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## JEAN-LUC NANCY'S NOTION OF SINGULARITY

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### ABSTRACT:

My article aims to explore Nancy's notion of *sense* as a key ontological concept because I believe this concept – as it appears mainly in his "Sense of the World", opens the possibility of a more profound understanding of his thesis. This will not be an attempt to draw a map or a line in Nancy's theory placing sense either as the starting point or as his central concept. Instead, it is an attempt to show that *sense* plays a significant role in Nancy's understanding of singularity and finitude and therefore provide an insight into Nancy's overall theory of being. My argument analyses *sense's* centrality to Nancy's discussion on *touch* and the vital role *touch* has in the articulation between his comprehension of *mitsein/etre-avec* and his elaboration of being as singular plural.

**KEYWORDS:** Sense; Ontology; Deconstruction; Touch; Being-With.

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“Qu’est-ce qu’une singularité? C’est ce qui n’a lieu qu’une fois, en un seul point – hors temps, hors lieu, en somme – ce qui est une exception. Non pas une particularité qui rentre sous un genre, mais une propriété unique qui échappe à l’appropriation, une touche exclusive et qui, comme telle, n’est même pas prélevée sur un fond commun et ne s’oppose pas non plus à lui.”<sup>2</sup> (Nancy, “Rives, bords, limite)

### Single existence

The central concern of this article is Nancy’s characterization of singularity, but before entering this topic we should ask: why pose the question of singularity? It may seem that singularity is superfluous. It involves commenting on the singular case of existence once a larger notion such as world could provide a better ontological standing point. Yet, this is a misleading conclusion. Nancy’s logic of existence is not established without a proper examination of the singular-plural mode of existence. Considering that Nancy’s philosophy is centered on the groundless occurrence/event, there is no common ground to all existing things so the configuration of each singular/specific case and its relation to the general truth is crucial to his enterprise.

### Being-with

In my view, the best place to enter Nancy’s analysis of existence is the question of being-with. This is not the essential principle behind the togetherness of things, but it establishes the central fact concerning existence: there is no existence in isolation. The analysis of singularity is invariably the analysis of the way things exist together rather than the analysis of the individual unrelated object. Further on this line on reasoning, since a thing is always being-with, by commenting on existence one is touching it. The analysis of the existing thing always “interferes” with it and is not an observation from a distance<sup>3</sup>. It is reaching as close as possible without gaining access to it, since there is no inner “nature” to be discovered. According to Nancy, the existing things are always in constant “contact” with each other and with themselves. Hence, besides “being-with”, the central concept here will be “touching”.

Nancy explains that being-with is the invariable condition of existing because being is being-sense. “Sensing” (as acting in direction) is at the same time “sensing” (touching) other “senses” (beings), so presence is never individual but only “singular-plural”. Things can only be-with<sup>4</sup>, because every-single-thing exists and they all

<sup>2</sup> “What is a singularity? It is that who does not take place beyond once, in a single point – outside time, outside space, in conclusion – that which is an exception. Not a particularity that enters a genre, but a unique property that escapes appropriation, an exclusive touch and, as such, is not even sampled/collected in a common ground and does not oppose itself to it” (my translation).

<sup>3</sup> Nancy argues that by weighing on existence (thinking existence) ontology also weighs (is part of the togetherness of all things). That is, ontology (the thoughts of the world) is also part of the totality of all things (i.e., the world) since thoughts are things.

<sup>4</sup> Nancy refers to Heidegger’s *mitsein* but I will not further elaborate on that.

exist together. The “with” is an inherent part of being because the world is the togetherness of all things, therefore there is no neutral place where being happens (“Of Being-in-Common” 1-2). There is no “background field” where all things are and “with” points to the interaction between them. The existing thing does not exist purely, in a neutral and unaffected “place”; rather, beings exist as the world (the finite configuration of every-single-thing together<sup>5</sup> and not the place where things happen).

