

WITH BEING-WITH?

Notes on Jean-Luc Nancy's Rewriting of *Being and Time*

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In this article, I would simply like to offer some expository and final critical remarks on Jean-Luc Nancy's recent book, *Etre singulier pluriel* (Nancy 1996). I would like to focus in particular on the central theme of this book, namely the concept of "being-with" (*être-avec*), which is obviously the French rendering of Martin Heidegger's *Mitsein*. Let me begin by summarizing the admirable philosophical ambition of *Etre singulier pluriel* in three reading hypotheses.

(I) What Nancy is attempting is what he calls "a co-existential analytic," an existential ontology of being-with which has the ambition of being a first philosophy, *une philosophie première* (13). For Nancy, "It is thus a 'first philosophy' that is necessary, in the canonical sense of the term, that is to say an ontology" (45). Of course, first philosophy (*philosophia protè*) is how Aristotle defines the area of inquiry later called "metaphysics". Although—and here an initial question can be raised—Nancy's metaphysics will ostensibly be a non-metaphysical metaphysics; that is, a metaphysics that respects the severe qualifications that the later Heidegger placed on the possibility of metaphysical thinking. Of course, one might ask: how exactly is first philosophy possible in light of Heidegger's account of the history of being? That is, how is it possible to conceive of a non-metaphysical first philosophy? Isn't this simply a contradiction in terms? A subsidiary but related question could also be raised: what exactly is the difference between metaphysics and ontology given that metaphysics is defined by Heidegger in complete fidelity to Aristotle as onto-theo-logy?

For Nancy—and rightly—the last great first philosophy in the European tradition was Heidegger's project of fundamental ontology. It is this project that needs to be remade for determinate and hopefully fairly evident historical and political reasons. Nancy writes, "il faut refaire l'ontologie fondamentale . . . à partir de l'*être-avec*" ("it is necessary to

remake fundamental ontology . . . starting from *being-with*") (45). This brings me to my second hypothesis.

(II) What Nancy is proposing is a rewriting of Heidegger's *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1962), where the concept of *Mitsein* would be essential (or co-essential) and originary. Nancy writes in a footnote, with another *il faut*, "Il faut réécrire *Sein und Zeit*" ("*Sein und Zeit* must be rewritten") (118n). Obviously, what compels Nancy's need for this rewriting, as with so much of Nancy's work, is the question of *the political*. Namely, that *Being and Time* must be rewritten because of the political fate of the project of fundamental ontology and the existential analytic of Dasein. That is to say, *Being and Time* must be rewritten without the *autarkic telos* and tragic-heroic *pathos* of the thematic of authenticity, where, in Paragraph 74, *Mitsein* is determined in terms of "the people" and its "destiny". Although this would have to be explained in much greater detail, this is what Lacoue-Labarthe calls Heidegger's "archi-fascism" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1993, 9; cf. 1997, 149).¹ If the awful political pathos of the thematics of authenticity is to be avoided, then *Being and Time*, it would seem, must be rewritten from the perspective of the inauthenticity of the *Mitsein*-analytic. Nancy would appear to be claiming—and incidentally, I completely agree with him—that the genuine philosophical radicality of *Being and Time* lies in the existential analytic of inauthenticity. What has to be recovered from the wreckage of Heidegger's political commitment is his phenomenology of everyday life, the sheer banality of our contact (*cotoïment*) with the world and with others, what Nancy calls "the extremely humble layer of our everyday experience" (Nancy 1996, 27).

