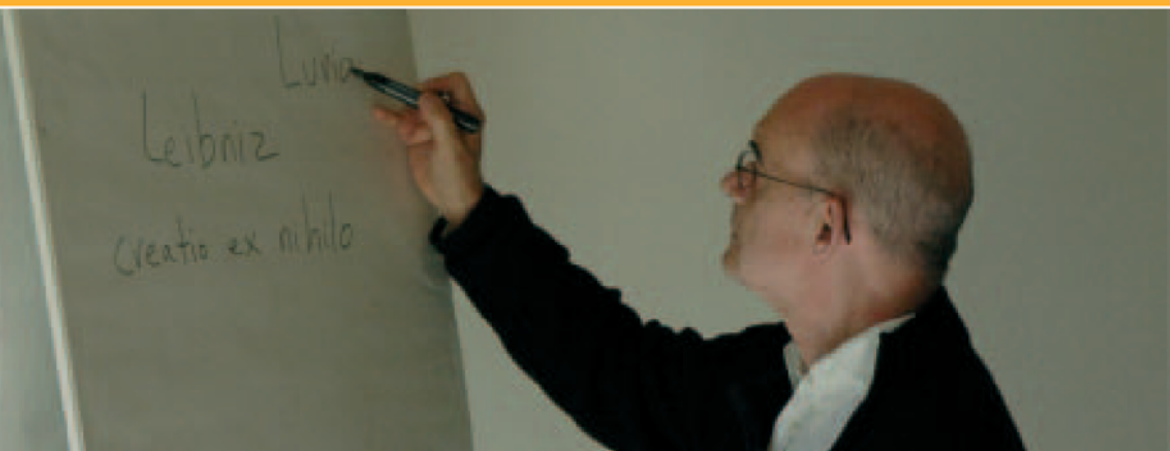


B. C. Hutchens



Jean-Luc Nancy

AND THE FUTURE OF PHILOSOPHY



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Jean-Luc Nancy and the Future of Philosophy

B. C. Hutchens

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2005 by Acumen

Published 2014 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group,
an informa business*

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ISBN 13: 978-1-84465-026-2 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-1-84465-027-9 (pbk)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Designed and typeset in Classical Garamond
by Kate Williams, Swansea.

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Abbreviations

- BC "Of Being in Common" (1991).
BP *The Birth to Presence* (1993).
BSP *Being Singular Plural* (2000).
C "La Comparution/The Compearance" (1992).
CMM *La création du monde ou la mondialisation* (2002).
DC "La Déconstruction du christianisme" (1998).
EF *The Experience of Freedom* (1993).
FT *A Finite Thinking* (2003).
GT *The Gravity of Thought* (1997).
HRN *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative* (2002).
IC *The Inoperative Community* (1991).
L "L'Intrus" (2002).
LA *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* (1988).
M *The Muses* (1996).
MMT "An Interview with Jean-Luc Nancy", M. Gaillot (ed.) (1998).
NM "The Nazi Myth" (1990).
OP *L'oubli de la philosophie* (1986).
P "Is Everything Political? (A Brief Remark)" (2002).
R "Responding for Existence" (1999).
RP *Retreating the Political* (1997).
SDC "The Self-Deconstruction of Christianity: A Discussion with Jean-Luc Nancy" (2000).
SR *The Speculative Remark (One of Hegel's Bon Mots)* (2001).
SV "Sharing Voices" (1990).
SW *The Sense of the World* (1997).
TL *The Title of the Letter: A Reading of Lacan* (1992).

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Preface

... parallel lines meet at infinity, an infinity that must be truly vast to accommodate so many things, dimensions, lines straight and curved and intersecting, the trams that go up these tracks and the passengers inside the trams, the light in the eyes of every passenger, the echo of words, *the inaudible friction of thoughts* ...

