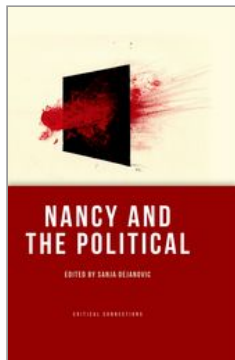


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Nancy and the Political

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'We Must Become What We Are'

Jean-Luc Nancy's Ontology as *Ethos* and *Praxis*

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[-] Abstract and Keywords

Jean-Luc Nancy often asserts that his ontology is also an ethos and praxis. I seek to develop this affirmation with a view to understanding the role and place of 'another politics' or 'another of politics' in Nancy's work. I start by unfolding Nancy's understanding of existence as abandonment, freedom, and decision, and underline the shifts in emphasis in his reappropriation of Heidegger's thought: from 'es gibt' to 'il y a', from gift to freedom, from guarding and sheltering, to opening and exposing. This is in an effort to show how the decision of existence is entwined with the praxis of inhabiting the world. Such praxis is a struggle for the world as an ungrounded, untotalisable plurality of existences, co-existing and co-appearing to themselves and each other.

Keywords: Jean-Luc Nancy, Martin Heidegger, Ontology, Politics, World, Freedom, Decision

In *Being Singular Plural*, Jean-Luc Nancy asserts that the ontology of being-with, or the thinking of the 'we' he is developing in this book, is at the same time an ethos and a praxis.¹ Nancy goes so far as to say that: "There is no difference between the ethical and the ontological: the "ethical" exposes what the "ontological" disposes."² From a cursory reading of various passages, we can glean Nancy's reasons for affirming this equivalence. His ontology is an ethos and a praxis because there can be no appropriation of the meaning of the 'with', no representation of the 'we'. More than ten years later, in a text about democracy the aim of which is more specifically to carve out the respective spaces of the political and the ontological, Nancy affirms: "'communism" must ...be posited as a given, as a fact: our first given. Before all else, we are in common. Then we must become what we are: the given is an exigency, and this exigency is infinite."³ This affirmation echoes another one found in Nancy's earlier book on community, where we can read: 'Community is given to us with being and as being, well in advance of all our projects, desires, and undertakings. At bottom, it is impossible for us to lose it ...We cannot not compear ...Community is given to us ...it is not a work to be done or produced. But it is a task, which is different - an infinite task at the heart of finitude.'⁴

In *Being Singular Plural*, the understanding of our being-in-common as *ethos* and *praxis*, as task and exigency, is developed explicitly against what Nancy calls philosophical politics or political philosophy - that is, against the reciprocal determination of philosophy and politics. In this reciprocal determination, each is the subject of the other. The *polis*, as the place where the *logos* is articulated, makes possible philosophy in its metaphysical institution, as the science that provides a ground for beings. **(p.22)** At the same time, philosophy, insofar as it produces a common reason, makes possible the *polis* as the gathering of rational men (*anthrōpos logikos*).⁵ As the middle term between politics and philosophy, the *logos* guarantees both the gathering of the *polis* and the unity of philosophy. If Nancy calls for a recommencement of philosophy from itself against this philosophical politics, it is because such a recommencement of philosophy apart from its overdetermination by politics (as founded in and as founding the *polis*) lays bare our ontological situation: not the commonality of reason as the 'one-origin' but the dis-position and ex-position of a plurality of singular origins without common ground. Without common ground, our existences derive their consistency not from something common but from the 'in' or the 'between' of existences, their sharing out. Yet, Nancy is clear that he 'does not plan to propose an "other politics"'⁶ under the heading of an ontology of the singular plural or the in-common. His ontology is an *ethos* and a *praxis*, but it does not propose an 'other politics'. This of course does not mean that it does not propose something else than a politics understood within the horizon of metaphysics (as the production or management of a given common).

In order to understand the role and place of 'another politics' or of 'another of politics' in Nancy's ontology, it is first crucial to elucidate the way in which Nancy's ontology is an *ethos* and a *praxis*. In order to do so, I will make a long detour through Nancy's description of existence as abandonment and as freedom, and then as decision. I will draw on the texts in which Nancy engages most directly with Heidegger's thought (in particular, *The Experience of Freedom*, 'Heidegger's "Originary Ethics"', and 'The Decision of Existence'), and I will use Heidegger's own works, when necessary, in order to flesh out and sometimes extrapolate from Nancy's evocative claims. The danger of proceeding in this way is that we run the risk of conflating Nancy with Heidegger. Indeed, Nancy often uses Heideggerian syntagms in such a way that the reader is unclear whether he is merely explicating a Heideggerian thought or speaking in his own name. Hence, I will also try to pay attention to the changes in emphasis in Nancy's reappropriation of Heidegger's thought: from '*es gibt*' to '*il y a*', from gift to freedom, from guarding and sheltering to opening and exposing. Throughout it will seem that Nancy is

confusing existence with Being. The reason for this apparent confusion will become clear at the end of this chapter. Despite its Heideggerian connotation, **(p.23)** existence in Nancy's sense is not limited to Dasein but applies to each being: star, rose, god, city, stone. In the end, it is the way in which existence is a struggle for the world in which other beings are implicated from the start that will differentiate Nancy's ontology, and hence its *ethos* and *praxis*, most radically from Heidegger's.