(III) Thus, what is entailed by the second hypothesis is that the question of co-existence becomes *the* ontological question. The question of Being is (or, as we will see below, "must be" with another *il faut*) equiprimordial with the question of being-with. Therefore, one might say—and once again, I agree—that the *Seinsfrage* loses some of its autonomy. The *Seinsfrage* has to be posed and pursued through the *Mitseinsfrage*. To express this thought in terms that Nancy always places between scare quotes (doubtless because of the Heideggerian or Arendtian worries about the decline of the *polis* into the *socius*), "The question of what we still see as a 'question of social being' should in fact constitute *the*

¹ For the definitive version of Lacoue-Labarthe's understanding of the relation between philosophy and politics in Heidegger, see (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989).

ontological question" (78). Thus, the question of the meaning of Being—and by implication Heidegger's later questions of the truth and history of Being and the entire thinking of *das Ereignis*—must take root in and be referred to the question of the "socius". *Being and Time* must be rewritten as a "social" ontology.

In the light of this third hypothesis, I would like to consider briefly the political context for *Etre singulier pluriel*, a context that is dramatically apparent from the untitled opening page of the book where Nancy compiles an extraordinary list of those who are in struggle or oppressed across the world—an oppression for which the name of Sarajevo is an emblem (11–12).

The Withdrawal of the Political: Situationism, Law, Critique

Nancy, in the wake of the collapse of the various communisms and socialisms, argues that what should be retained is the urgency that communism maintained within it: the urgency to say "we," to say "we" to ourselves when neither a God nor a leader can say it for us. That is, to say "we" when we have witnessed the withdrawal of what Nancy calls "the theologico-political," i.e., the possibility of a religious legitimation of community. For Nancy, to say "we" is for existence to reclaim its due or to find its condition in co-existence.

Nancy's thesis here is that the collapse of communism only brings to light all the more clearly the *sense* (perhaps Nancy's master word [see Nancy 1993]) that underpins it. Or rather, the collapse of socialism reveals *the making of sense* that is implicit within the socialist project. Nancy writes, "What Marx understood by alienation . . . was ultimately the alienation of sense" (Nancy 1996, 62). For Nancy, communism is a *praxis of sense*,² a making of sense by us, by the "we" that we are, that is our being. What would seem to be implicit here is a fairly traditional secularization thesis (collapse or withdrawal of the theologico-political, the death of God), namely, that in modernity sense has to be something made by us, by the "we", because we cannot depend upon God or our political leaders to make sense for us. Thus, communism is the recognition within modernity of the fact that the question of sense has devolved upon the "we", upon finite humanity, and that the question of being-with is *the* ontological question that requires a political settlement.

Therefore, for Nancy, our *fin-de-siècle* disenchantment does not result

² Nancy also uses precisely these words in describing Hegel's concept of philosophy in (Nancy 1997, 15, 80). See also the discussion of the "we" in relation to Hegel (113–17).

in political cynicism or liberalism (“that cynicism called ‘liberalism’” [64]), but rather points us all the more powerfully to the question of what constitutes “us” today, who “we” are today, that is, the question of “social being.” In other words, the question of co-existence, the ontological question of the political (*le politique*) arises at the moment of the evaporation of the possibility of a polity that would incarnate such a being-with. This hopefully familiar logic of what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy have since the early 1980’s called *le retrait du politique* should be noted here, i.e., the question of the political (*le politique*) can be retraced or retreated because politics itself (*la politique*) has withdrawn. It is by virtue of the collapse of communism that the question of being-with can be raised, and not despite that fact.

In Nancy’s work, as I have tried to show elsewhere, the withdrawal of the political raises the question of *figure* and *figuration* (*Gestalt* and *Gestaltung*) (cf. Critchley 1993, 73–93; Sparks 1997, xx–xv). That is, the withdrawal of the theologico-political in modernity—as modernity—means nothing else but the withdrawal of every possible figure for community. This means that what is lacking is a means of *identification* (in the Freudian sense) for being-with, given that previous forms of identification for the political reconstitution of the social have become degraded: people, nation, race, party, leader, proletariat or whatever. In Claude Lefort’s sense, the place of power has become “un lieu vide.” The vast question here is whether being-with can do without some figure, without some form of identification, without some form of what Nancy would call “civil religion.” Nancy’s responds to this question with his concept of *comparution*, which I shall analyze in detail below.

