



LAVELLE, Louis, *L'existence et la valeur, leçon inaugurale et résumés des cours au Collège de France (1941-1951)*

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Hommage à Jean Ladrière

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Louis LAVELLE, *L'existence et la valeur, leçon inaugurale et résumés des cours au Collège de France (1941-1951)*. Paris, Documents et Inédits du Collège de France, 1991, 149 pages.

December 2, 1941, the occasion of Louis Lavelle's inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, must have been one of the darkest days in the history of his country. A year and a half after the fall of France in a cheerless Paris winter marked by shortages of fuel and food, the first glimmers of hope had yet to appear.

Lavelle set out to remind his audience of the main lines of French philosophy since Descartes. He paid tribute to his immediate predecessors, Édouard Le Roy and Henri Bergson, as men who represented the essentials of that tradition. But he singled out Nicolas Malebranche as "perhaps our greatest philosopher". Malebranche had "less glory" than Descartes, said Lavelle, but he deserved the place of honour because "his whole thought is an uninterrupted traffic between the self and God".

To justify this judgement he offered his own perspective on the history of philosophy and offered his own special theory about what is perennially true in it. Since the time of Bishop Agostino Steuco, the Vatican librarian whose *Perenni Philosophia*, published in 1540, seems to have originated the term "perennial philosophy", it was essentially sound doctrine which was thought to make a philosophy perennial. Modern Thomists emphasised the development of Aristotelianism rather than Steuco's Platonism, but they continued to emphasise the continuity of doctrine.

Lavelle insists that the way in which philosophical systems are related to one another demands a different thesis. He begins by noticing that all philosophy has as its object the whole of being. Philosophies — or at any rate what Lavelle thought of as serious philosophies — do not differ from one another in scope. For they are all in some way about everything. And their details are relatively insignificant. Thus philosophy does not progress like the sciences in which new discoveries extend the scope of the subject

and add more facts. Nor is there an historicist answer. Lavelle insists that "If one neglects what attaches to their epoch, that is to say their language, mores and the state of their knowledge, and if one searches for the indivisible centre of their thought, and their deepest intention, Plato, St. Thomas and Descartes are our contemporaries."

Yet philosophers do differ. They differ, Lavelle says, in their "profondeur", by which he means both their depth and their profundity. How are we to measure this? The greater part of his lectures at the Collège de France, lectures whose bare outlines are included in this book, were to be devoted to the examination of the history of philosophy in an effort to answer to this question. But the main clues are to be found in the inaugural lecture itself.

Profundity has to do with the ways in which the human being can grasp being itself. Descartes' chief "glory", Lavelle says, was his realization that the principle of certainty is to be found in the grasping of the self by itself. But Malebranche, in associating this insight with the knowledge of God, discovered the source of its generality and the basis of its true insight into being. Others, Maine de Biran, Ravaisson, Lachelier and Bergson — but especially Lachelier — sharpened the notion of spiritual activity which makes reality intelligible. And, indeed, Édouard Le Roy underlined the link between Descartes and Malebranche in insisting that "the problem of God is the problem of the human spirit" and in insisting that God appears in our experience as the source of our unease.

This unease is a personal thing and, therefore, though these philosophers offer us help and direction, philosophy, for Lavelle, is basically a personal meditation. The argument — partly stated clearly and partly only implied here — is that, if philosophy is what sees reality whole, as being, then its search is the search for the unity in things. This unity cannot come from the plurality of things in themselves, but must come from thought. Lavelle suggests (though he does not mention Aristotle here) that what ultimately unifies is thought, and that, to see the unity,

we must, like Aristotle's God, think about thinking. Philosophy is, therefore, always what is "present and personal".

In these terms we can see how philosophies differ in "profondeur". For one can see thought in its most immediate form and one can see it in its most universal form. Finally one might see, like Malebranche, how the two must be conjoined.

Lavelle remained faithful to his project. As the war drew to its close in 1944-45 (a year when there was shooting in the streets of Paris, some close to the Collège, as the little memorial plaques testify), Lavelle was deeply engaged in expounding the Platonic notions of participation, exploring how all things might be linked to the forms — but he was interested even more than Plato was in the ways in which this linkage could be manifested in human consciousness. The next year in the first of the two lectures he gave each week, he tried to press this linkage even further and the sub-title "l'émotion d'exister" appears in the prospectus for his Tuesday lectures. The second lecture each week returned to Descartes.

In 1946-47, having laid his foundation with extensive earlier lectures on Plato and Descartes, Lavelle tackled Malebranche directly. What interested him most was the way in which Malebranche transformed Descartes' innate ideas into something which is literally the activity of God. The next year he followed these notions with a further analysis of "the world of ideas", this time exploring the relations between the developing strands of Platonism and the notion of value — an issue about which Malebranche has much to say but which remains puzzling. But, again, the second series of lectures featured Descartes, though Leibniz was added this time. In 1948-49, not surprisingly, Descartes and Leibniz were displaced by Spinoza. In 1949-50 Lavelle addressed the different kinds of value in one series of lectures. But the itch to explore Platonism and neo-Platonism took him back to Plotinus in the second series. Interestingly, Aristotle took over the second series in the final year, 1950-51 and, of course, the lectures had much to do with the intellect, the problem of the way in which form appears in nature, and the ultimate questions of individuation.

These resumé, brief though they are, give us a new insight into Lavelle's mind and into the way in which he saw himself within the history of philosophy. Together with the inaugural lecture, they provide, in fact, an argument for a very distinct kind of idealism. It takes its shape from the notion of thought

as what unifies and of what thought stands against as essentially — as he says in the resumé of the last lectures — something negative. As such this idealism provides a ground for the reflective method in philosophy and makes a case for an understanding of philosophy as something within which there can, indeed, be progress, but which, nonetheless, is personal in the sense that it always requires the active participation of the knowing subject.

Lavelle has not been at the forefront of recent philosophical thought though the mention of his name at a philosophical gathering surprisingly often brings a positive response from someone for whom reading Lavelle is a happy memory. The inaugural lecture has been available since it was first given, but the addition of the course resumé gives it a new depth and should arouse some sympathetic interest. The bibliography appended to the volume will make it easier to look at Lavelle's world in its full context.

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Droits. Revue française de théorie juridique. N^{os} 15 et 16: L'État. Paris, PUF, 1992.

Les deux derniers numéros de la revue *Droits* sont consacrés au difficile concept d'État. Le problème est aujourd'hui particulièrement grave puisque l'État doit en effet faire face à l'internationalisation de la puissance politique et que sa légitimité est parfois mise en question. De surcroît, la notion d'État de droit, si souvent invoquée de nos jours avec plus ou moins de pertinence, est loin d'être aussi simple et claire (cf. le très bel article de Michel Troper) que certains le croient ou feignent de le croire. Aussi est-il tout à fait appréciable que les auteurs des dix-huit contributions rassemblées par les deux volumes de la revue aient, selon l'expression suggestive de Denis Alland, « "retourné" l'État dans tous les sens un peu comme on le fait d'un objet qu'on hésite à acquérir ou dont on se demande à quoi il peut bien servir ». En tout cas, les divers articles montrent la silhouette polymorphe que prend l'État: selon que l'on s'interroge sur ses origines (Jacques Ellul), qu'on en situe le concept dans une perspective historique (Jean Beauté), que l'on scrute l'histoire des idées pour y capter à la fois sa manifestation et son essence (Jean-François Kervegan, Anton Schütz), que l'on se place dans l'optique du droit constitutionnel (Marie-Joëlle Redor), du droit civil (Jean Carbonnier) ou pénal (Denis Salas) ou encore qu'on le situe dans les pers-