1. Abandonment of Being: From Gift to Freedom

In the simplest terms, Being means, for Nancy, *Setzung*, position or positioning. An essence doesn't exist or it exists only when it is positioned. This is how Nancy reads the Kantian thesis that is also discussed by Heidegger in *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*: 'Being is not a real predicate', or in its positive formulation: 'Being is absolute position of a thing.'⁷ Nancy explains in the following words:

Being is neither substance nor cause of the thing, rather, it is a being-the-thing in which the verb 'to be' has a transitive value of 'positioning', but one in which the 'positioning' is based on and caused by nothing else but Dasein, being-there, being thrown down, given over, abandoned, offered up by existence.⁸

The existence of an essence lies in its taking place, its arrival or coming 'here and now'. 'Existence' (that there is such and such, rather than what there is as such) is, in Nancy's terms, abandoned being. This expression has a double meaning. First, Being is abandoned or left behind as a cause or ground, or a condition of possibility that would precede what is and serve to explain why what is, is. In other words, the answer to the fundamental question of metaphysics, 'Why are there beings rather than nothing?', is not to be sought in the antecedence of Being. The answer already lies in the question: 'Since there is something, and not everything, it is because this thing is in abandonment, it is because everything is abandoned.'⁹ This is the second sense of abandonment: the cause/ground of the thing withdraws into the thing itself. The notion of creation *ex nihilo* is another way of thematising this abandonment or withdrawal of the cause/ground of beings. That the world - beings as a whole - is 'created' does not mean that it is produced by a very powerful Demiurge on the basis of a pre-existing nothing. The nothing is not that on the basis of which the world is **(p.24)** made, since such a thought of the nothing would turn it into a pre-given substrate. To think of a creation *ex nihilo*, it is not enough to get rid of a God-Maker; the nihil must also be emptied out of its role as underlying, pre-given substrate. Ultimately, what needs to be emptied out or deconstructed, is the place of the transcendent principle that grounds the world, a place that can be occupied by a God-Maker, by the 'Man' of humanism, or by the 'Nothing'. What we are left with after the deconstruction of the transcendent principle - though speaking of a 'remainder' can mislead us into thinking that this process is negative and leads to a loss - is the world in its proper sense: 'nothing but that which grows [*rien que cela qui croît*] (*creo, cresco*), lacking any growth principle'.¹⁰

The abandonment of Being in the double sense in which Nancy uses the phrase shows deep affinities with Heidegger's *Seinsverlassenheit*. Yet, according to Nancy, Heidegger's *Seinsverlassenheit* still has the connotations of withdrawing, leaving behind in one's retreat and hence holding to oneself, connotations from which Nancy will try to distance himself. Indeed, in *Der Spruch des Anaximander*, Heidegger characterises the way in which Being discloses itself in the unconcealment of what is as a *Ansichhalten*, a keeping to oneself.¹¹ On the other hand, what Nancy emphasises in the abandonment is an expenditure without reserve, and hence a certain disponibility and abundance of what is. Indeed, while *abandonner* has the connotation of a

withdrawing or leaving behind, and hence of a neglecting, not caring for, *être à l'abandon* does not only have this connotation of destituteness, but also points to a certain freedom, availability or even abundance, as a garden *à l'abandon* is an overgrown garden.¹²

What we witness then, from Heidegger to Nancy, is a subtle shift in the meaning of Being, and more specifically in the significance of the abandonment or withdrawal of Being. The crux of the problem could be formulated in the following way: in the withdrawal or abandonment of Being, is Being kept in reserve, hidden and withdrawn, or is it rather the case that Being is nothing more than the thing itself in its sheer existence? Rightly or wrongly, Nancy sees Heidegger as holding on to the first option: Being withdraws, it is effaced by the presencing of beings; it holds itself back and can only 'appear' as nothing. For Heidegger, the 'free gesture' of the disclosure of Being – the gesture that lets beings be encountered meaningfully in the world – is also at the same time a holding back that is responsible for the history of Being as errancy. **(p.25)** Only beings are, so that when Being is thought, it is thought as an exemplary or supreme being. This forgetting or oblivion of Being is a consequence of the essential withdrawal of Being (the fact that Being, which is not a being, is only the 'letting-be' of beings).

For Nancy, Heidegger's thought of the concealing of Being is an ontodicy, a justification of evil.¹³ This is the case because evil is made possible by the withdrawal of Being, but it does not ruin Being as such. Rather Being holds itself back, and in this way enables both *das Grimmige* und *das Heile*, fury and grace, by enabling good and evil. Thought in such a way, the withdrawal of Being holds within itself the possibility of a 'saving'. Being withdraws behind good and evil, remains the potential for both good and evil, even in the midst of fury. Even though evil does not necessarily lead to its reversal into the good, that is, even though the history of metaphysics is not necessarily the history of a redemption, evil is still justified. In 'The Question Concerning Technology', reading the two verses of Hölderlin's *Patmos*, 'But where *danger* is, *grows*/The *saving power* also', Heidegger shows how the saving power [*das Rettende*] is the flip side of revealing [*Entbergen*] in so far as the latter happens or comes to pass 'from out of a granting [*Gewähren*] and as such a granting'.¹⁴ As the translator points out, the verb *gewähren* is connected, for Heidegger, to both *wahren*, to watch over, keep safe or protect, and *währen*, to endure, and means, besides to grant, also to guarantee or vouchsafe.¹⁵ The highest dignity of the human being lies in keeping watch over the unconcealment insofar as it is a granting, that is, insofar as it harbours a granting gesture that necessary conceals itself in granting that what is unconceals itself.

