

Worlds Apart: Conversations between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy

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Abstract: This article attempts to sort out the misunderstandings between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy surrounding the question of the animal as they come to the fore in the conversations published in *For Strasbourg*. While Derrida finds the lack of animals in Nancy's world puzzling, Nancy criticises Derrida's blurring of the border between the human and the animal for inadvertently reinstating a scale or a difference, if not between humans and animals, at least between the living and the non-living. Though this criticism appears misguided at first, I argue that Nancy's recasting of finitude in terms of the limit as the place of exposure undoes the phenomenological, or more precisely Heideggerian, understanding of sense and world, which Derrida still attributes to Nancy. Ultimately, what we have in both thinkers is a radically different account of plurality. Whereas Derrida emphasises the abyss between singularities and places faith, engagement, and responsibility at the origin of the world, for Nancy the edges between singularities always already hold any inside in contact with an outside, any one in contact with the other.

Keyword: Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Animal, Martin Heidegger, World, Sense, Finitude, Freedom.

With the publication of *For Strasbourg: Conversations of Friendship and Philosophy*, we now have access to the transcription of the last two public conversations between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, and hence to what will have constituted the last chapter of a lifelong philosophical dialogue, which began in 1970 when Nancy, at the time a young assistant at the University of Strasbourg, sent Derrida a commentary on his work he had written for the *Bulletin de la Faculté des Lettres de Strasbourg* (Peeters 2013, 216). From then on, both would not only correspond but also invite each other to their respective seminars, contribute to events and conferences (such as the 1980 Cérisy-Lasalle symposium on Derrida's work, 'The Ends of Man', organised by Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe), and of course, read each other's work. Yet, up until the publication of *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy* in 2000 and *Rogues* in 2003, the reader could only find in their respective texts traces of this dialogue, often hidden in footnotes.¹ These furtive references revolved around Nancy's use of the word fraternity and of the concept of ontological generosity. Derrida had already expressed his reservations regarding both themes as a member of the jury on Nancy's *thèse d'État* in 1987 (Derrida 2005b, 166n.36), which was published a year later under the title *The Experience of Freedom*. Derrida would then go on to address both fraternity and generosity at length in *Rogues*, while he would only mention them in passing in *On Touching*, focusing instead on whether or not Nancy's concept of touch still

belongs to the Christian and phenomenological tradition of haptocentrism or whether it succeeds in interrupting the desire for assimilation and coincidence inherent in touching. No matter the topic, then, Derrida's admiration for Nancy's work is, from beginning to end, always tinged with reservation.

Nancy's engagement with Derrida's work, for its part, has remained both less critical and more oblique, often taking the form of homage. Emblematic here are texts such as 'Elliptical Sense', first presented at the *Collegium phaenomenologicum* in 1987, and 'Mad Derrida: *Ipsa facto cogitans ac demens*', published in *Adieu Derrida* some twenty years later.² These texts proceed in a similar way as Nancy's text on Heidegger: Although Nancy's paraphrases are lucid and often enlightening, and while the reader feels like she is gaining a better grasp of Derrida's own ideas, because Nancy transposes Derrida's ideas in his own vocabulary and, inversely, phrases his own ideas in Derridean tropes, it becomes almost impossible to decide where Derrida ends and where Nancy begins. Nancy rarely addresses Derrida's thought critically from the outside³; rather, it is as if Nancy had secretly introduced himself into Derrida's thought, as if his own, most proper thoughts could only come out of the other's mouth.

In such a context, why turn to the last two public conversations between Derrida and Nancy? Why tackle the philosophical relationship between these two thinkers working our way backwards, so to speak? What is most striking about these late conversations are the misunderstandings on both sides. Despite their recurrent expressed agreement, the dialogue does not get underway as easily as one might expect between life-long philosophical partners, and the reader constantly feels that something is amiss. I think that this difficulty sheds new light on the stumbling block between them and allows us to pinpoint the origin of their disagreement. I would venture to say that it lies in their respective relationship to phenomenology, and more specifically to Heidegger. Contrary to what one might assume, I think that Nancy has radically displaced the Heideggerian concepts of sense and world, while Derrida is still working within a phenomenological, and more specifically Heideggerian, understanding of the concepts of sense and world.

In order to show this point, I want to focus on two specific exchanges, both surrounding the question of the animal. During what would be their last public conversations, Nancy challenges Derrida's deconstruction of the oppositional limit between the human and the animal:

J-LN: earlier you spoke many times in favor of animals and against 'the animal without world'. You insist on the fact that there are animals that mourn, and so on. Earlier you gave us a very impressive list. You talked about everything: love, work, speech. But in doing this, it seems to me that you are nonetheless *reestablishing* a scale, for you made it quite clear that the ant, for example, is not the same thing as the chimpanzee ...

JD: It's not a scale, it's a difference ...

J-LN: A difference. But what I wanted to ask you in the end is whether, by blurring the difference between the human and all other living beings, you don't end up reestablishing a difference? (Derrida 2014, 29)

However, two years earlier, it was Derrida who was questioning Nancy on the place of animals in his thought:

JD: Are there animals in your world? There are, of course, but do you give them an essential place?