In Nancy’s *Zeitdiagnose*, as a consequence of the collapse of the theologico-political, the withdrawal of the political occurs in two dominant forms: (a) into law, and (b) into a specular self-representation.

(a) In relation to law, the theologico-political can retreat into the formal abstraction of law, into that cynicism that Nancy calls liberalism. But it can also retreat into an ethics premised upon the transcendental unrepresentability of law, that is to say, the radical alterity of law or the law as the law of the other. This would presumably be Nancy’s critique of Levinasian ethics, but equally of Lyotard’s reading of Kant, or Lacan’s ethics of psychoanalysis, that is, to what I have attempted elsewhere to describe as the structure of ethical experience. One might note in passing Nancy’s apparent opposition to Lacanian psychoanalysis, where he writes, “In a remarkable way, it is here that one sometimes sees how psychoanalysis seeks to conform to a substantialist and

authoritarian vision of society” (Nancy 1996, 68, cf. 29). I will come back to these themes below where I detect a certain communistic flattening or neutralizing of transcendence in Nancy’s work. However, it should be noted that, for Nancy, it is not a question of opposing law, it is rather a question of

“doing justice” both to the singular plural of the origin . . . [and], as regards law, to what might be termed the “originary anarchy” or the very origin of law in what is “legitimately without law” (*de droit sans droit*): existence unjustifiable as such (69).

It is thus a question of doing justice to an existence in itself unjustifiable, of deriving law from originary anarchy, a thought which strangely recalls Levinas’s analyses in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Levinas 1974).

(b) The second form of the withdrawal of the theologico-political is in specular self-representation, where society implodes into a specular mirror play, namely Guy Debord’s society of the spectacle, where a completely commodified society collapses into the radical immanentism of an auto-simulation or auto-dissimulation, into the society criticized by situationism in the 1960’s. For Nancy, and there are strongly autobiographical elements to his remarks here as he was closely connected with the Situationist International in Paris and Strasbourg, situationism appears as “la dernière ressource critique dans un monde sans critique” (“the final critical resource in a world without critique”) (70). However, the Situationist critique, although necessary, was available for complete recuperation because of its metaphysical assumptions. That is, situationism criticizes the society of the spectacle, a society based on entirely imaginary constructions, but it does two things as a consequence: first, it attempts to replace this capitalist imaginary with a concept of creative imagination that remains tributary to a romantic conception of genius. Second, it understands appearance as mere appearance, namely as that which is opposed to an authentic reality or presence. Thus, the situationist critique remains unwaveringly obedient to the Platonist tradition, opposing an order of essential truth (“desire” and “imagination”) to the false order of the spectacle.

Bringing together the two strands of the above critique in Hegelian fashion, Nancy’s claim is that the two forms of the withdrawal of the theologico-political collapse into an ontology of same and other which is either: (a) the uncritical submission to the unrepresentable alterity of law, or (b) the finally traditional sameness of the spectacle and its critique. We thus require, according to Nancy, a different ontology of

being-with-one-another, a co-ontology of being-with that will provide the basis for a form of critique.

A guiding and vital concern in the central pages of *Être singulier pluriel* concerns this question of the possibility of critique and the extent to which all previous forms of critique—with situationism as the last great example—have remained “. . . paradoxically and unconsciously subject to a classical model of reality opposed to appearance . . .” (75). This means that the lesson has not been learnt from Nietzsche’s critique of Platonism, namely that when the true world becomes a fable, then the world of appearance, which only made sense in opposition to reality, also disappears. And if this so, then the meta-question that this opens is whether the critical attitude is possible at all, and if it is not then what alternatives are available apart from uncritical resignation.

In the light of the above questions, the lesson of critique is that we are confronted with an appeal to provide the sense of being-in-common according to what is in-common or the “with,” but not in accordance with some metaphysical essence of the common. To put it crudely, what is required is a thinking of the in-common or the being of the social which enables critique while also being cognizant of the Nietzschean and Heideggerian critiques of metaphysics, that is, the critiques of metaphysical critique. For Nancy, this thinking will be that of *comparution*. To translate this into Anglo-American terms, one might say that Nancy is after a post-foundationalist conception of intersubjectivity that will provide a non-essentialist “basis” for a critical ethics and politics.