In the *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger speaks instead of *wahren* or *Wahrnis* of a guarding [*hüten*] or shepherding [*hirten*] of the truth of Being.¹⁶ What is so shepherded is not what is in so far as its appearance is granted to us, but the 'source' of the meaningful appearance of what is. What Heidegger comes to realise after *Being and Time* is the inadequacy of transcendental-horizontal thinking to grasp this source in its giving or granting gesture, to think from out of this source rather than towards it. That the transcendental-horizontal way of thinking is inadequate to think the source of meaningfulness comes to the fore in the essay 'On the Essence of Truth' as soon as this source is shown to be hidden: both concealed and overlooked. Thought as the mystery, *das Geheimnis*, this source is not only responsible for the giving **(p.26)** or sending, the opening up of a world, but it also holds open the inexhaustible possibility of other worlds. This source will later be thought as *Ereignis*, as the 'event' that binds the human being to Being and vice versa, by throwing the human being into a specific meaning-formation (a specific world with its specific way of understanding what it means to be and hence of relating to what is), and calling forth the human being to sustain this meaning-formation. If the source is hidden, it is not

because it stands behind something that blocks our access to it but because, as the bond between the human being and Being, it cannot be surveyed or mastered by the human being. This would require that the human being step out of its bond with Being. At the same time, if there is an 'experience' of the mystery that does not betray this mystery by making it present, but at the same time still lets us experience it as holding in reserve possibilities of radical transformation of the human being- Being bond, then this experience must be the experience of the contingency of our current bond to Being. Such is the experience of the history of Being in its epochal character, that is, as both a granting and a refusal, or as granting refusal. The sheltering or guarding of the mysterious source of the meaningfulness of beings requires that we hold on to the reciprocal bond between the human being and Being, that we become the ground of the 'there' or the 'open' that is opened through this reciprocal bond. But what is guarded then is not a thing but an opening. As Nancy points out, an opening cannot be guarded by protecting it from or guaranteeing it against closure since such a move would turn the opening into something given, stable, fixed. The guard of the open can only happen through its opening without protection or guarantee.¹⁷ There is nothing 'there' to be safeguarded.

To avoid this subtle shift in the understanding of Being from a letting/opening to a giving that has to be received and kept, Nancy insists on shifting the emphasis from a granting or giving of Being toward the freedom of this granting. In this way, the granting does not become subordinated to a *truth* of Being as concealing, refusal, mystery, a truth that would have to be retrieved, remembered and kept. A *free* giving is not a movement of concealing in the unconcealing of beings, a concealing of Being's own giving in the given beings. Such a giving gesture is not 'free' since it runs the risk of turning into the (mysterious) 'origin' or ground of beings. Or at least it is not free of the metaphysical thought of freedom that questions what is with regards to its ground. In the shift of (p.27) emphasis Nancy proposes, Being is not thought as '*es gibt*' but as '*il y a*': that there are beings. While the '*es gibt*' is the formulation of a *Verlassenheit/Vergessenheit* that also calls for a guarding/sheltering or a reminiscing, the '*il y a*' is the formulation of freedom, of the abandonment of beings to the *y*, to the spacing of a place.¹⁸

In the releasement of beings into the clearing of Being, nothing is properly held back or 'withdrawn'. This means, according to Nancy, that the ontological difference is annulled. We know that for Heidegger the ontological difference is the way in which Being comes to pass as the forgetting of Being. Metaphysics thinks Being always from out of beings and in view of beings as that which is different from beings. Being is the answer to the question: What are beings qua beings? This way of questioning beings sets Being apart from beings and thought as their ground. Hence the ontological difference is invoked by metaphysics, but it is not thought as such, the focus being on the two different elements, the relation between which is one of grounding. The ontological difference is overcome in a leap into *Ereignis*, where the difference is thought as *Unterschied* and *Austrag*.¹⁹ What is so thought is not Being as the different, but rather the in-between that perdures and out of which Being and beings differentiate themselves. The co-belonging of Being and beings is now thought transitively as overwhelming and arrival: Being comes over beings and unconceals them; beings arrive and abide in sheltering the overcoming that unconceals them. Here, beings are not expropriated or abandoned by Being; rather they shelter the truth of Being.

When Nancy speaks of the annulment of the ontological difference, he seems to think something similar to the Heideggerian step back into the domain where Being and beings can be experienced from out of the difference in which they are held apart and toward each other. Nancy comes to think of the ontological difference, of the fact that Being is not a being, by

looking back to the Latin etymology of the word '*rien*'. As Nancy points out, 'nothing' [*rien*] does not mean 'not a thing at all' but rather the thing itself, *res*, insofar as it is no thing, that is, in so far as it empties itself out of its essence, its whatness.²⁰ Here Nancy differentiates between *le néant* (nothingness, *das Nichts*) and *le rien* (nothing, *rem*, the thing). Nothingness is what Being turns into as soon as it is posited in its difference from beings, as the universal and the highest. Nothing, on the other hand, is the thing taken in its existence (and not in its essence, as this or that): 'Nothing (p.28) is the thing tending towards its pure and simple being of a thing, consequently also towards the most common being of something and thus towards the vanishing, momentary quality of the smallest amount of beingness [*étantité*].'²¹ The difference is cancelled as a difference between two realities, Being and being, the ground and the grounded, but also as the abandonment of beings by Being, the withdrawal and reserve of Being. There are only beings, nothing behind, beneath or beyond them. Or, in other words: 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. Hence, the annulment of the ontological difference has nothing to do with the confusion between Being and beings, a forgetting of their difference. Rather Nancy writes: 'This step back [from the ontological difference into the difference] is the *identity of being and beings*: existence. Or more precisely: freedom. Freedom: *the withdrawal of every positing of being, including its being posited as differing from beings*.'²²