José Saramago¹

Jean-Luc Nancy is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Strasbourg, co-founder of the former “Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political” and author of numerous influential books about meaning, freedom, community, art and politics. However, he is not merely another academic celebrity seduced by the allures of pedantry. His ideas not only bear on social realities; they also stem from them. For approximately a decade, he has endured the suffering of both a heart transplant and cancer, and written profoundly about both in such works as “The Heart of Things” and “*L’Intrus*”. It is from Nancy that we learn that, if each part of a body could take over or spread over the body itself, then there is no such thing as body at all, only a sharing out of bodies and their relations (BP: 207). His misfortunes have inspired a relentless enquiry into the meaning of the body’s fragility and fragmentation, the tenuous connections of a community of such bodies, and the plurality of voices that express their sense. The single heart of all things, their sense, he writes, “never stops coming into presence, and putting us in its presence, the presence of this concretion of being, always unique and always ‘whatever’” (BP: 188). Clearly, not even the grievance against human finitude that he could so naturally possess has forced him to lose his spirited fascination with the incertitude and undecidability of discourses that incessantly fail to acquiesce in comprehension. One can only admire the fortitude of a thinker whose thoughts are not swayed by misfortune, but encouraged, deepened and

even vindicated by it. Perhaps not since Pascal has a thinker's pained musing been more stirring apt to the human condition.

Jean-Luc Nancy and the Future of Philosophy is a book addressing what this philosopher has written about the future of philosophy and the concept of "the future". It surveys Nancy's timely insights about the unstable conditions under which existence is always endured and fleetingly understood. Philosophical thoughts are master only of those domains they imagine for themselves; they are as vulnerable to the exigencies of a coming future as all human bodies are. It is with that in mind that Nancy writes of the "corpus" of philosophy, the catalogue of the ways that bodies have sense only because sense itself is bound to corporeal states and activities open to their own improvidence. Just as philosophy is troubled by the coming of sense, so are bodies in contiguity with and invaded by strangenesses that never "cease being a disturbance and a perturbation of intimacy" (L: 2). There is something foreign in us all, and in this respect we are each equally exposed to our shared strangeness. When the invader exposes bodies' strangeness to themselves, then the philosopher is exposed to what José Saramago calls the "inaudible friction of thoughts" (see epigraph). But if there are only bodies, then every reader of this corpus should recognize the sharing in the community of bodies this necessarily brings to presence. Despite the cacophony of voices in which we philosophers share, we are nonetheless answerable to this "inaudible friction" between "our" thoughts of what is to come for "our" bodies and what "we" represent "our" bodies to be.

It is appropriate, then, to dedicate this book in gratitude to Jean-Luc Nancy himself. It is as much about the man as it is the stimulations his ideas have undoubtedly provided to appreciative readers.

In this book, it has been my objective to survey the relevance of Nancy's expansive vision to many contemporary philosophical concerns, all of which relate to the question of the future of our time and the status of the concept of the "future" today. I have chosen to present Nancy's critiques of various prevailing contemporary presuppositions: in particular, the substantialist, transcendentalist and immanentist metaphysics are discernible in the context of libertarianism, post-secular theology, communitarianism, contractarianism and specific, timely questions about technology and globalization. There are gaping holes in coverage, some of which are scandalous: literature, the visual arts, love, joy, and justice are some of the concepts that figure only glimmeringly in this book, if they figure at all. Nancy's voluminous work on the visual arts alone would require an independent study I must confess would be beyond my abilities. Nevertheless, I hope that the reader will find what follows to be at least a suitable primer for the study of this fascinating contemporary thinker.

PREFACE

It is hoped that the reader will find this book more accessible than Nancy's own daunting composition. I advise the reader to examine the introduction, interview and conclusion of the book, as well as to consult the glossary for clarification of the meanings of terms as I have used them. Bulleted conclusions are to be found at the end of each chapter.