Comparution

La Comparution (Nancy 1991) is the title of an earlier, shorter and much more polemical book from 1991 that I discuss elsewhere (see Critchley 1993). In everyday French, the verb *comparaître* means to appear in a court of law, and it is this sense of the word that is employed, for example, by Levinas when he writes in *Autrement qu’être*, “La façon dont j’apparais est une comparution” (Levinas 1974, 77). However, for Nancy, *comparution* has the etymological sense of an appearing-with, although the notion of “appearing” needs heavy qualification for good Nietzschean and Heideggerian reasons. That is, for Nancy, the primordial requirement for ontology, as first philosophy, must henceforth be that the concept of being should not be presupposed in the manner of classical metaphysics (as in Aristotle or Aquinas, say). Rather being is simply the being of that which exists, it is not the presupposition for that existence. Now, existence always exists in the plural, it is the being-in-common of

many. Thus, the meaning of the phrase *être singulier pluriel* is that *being one can only be understood on the basis of plurality within being, the singularity of being is plural*. In other words, as I said in my third reading hypothesis above, the question of social being is *the* ontological question.

Nancy suggests, a little hopefully perhaps, that we are living through a new Copernican revolution (Nancy 1996, 78), which is neither the cosmological revolution of Copernicus, nor the critical revolution of Kant, nor the turn towards the unconscious in Freud, but a revolution at the level of social being. This revolution would be, and this is an interesting but question-begging formulation, “la mise à nu de la réalité sociale—du *réel* même de l’être-social—dans, par et comme la symbol-icité qui la constitue” (“the laying bare of social reality—of the *real* itself of social being—in, through and as the symbolicity that constitutes it”) (79). Nancy would appear to be claiming that not only is the reality of the social revealed by symbolicity, or the symbolic order, but that the latter also constitutes the former. This would seem to imply that the real is the effect of the symbolic, and that the former has no meaning outside the latter. Nancy qualifies his use of symbolic and imaginary (79–80), but the claim that social reality is laid bare “in, by, and through the symbolicity that constitutes it” entails that “society” is understood (as distinct from situationism) as being nothing other than the appearance of itself, and not as referring back to a background of being, essence or whatever. So, appearance does not in any way mean “mere appearance,” but is similar to Heidegger’s notion of “phenomenon,” which is the showing of that which shows itself, where being would be understood in terms of phenomenality. Symbolizing here does not therefore mean something standing in for something else in way a flag symbolizes a nation or the eucharist symbolizes the body of Christ, but rather in the etymological sense of *sumbolon* as the joining together of what is broken. Nancy’s claim is that *the manner in which social being faces itself, symbolizes itself, is as comparison*.

Comparison means that the “appearing”—the fact of the world, of coming into the world, the symbolic constitution of the real—is inseparable from the *cum*, from the with. It is here that we can begin to detect a (or the) fundamental ontological structure, described in absolutist terms with yet another *il faut*, “Que l’être, absolument, est être-avec, voilà ce qu’il nous faut penser” (“That being, absolutely, is being-with, this is what we must think”) (83–84). As Nancy rather candidly puts it in the penultimate paragraph of his book on Hegel, “L’absolu est entre nous” (Nancy 1997, 117).

However, what becomes clear a couple of pages further on is that

this fundamental ontology of being-with, this originary symbolizing of social reality as *comparution*, is not only an ontology. It is also, it must be (*doit être*) an *ethos* and a *praxis*, “cette ontologie doit être, identiquement, un *ethos* et une *praxis*” (Nancy 1996, 87). This claim, which is mentioned only in passing (and in parenthesis) is developed in a later paper on Heidegger’s *Brief über den Humanismus* (see Nancy 1999), itself footnoted in *Être singulier pluriel* (87n).³ Thus, *comparution* as a (or the) fundamental ontological structure is also the structure of an originary ethics, or what Lacoue-Labarthe has called, also with reference to Heidegger, an *archi-ethics* (Lacoue-Labarthe 1993, 10). Thus, to express this in a speculative proposition: *fundamental ontology is ethical and ethics is fundamentally ontological*.