Nancy uses the concept of *comparution* [compearance<sup>6</sup>] to describe this aspect of being. The concept refers to the fact that all things, every single one of them, co-appears (comparing, in some translations). Put differently, they take place together. But not because they appear together under one essential motion; there is no force that assembles them into simultaneously existing. Instead, Nancy affirms that the mode of existing (performing the act of being) is to be-with. Or returning to the language of sense: the sensing of sense (acting of being) is invariably sensing (touching) sense (being[s]). He even uses the term “co-essence” and “co-ipséité” to describe this condition:

What is shared is nothing like a unique substance in which each being would participate; what is shared is also what shares, what is structurally constituted by sharing, and what we call “matter”. The ontology of being-with can only be “materialist”, in the sense that “matter” does not designate a substance or a subject (or an antsubject), but literally designates what is divided of itself, what is only as distinct from itself, *partes extra partes*, [...]. The ontology of being-with is an ontology of bodies, of everybody, whether they be inanimate, animate, sentient, speaking, thinking, having weight, and so on. (*Being Singular Plural* 83-84)<sup>7</sup>

By definition, all existing things *must exist somewhere*, since existence is analogous to taking place. It is impossible to conceive of something that does not exist within a context so, in that sense, it is constantly touching something. As mentioned before, existence is always “more than one”, so there is invariably a contact within plurality. Considering the previous argument regarding totality, a possible counterargument becomes impossible. It would require arguing that one can find an absolute object that does not touch anything because it is everything (so there would be nothing besides it, i.e., nothing exterior for it to touch). But such an object would not exist, because it would literally be nowhere. In that sense, being/existing is touching: it is being present in the togetherness of every existing thing. In this way, being-with evidences the extensive “nature” of materiality.

Being-with also marks materiality as weight, since existing happens among other existing things. The weight of being marks the invariable “pressure” of being-

<sup>5</sup> See *The Sense of the World* 6-8, 155 and *The Creation of the World, Or, Globalization* 41-42.

<sup>6</sup> But not in the legal connotation exclusively.

<sup>7</sup> See the quote from *The Sense of the World* 70. Nancy argues in the same paragraph that both Peter and a rock (in French: Pierre and pierre) answer the question of existence by being.

with. Weight is not a quality of the thing, but something the object is. It is the mark of the objects materiality as its presence, i.e., as the fact that it invariably exists among other things and therefore its occurrence exerts “pressure” in touching.

Considering that the thing is its weight and this weight, so Nancy is clearly arguing, is an invariable “contact” due to the thing’s mere occurrence, Existing means being-with. Or to put it through negation, there is no object in a vacuum of zero gravity. There is no materiality in isolation because both extension and weight demand touching:

*Here* (but where’s here? It’s not localizable, it’s localization *taking place*, the being’s that’s *coming* to bodies), so here it’s not a question of rejoining an intact “matter”: immanence isn’t being opposed to transcendence. In a general way, we don’t *oppose*, bodies neither oppose nor are opposed. They are posed, deposed, weighted. There’s no intact matter-or else there’d be nothing. On contrary, there’s tact, the pose and deposing, the rhythm of coming-and-going of the bodies in the world. Tact united, divided unto itself. (*Corpus* 117)

Harman (in Gratton and Morin, *Jean-Luc Nancy and Plural Thinking*) accuses Nancy of defending an amorphous state of matter where things become themselves only within a relation. According to him, Nancy must assume some sort of *prima materia* before any touching. He argues that, for Nancy, things are either in a relation or they are an indeterminate form/matter. But this is just Harman’s assumption: “This untouchable touchable deserves the name of ‘object’. What I mean by an object is a concrete reality that has specific determination or from quite apart from its relations with anything else. And quite apart from its purely accidental way of being on the stage at any moment” (87). The response from within Nancy’s theory would be simple: Harman demands a non-existing object, i.e., an object that is not taking place. This intact object Harman demands does not exist because it is not occurring. Harman demands an ontology that separates between the essence of the object and its occurrence. In this way, he creates the demand for a *prima materia* and forces it on Nancy’s philosophy. Nancy clearly states that the two options Harman gives him are unreal; there is only one of them: being-with.