J-LN: No, not at all. In fact, I was going to start there ... I agree with you entirely that I do not reserve any special place for animals, but I do for living beings, and there is, let me remind you, somewhere in one of my texts the tree that is free ...

JD: If there are living beings, okay, if there are animals ...

J-LN: Of course, I grant you that one poor tree, whose species is not even identified, is not much to pull in the entire world of living beings. (Derrida 2014, 84)

Here, the misunderstandings should be obvious to anybody familiar with the works of both thinkers: How could Nancy think that Derrida wants to erase all differences between man and animal? And how could Derrida think that there are no animals, and no living beings, in Nancy's world? Rather than dismissing these misunderstandings by attributing them to a simple miscommunication that sometimes accompanies improvised conversations, I want to follow them back to their roots, which I think are to be found in radically different understandings of limits, or borders. Focusing on these differences will then allow us to understand the ways in which Derrida's use of the concepts of sense and world is still phenomenological, and more specifically Heideggerian, whereas Nancy's is not.

Jean-Luc Nancy on limits as the place of exposition

At the heart of Jean-Luc Nancy's ontology, we find a thought that should be familiar to Derrideans, that is, the thought of selfhood as difference. A self, or what Nancy also calls a singularity, does not have the structure of substantial presence, whether it be in-itself or for-itself, extended or thinking, but that of the 'to-itself' or the 'toward-itself' (*à-soi*). 'To-itself' denotes for Nancy the movement of existence as being-toward itself so that there is no self at the origin of this movement. Rather, the self is an effect of the movement toward an exteriority that the self can never fully reappropriate or reflect back into itself. This inappropriable exteriority is not some other thing out there, but the limit upon which the self is exposed – to itself, to others – and which properly belongs neither to the inside nor to the outside (Nancy 1996, 40–1, 95–6; Nancy 1993a, 154–5). This limit *is* no positive thing that can be given in the form of presence; yet it allows that there be things (Nancy 1993b, 69). Now it is important to emphasise that such a movement of exposition at the limit is only possible, according to Nancy, because there is

already a spacing, or a nothing, at the heart of the thing itself. Without this nothing at the heart of the thing that spaces the thing out, turns it toward the outside, and exposes it unto its limit – unto a *ligne de partage* – the thing would collapse into itself, it would not quite come to presence. In other words, without this nothing/spacing, there is no spacing between things but only a black hole,

a total absence of exteriority, a nonextension concentrated in itself, not something impenetrable, but rather its excess, the impenetrable *mixed with* the impenetrable, infinite intussusception, the *proper* devouring itself, all the way to the void at its center-in truth deeper, even, than the center, deeper than any trace of spacing (which the ‘center’ still retains), in an abyss where the hole absorbs even its own edges. (Nancy 2008, 75)

Substantial presence is, according to Nancy, such a black hole because it is the negation of presence-*to*.

Nancy’s thinking of the selfhood as exposition to the limit is essentially related to his recasting of freedom and finitude. In *The Experience of Freedom*, Nancy operates a radical desubjectivisation of freedom, which will lead him to affirm not only the ‘freedom of the world’ but the freedom of each thing, including the stone (Nancy 1993b, 158–60). Once Being is freed from a certain metaphysical conception, once the existence of beings is not deduced from any ground or principle, then we must think not only the abandonment of beings but also the ‘freedom’ of such an abandonment (Nancy 1993b, 10–11). Traditionally, freedom is supposed to be the property of a subject or the structure of subjectivity itself. To be free means not to be subjected to any external determination. In this sense, I can be free only if I absolve myself from any contact with what is other and find the reason or determination of my existence within myself. The free being is the self-founding entity absolved from any relation with exteriority. Thought in this way, freedom becomes a ground. For example, in Kant, freedom becomes uncaused causality, the ability to be the absolute origin of a causal chain; similarly in Sartre, it becomes the ability to be the origin of one’s own life-project, one’s own meaning. For Nancy, on the contrary, to be free does not mean to be self-determined but to be absolutely without ‘why’. Freedom means that existence is ‘abandoned’ without being abandoned by anything that would precede it (for example, God or Being) nor abandoned to anything other than its own existence. Freedom is the unfounded factuality of an existence that surprises itself in existing. It is the deliverance from foundation and the releasing into existence (Nancy 1993b, 92–5, 114–5). At this point, the ontological difference is cancelled as a difference between two realities, Being and beings, or as the abandonment of beings by Being (the withdrawal and reserve of Being); there is no difference between existence and the existent, the existent’s ‘reality’ is nothing other than the putting into play of its own existence (Nancy 2007, 71–3, 102–3).