I shall have another reason to return to these last propositions below, but let me briefly return to the question of what one might think of as a possible psychoanalytic critique of Nancy’s project. I am thinking of Lacan here because the identification of the ethical with the ontological would also entail the collapsing of the order of the real into the symbolic. For Lacan, as I discuss elsewhere (Critchley forthcoming), ethics articulates itself in relation to the real, and Freudian ethics testifies to a certain contact with the real as the guarantor of what Lacan calls *das Ding*. My question here is whether this identification of the ethical and the ontological in Nancy, which would also seem to run parallel to the claim for the symbolic constitution of the real, does not run of the risk of turning so-called “originary ethics” into a yearning for a symbolic order and for forms of symbolic identification inconceivable or only available in a degraded form in modernity?

For Nancy, there would seem to be no dimension of the real outside of the symbolicity of *comparution*. All conceptualizations of the real that would allow it to stand apart from and support the symbolic would be metaphysical and pre-Heideggerian. On such a reading, Lacan is therefore a metaphysician. But, despite these claims, where might one look for the dimension of the real in Nancy? What is there in his work that would stand in for the place of the *das Ding*? One response to this question would be to refer to his beautiful 1988 essay “Le cœur des choses.”⁴ This essay and later work on the body (*corpus*) attempt precisely to identify that thing “[a]t the heart of thinking . . . that defies all appropriation,” the immemorial source of thinking towards which think-

³ For a very similar reading of Heidegger, which makes explicit reference to Nancy, see Esposito 1997.

⁴ Reprinted in Nancy 1990. In this regard, see also Nancy 1992.

ing proves itself inadequate like a “black hole” that absorbs all light without reflecting anything back. Indeed, in *Etre singulier pluriel*, Nancy insists in the penultimate section—“Corps, langage”—that “the ontology of being-with is an ontology of bodies” (Nancy 1996, 107), where body would seem to denote the dimension of exteriority, of the outside to the incorporeal working of language. However, the above question remains in an altered form: namely, what might be said to be the relation between this thinking of the materiality or exteriority of *das Ding* and the *ethos* of Nancy’s first philosophy? Obviously, for Lacan, there is a connection between the materiality of unconscious desire and ethical experience. What of such a connection from Nancy’s perspective? Does not the claim that the real is symbolically constituted as comparution entail that ethical experience is restricted to the symbolic order, thereby making the relation to *das Ding* pre-ethical?

The Co-existential Sense of Self

Let me now return to my opening reading hypothesis on the question of Nancy’s co-existential analytic. With admirable philosophical honesty but questionable hyperbole, he writes in the final pages of *Etre singulier pluriel*,

The existential analytic of *Being and Time* is the enterprise from which *all ulterior thinking* (*toute pensée ultérieure*) remains tributary, whether it is a question of Heidegger himself or of our thoughts, such as they are and whatever relation of conflict or overcoming that want with regard to Heidegger himself (117, my emphasis).

Although I would need a little more convincing on this point as to whether *all ulterior thinking* remains tributary to Heidegger (doesn’t Wittgenstein at least merit a passing reference?), Nancy goes on to claim that the above is not the faithful profession of a Heideggerianism, and neither does it mean that every word of the existential analytic is definitive. Rather, what took place in *Being and Time* is a paradigm shift in the history of philosophy analogous to that of Descartes or Kant. In Nancy’s own language, *Being and Time* registered “the seismic shift of a decisive rupture in the constitution or in the consideration of sense” (117). Although I agree with Nancy that *Being and Time* does indeed represent a decisive paradigm shift in the history of philosophy—indeed a thinker as suspicious of Heidegger as Habermas would assent to this—but I would rather express this thought in a more sceptical manner: namely that if it is granted that there is no way that one can be consequen-

tially pre-Heideggerian in philosophy (no more than one can be pre-Kantian), this is also accompanied by the profound need to leave the climate of Heidegger's thinking for reasons at once metaphysical, ethical, sociological, and political.⁵