If existence is equated with freedom, it is because there can only be existence where the essence or the signification of this existence is not given. Nancy writes

once existence dearly offers itself ...as a factuality that contains in itself and as such, *hic and nunc*, the reason for its presence and the presence of its reason, we must ...think its 'fact' as a 'freedom'. This means that we must think what gives existence back to itself and only to itself, or what makes it available as an *existence* that is neither an essence nor a sheer given [in the sense of a brute, meaningless fact].²³

The annulment of the ontological difference, the move from 'Being is not a being' to 'Being is nothing but that there is being [*qu'il y a l'étant*]' does not mean that we can no longer make any distinction between Being and entities, that there is brute meaningless given. On the contrary, it means that the difference is itself active or praxical, in the technical sense that opposes *praxis* to *poiesis*. It is 'the reality of Dasein insofar as it is, in and of itself, open and called to an essential and "active" relation to the proper fact of being'.²⁴ To make this difference is to make sense, but it is not to produce something else above existence itself, a transcendent signification. But this non-giveness of such a signification does not mean that it is projected into an inaccessible realm from which the existent would be cut off. Rather than the 'powerlessness to (p.29) fix the sense of existence, this non-giveness has to be thought positively as "the power to leave it open".²⁵ Sense is non-givable: it is not what awaits us at the end of a long process, it is not what existence strives for or desires as if it aimed at some object or some ideal above existence itself. The non-giveness of sense makes up the entire act of existing itself. We could also say that existence aims at and desires nothing but the non-giveness of its sense, that is, it aims at and desires nothing but its freedom.²⁶ Does that not contradict what was said at the beginning, namely, that existence is the position of essence? Not if we recognise that the positioning of essence is an offering, an exposition so that the essence is not posited in-itself, in pure self-presence, but 'handed over to itself [*remis à soi*]',²⁷ 'exposed to being of itself, for itself, and unto itself what it is in itself'.²⁸ As Nancy says:

To exist does not mean simply 'to be'. On the contrary: to exist means *not* to be in the immediate presence or in the immanency of a 'being-thing'. To exist is not to be immanent, or not to be present to oneself, and not to be sent forth *by* oneself. To exist, therefore, is to hold one's 'selfness' as an 'otherness', and in such a way that no essence, no subject, no place can present *this otherness in itself* – either as the proper selfness of an other, or an 'Other', or a common being (life or substance).²⁹

The whole point is to understand this self-relation as something else than a self-determining (Kant: to be free is to give oneself the law of one's own action without any relation to what is outside oneself as rational being) or self-making (Sartre: to be free is to be the origin of one's own life-project or of one's own meaning, to be able to negate what one is and make oneself into the self one wants to be). In both cases, the self becomes a self-founding entity absolved from any relation with exteriority. The self closes itself upon itself in the infinite circle of self-relation.

To think of the givenness of the self as relation is to think the self as opening or spacing, or as *différance*. *Différance* is not a relation between two things that would exist prior to their being put into relation, a relation that would first let them appear as different from each other, but only insofar as each would remain identical to itself. Rather, *différance* is the openness or spacing that first allows something like a self to identify itself. What both Derrida and Nancy emphasise is the irreducibility or absolute exteriority of **(p.30)** the 'spacing' that allows for something to exist.³⁰ This 'spacing' *is* not, but it allows that there be things. Following this logic, existence lies not in the immediacy of self-presence but rather in the 'movement' of being-unto-self or being-toward-self. This means that there is nothing given at the origin of this 'movement' or this 'exposition'. Rather, existence is an 'effect' of the spacing that rends the immediate presence of the self and turns it inside-out, exposing it to itself and others.

We started by saying that for Nancy, being means positioning: *that* a thing is rather than *what* it is. In speaking in this way, we seemed to repeat the *essentia/existentia* distinction that Heidegger diagnoses as the key feature of metaphysical thinking (*existentia* is the actual presence or givenness of some 'what'). Later, we said that nothing (or being) is the thing tending towards the simple and most common being of a thing. This seemed again to reaffirm Being as *existentia* and remain within the metaphysical thinking of Being as essence and existence. Yet Nancy's positioning is not metaphysical: neither essentialist nor existentialist, neither the position of an essence, nor the pure position of an existent that would have to make its own essence. Rather, if what exists has the structure of *Différance*, then this means that the existent does stand there within its essence but is fully engaged in existence, in an active relation with its Being.

2. The *Ethos* and *Praxis* of Existence as Decision

We are now in a position to understand how the 'freedom' of existence, the 'non-givenness' of its essence makes of existence an *ethos* and a *praxis*. While Nancy writes that his ontology is both an *ethos* and a *praxis*, I think it is important to understand that the *ethos* is itself a *praxis* and vice versa, since this exemplifies the same shift from Heidegger's insistence on the gift towards Nancy's emphasis of freedom outlined above.