Harman defends his point by arguing that Nancy is interested in more than the “here-and-now”. This seems to be a misinterpretation of Nancy, because even though the “here-and-now” is insufficient for Nancy, there is nothing “more”. There is no surplus intact aspect of things that remains secret. Nancy would argue that the “here-and-now” is not sufficient to ground the object precisely because there is no grounding. The “here-and-now” is all there is, at the same time that it is always “without”<sup>8</sup> (rather than the excess Harman mentioned in Gratton and Morin, *Jean-Luc Nancy and Plural Thinking* 88). This is the reason things are not predetermined and therefore are a surprise<sup>9</sup>. Contrary to Harman’s affirmation, Nancy is exclusively interested in the “here-and-now” because there is no intact (untouched)

<sup>8</sup> As I elaborated in the previous section.

<sup>9</sup> This was extensively analyzed previously.

aspect of being to reveal. That is, there is no untouched “nature” to be discovered beyond the being-with. The “whatness” of thing is its presence among all things.

It becomes evident that “touch” plays a crucial role in Nancy’s ontology of being-with. In his book *On touching*, Jean Luc Nancy, Derrida mentions the following phrase by Bergson to describe Nancy’s philosophy: “A philosopher worthy of the name has never said more than a single thing: and even then, it is something he has tried to say, rather than actually said” (368). For Derrida, this single thing is “touch”.

Derrida mentions the fact that, in Nancy, touching is not exclusive to humans. As it is clearly stated in the chapter “touching” of *The Sense of the World*, even a stone touches. If even the most “passive” things touch, it must concern an extremely elementary and common quality. Touching does not imply agency or intention. Nancy argues that touching in fact concerns the most basic and common aspect of all things: existing. Touching is existing, because existing is being-with. In that sense, touch occupies a central place in Nancy’s ontology, but it is worth showing that it cannot serve as the core around which his whole theory orbits, as Derrida seems to imply. Touch is only *a* sense among the plural senses on sense, which also include the orientation and meaning of being as I previously elaborated.

Before any further development on this issue, it is crucial to mention that Nancy is not arguing that touch is the essential sense of being. Existence is not reduced to touching. Nevertheless, it is a central part of Nancy’s ontology so the question of its status deserves a careful inspection. If touch is not literally the act of touching (or at least not just the intuitive understanding of it), then what is it? It seems that, for Nancy, touching is simply being in contact (or at least this seems to be the only definition that engulfs both the stone and the human). It seems that the simple fact that two things are in contact already configures touching. Derrida does not provide a definite answer, but he does point at the aporetic nature of the question: one can never really touch anything; at the same time, there is no absolute isolation. Moreover, is touching something we do, or is it something that happens to us? Can one really touch without being touched? It seems like touch enjoys a distinct status from other senses. It is simultaneously the most banal of the senses, i.e., simple contact, and impossible to grasp.

According to Derrida, Nancy argues that one touches only the untouchable: one can only touch the limit of touching and never actually come in contact. No matter how close two objects are, it is always possible to distinguish them, or else they would be the same. The sole fact that one comments on the existence of two things already presupposes their distinction. If two things cannot occupy the same space, then it is quite trivial that there must be something between them that separates them thus making contact impossible.

On the other hand, things never stop touching. There is no-thing in isolation: there is no intact object segregated from all other things. Derrida mention of Husserl’s distinction between seeing and touching illustrates this point. One never sees oneself seeing. One can look in the mirror and see one’s own eye, but the eye does not see itself seeing. There is a blind spot conditioning vision. Touching, on the other hand, must sense itself sensing. One is constantly touching and being touched;

it is a non-mediated sensing. Touching is immediate. It is always already taking place. It is possible to see without being seen, but it is impossible to touch without being touched.

According to Derrida this is the *law of tact*: “in the sense of knowing how to touch *without* touching, without touching *too much*, where touching is already too much” (*On Touching, Jean Luc Nancy* 67). We are always already touching and every touch is always too much since touching is impossible. The “without” marked here by Derrida plays the same role as Schuback’s “without”. It is at the same time a touch without completion, i.e., without full contact, and all there is to touching. Moreover, touching as the condition of being implied in being-with means that occurrence is simultaneously singularly distinguished from the world and completely in touch with the world. Being is *in-common*, so it is singular only inasmuch as it is invariably touching/sharing the world as a distinct/specific thing (i.e., as co-extensive). As Nancy defends, there is no who or what to touch; being is always already touching. Touch is not the action of an absolute subject towards an external world, it does not demand intention – it simply occurs.