Indeed, Nancy goes some way towards conceding this point, as I pointed out in my second reading hypothesis above. That is, although *Being and Time* sketches (*esquisse*, a verb repeated in these pages of *Etre singulier pluriel*) the co-existential analytic of being-with, where *Mitsein* is shown to be co-essential with *Dasein*, Nancy acknowledges that it also contains "the principle of a closure of its own opening" (117) insofar as Heidegger in Paragraph 74 (Heidegger 1962) seeks to determine *Mitsein* in terms of "the people" and its "destiny". Although, for Nancy, it is not at all a question of completing *Being and Time*, or surgically transforming the torso of the published book into *un corps propre*, it is certainly a matter of strongly emphasizing that the co-essentiality of *Mitsein* entails the co-originality of meaning and thus that the question of the meaning of being would not be what it is—the dimension of pre-comprehension as the constitution of existence—if it was not first given in *Mitsein*, as being-with. If one were to push this claim a little further, one might simply say that there is a straightforward incoherence in Heidegger's *Being and Time* between the analysis of *Mitsein* in Division I and the determination of *Mitsein* as *das Volk* in Division II.

On this question of sense or meaning (*sens*), Nancy writes, "Il n'y a de 'sens' qu'en raison d'un 'soi'" (Nancy 1996, 118). That is, there is no meaning or sense without a self. In his way, Nancy would appear to be committed to *the subjective ideality of meaning*, namely that meaning comes into being through the creative activity of what Hegel would call the Subject, a self that is for-itself in being for-the-other. However, if there is no sense without a self, then there is no self without being-with, and the self is fundamentally structured co-existentially. As Nancy somewhat hyperbolically points out, "tel devrait être l'axiome d'une analytique désormais co-existentielle" ("such must henceforth be the axiom of a co-existential analytic") (118). The subjective ideality of meaning is structured intersubjectively.

However, Nancy has another—and rather troubling—way of formulating the basic axiom of the co-existential analytic. Namely, that to say that sense is dependent on the self and that the self is always already co-existentially mediated is to say that being-with, as the axiom of a new first philosophy, is a thought of pure *mediation*.⁶ As Nancy puts it

⁵ I allude to Levinas's remarks in the Introduction Levinas 1978, 19.

⁶ On mediation, see Nancy 1997, 74–78.

in a parenthesis, “it is a question here of mediation without a mediator” (118). Thus, Nancy places out of court the idea of the other (of any other: human, animal, vegetable, mineral) as a form of mediation that might be constitutive of intersubjectivity. There would seem to be no fundamentally ontological (or ethically pre-ontological) dimension to the encounter with the other: the dimension of surprise, challenge, placing in question, falling in love or into hatred, being overcome by desire, acknowledging, refusing, blaming, forgiving or even cruelly murdering the other, or simply being moved by another’s suffering. Such phenomena would presumably only be *ontic* modifications of a fundamental ontological structure.

But Nancy’s reasons for refusing the role of mediation are even more revealing and troubling, namely that the “prototype” of the figure of the “the Mediator” is “Christ” (“Autre est toujours le Médiateur: son prototype est le Christ.” [118]). Although thinkers from non-Christian traditions might conceivably object to the thought that the figure of Christ is *the* prototype for the mediation between the divine and human, let us grant Nancy his rather Hegelian premise. He then goes on to claim that the thought of being-with as mediation without a mediator is,

Not Christ, but only such a *mi-lieu*: and this would no longer be the cross, but only the crossing (*croisement*), the intersection and spacing (*écartement*), the lighting up with stars (*étoilement*) of the very di-mension of the world. It would be the very apogee and abyss of a deconstruction of Christianity (119).

