object gives each object its absolute value.

³⁴Literally, men, humankind.

³⁵ Literally, man.