Special thanks are owed to Tristan Palmer of Acumen, who has guided and encouraged this production from its troubled origins. I am grateful for his faith in the pertinence of the project when many editors would have been incapable of suspending their "ecotechnical" incredulity. Professor William Hawk of James Madison University and Professor Duncan Richter of the Virginia Military Institute deserve thanks for providing ample and desirable teaching opportunities. Above all, warmest thanks to Karen Hutchens, whose inquisitive mind and capacity for wonder have been not only an inheritance, but an inspiration.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

What will become of our world is something we cannot know, and we can no longer believe in being able to predict or command it. But we can act in such a way that this world is a world able to open itself up to its own uncertainty as such. (RP: 158)

All that we transmit to ourselves . . . has begun to transmit itself in front of us, toward or coming from a “we” that we have not yet appropriated, and which has not yet received its name, if ever it should have one. (C: 384)

Our time is the time that, as it were, exposes exposure itself: the time for which all identifiable figures have become inconsistent (the gods, the *logoi*, the wise, knowledge), and which therefore works toward (or which gives itself over to) the coming of a figure of the unidentifiable, the figures of opacity and of resistant consistency as such. “Man” thus becomes opaque to himself, he grows thick and heavy with the weight of an excessive thought of his humanity: eight billions bodies in an ecotechnical whirlwind that no longer has any other end than the infinity of an inappropriable meaning. (GT: 83–4)

Jean-Luc Nancy is a contemporary philosopher fixated by the parlous future of community and its spontaneous freedoms in a globalizing West. His core commitment is to an alternative view of community dissimilar to those normally offered today. In particular, he regards social relations as an insubstantial sharing in an “impalpable reticulation of contiguous and tangential contacts”, not as a substantial cluster of “individuals” determined by common social means and focused on common political ends that produce a controllable future. In addressing this possibility, he proposes a

“community of being” (the irreducible plurality of singular “ones”) that replaces the intractably traditional question of the “being of community” (the “being” that brings predetermined “individuals” into communion) (SW: 61; BC: 1). With undeniable sincerity, he addresses the possibility of the West’s future being determined by the feral interplay between, on the one hand, a democracy of individualism rendered impotent by its “cynical” liberal values and, on the other, an “ecotechnics” of capital (expansively formative of community and sovereignty). He insists vehemently that, despite the political and technological progress of our contemporary “market democracy”, we remain unwittingly improvident, closed to an uncertain future and the undecidability of the consequences of agency. Nevertheless, for Nancy, whatever form modern life may assume, each of “us” is a finite being whose radical singularity has been neither eradicated by the demands of political and social reality nor entirely deracinated from community life. It is in our freedom and community that we are open to a future that is always a surprise or shock to our traditional sensibilities. To realize this, however, we must think differently of what freedom and community have conventionally come to mean.

In the main, he is intrigued by the thought that the Westernization of the globe has redounded to become the globalization of the West, leading to a suspended “end” torn between the incompatible options of a reductive Enlightenment and a lyric Romanticism (MMT: 94; BSP: 63). Singularly devoid of the bromides and vatic pronouncements so common in “Continental” philosophy, his work soberly attests a fascination with the West’s panoply of immanence: its suspended history and the resulting “crisis of sense”; its exclusionary and appropriative politics (in which “everything is political”); its yearning fascination with exteriority (God, Law, Value); its debilitating nostalgia for lost community, myth and rituals of spiritual sacrifice (already a minatory totalitarianism); the precariousness of its rational and libertarian efforts to establish the self-evidence of “freedom”; its self-deceiving presumption of evil’s essential negativity; the intrusion of its ecotechnical values into health and life; its determination of the market value of “being-human” reflected in the media’s opinion polling, market research, and human interest stories; and above all, perhaps, its *horror vacui*.

This is certainly not to imply that Nancy is a “revolutionary” philosopher in any traditional sense of the term. Although he calls for a “revolutionary politics”, he understands this to mean resistance to the political establishment of formal freedom and community, or alternatively, a spacing within which freedom disrupts the market democratic effort to bestow it with a meaning and put it to a political task. What liberal, libertarian and communitarian philosophies of democracy cannot grasp, he enjoins us to realize, is freedom as the inaugural act itself, the surprising burst of

freedom exercised in the social effort to take freedom back from any political cause that has allegedly granted “liberty” as a “right” and then attempted to recover it for political reasons. In other words, he is interested in the revolutionary politics of the “an-archy” of freedom itself, the irreducible and inappropriable surprise that opens singular beings to their own future (a future, it must be said, that political views of freedom and community cannot anticipate) (EF: 76–8).