In his essay on Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism', Nancy comes to the conclusion that when existence is understood as self-relation, as opening for and to sense, then 'ethics becomes the ontology of ontology itself'.³¹ We could take this affirmation to mean that ethics is metontology. Indeed, this thought is not far from the position Heidegger held in the 1928 lecture course, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*. There, Heidegger speaks of a metontology, which is the domain of the metaphysics of existence, **(p.31)** as the domain where the question of ethics may be raised properly for the first time.³² The universalisation and radicalisation of fundamental ontology, which consists in the analytic of Dasein and of the temporality of Being (and hence which is descriptive in its approach), leads to a turn or swerve into a metontology: a reflection on beings as whole or of the totality of beings in the light of the Being brought to light in fundamental ontology. Ontology depends on the factual existence of Dasein, which depends on the factual presence of nature. Hence fundamental ontology leads back to a metontology or a metaphysical ontic, even though the latter still depends on Dasein's understanding of Being. The metaphysics of existence, which clarifies the role of existing Dasein in the totality of beings is housed in metontology and builds the bridge to, or consists in the metaphysical foundations of, ethics. Yet, Heidegger puts into question such an understanding of the relation between ontology and ethics in the *Letter on Humanism*, not because it is mistaken, but because we do not know what is meant by the two terms, ontology and ethics, let alone how they relate, until we think them in relation to the truth of Being. Here's what Heidegger says in the *Letter*:

If the name 'ethics', in keeping with the basic meaning of the word *eēthos*, should now say that ethics ponders the abode of the human being, then that thinking which thinks the truth of being as the primordial element of the human being, as one who exists, is in itself originary ethics. However, this thinking is not ethics in the first instance because it is ontology. For ontology always thinks solely the being (on) in its being. But as long as the truth of being is not thought all ontology remains without its foundation.³³

Hence the 'ontology of ontology' here is not the metontology of 1928, but the thinking that ponders the truth of being as the abode (*Aufenthalt*) of the human being. This thinking of the truth of Being, or more precisely the thought of the human being in its relation to the truth of Being, is the thought of a leaping into and a steadfastness in *Da-sein*, in the there.

But while Heidegger has, according to Nancy, a tendency to think the *Aufenthalt* of the human being in the open region as an abiding and the place of this *Aufenthalt* as abode (*demeure*, house), Nancy himself thinks it more actively as conduct. Or, for Nancy, it is essential to remember that to 'remain in the opening', **(p.32)** to abide, is to act. Indeed, we should remember that Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism' is a reflection on '*l'agir*', das *Handeln*. If Heidegger has defined Dasein in *Being and Time* as the entity for whom 'in its very Being that Being is an *issue* for it', this issue is for Nancy an action or conduct: The translation of '*es geht um das Sein*' by '*il s'agit de l'être*' lets 'the issue' appear clearly in relation to an *agir*: an action or a conduct. Nancy understands this conduct as decision. To 'decide to exist' means to let existence come to itself. The whole point is to understand this movement of 'owning' at the heart

of existence that Nancy calls 'decision'. Here, we must turn to essay 'The Decision of Existence' and the insightful reading of the concept of authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*: ownness or the proper) in *Being and Time* it proposes.³⁴

In *Being and Time*, it can seem as though authenticity and inauthenticity are two possibilities of being between which Dasein is free to choose, while its existence as such remains indifferent to this choice. Indeed Heidegger does say that existence, as a potentiality-for-Being (*Seinkönnen*) which is in each case mine, 'is free either for authenticity or for inauthenticity or for a mode in which neither of these has been differentiated [*frei für Eigentlichkeit oder Uneigentlichkeit oder die modale Indifferenz ihrer*]'.³⁵ Of course, Heidegger also says that 'possibility, as an *existentiale*, does not signify a free-floating potentiality-for-Being in the sense of the "liberty of indifference" (*libertas indifferentiae*). In every case Dasein ...has already got itself into definite possibilities.'³⁶ Dasein is always already involved in existing, and this means that it has always already 'lost itself', or that thrown Dasein is always already falling, entangled in what is of concern, so that it has not taken hold of its own existing. But Dasein can be freed for its ownmost potentiality-for-Being so that it can choose itself.³⁷ At the same time, we know that whatever this choice consists of, authenticity is only an 'existentiell modification' or a 'modified way of grasping' falling everydayness.³⁸

Based on this textual evidence, Nancy will make two claims: 1) the decision of authentic existence is made right at inauthenticity or indecision itself, and 2) this decision does not concern two distinct alternatives that would float in front of Dasein and between which Dasein would have to choose. Nancy defends this reading of *Entschlossenheit*, that is, of disclosedness in the proper mode of resoluteness or decidedness,³⁹ by going back to the sections on idle talk and ambiguity in *Being and Time*. In these sections, Heidegger (**p.33**) maintains that inauthenticity is the inability to distinguish between what is originary and what is not, what is properly understood and what is not. For Nancy, this situation of indistinction or undecidability is the *proper* situation of the opening: it is disclosedness or existence itself. If Dasein were able to decide on what is originary it would appropriate its own origin, it would open the opening for itself, or would open itself to the opening from itself. Nancy explains:

thus mastered and appropriated, that opening up, that disclosedness, would no longer exactly be the opening that it *is*. What is to be decided is disclosedness's difference from itself, by reason of which (a reason with neither fundament nor reason) *disclosedness cannot be made one's own* and thus is what it is, in its ownness: to exist. Therefore, 'to decide' means not to cut through to this or that 'truth', to this or that 'meaning' of existence - but to expose oneself to the undecidability of meaning that existence *is*.⁴⁰

Proper (or decided) existence is not another kind of existence. In a sense, the existent does not decide or resolve itself for anything else than what it already is. Rather, in the decision, the existent lets existence relate to itself. If this decision must be a decision *in favour of* existence, not because existence would be absolutely good, but because only in existence can there be a decision as that which cuts/decides. Existence is always the arche-decision: a decision for decision, that is, a decision not to decide in advance on what the existent must decide, a decision for in-decision in which alone there can be decision.⁴¹ Again, if existence reaches itself or touches itself, it is always as something that is 'without-ground' or 'without-essence', essentially in suspension. The opening is 'properly' received as such when it decides (itself), that is, when it decides to hold itself firmly to the opening that it is. This holding (*tenue*: ethos or habitus) is

without assurance or stability. As we said above, to abide or remain in the opening is to act, and this act is a decision, a decision in which suspended existence received a certain firmness or steadfastness, but one that has an essentially different character than a ground or soil.