Derrida points to the fact that touching always touches the limit, since one only touches the outside of the thing. Even if one penetrates a thing, one does not touch but its surface. One is never really inside (*On Touching, Jean Luc Nancy* 103). Nancy clearly defends the idea that there is no inside to things. This is in line with his argument that there is no essence to things, that is, there is no hidden factor underneath the thing’s occurrence. Returning to the definition of being as taking place, it becomes clear that all existence is invariably external. The extensive “whatness” of existence demands this liminality of being. This is the “ex” (excription, ex-position...) that appears so often in Nancy. It is not a movement from inside to outside; it is the fact that being is always already taking place in the world and hence already touched in its extension. Put differently, the extension of being is a “surface of contact”. Being is always at its own threshold (Nancy, *Ego Sum* 115-116).

Things are never intact yet they are never in contact. In that sense, things are impenetrable (Nancy, *The Birth to Presence* 189), not because it is impossible to overcome their external layer and access their essential nature, but because there is no essential nature to be revealed. There is nothing to things beyond their taking place, so there is nothing “inside”.

This seems reasonably obvious regarding thoughts, since thoughts do not have internal or external parts, and one could hardly argue that it is possible to cut a thought in half or be within a thought. In other words, a thought is always a singular impenetrable thing. We can be fully consumed or focused on a thought or feeling, but never penetrate it. It is always a contemplation from the “exterior”: one contemplates something “distinct” from oneself<sup>10</sup>.

Still, Nancy’s sense-based ontology must account for “physical objects” in order to be relevant. Think, for example, of a ball made of a gel-like substance: I can obviously hold it in my hand and therefore touch its limits, but even if I introduce my finger inside the surface so that my finger is “inside” the ball, I have not

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<sup>10</sup> One is never identical to one’s thoughts. This is the configuration of subjectivity I will later explore.



penetrated the gel. I am still touching the gel from the outside. Now, my finger in completely engulfed by it, but since they are separate things, there is always a distinction between them. One could argue that I have penetrated the circumference, but this is also not true. I am not inside the ball. I am only touching it from another point. Nor has the circumference incorporated my finger. Its shape changes with my finger, but the ball remains the ball and my finger remains my finger. This is the most basic principle that two things cannot occupy the same space at the same time. At the moment that I introduce my finger, the space previously occupied by the ball is no longer occupied by it. In that way, it is impossible to enter the thing. You might put you hand inside it and still you would just encounter the limit of the thing.

One might argue that this argument is absurd, since everyone has entered a room or placed their hand inside a bag. The experience of accessing something is natural. Intuitively, one comprehends that all things have volume and depth, so it seems absurd to deny that things have an inner side. This is in fact a challenge for Nancy, but I believe his argument concerning black holes overcomes the challenge. Singularities (black holes) are only accessed from the outside. One is always on the exterior of a black hole since it has no inner since: *there is only gravity*. In that sense, one cannot enter a black hole. If one were to enter a black hole, one would only encounter more “black hole” (i.e., gravity). The same is valid for a room or a bag: even if one enters them, one only encounters “room” or “bag”, that is, one only finds the liminal extension of those things. One is never absolutely “in” the bag or the room, even though one is undeniably inside them.

This point returns to Nancy’s comment regarding Wittgenstein’s phrase. Nancy argues that the world has no Other since it is all there is. So even the outside of the world must be inside. It is now clear that Nancy does not mean that the world folds itself as to have its exterior on the inside: he means that all things are invariably outside<sup>11</sup>. There is no inside of the world from which sense is excluded. All there is to the world is its taking place, and by taking place it touches, and in touching it is always outside. But not outside itself; in fact, it is at its utmost reality. It is *at* itself since it is occurring.

In this sense, touching marks the ontological being-with since it marks the materiality (extension and weight) of existing. Being is taking place so, by existing, each thing is in a spatial/extensive configuration among other things. By the sheer fact of their existing, things are always on the limit of themselves. Even if there is no contact, all things are as close as possible to each other, hence they invariably touch each other.