As an earlier note indicates, this project of a deconstruction of Christianity is future research for Nancy (34). However, one cannot avoid a slight feeling of déjà vu in the face of such remarks, for one might say that the desire for mediation without a mediator is precisely the motivation behind the Third Person of the Holy Trinity: *Spirit*, whether in its Augustinian formulation or in Hegel, where it is the element in which the thinking of community, of the “we”, of being-with, would take place. Absolute Knowing in Hegel can be thought of as the community for which Spirit has become Subject and Subject has become Spirit, that is, where the self recognizes itself in and through absolute otherness. As Hegel puts it, “Spirit is the image of God, the divinity of the human.”⁷ Might one not say Hegel too is attempting a deconstruction of Christianity (both apogee and abyss) insofar as Spirit would be achieved by the Subject when it had successfully overcome all forms of *Vorstellungsdenken* (Christ as representation or figuration) and attained the pure mediation

⁷ This passage from the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (paragraph 441) is cited by Nancy in Nancy 1997, 139.

of the *Begriff*, where religion passes over into philosophy. My worry here concerns the way in which the fundamental ontological drive for mediation without a mediator in Nancy seems to entail both a subordination of the concrete, ontic other to ontological otherness *überhaupt*, and the extent to which this seemingly pure move within first philosophy is parasitic upon a more or less latent, more or less deconstructed Christianity.

Is Ontology Fundamental?

Returning to the main strand of Nancy's argument, his sense of the self (*le soi*) is the element in which I, you, and we take place. The self is the element that comes to itself in the there of the world, it is a self that finds itself (*sich befinden*) there in the world, in the event of the world. The self is that which exists ecstatically, the self is *auprès-de-soi*, alongside itself and affectively disposed into the there of the world. That is to say, self is *Dasein*. It is "*être-le-là*": a pre-cognitive affective disposition towards the world. Such is Nancy's creative reconstruction of the arguments of Division I of *Being and Time*.

Nancy illustrates these arguments in the closing pages of *Etre singulier pluriel* with an image, "Quelqu'un entre dans une pièce" ("Someone enters a room") (121). That is, before being the possible subject of a representation, a *res cogitans* or an "I think", the self disposes itself within and towards the room, the self comes to itself insofar as it is disposed (pre-reflectively, pre-cognitively, pre-representationally) towards the world. Of course, this recalls Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein's* spatiality, but Nancy goes on to qualify the image, "Mais le monde n'est pas une pièce dans laquelle on pourrait entrer . . ." ("The world is not a room we might enter") (121). We cannot begin philosophizing from the solitary, solipsistic subject who is apart from the world. Being a self, for Nancy, is through and through based in the "with", the with-world and the with-others. Thus, "Being-with cannot be added to being-there" (122). To-be-there is to-be-with and to-be-with is to make sense, to understand that sense is something that "we" make.

Nancy concludes in Kantian terms: if pure reason is by itself practical, and not practical only through reference or reverence for some transcendent norm, it is because it is a *sensus communis* from the beginning. That is, the praxis of the "with" is the foundation of practical reason. Thus, "Il n'y a pas de différence entre l'éthique et l'ontologique: l'éthique expose ce que l'ontologie dispose" ("there is no difference between the ethical and the ontological: 'ethics' exposes what 'ontology' disposes") (123). The ontological dimension of the "with" which is the

co-existential foundation of any sense of self and any making of sense is always already an *ethos*, an originary ethics. Ontology is ethical, ethics is ontological.

But is ontology fundamental? From a Levinasian point of view, the identification of the ethical and the ontological, that is the collapsing of the former into the latter, is the very gesture that governs and defines the philosophical tradition. This tradition is called “ontology” by Levinas and reaches its final and critical articulation in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. From this perspective, Nancy’s first philosophy of being-with and *comparution* rejoins the philosophical tradition of ontology with its suppression of ontic plurality and multiplicity. Yet, how is this possible given that Nancy’s book is devoted to the question of the singular plurality of being?