Once we understand how Nancy recasts the thought of freedom, we are in a better position to understand its essential link to the thought of the limit we discussed at the beginning

of this section, or what Nancy also calls finitude. If Nancy insists on the finitude of what exists, this must not be taken to mean that each entity is encircled within a limit that separates or absolves it from all other entities since the limit, as we saw above, is also the place of exposure. In other words, finitude is not a limitation imposed on a being by the fact that there happens to be other things outside of it that press against it. Rather, it consists in the fact that any being must be exposed to an exteriority or an otherness in order to be what it is:

Finitude does not mean that we are non-infinite – like small, insignificant beings within a grand, universal, and continuous being – but it means that we are *infinitely* finite, infinitely exposed to our existence as a nonessence, infinitely exposed to the otherness of our own ‘being’ (or that being is in us exposed to its own otherness). We begin and we end without beginning and ending: without having a beginning and an end that is *ours*, but having (or being) them only as others, and through others. (Nancy 1993a, 155)

Accordingly, finitude denotes that which exists at its limits or is affected by its end, not as something external imposed on it, but as something that is originary (Nancy 1997, 31–2). Since the finite being does not cease to be exposed at its limits, its exposition is endlessly repeated and therefore never finished once and for all. Finitude therefore will itself be the true infinite: ‘the good infinite or the actual infinite – it is infinity in the actuality of the act itself insofar as it is the act of exceeding itself’ (Nancy 2013, 15). The finite being has no proper beginning or end; at no point can it be properly complete or finished, yet this incompleteness is not a lack: in every instant, each finite being is fully exposed, without holding anything back, without leaving anything to be actualised later. Nevertheless, this being fully offered should not be confused with a standing in full presence, since it always remains in the movement of coming to presence. As Nancy says:

The coming is infinite: it does not get finished with coming; it is finite: it is offered up in the instant. But that which takes place ‘in the instant’ – in this distancing of time ‘within’ itself – is neither the stasis nor the stance of the present instant, but its instability, the inconclusiveness of its coming – and of the ‘going’ that corresponds to that coming. The coming into presence takes place precisely as non-arrival of presence. (Nancy 1997, 35; see Nancy 1993b, 159; Nancy 2001, 135)

To be finite is to never cease to ‘arrive’ to the world and hence to never cease to be exposed to ‘all there is’. It is also in this sense that Nancy will be able to say that a finite being is absolute. Not in the sense that it has no exteriority and is absolved from contact with any exteriority at its limit or edge. Such an absolute would be, according to Nancy, an essential contradiction, since not only would it have to be separated from its outside by a limit, but this limit itself would have to be without relation to its outside, the enclosure itself would have to be enclosed (Nancy 1991,

4). This is the black hole I mentioned earlier. For Nancy, the absoluteness of a singularity is the withdrawal of its essence as cause or ground, ‘in the fact of existence, in its singularity, in the material intensity of its coming’. As we can see, freedom ‘is the philosophical name of this absoluteness’ (Nancy 1993b, 109).⁴

At this point, we are in a position to understand why Nancy would want to extend the claim of free existence not only to all living beings but also to the stone. Indeed, while Derrida remembers, in the discussion quoted at the beginning, the ‘tree that is free’, and while there is indeed a tree in Nancy’s *Experience of Freedom* (Nancy 1993b, 192n.2), it is the stone that, he asserts, ‘is free’ (Nancy 1993b, 159–60). The Nancean ‘logic’ of the limit and of exposition at the limit knows neither hierarchy nor individuality so that when Nancy speaks of singularities he does not have in mind just individual human beings, nor does he think only of individual things. Every ‘one’ – stones, cats, communities, books, thoughts, feelings, cities, and so on – in so far as it comes to presence and in this coming is caught in the movement of exposure, rather than being merely an essence, exists. We know that for Heidegger the stone does not touch the earth because the stone is not opened to and cannot make sense of the ground as such (Heidegger 1995, §47; Heidegger 1962, H. 55). Dasein can say that the stone is on the ground because it meaningfully relates to the stone and the ground and to their relation ‘as such’. However, for Nancy, sense-making is also not restricted to human beings, or to Dasein. For him, as for Heidegger, the relation of sense is not primordially a hierarchical relation of signification between signifier and signified, or between word and thing, but unlike Heidegger, it is also not the appearing of something ‘as such’. Rather, it is the encounter with an exteriority or an alterity that resists assimilation, the alterity of another ‘singularity’, to which I gain access precisely in the mode of non-access, or which, in other words, I touch (Nancy 1996, 14). Touch is only possible if one is not glued to oneself but opened to an exteriority and affected by it. At the same time, one cannot merge or melt with this exteriority or there would be no touch. It is necessary that a distance or difference remain between what touches and what is touched. This also means that the two singularities that touch each other cannot be commensurable or interchangeable.⁵ When the distance between them remains unbridgeable, when what is other, what is outside, remains inappropriable, then the only possible access is through the interruption of access (Nancy 1997, 59–60).

For Nancy, then, the stone is neither an essence for the understanding alone nor a pure in-itself waiting there to be taken up in the circuit of human existence. If the stone makes sense, if there is sense for and with the stone, it is because the stone ex-sists, is already exposed to itself and to others. This in turn requires that the stone be, however minimally, *toward*, or that its being have the structure of differance and spacing described above. ‘Otherwise’, Nancy asks, ‘how could its hardness *feel* hard?’ (Nancy 2003, 321–3n.14). At the same time, we need to be clear that it is not a matter of ‘endowing the stone with an interiority. ... For the differance of the toward-itself, in accordance with which sense opens, is inscribed along the edge of the “in itself”. Corpus: all bodies, each outside the others, make up the inorganic body of sense’ (Nancy 1997, 61–2). The body of sense is inorganic first because sense is a function of the spacing (or, as

Derrida would say, the technical supplement) of each body within itself and amongst each other, rather than of the living unity *per se*. And it is inorganic also because ‘the body of sense’ is not organised into a functional whole.