I believe the notion of contiguity (as proposed in Watkin 179) is relevant here. Contiguity means bordering something, approximate in space or even in contact; it makes reference to proximity with distinction/separation. I believe this is precisely Nancy’s description of sense. For him, being is tangential. Things are always in

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<sup>11</sup> Nancy is not arguing like a behaviorist that we only have access to the outside and there is an inner intact “black-box”. In fact, the whole distinction between inner and outwards collapses since existence is only the fact that things take place (i.e., their extension and weight). Outside here does not oppose inside. It marks the fact that there is no inside since all things are exposed/taking place.



touch with each other, but there is no contact, so they never *really* touch. Things are touching and untouchable simultaneously. This is the meaning of Nancy's affirmation that things are tangible: "Sense is concrete: that is, it is tangible *and* impenetrable (these two attributes mutually imply each other)" (*The Sense of the World* 11).

Touch is always limited to a non-extended point, which is true only in its occurrence. touch is not an intersection or accumulation of points. Things do not cross each other, they remain distinguished. Tangency happens only as a fact of its occurrence, but not as something in itself. This is the meaning of Nancy's argument that "there is no 'the' touch". Touch is not "the" sense of existence so it does not form a field of being. It does not take place, it simply punctuates the fact of things' occurrence as being-with.

Derrida differentiates himself from Nancy by pointing out that Nancy defends the formulation "there is no 'the' X", while Derrida prefers the formulation "X if there is any" [*s'il y en a*] (*On Touching, Jean Luc Nancy* 288). Derrida comments that both come from a deconstructive move where multiplicity interferes with the attempt to reach a definite sense of things. Still, he argues they are not equivalent<sup>12</sup>.

McQuillan (*Toucher I* 203) is right in suggesting that Derrida is not convinced by Nancy's ontology. Derrida seems to doubt Nancy's capacity to deconstruct logocentrism, that is, Nancy's capacity to comment on what *there is*, despite arguing that "there is no 'the' X". *Logos* here has a double meaning. *Logos* means, firstly, a structure of knowledge, and Derrida doubts if Nancy's ontology is not grounded/dependent on an external grounding anchor (i.e., on an ultimate definition of sense); Derrida's "*s'il y en a*" suggests that existence is always conditioned. And secondly, *logos* means truth, and Derrida is doubtful of Nancy's ontology capacity to comment on the truth of being. Derrida's "*s'il y en a*" suggests there is never *really* a thing, hence there is no truth of being<sup>13</sup>.

I believe this disbelief is most evident in their conversation (Derrida, "Interview with Jean-Luc Nancy" 115), when Derrida explicitly mentions his interest in "a before". For him, there seems to always be a before (not chronologically, but as a condition). Nancy, on the other hand, is concerned with "what comes after", that is, with what are the implications of *what is*, regardless of how it came to be. Those are vital questions because a response to Derrida's criticism is equivalent to showing Nancy's success in his groundless ontology. My thesis as a whole is, to a certain extent, an attempt to unfold Nancy's success (even if I am not directly responding to Derrida).

An appropriate response to Derrida disbelief would be the notion of touch. Nancy argues that, despite the separation and impenetrability of things, there is touch. Put differently, despite the fact that touching is always an encounter with the untouchable, there is such a thing as touch. In fact, it is all there is since being is being-with. Things touch each other even though Nancy argues that they never *really* come in contact with each other. So, for Nancy, there is touch despite (or even

<sup>12</sup> I will not comment on Derrida's philosophy, but I believe the difference between the formulations enlightens a crucial point in Nancy's theory.

<sup>13</sup> Berkman's arguments are extremely helpful here (Berkman and Cohen-Levinas 446-447).

because) there is no “the” touch, that is, because there is no ultimate definition/contact. For Derrida, it seems there is never touch because there is no “the” touch. It is an aporia of contact which seems to be left unresolved. Derrida is still concerned with the condition of touch as the way to ground it – a concern with being’s condition (before) of possibility – only to find that it is impossible and conclude that there is no ground for existence. Nancy, on the other hand, defends that there is touch even if there is no ground for it. Things *are*, regardless of their “before”.