Ultimately, the focus of his attacks on contemporary views of freedom, community and politics is their implication of “substantialist” and “immanentist” metaphysics, which neglects the futural spacings of modern social relations. (By “substantialist” I mean any commitment to the predetermined existence of beings and the self-evidence of their essence; by “immanentist” I mean the activity of determining such beings’ identities through the reflection and playing back of ideals conceived for this purpose.) In this respect, he is not merely another thinker of the “end” of the West’s intellectual projects and political missions, but a Nietzschean *Versucher* who wonders at futural possibilities of precisely the intense debilities of that “end”. The West is not mistaken in its view of the end of the meaning of community, yet the openness to the uncertainty of its destiny provides the very conditions of that meaning (C: 374). His writings explore the sense of the world, in particular its circulations, relations, singularities, inoperable implications, and certainly the polymorphy and polyphony of the banalities of common life. Aversion to the singular things of such life and inordinate passion for mediation, he proposes, place Western subjectivity at once “in” the world transcendently but not immanent to it as a finite existent amongst singularities. Celebrating the capricious behaviour of concepts, he shares with many post-structuralist philosophers a determination to discover untapped “an-archic” conceptual possibilities of experience, especially those involving intense disruptions, interruptions and fragmentations of existence and its discourses. Perhaps Nancy’s work is a response to the intensities of finitude, the ecstasy of freedom (better: the ecstasy that freedom is), and the rapture of sharing in loving, giving, dying and writing – in other words, the perturbations of philosophical thought. And it must be said that, despite the enriching presence of many influences on his thinking, Nancy is inexorably original in his pursuit of the conditions of another, *futural* philosophical scene of openness to uncertainty, the undecidability of philosophical discourse (that is, its openness to a futural resolution that always “is coming” but never arrives).

From the outset, what is meant by the statement that Nancy is a philosopher of “the future” should be clarified. Of course, Nancy’s argumentation has not yet been thoroughly raked through and continues to yield many

fecund ideas. However, it might be said with some temerity that Nancy's "future" is not merely the post-Enlightenment's field of opportunity for the deployment of rationality into a progressive scheme; nor is it the fashionable post-secular eschatological "not-yet" or "to-come" in Heidegger, Bloch and Levinas; nor is it even the ecotechnical reticulations of the indefinite power of capital so dominant in the shopping malls and entertainment circles of the market democratic world. Rather, following the thought of "the end" to its end, Nancy is interested in the intrinsic limits transgressed in this culmination of thought, the interstitial boundaries leaped on the way to the end. His self-engendered discourse straddles such internal divisions and strives to nullify each of the terms of their dichotomies. Existential conditions are espoused in the "extensive/intensive dynamic" of singularities exposed to one another, at once "in" and "not in" existence but exposed to it and having a share in it nonetheless. In this way, he is, as Christopher Fynsk has remarked, a "laborer of thought"¹ (BC: 4–8) undaunted by the thinking of the uncertain future of a plurality of singular "ones" and the undecidability of the vectoral relations among them.