Levinas’s work seeks to describe a relation to an alterity irreducible to comprehension, that is to say, irreducible to what he sees as the *ontological* relation to others where alterity is reduced to what he calls the Same. Even the Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian ontology of Nancy, an ontology that exceeds and precedes Husserlian intellectualism and theoreticism, is unable to describe this relation because the particular being is always already understood within the pre-comprehension of Being. Both singularity and plurality are always understood from within Being and not as being otherwise than Being, a dimension of otherness that is refractory to *Seins-* or *Mitseinsverständnis*. Heideggerian prioritization of the ontological over the ontic, however subtly this ontological difference is nuanced, subordinates the relation to the other to the relation to Being. In other words, although Heidegger acknowledges that *Dasein* is *Mitsein*, this question is only a moment of an existential analytic whose ambition is the elaboration of the question of the meaning of Being.

Of course, this last claim is not true of Nancy’s work, as I have tried to show, where the ambition is to rewrite *Being and Time* as a “social” ontology where *die Seinsfrage* must be subordinated to *die Mitseinsfrage*. However, despite this laudable advance on Heidegger, Nancy might still be said to fall foul of the same critique insofar as the relation to the other, as mediator, always already presupposes the ontological pre-comprehension of my *Mitseinsverständnis*: pure mediation, apogee and abyss of Christianity. And perhaps more apogee than abyss.

Thus, even given the radicality of Nancy’s rewriting of *Being and Time*, his conception of being-with constitutes what one might call a *neutralizing of ethical transcendence* or a *flattening of the structure of ethical experience*. What I mean is that the other person is no longer “the widow, the

orphan, the stranger” who stands to me in an asymmetrical relation of height, but the other becomes my colleague, my comrade, my *semblable*, perhaps also my lover. Nancy’s conception of being-with risks reducing intersubjectivity to a relation of reciprocity, equality, and symmetry, where I rub shoulders or stand shoulder to shoulder with the other, but where I do not *face* him. That is, I do not see in the other person that dimension of surprise, separateness or secrecy that continually defies my attempts at comprehension and appropriation. In more Hegelian terms, it would seem that the self in Nancy is constituted through the desire for recognition—the dialectic of intersubjectivity that defines the Subject through its appropriation of absolute otherness. The other is my other or an other for me, a logic that must always think intersubjectivity on the model of *love*.⁸ For Nancy, I speak of “me” and “you” as a “we”, and speak of our world as a “with”-world. But perhaps ontology is not fundamental. That is, perhaps I am never fundamentally “with” the other and the relation to the other is, as Sartre suggested, a hole in the world, a tear in the ontological fabric of *In-der-Welt-sein*. Perhaps, I am also “without” the other, and perhaps, most of all, in love—in a relation that demands my *acknowledgement* because it exceeds the bounds of my knowledge. Perhaps, the co-existential structures of being-with overlay a prior level of “being-without,” a being-without the other that is without being.

Nancy’s model of being-with might be said to produce the desired political virtue of solidarity. Yet, my view is that unless solidarity is underpinned by the separation, distance, and radical non-solidarity of the ethical relation to the other, a relation that I have sought to understand elsewhere in terms of the psychoanalytic model of trauma, then it will ineluctably lead back to an ontological tradition that has shown itself incapable of acknowledging that which resists knowledge, that is, the source of ethical experience—what Levinas identifies as the other, what Lacan calls *das Ding*, what Genet calls “saintliness”, what Derrida calls justice, and what Lyotard more provocatively (and not unproblematically) names “the jews” (Lyotard 1998). The face-to-face risks effacing itself in the reciprocity of the “with” and it is therefore a matter—ontologically, ethically, politically—not of thinking without the “with,” but of thinking the “without” within this “with.”

⁸ For these Hegelian themes in Nancy, see Nancy 1997, 86–90.

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