McQuillan<sup>14</sup> (*Toucher I*) argues that Nancy, in his argument that “there is no ‘the’ X”, cancels the possibility of any concrete philosophical theory since it is a determination that there is no determination. He even affirms that Nancy invents an object (touch) only to annul its existence (205-207). I believe his reading misses Nancy’s point. Nancy’s formulation is not annulling existence, he exclusively negates the definite article “the”. He is arguing that a thing’s existence is not given to a definition. His formulation argues that there is something, but since there is no ultimate definition of it, it is nothing.

Nancy is arguing that undoubtedly there are things, but there is nothing they ultimately are since there is no essence – hence, there is no “the” X. He shows it is impossible to fully touch the sense of X. One can only be-with it (touching it from the outside). In fact, there is nothing more to being (to “thinghood”/“whatness”) than this sensing, i.e., the fact that existing is constantly taking place and therefore touching without ever contacting anything. Derrida’s formulation, on the other hand, seems to imply that despite its occurrence, something is never completely itself; it lacks something essential, so one wonders “if there is”. In Nancy, things undoubtedly *are*. So, there is touch even if there is no “the” touch, just as there are things even if there is no “the” thing.

With being-with, Nancy’s objective is not to reveal the common ground behind all existing things. Sense is not the common principle of all existing things. Such a project would imply the notion of *prima materia*; a resort to some essence of being. Commenting on all things being-with each other, in this context, would be a research into the principle permeating all individual things, but Nancy opposes individuality. There are only specific beings/senses: unique and singular things *in-common* but without anything in common: “No doubt, the singular is *per se*: it singularizes itself only by or through its singularity” and

What then is someone? This is precisely what one cannot ask- even though this is *the whole question* – because if there is someone, there has already been a response to the question (*s/he* has already responded). But there is someone, there are numerous someones, indeed, there is nothing else. [...] This is what “makes” up [fait] the world and “make sense” [fait sense]. *Someone, some ones, the numerous ones*, that is to say, the *plural singular* “is” the response that answers the question of the “sense of the world”. “Someone” ought to be approached from the angle of this response. But this

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<sup>14</sup> Adopting what he sees is Derrida’s position.

response responds to nothing. No one asked “is anyone there? It has not been possible to pose this question because something is there.” (Nancy, *The Sense of the World* 72 - 70)

## Singularity

Things are not “created” from their relation with other things. They are invariably present in the world’s togetherness, but this does not exhaust the sense of being. “Whatness” is not reduced to being-with. It is not sufficient to argue that things must exist together in order to elucidate what they are; one must also account for how things are as singularities as specific beings. Each sense is one sense (*a* sense), it is a specific thing. Anything that exists is always already something/someone<sup>15</sup>, always already “one” but not in the sense of being “the one”; rather, in the sense of being “this/that one/thing” and not “another”. There is no extraordinary quality making it an absolutely incomparable thing. Singularity does not point at the individuality of a thing (“the one thing”). For Nancy, all things are just *a* thing (ordinary/common): each thing is like all others at the same time that it is this/that specific/singular thing. It is being in the most common and singular aspect of it<sup>16</sup>.

For example, each day is one specific day. It is a momentaneous event that is specific in its occurrence. At the same time, days are part of a plural configuration of time organization. Days are not extraordinary events, yet each day is a singular/unique event.

The question of singularity also implies the question of identity: what does it mean to be *one* thing? The singular being always implies the “more than one”, but Nancy still wants to preserve the “oneness” of each thing without turning it into an individual and fulfilled thing (Morin, *Jean Luc Nancy* 37). Things are not absolutely identical to themselves, yet, they are invariably themselves. This concerns the concepts of ipseity and aseity.

There is no *one* thing holding all possible senses of the same thing. All possible senses are singular senses of a plural configuration. In fact, there is no absolute referential object, there are only senses: “3+1”, “2+2” and “4” are all equal to 4, but the question regarding the “whatness” of 4 remains open. Answering that 4 is “4” is tautological. But again, according to Nancy, one does not need to uphold more than that, as long as one comprehends that there is no essential nature of 4. All there is to 4 is all its occurrences, i.e., all its senses or all the existing things that are “4”.