(p.34) 3. 'Our' Responsibility for the Freedom of the World

I started by quoting the passages where Nancy speaks of his ontology as *ethos* and *praxis*, of existence as an exigency, a demand to become what we are. In all of these passages, Nancy was clear that the ontology in question is the ontology of being-with or being-in-common. Yet, in focusing on the texts where Nancy engages directly with Heidegger in order to clarify Nancy's understanding of existence, I seem to have turned the existent into a self that is entirely focused on its ontological relation to existence, distorting Nancy's focus on community and world. Indeed, while I have underlined the active dimension of existence as conduct and decision, it does seem that any activity implied by existence is purely internal and does not involve any external actions. Hence, it seems that despite its active dimension, the 'praxis' of existing is not political, if by that we mean that it leads to being engaged in the world with others in a certain way. Yet, such a separation between inside and outside, between an internal conduct and an external action is exactly what Nancy's ontology seeks to undo. In order to overcome the suspicion of a divide between the inside and the outside, it is now necessary to outline the way in which other beings are essentially implicated in existence, and in doing so distance Nancy further from Heidegger.

It is true that for Heidegger, Dasein is essentially Being-with. But at the same time, what singles Dasein out? - this Dasein that is in each case mine, is its existence, its essential, active relation to Being, which is always at issue for it. Of course, existence means, insofar as its structure is ecstatic, that Dasein is exposed to beings, always already entering into meaningful relation with them. But this exposure is always a function of existence, of the co-appropriation of the human being to Being, and vice versa. Hence, Heidegger's originary ethics ponders the belonging of Dasein to Being and not Dasein's relation to Others and to the totality of beings. In speaking of the necessary exposition of what exists, Nancy will emphasise the exteriority that is needed for the existent to be exposed or open. For Nancy, the thought of existence requires that we think being as singular plural, while in Heidegger one can get the impression that Dasein is an isolated self that is open and responsive to an impersonal Being.

For Nancy, there is no opening (no disclosedness or no 'self-relation') without an outside, and hence the spacing at the heart **(p.35)** of self-relation requires a plurality of existents, a plurality and sharing-out of the 'there'. If the *ethos* and *praxis* of existence - opening up the opening by holding oneself to indecision - makes the closure of a Subject (I or We) impossible, then the existent is necessarily from the start implicated in the world, exposed to others. Hence, while it ponders existence as *ethos* and *praxis*, Nancy's originary ethics is responsive not only to existence, but also to the existents in the concrete materiality. In Heidegger, on the contrary,

always, and in the final analysis, it is *existence* as such that puts at stake freedom and the openness in which beings present themselves. However, in this coming into presence, beings themselves in general also *exist* in a certain way, and singularly. We could say: because existence is in the world, the world as such itself also exists - it exists because of the proper existence of existence, which is outside of itself: *this* tree exists in its singularity and in its free space where it singularly grows and branches out. It is not a

question of subjectivism, the tree does not appear to me thus, it is a question of the material reality ...⁴²

Of course, Heidegger also says that the world exists but this is because world is the where-in of Dasein's factual existence or the space of intelligibility in which Dasein finds itself. For Nancy, the world is also neither the totality of what is nor a big container, but it is also not the coherent space of understanding in which Dasein finds itself. Rather, the world is the totality of all the expositions and being-toward of all that exists, the play of the existents' articulations. Nancy explains the concept of articulation or juncture in relation to community in the following way:

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.⁴³

The mutual play between existents, their coexistence or coexposition, gives form and coherence to the world, but without subsuming the *cum* of the *ex* into a One.⁴⁴ While I have linked existence to the verbs 'remaining', 'abiding', 'acting' and 'deciding', here **(p.36)** Nancy links this praxis of existence to the way in which we inhabit the world.

The question of the existence of the world, not as the context of the existence of Dasein, but as the proliferation of differences among beings, is, Nancy recognises, a difficult question. It is not so much a question of extending the kind of being of Dasein to all other beings. Rather, it is a question of understanding how other beings also display modes of existence that are not reducible to their being available for Dasein, there to be taken up into the circuit of its existence and illuminated by it. Does this mean that all other beings exist as this decision of existence that was discussed above? In a fragment at the end of *The Experience of Freedom*, Nancy wonders whether he should claim that all beings are free and replies candidly: 'Yes, if I knew how to understand this.'⁴⁵ If freedom is not anymore the property of a self-legislating subject but the withdrawal of the cause or ground of what exists or is abandoned, then the freedom of the world, of all that exists in its singularity and plurality, is essentially equivalent to its creation *ex nihilo*. The rose grows and the stone rolls without 'why', but this absence of ground does not enclose them within themselves. If this were the case, the rose or the stone would find in this absence of ground all the reason of the world. Rather, the stone or the rose is without ground because it grows or rolls outside of itself, 'with the reseda, the eglantine, and the thistle - as well as with crystals, seahorses, humans, and their inventions'.⁴⁶ This freedom of the world forces us to rethink the relation between the human being and the rest of beings differently than as the technological exploitation of an essentially unfree nature in free, human production. Nancy is clear that the point is not to demonise technology and appeal to human beings to protect nature against exploitation - such a reversal would not undermine the free subject/unfree nature dichotomy. At the same time, he is less than explicit, at least in this fragment, about the way in which such relation ought to be conceptualised. What we do learn from him is that we exist to or towards this freedom of the world and that this makes us responsible for it.