Jacques Derrida on conceptual limits

To Nancy’s affirmation that Derrida was blurring the differences between man and animal, Derrida, unsurprisingly, replied by saying that he ‘never wanted to blur the difference between what is called the human and the animal’ but rather ‘call into question the linear and oppositional limit between the human and the animal in order, on the contrary, to introduce a greater differentiation’ (Derrida 2014, 29).

Because oppositional limits are homogenising, Derrida’s strategy is to complicate the opposition by multiplying limits and differences until any pretension to identify something ‘as such’ (man or animal) is unsettled. We can see this operation clearly at work in *The Animal That Therefore I am*. First, Derrida identifies the criterion that gives rise to ‘the limit presumed to separate man in general from the animal in general’ (Derrida 2008, 40). As Derrida points out, whereas philosophers disagree as to the criterion that should be used to draw this limit, they all agree that the limit is ‘single and indivisible’ (ibid.). In order to undo this presupposition, Derrida shows how all the supposedly properly human characteristics, whether it is auto-affection, language, the ability to respond, or the ability to die, are themselves not pure but always already affected by differance, iterability, prosthesis, technicity, and so on (Derrida 2008, 135). Even though in the later work this strategy is clearly applied to undermining the difference between ‘the human’ and ‘the animal’, it should already be familiar to readers of Derrida. Indeed, already in *Voice and Phenomenon*, Derrida had shown that since auto-affection is always contaminated by what it seeks to exclude – a detour through exteriority – the circle of self-presence or auto-affection never fully closes itself. Or rather, it closes itself only by means of an exteriority that is inscribed in it as its condition of possibility as well as of impossibility since the irreducibility of this exteriority means the impossibility of pure auto-affection. This irreducible otherness is the blind spot of the famous blink of the eye – of the ‘I’ – in *Voice and Phenomenon* (Derrida 2010, 56).

Here, in the later work, Derrida seeks to draw the consequences of the impossibility of, for example, pure auto-affection for any oppositional limit that is drawn on the basis of it. It is important to note that Derrida is not claiming that the criterion used to draw the border between human and animal is not the right one and should be traded in favour of a more inclusive one.⁶ Any criterion that is thought to be pure – that is thought to be able to identify something ‘as such’ – gives rise to an oppositional border. For example, a thought of pure life gives rise to the opposition between the ‘living as such’ and the nonliving, which would include not only those who do not live at all, but also those who do not *really* live, that is, those who do not live up to the criterion of ‘pure life’. Hence rather than looking for a better criterion, Derrida seeks to point out the originary contamination of any criterion used to distinguish the human from the animal: pure living is always already affected by prosthesis and technicity and hence by absence/death; pure

speech is always already affected by the mark or the trace so that it is already a form of writing, and so on. This also means that Derrida is not merely trying to extend the application of the criterion used to draw the oppositional border by claiming that it applies *also and in the same way* to animals, plants, and so on. The latter would homogenise even more by covering over ‘differences’, ‘heterogeneities’ and ‘abyssal ruptures’ (Derrida 2008, 30). This is the lesson one ought to have drawn from Derrida’s critical engagement with the universalising power of fraternity in *Politics of Friendship*. The fraternal community, though restricted to those who are brothers, also contains within itself an appeal to universalisation: ‘Anyone can be my brother!’ Yet, such an openness is predicated upon exemplarity, and hence upon a homogenisation of differences (see Derrida 1997, 164). For example, since ‘French’ is the ‘exemplar’ of the citizen, it is by imitating it that one becomes a citizen of the world; and since ‘man’ is the ‘exemplar’ of the human, it is by imitating it that one becomes truly human. Failing to live up to the exemplar, being a false brother, is ground for exclusion. What this means is that there is, for Derrida, a radical difference between an openness to the other that is based on exemplarity and one that is based on the contamination of any identifiable criterion.

The point, as Derrida notes in the 1989 interview with Nancy titled “‘Eating Well”, or the Calculation of the Subject’, is that the contamination of the criterion ‘does not allow us to “cut” once and for all where we would in general like to cut’ (Derrida 1995, 285), but rather gives rise to a multiplicity of ungrounded cuts. Two years earlier, in a discussion following a presentation on Heidegger at the University of Essex, Derrida had provided a more detailed explanation in reply to a question by David Wood, question that directly spoke to the danger of blurring the difference between human beings and animals in light of Heidegger infamous comparison of the death camp with factory farming. Derrida explains:

No, on the contrary, you have to multiply the differences, not blur the differences. ... If you draw a single or two single lines [between animals and human beings], then you have homogenous sets of undifferentiated societies, or groups, or structures. No, no I am not advocating the blurring of differences. On the contrary. I am trying to explain how drawing an oppositional limit itself blurs the differences, the difference and the differences, not only between man and animal, but among animal societies – there are an infinite number of animal societies, and within the animal societies and within human society itself, so many differences. (Derrida 1987, 183)

It is in order to point to this conceptual homogenisation of all sorts of animals and animal societies that Derrida coined the portmanteau ‘animot’: ‘animal’ is a word or concept; it refers to how all these living beings that we call animal are taken up in human discourses, how they appear to us, how we make sense of them. Derrida’s deconstruction of any discourse on the ‘proper of man’, which is also a discourse on ‘the animal as such’, leads to the realisation that, to borrow a phrase Derrida picks up from Nancy, there is no ‘the animal’.

Derrida and Nancy's missed dialogue on the animal

At the same time, Nancy's (and Wood's) worry is not completely misguided. Derrida agrees with Nancy that any self-relation is affected by a dehiscence or ex-appropriation. In the earlier interview with Nancy, Derrida affirms the possibility of a post-deconstructive subjectivity, one that would not be 'the absolute origin, pure will, identity to self, or presence to self of consciousness (since a presence is always a phantasm and a fable) but rather non-coincidence, distance, differance from itself' (Derrida 1995, 265). As Derrida remarks, Heidegger does undertake such a displacement of the value of the Subject in *Being and Time*, yet by submitting the originary dehiscence or ex-appropriation of the subject to the power of the phenomenological 'as such' – Dasein is the entity capable of relating to what is 'as such' – Heidegger reinstates a radical and rigorous distinction between man and animal. This allows Derrida to claim that 'the discourse on the subject, even where it locates difference, inadequation, the dehiscence within auto-affectation, and so on, continues to link subjectivity with man'. Derrida continues: 'One can recognize [the] differential figures [of ex-appropriation] as soon as there is a relation to self in its most elementary form (but for this very reason there is no such thing as elementary)'. Here Nancy intervenes and wonders: 'When you decide not to limit a potential "subjectivity" to man, why do you then limit yourself simply to the animal?' To which Derrida answers

I said 'animal' for the sake of convenience and to use a reference which is as classical as it is dogmatic. The difference between 'animal' and 'vegetal' also remains problematic. Of course the relation to self in ex-appropriation is radically different (and that's why it is a thinking of *diffférance* and not of opposition) in the case of what one calls the 'non-living', the 'vegetal', the 'animal', 'man', or 'God'. (Derrida 1995, 268–9)

Two things are noteworthy about Derrida's conversation with Nancy here. First, when the mineral world comes to Derrida's mind, it is as the 'non-living'. This negative formulation (the only such formulation on the list) might indicate that, even though every self-relation is one of ex-appropriation, Derrida's focus falls first on a deconstruction of Life as such – on the technical supplement or prosthesis at the heart of any living being and on a redefinition of life as life-death (*la vie la mort*) – and second on a deconstruction of human life in particular, or of the 'proper of man'. The way in which the stone is also in a relation of ex-appropriation with regard to itself is not something Derrida ever endeavours to describe.

Second, Derrida clearly states that by multiplying differences he is seeking to undo oppositions in favour of a differance ranging from the mineral to God. What does it mean to say, for example, that the relation between man and God, and man and animal is one of differance rather than opposition? More specifically, what does it mean to take the 'a' of differance seriously in this context? I think it means that, inasmuch as any criterion that could serve to identify 'the proper of man' and hence differentiate 'man' from 'the animal' and 'God' is always

contaminated, it is always in relation to a ‘trace’ of ‘the animal’ and ‘God’ that the human being comes to be ‘human’. And the same can be said of any of the ‘cuts’ we attempt to make by identifying what is ‘proper’ to any species, group, or society. As a result, there is no ‘human as such’, no ‘identity of the human’ (both the species human and any individual human), but only ever a – provisional, risky, open – identification through ex-appropriation.

Given this, what leads Nancy to rephrase Derrida’s strategy, which attempts to show the contamination of the criterion so that binary oppositions give way to the multiplication of differences as a ‘blurring of the differences and in so doing a reestablishment, if not of a scale, at least of a difference’? I think there are two reasons that speak in favour of Nancy’s ‘misunderstanding’. First, in order to speak of these ‘differences’, Derrida retains traditional ways of classifying or grouping beings: human beings (‘man’), higher primates, lower primates, and so on. As a result, the ‘differences’ he speaks of not only remain ‘dogmatic’, as he readily acknowledges, but also conceptual: they separate these beings from those ones. Hence it seems as if the multiplication of cuts leaves intact the ‘as such’ of each group. This impression is reinforced by the fact that Derrida always also emphasises the ‘abyssal gap’ or the ‘radical discontinuity between what one calls animals...and man’ (Derrida & Roudinesco 2004, 66, 72–3). We seem to be left with a ‘scale’, as Nancy says, and a fairly traditional one at that. What has gone unnoticed here, however, is the difference that underlies these differences and undoes our ability to cut once and for all here rather than there. It is this inability to *ground* the way we cut in a criterion uncontaminated by what it seeks to exclude that explains why these cuts do not give rise to ‘this as such’ and ‘that as such’, and hence do not lead to homogenisation on each side of the border. As a result, there are differences, these differences are real, and even abyssal, but they are expressions of difference rather than being grounded in any pure criterion such as the ability to death, mourn, or cry.⁷