Despite being subjected to a modest but respectable degree of commentary, Nancy's work has not yet yielded its primary focus. After all, his erudition encompasses Romanticism and techno music, phenomenology and communitarianism, Hegelian logic and contemporary cinema. Commentators have proposed a number of significant nodal concepts that might provide insights into this focus. For Howard Caygill (who contrasts Nancy with the political scientist Hannah Arendt), Fred Dallmayr (who intersects his work with that of historians Samuel Huntington and Immanuel Wallerstein), Christopher Fynsk (who reads him in conjunction with Rorty) and Simon Critchley,² among others, it is the concept of an open community of sharing that is irreducible to political appropriation. Wilhelm Wurzer and Krzysztof Ziarek explore the provocative notions of ecotechnics and globalization in the context of a more general discussion of technology.³ Alternatively, for Gary Shapiro and Anne O'Byrne,⁴ it is the horizons of the body's elliptical contact with others addressed at the very edge of philosophical discourse. Michael Naas hears in Nancy "perhaps the greatest thinker of worklessness and the interruption of the practical on the contemporary scene", that is, one who daringly explores the resistances of meaning to sheer production and appropriation.⁵ John T. Lysaker emphasizes that Nancy is the composer of "literary communism", the counter *praxis* posed against the totalizing practices of theory itself.⁶ Finally, Peter Fenves⁷ proposes that Nancy's primary intent is an empirical exploration of the burst of freedom exhibited most poignantly in the positivity of wickedness. This diversity of perspectives attests to the rich conceptual possibilities Nancy's work advertently offers.

However, all commentators agree that, despite the many possible gleanings of Nancy's profoundly endowed texts, the task of his philosophy is to enquire into *the sense of the world*. (By "sense" one might understand preliminarily the condition of truth and meaning that precedes their partial disclosure and that is incommensurate with, yet enabling of, conventional views of both.) Indeed, there is nothing but the world, he avers, and any appeal to a transcendental reserve of meaning from which the sense of the world could be drawn is strictly unjustifiable. Refreshingly, Nancy will not temporize any "alterity" that would be "exterior" and "irreducible" to immanence, a transcendentality that, in contemporary post-secular theories, invariably provides an "opening" anticipating religious discourse. Strictly speaking, Nancy is not another philosopher of "the Other". Christianity, he reiterates adroitly throughout his work, deserves deconstruction even if it is Christianity itself that enables deconstructive possibilities, although the danger remains that spiritual "alterities" will serve as foils for a self-fulfilling interpretative scheme that would preclude or "exscribe" the thought of the insubstantial "community of being". Christianity, he remarks, is not a religion but the "self-deconstruction of religion"; it is an "exit from all religion" in so far as it is necessary "from the inside" to ask: "What does this mean?" (SDC: 3). Along with another stellar contemporary thinker who will have no truck with the theological excrescence of "alterities", Alain Badiou, he insists that the world attests to itself and requires no external foundations. He demands that contemporary critical philosophy rid itself of the foundational "ontology of the Other and the Same" and emphasize enquiry into the ontology of a world of unmediated multiplicities of singular "ones", of a community of others co-appearing in irreducible plurality (BSP: 53, 67).⁸ That is to say, there is no closed immanent "inside" of the world, because there could be no "outside" of any diversity of singular "ones". This world is not merely a collection of entities whose meanings could be substantiated through exterior factors (such as God, creation, etc.). The sense of the world, he avers relentlessly against Hegel, should not be sublated into any greater synthesis of the significations of such entities. On the contrary, in order to "think" such sense at all, one would need to examine the question of relations among singularities, especially their trajectories and intersections. In his desire to "let oneself be led to concrete thinking" (BSP: 19, 45, 77, 199; BP: 188), Nancy is fascinated by the behaviours of such "corpuscular" vectors and relations, not merely with the substances and entities they relate (although he regards "sense" to be the material totality, not merely some truant ideality that divagates through tangible reality) (R: 8). And, in a phrase that recurs less frequently than its sentiment, "nothing more can be said". The world is what it is – sense. The task of philosophy is to offer a "finite thinking" (the singular thought of

singular beings, double genitive) through the variegations of the disclosure of sense.

Despite the stress on the singularity of sense, it is most obviously discernible on the surfaces or contours of entities, where such relations have an empirical presence, or in particular, where the world can be seen to “come to presence”. If one were to imagine erasing the entities of such immanent relations, then the result would be a denuded reality, a nothingness that would still have sense despite the nullification of its entities. In spite of our *horror vacui*, such a world does not “have” a sense (which would imply a transcendental reserve from which it receives it). Rather it “is” sense on the grounds that there could be nothing else. Sense and world are coextensive, perfectly commensurate, with no superfluous meanings overhanging this coextensivity. Of course, relations are a plurality of singular events, at once fissile and feral, which circulate through human experience and are grasped in figments of meaning. In order to “think” the sense of the world, it would be necessary to be sensitive to the nuances of such circulations.