In *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy explains the relation between the human being and other beings in the following way: Humans are 'those who expose *as such* sharing and circulation by saying "we", by *saying we to themselves* in all possible senses of that expression, and by saying we for

the totality of all being'.⁴⁷ World (**p.37**) is existence, freedom, exposition; the human existent is exposed to and also exposes this exposition in saying 'we' for all beings and for each one, one by one. Nancy explains this redoubling of exposition in the following terms:

Humans are the exposor [*l'exposant*, the exponent] of the world; they are neither its end nor its ground – the world [that is, the exposing of singularities to themselves and each other] is what is exposed by and to humans [*l'exposé de l'homme*]; it is neither their environment, nor their representation.⁴⁸

This exponential characteristic of human beings also means that humans, and humans alone, are also potentially the unexposer of the exposing. If human existing takes on the active connotation of 'deciding to exist', it is because it is always possible for the existents that we are to close off exposition. Hence, when Nancy ends the second section of *The Creation of the World* by affirming that 'it is for us to decide for ourselves [*c'est à nous de nous décider*]',⁴⁹ the 'us' in favour of which we are to decide cannot be the self-enclosed human subject, individual or collective. Our existence as decision is the responsibility for the freedom of the world, understood as the ungrounded diffraction of beings (*Ent-scheidung, Auseinandertreten*) that make up the world.

The decision of existence is the decision to inhabit the world in such a way that the world can really form a world: an ungrounded, untotalisable plurality of existences, co-existing and co-appearing to themselves and each other. Inhabiting the world for Nancy requires that we stop seeking to totalise the world in a representation or ground it in a principle. In both cases, we posit a place outside of the world (the place of the principle or of the onlooker) from which the world appears as a totality or unity. At the same time, inhabiting the world insofar as it requires that we relinquish all transcendent meaning of the world (this is what Nancy calls the process of world-becoming or *mondanisation*⁵⁰) cannot merely lead to endless circulation and exchange between existences. Such circulation and exchange arise from the general equivalence between all existences, a general equivalence that erases all differences, and hence all meaningful co-existence and ex-position. To learn to inhabit the world is to learn to stand within a world that has no firm ground, but the consistency of which resides only in the mutual articulation and play of all existences. In *The Creation (p.38) of the World*, Nancy is very clear that this inhabiting, which is the true creation of the world (*mondialisation*), is a struggle.

In *The Truth of Democracy*, Nancy will be more careful to differentiate between what belongs to existence and its sense, and what belongs to politics. Politics, Nancy claims, ought not to take over the sense of existence or to prefigure the good that makes up a good life. If it does so, then we have a metaphysical politics, one in which existence is referred to a good outside of itself that the *polis* aims to realise. Rather, politics ought to open a space for the affirmation of existence, an existence that is, as I showed in this chapter, always without essence and without guarantee, always plural and shared, always exposed to itself and the world. In this sense, the 'struggle for the world' encountered in *The Creation of the World* is political insofar as it aims to open a space where 'there is room for all the world and for everyone [*pour tout le monde*], but a genuine place, one in which things can genuinely *take place* (in this world)'.⁵¹ For those who would too quickly find in this call to struggle for the world a justification of political actions, of protests, revolts and revolutions, violent or non-violent, it should be pointed out that in both texts Nancy describes this struggle first and foremost as a 'struggle of thought'. It seems that for Nancy the struggle to enter into the thought of existence *alone* can 'dislodg[e] the very foundation of general equivalence' and put into question 'its false infinity'.⁵² While Nancy's

emphasis on thought might suggest quiescence or passivism to some, it should be underlined that this thought is not merely theoretical or abstract, but 'very precisely concrete and demanding'.⁵³ It is a thought at work in the world, a transformative praxis, creative of a sense in excess of all produced meaning or measurable value. Just as existence unsettles the opposition between being and acting, Nancy's politics unsettles the opposition between thinking and acting.

Notes

Notes:

- (1.) Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. R. D. Richardson and A. E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 7, 71, 99.
- (2.) *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- (3.) Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Truth of Democracy*, trans. P.-A. Brault and M. Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), p. 54, n.6.
- (4.) Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. P. Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 35.
- (5.) Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, pp. 22-3.
- (6.) *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- (7.) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Guyer and A. W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A592/B620-A603/B631. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. A. Hofstadter, rev. edn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), §7.
- (8.) Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Of Being-in-Common', in The Miami Theory Collective (ed.), *Community at Loose Ends* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 2.
- (9.) Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. B. Holmes et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 43. For a reading of the abandonment of being as it relates to the imperative of being, see François Raffoul, 'Abandonment and the Categorical Imperative of Being', in B. C. Hutchens (ed.), *Jean-Luc Nancy: Justice, Legality and World* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), pp. 65-81.
- (10.) Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. B. Bergo, G. Malenfant and M. B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 24. See also *Being Singular Plural*, p. 16.

(11.) By revealing itself in what is [*in das Seiende*], being withdraws. In this way being, with its truth, keeps to itself. This keeping to itself [*Ansichhalten*] is the way it discloses itself early on ... By bringing the unconcealment of what is [*Un-Verborgenheit des Seienden*], it finds, for the first time, the concealment of being. Concealment remains, however, the characteristic of the refusal that keeps to itself [*des an sich haltenden Verweigerens*]. Martin Heidegger, 'Anaximander's Saying', in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. J. Young and K. Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 254; translation modified.