Derrida and Nancy on Sense and World

Much of Derrida’s work around the question of the animal targets a thinking of the limit as that which allows us to separate, and even oppose, one group to another while at the same time erasing the differences inherent in each group. In that sense, Derrida’s work on the question of the animal follows directly from his work on fraternal communities. Yet there is also another thought of the limit in Derrida. Indeed, if we run Derrida’s thought of absolute heterogeneity or abyssal difference all the way down, we arrive at his conception of singularities as secret. As he writes: ‘Others [*autrui*] are secret because they are other. I am secret, I am *in secret*, like any other. A singularity is of its nature in secret’ (Derrida 2005a, 162). This choice of the word secret to designate a singularity is, Derrida insists, ‘a strategy, in a definite philosophical scene, that wishes to insist on separation, isolation’ (Derrida & Ferraris 2001, 58). Indeed, according to its Latin root, secret means distinct, separate, isolated, or in a word: absolute. It is important here to recall that the secret, for Derrida, is not what is hidden from view, since such hiddenness is still in relation to a possible phenomenalisation. Rather the absolute secret remains radically heterogeneous to phenomenalisation, and hence to sense.⁸

The question that immediately arise is: if we are ‘in secret’ not only with regards to each other and to all there is, but also with regards to ourselves, what kind of relation, what kind of sharing and world, can there be between us? The first thing that is clear is that the world in the phenomenological sense as shared horizon of intelligibility, as meaningful totality of involvement, is a projection or a phantasm, the function of which is to cover over the abyssal gap between. The world in this sense would guarantee from the start that ‘[n]o matter how extreme the differences or how great the distances between us... passages can always be constructed’ (Naas 2015, 47). As Derrida makes clear in the second volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, this world is a denial of, an insurance policy and a lifeline against, death, death being here the figure of the impossibility of passage, in order words, of *experience* (Derrida 2011, 368). The deconstruction of this ‘community of the world’ leads to another sense of the world, the world as island. Here world names

the absolutely unshareable ... the abyssal un-shareable, then, of the abyss between the islands of the archipelago and the vertiginous untranslatable, to the point that the very solitude we are saying so much about is not even the solitude of several people in the same world, this still shareable solitude in one and the same co-habitable world, but the solitude of worlds, the undeniable fact that there is no world, not even a world, not even one and the same world, no world that is one: *the world, a world, a world that is one*, is what there is not (Derrida 2011, 367).

At the same time, these island-worlds should not be thought of in a solipsistic fashion (see Naas 2015, 49–50). As places of self-relation, islands are an effect of a more fundamental self-difference, the primordial inscription of exteriority and death within life itself, an inscription which is responsible both for the desire for and the impossibility of pure auto-affection. Thinking through islands-worlds as place of differential self-relation allows Derrida to appeal to the possibility of another kind of sharing, of another kind of world, which Derrida calls the world of life-death. Islands are separated and connected, separated by the tumultuous sea that makes any passage dangerous and potentially deadly, but also abyssally connected by the earth. Here what is shared is not a stable horizon, but rather the unmasterable, unpossessable other (call it earth or death) that we share without sharing because it radically undermines any common phenomenological horizon of intelligibility.⁹ This is the famous experience of the impossible or experience of the aporia Derrida discusses at length in *Aporias* in relation to Heidegger’s affirmation that Dasein has access to ‘death as such’. For Derrida, the experience of the aporia, the only experience worthy of the name, is the experience of non-passage, an experience that would ‘pass through’ non-passage without ‘stopping at it nor overcoming it’ (Derrida 1993, 23).

This world of life-death has a certain tragic character, which is exemplified not only by Derrida’s insistence that the death of the other is the end of *the world* (and not merely of *a world*) but also by his recurrent appeal to the last line of a poem by Celan: ‘*die Welt is fort, ich muss dich tragen*’, ‘the world is gone, I must carry you’. The phenomenological world as

common horizon of intelligibility is gone; the stable structures that protects us against the loss of world and assures us that the world goes on after death, that death is merely an event within the world-horizon, have come undone. The world is far away: it can no longer ‘support us, serve as mediation, as ground, as earth, as foundation or as alibi’ (Derrida 2005c, 158). At this point, your mortality, your finitude is entrusted not to the common world, but to me. The recognition of our solitude turns me toward the other in an act of faith without assurance; it prompts a *Zusage*, a response, an engagement on my part to carry you in the absence of world.