Nevertheless, there are many aspects of Nancy’s thought that defy binary reasoning and its constraining dichotomies. For example, we shall hear Nancy say that the sense of the world is that the world “is” sense, that “we” are sense, and that evil is a positive presence or “constitutive decay” in the ground of freedom. Often, as if echoing Samuel Butler, he suggests that something is simply what it is, nothing more, and there is nothing else available to the requisite finite thinking. What Nancy appears to have in mind is that all questions about sense lead it to *collapse* into an infinity of relational moments, each with its own self-attesting and absolutely singular density. Nancy refers to a pure space, an “areality” (area, surface) of points or movements that simultaneously define the exteriority and its common division, which results from a commonality of sense “despoiled” of transcendence and immanence alike (C: 373). Even the process of interpretation is either interrupted or “contracts to a certain point”, a prepositional point in which there is “nothing but” sense – we “are” sense, the world “is” sense. It is in this way that he can speak in the same breath of a singular sense and a multiplicity of circulating forms of it. Again, this collapse of existential relations into a singular, “open” immanence defies the imperative (or even the possibility) of a transcendental ground or foundation on which theories of causal necessity are established and from which theories of signification may spring effulgently. To say that there is nothing more to the world than sense, and that nothing more can be said, is to attempt to draw our attention to this collapse of the immanence–transcendence dichotomy into sense.

Although Nancy does not present his thought in this way, one might think of it heuristically. The point of Nancy’s enquiry is always to pay close

attention to the behaviour of concepts and figures in philosophical discourse. The collapse of existential conditions into sense figures on the axiology of plethora and lacuna, origin and end. Of course, other axes, such as *technē* and *physis*, can intersect these coordinates, but ultimately they merely add detail. To insist that we live in an age lacking sense, for example, is to say that the incessant origin of the question of sense is the end of enquiry. And the absence of sense is itself indicative of an abundance of significations of sense. Nevertheless, regardless of the form of the enquiry, the result is an internal folding of all axes into a singular moment of sense. That is indicative of the tessellating behaviour of the concept of sense, never in isolation and always intersecting with the behaviours of other nodal concepts. Although this is not easy to grasp, it serves as the conceptual possibility reiterated on many registers of Nancy's expansive vision.

With this discourse of the behaviour of concepts in mind, one might say that Nancy's work exhibits a *conceptual delirium*. Dismissive of simulated nostalgias and vengeful calls for cultural renewal, and offering a worthy departure from both the climate of despair and the ignorance of this despair, his thoughts are often conveyed with a contagious passion crackling with an energy often lacking in the feigned, world-weary ennui of so much contemporary theory. Ultimately his gaze focuses unblinkingly on an existence consisting of a multiplicity of singular events of infinite multi-linear contact between material entities. Undistracted by theoretical constraints and paradigmatic imperatives, he admires the impenetrable density, granulated surfaces and collective frictions of such relations, as well as the absolute facticity of empirical experiences divorced from philosophical discourse. And for this reason, as many commentators have remarked, he takes philosophy to the limit of its integrity, to the edge of its tolerance, by flirting with the singularities of non-philosophical life.

One might think of this in a more truncated manner. His philosophical fixation is with theory frozen at the absolute moment of contact with (or between) singularities. At this moment, theory is not enabled to move on to conceptual schematization of a universal or essential nature. The result is almost casuistic in form: when elaborating on community or politics, for example, Nancy endeavours to "think" their universal values in terms of singular events, processes and entities. What Nancy finds hermeneutically objectionable is that, in the composition of theories, there is always enthusiasm for generalities that slide past the fascinating richness of singular relations (SV: 211–18). Nancy's textual discipline creates an intensity of focus upon the singularity at hand that refuses the arrogation of reason whereby thought endows itself with protocols of entitlement. He will not relinquish an existent until he has subjected its ineradicable singularity to a