(12.) See Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, pp. 36–7.

(13.) See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*, trans. B. McDonald (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), §12. See also Patrick Roney, 'Evil and the Experience of Freedom: Nancy on Schelling and Heidegger', *Research in Phenomenology*, 9:3, 2009, pp. 374–400.

(14.) Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. W. Lovitt (New York: HarperCollins, 1977), pp. 28–34, here 32.

(15.) *Ibid.*, p. 31, n.24.

(16.) Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 252 and 260.

(17.) Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, ed. Simon Sparks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 184.

(18.) Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'impératif catégorique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), p. 145. An abridged version of the chapter from which I am quoting is translated as 'Abandoned Being' in *The Birth to Presence*, but the paragraph I am referring to is omitted. See *The Birth to Presence*, p. 40.

(19.) Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. J. Stambaugh (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 65. See also the translator's introduction, p. 17, n.3.

(20.) As Littré explains, the literal meaning of the word *rien*, which goes back to its etymological root in the Latin *rem* (accusative of *res*), is something. Only when the negative particle *ne* or *ni* is added to form the locution *ne ...rien* or *ni ...rien* does it mean nothing. In this way, the sentence '*Il serait dangereux de rien entreprendre*' means 'it would be dangerous to undertake something' while the sentence '*il serait dangereux de ne rien entreprendre*' means the exact opposite, namely that it would be dangerous to undertake nothing or not to undertake something. As a noun, *un rien* means a very little thing, something that is almost nothing at all, as in the phrase '*pleurer pour un rien*', 'to burst into tears for a trifle'.

(21.) Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World, or Globalization*, trans. F. Raffoul and D. Pettigrew (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), p. 103.

(22.) Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*, p. 167; emphasis in the original. Here, Nancy seems to be thinking of existence more in terms of Heidegger's *Ereignis* and not as the human being's insertion [*Einrückung*] in the there. See Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. R. Rojcewicz and D. Vallega-Neu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), §179.

(23.) Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*, pp. 9–10.

- (24.) Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, p. 175. In the French version published in *La pensée dérobée* (Paris: Galilée, 2001), Nancy adds an explication of the kind of praxis that the ontological difference is: 'À savoir, la praxis selon laquelle l'être fait l'étant (ou l'existant): il ne le fait pas comme un produit, il le fait en tant qu'il se fait être en ex-istant dans l'existant ou comme existant [The praxis according to which being makes the being (or the existent): Being does not make it as a product, but it makes it insofar as it makes itself be in ex-isting in the existent and as the existent].' See also *The Birth to Presence*, p. 103.
- (25.) Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, p. 178.
- (26.) Nancy, 'La liberté vient du dehors', in *La pensée dérobée*, p. 133.
- (27.) Ibid., p. 130.
- (28.) Nancy, 'Of Being-in-Common', p. 3.
- (29.) Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, pp. 154–5; translation modified, emphasis in the original. In the language of *Being and Time*, this thought was expressed by saying that to exist is have one's own being (one's own self) as possibility, but such that the self I have to be is not something (some ideal image of myself) that I can represent to myself, hold in front of me and appropriate for myself. The relation is not between a present self and a future possible self. Rather, what the existent (Dasein) has as its ownmost possibility is its Being, its existence itself, which can never be fully its own since it is exposed to limits that are not (birth, death) and hence cannot be appropriated.
- (30.) Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 303.
- (31.) Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, p. 187.
- (32.) Martin Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. M. Heim (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), §10 Appendix, pp. 154–9.
- (33.) Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, p. 271.
- (34.) For a reading of 'The Decision of Existence' in relation to Heidegger and Kierkegaard, see Werner Hamacher, 'Ou, séance, touche de Nancy, ici', in D. Sheppard, S. Sparks and C. Thomas (eds), *On Jean-Luc Nancy: The Sense of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 40–63.
- (35.) Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), H. 232, see also H. 53.
- (36.) Ibid., H. 144, see also H. 12.
- (37.) See Ibid., H. 42.
- (38.) See Ibid., H. 103 and 179.
- (39.) *Entschlossenheit* is rendered in the Macquarrie and Robinson translation by resoluteness and *Entschluß* by resolution. In French, Martineau translates the former with *résolution* and the latter with *décision*. Nancy, for his part, uses 'ouverture décidante/décidé', deciding/decided
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opening or decisive opening for Entschlossenheit, which the English translator renders as decisiveness, losing the connection with the opening (Erschlossenheit, disclosedness). See Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, pp. 87-8. For the French original, see *Une pensée finie* (Paris: Galilée, 1990), pp. 117-18.

(40.) Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, p. 97; emphasis in the original.

(41.) See Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*, §12, especially pp. 138-40.

(42.) Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*, p. 172, n.2; emphasis in the original.

(43.) Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 76; emphasis in the original.

(44.) Nancy, *The Creation of the World, or Globalization*, p. 73.

(45.) Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*, p. 160.

(46.) Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 86.

(47.) Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 3; translation modified, emphasis in the original.

(48.) *Ibid.*, p. 18; translation modified.

(49.) Nancy, *The Creation of the World, or Globalization*, p. 74; emphasis in the original.

(50.) *Ibid.*, p. 44.

(51.) *Ibid.*, p. 42; translation modified, emphasis in the original.

(52.) Nancy, *The Truth of Democracy*, p. 31.

(53.) Nancy, *The Creation of the World, or Globalization*, p. 53.



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