Coming back to Nancy, we remember that for him, the limit is the edge between singularities (and “within” them), the place of differentiation or articulation, and hence the locus of the event of sense. The limit does not cut ‘us’ from ‘them’, rather it is ‘both inherent to the singular and exterior to it: it ex-poses it. It is immediately and conjointly the strict shape of its “inside [*dedans*]” and the drawing of its “outside [*dehors*]”’ (Nancy 2004b, 46). Hence, conceptual distinctions between human and nonhuman, living and nonliving, are not what is at stake for Nancy. Rather, he insists that there is all there is, singularly. ““A thing” is anything whatever. ... The ‘whatever’ of the thing constitutes its most characteristic affirmation, with the compaction, the concretion, wherein the thing “reifies” itself, properly speaking. We can define it: a thing is a concretion, any one whatever, of being’ (Nancy 1993a, 174). The question is, of course: isn’t Nancy here who is guilty of erasing all differences? Doesn’t this thinking of ‘whatever’ lead to the general equivalence of all things? But Nancy is quick to add:

This takes nothing away from the differences between things. The ‘whatever’ is not the ‘banal’ – and it is only against the background of ‘whatever’ that differences can arise. ... ‘Whatever’ is the indeterminateness of being in what is posited and exposed within the strict, determined concretion of a singular thing, and the indeterminateness of its singular existence. To think this: to leave behind all our determining, identifying, destining thoughts. That is, to leave behind what ‘thinking’ usually means (Nancy 1993a, 174),

and I would add including what ‘thinking’ – and sense – means for Derrida. The whateverness of the thing is both its concretion (its determinacy: *this* tree) and its ‘conceptual’ indeterminacy (its lack of essential determinations). But the word ‘thing’ can be misleading here since it does not name a thing by opposition to an animal or a man or a god: ‘*some* thing is free to be a stone, a tree, a ball, Pierre, a nail, salt, Jacques, a number, a trace, a lioness, a marguerite’ (Nancy 1993a, 186).

By now we understand that this freedom is not the freedom of the will, the freedom to give oneself determinations. But it is also not the ‘fact of appearing’, of standing ‘in the open and in appearing’ as Derrida thinks (Derrida 2014, 76). Freedom, for Nancy, is not subjectivist: the world is neither free *for* the human, nor is the appearing of the world a function of the disclosure of Being *to* the human being. Rather the world is

the taking-place of all comings, and of their abandonments. *Some thing* affirms a coming into presence, some thing affirms itself as coming into presence, coming without coming from anywhere, only coming *there*, indeterminate in its determination, unfettered by any attachment to or foundation in a substance or a negation of substance. (Nancy 1993a, 177)

Whereas Derrida would certainly take issue with the ‘itself’, the *soi-même* of self-affirmation (Derrida 2014, 76), Nancy’s singular plural has undone the value of mastery, allowing for an experience of the world (in the subjective genitive) where difference gives way to genuine plurality.

We saw that Derrida seeks to undermine the phenomenological concept of world as horizon of intelligibility in order to give rise to a different experience of the world. In this discussion, world was the place of sense as the possibility of appearing as such. For Nancy, world and sense are also correlated: the world *is* sense. Like Derrida, Nancy speaks of the ‘end of the world’ as the deconstruction of any *cosmos* or *mundus*, any clear, pre-given order. While this deconstruction can be experienced as the ‘loss of sense’, it represents for Nancy a transformation in the meaning of sense. Rather than the world *having* a sense bestowed upon it from the outside (be it God or the transcendental Subject), the world itself is sense (Nancy 1997, 8).

Yet, speaking of ‘the’ world in this context can be misleading. The world is not the totalisation of what is, an overarching horizon or a super container that would unite everything into a whole. Nancy writes

But that there is no whole (or *the* whole) is not the definition of a lack or the indication that something has been taken away, because there was no whole before there was no whole-at-all. It indicates, rather, that all that there is (for there is indeed all that there is) does not totalize itself, even though it is the whole. (Nancy 2013, 9; see Nancy 2007, 109)

Hence if we say that ‘the world stands by itself, configures itself, and exposes itself in itself, relates to itself’ (Nancy 2007, 47), we must always hear the ‘itself’ according to the singular plural and to the logic of differance outlined above.

The world is a com-position or dis-position of a multiplicity of singularities (of worlds) exposed to themselves and to each other; it is the play of a plurality of edges that open right in the middle of [*à même*] the world. In a different context, Nancy describes this play:

By itself, articulation is only a juncture, or more exactly the play of the juncture: what takes place where different pieces touch each other without fusing together, where they slide, pivot, or tumble over one another, one at the limit of the other without the mutual *play* – which always remains, at the same time, a play *between*

them – ever forming into the substance or the higher power of a Whole. Here, the *totality is itself the play* of the articulations. (Nancy 1991, 76)

Mondialisation or world-forming points, for Nancy, to this composition of world(s): we – that is, singularities – form a world at our outer edges, we articulate ourselves. World-forming is not a human activity but an ontological one: *it* worlds, or *there is* sense, sense circulates. That the world makes sense means that a movement of exposure happens in the spacings and articulations of singularities so that sense is primordially, for Nancy, a directional movement *toward*, a presentation-*to*.

The similarities between Nancy's sense and Derrida's *Zusage* should be obvious. At the same time, at least two crucial differences remain. The first one is semantic: the address for Derrida is a call to go *beyond* sense (Derrida 2014, 72) because sense is linked to 'appearing as such' and there can be no 'as such' of the event of the coming of the other, that is, there can be no 'as such' of the other shore from which the call resonates that gives rise to my engagement and my promise – to carry you in the absence of world, to create the world '*ex nihilo*' (Naas 2015, 60). The second one runs more deeply, and has to do with their respective understanding of the limit, edge or gap across which one addresses herself and responds to the other. In response to a question about 'the opening', which Derrida defines in Heideggerian terms as 'the fact of appearing', of standing 'in the open' (Derrida 2014, 76), Nancy responds:

The opening ... must always be brought back ... to that which is the condition of an opening, namely, the contour. The opening is not just some infinite gaping: in fact, there is no infinite opening. It might be possible to say ... that the opening is always opening *to* infinity but it itself is not infinite – and from that point of view I am really not comfortable with the theme of the Open in Heidegger. (Derrida 2014, 78)

The model of the opening as outline or contour for Nancy is the mouth, the non-place that opens up in the midst of a body and is only what it is (a place of externalization and exposition) in relation to that in the midst of which it opens. The outline separates and conjoins, in one stroke, inside and outside. For Derrida, the model of the opening is the absolute abyss that radically separates islands and calls for an act of faith, a response beyond any assurance.

The result is a radically different understanding of plurality. The 'with' or the 'together' of the islands on Derrida's account is always threatened by the sea that can engulf it. This is why it is an act of faith and a responsibility. The 'with' or the 'together' of everything that is seems ontologically guaranteed for Nancy, even though it rests on nothing. This is the meaning of creation *ex nihilo*: 'nothing but that which is [*rien que cela qui est*], nothing but that which grows [*rien que cela qui croît*] (*creo, cresco*), lacking any growth principle, even (and especially not) the autonomous premise of a "nature"' (Nancy 2008b, 24). Creation *ex nihilo* is for Nancy the expression of a 'radical materialism', one that is precisely 'without roots' (Nancy 2007, 51).

At the same time, despite this lack of grounding principle, the edges already hold any inside in contact with an outside, any one in contact with the other.

Derrida certainly finds this ontological guarantee problematic – we could even say unethical. Whether he is right would have to be assessed in light of the texts where Nancy explicitly tackles the problem of the relation between ontology and ethics.¹⁰ In closing, I just want to underline once more a potential weakness of Derrida’s ethical account of world. By emphasizing the faith, engagement, and responsibility at the origin of the world – by appealing to Celan poem with its *I* and its *you* – Derrida’s account still seems to put the possibility of ‘worlding’ squarely on the shoulders of the human. Or at least, it still seems to privilege the human world, the world between you and I. You – what or who comes from beyond phenomenological sense – who of course can always turn out to be the enemy rather than the friend, radical evil rather than the good, but who more often than not takes, in Derrida’s texts, the figure of a little cat rather than of a cold, indifferent stone. In this sense, Nancy’s ‘materialism’ might offer radically different possibilities for rethinking the concept of world and for engaging all those beings that exist in the world.

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Notes

1. See the few allusions to the inoperative community in Derrida 1997, 42, 46–8n.15, 80–1, 298, 304–5. See also Nancy response in Nancy 2000, 198n.28.
2. In Nancy 2003 and Douzinas 2007 respectively.

3. Three other important texts of Nancy are directly addressed to Derrida: ‘The Judeo-Christian (on Faith)’, ‘Consolation, Desolation’, and ‘Of a Divine Wink’ all collected in Nancy 2008b. On the dialogue Nancy hoped to be able to engage on the theme of the deconstruction of Christianity, see Nancy 2008b, 164–5 n.15. For a discussion of Nancy’s relationship to Derrida, see Nancy 2004a.
4. For a more detailed explanation of existence, finitude and freedom in Nancy, see Morin 2012, chapter 1.
5. It is important to emphasise this point so as not to confuse Nancy’s ontology with flat ontologies.
6. Even though his work on community and hospitality is often read in this way. For a critical discussion of this reading see Morin 2015a.
7. I am thankful to Jay Worthy for a conversation that helped me clarify this point for myself.
8. That sense for Derrida means ‘phenomenological sense’, and is essentially linked to phenomenalisation is obvious from Derrida 2014, 66, 72.
9. In his lecture at the *Collegium Phaenomenologicum* in July 2015, titled ‘Interment: Earth and Lifedead in Derrida’, Matthias Fritsch clearly laid out these three concepts of world and their relation. I am thankful to him for sharing a written draft of this paper with me. In his talk, Fritsch also argues, against certain critiques of Derrida for whom deconstruction fails to think ‘the materiality of ecology and the earth’ that the thinking of the earth found in *The Beast and the Sovereign* proves to be productive for environmental ethics. Fritsch’s interpretation of ‘earth’ could also give rise to a new interpretation of the relation between Derrida and Nancy, since the latter does put a lot of emphasis on the materiality (and even minerality) of the living body as well as of nature. See for example Nancy 2000, 18 and Nancy 2013, 84.
10. For a discussion of these texts in relation to Heidegger, see Morin 2015b.

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