It is possible to challenge the previous argument and state that numbers are just ideas, so they make a convenient case for proving there is no referential object

<sup>15</sup> The argument here is the banal statement that to be is to be some-thing in the most general sense of the term.

<sup>16</sup> “There is relation as relation of *example*: every one, being born, dying, being-there, exemplifies singularity. Each proposes itself as *an* example, if you like, but it exposes this example, every time, as exemplary, in the sense of a remarkable model. That which is exemplary each time, that which sets an example, is singularity itself, insofar as it is never anything but *this* or *that* singularity, inimitable at the very heart of its being-whatever.” (Nancy, *The Sense of the World* 73).

relevant to them; validation would only come from showing that Nancy's configuration is applicable to "actual" objects. Frege's "actual" existing star does not depend on its senses. *There is* a star and one must be able to comment on this fact using Nancy's ontology if his philosophy is to be relevant. I believe this is precisely Nancy's point: *there is* a star and it is self-sufficient (i.e., this fact is all *there is* to the star), so the star's existence is not conditioned on its senses although *it is* its senses. If one searches for the nature of the star, one will always encounter something, but never an ultimate sense the star essentially *is*.

For example, one might affirm that the star is essentially composed of element "X", but one has only transformed the original question without answering it, since one still has to comment on the nature of "X" in order to reach the star's ipseity. It is possible to define it as just another element (for example X is Y), but the question will always remain. For every possible answer regarding the nature of X, one can always reach deeper into it and question its composition and nature. There will never be "the" Thing that explains all other things, since such object would have to exist beyond all things<sup>17</sup>. This does not mean that the answer is inaccessible or that there is no answer because the thing is essentially composed of nothing. The opposite is true: there is always a thing. One is constantly confronted by materiality despite not finding a *prima materia*. In fact, one never escapes such materiality. There is always already "access" to the truth of existing since one is always confronted by things taking place, so one is always confronted by what things are: existing. Or in a simple formulation, one is always confronted<sup>18</sup> by the fact that things *are* existing. Singular sense is the fact that there is no "the" object, since there is nothing the object ultimately is, while at the same time, there *is* something necessarily.

All there is to the star (or any object) is its occurrences: the physical elements taking place, as well as, the range of its conceptualization. The star is neither just the object separated from our thought nor the result of our thoughts about it. It is both. For Nancy, thoughts are as material as physical things. Things are the self-coincidence of all the senses they are, that is, the star is the morning star, the evening star, Venus, carbon (or any other chemical we find there), protons, [...] without any of those senses being its essential form of existence. That is, without ultimately being any of those senses. There is no privileged stance where the star takes place. All the "places" the star takes place in are equally relevant for Nancy. The thing is the co-extension of all its senses' extension.

There is no ultimate instance or essential occurrence where the star *really* takes place and based on it one could ground an ontological knowledge of the object. All there *is*, are things existing as sense: being towards/at [etre-a] the world. That is, being as the activity of being, as the act of taking place, as the sense (orientation) in/at the world<sup>19</sup>. In this way, one can comment on the star because there invariably *is* a star, but it is nothing because there is no one definite thing the star is. Thus,

<sup>17</sup> I already made this point earlier on the first part.

<sup>18</sup> This confrontation is related to being-with since there is nothing outside the togetherness of the world. One is always in-touch/confronted with the world. Existence is thrown/abandoned against the world.

<sup>19</sup> "Ecceity opens an *areality*. But the areality of the area (of being) is not its design, not its configuration. It is its tracing, beginning from the here. The here has no place: at every moment it is here and there, here and now, for here is now. *Hic est nunc.*" (Nancy, *The Birth to Presence* 47)

ipseity is aseity because the thing does not rely on anything else (Nancy, *The Sense of the World* 155-157).

Even though things *are* nothing, they invariably *are*; moreover, their existence is not conditioned, so it is self-sufficient. The "whatness" of things already implies their non-conditioned presence. They simply *are* at the same time that they are not an absolute individual thing. In other words, things are self-sufficient, but not self-grounding. Returning to Harman's criticism, Nancy is not searching for the object that remains regardless of all its relations (since there is none), but for the object that "includes/considers" all its senses without ever becoming an absolute thing (an ultimately grounded existence/sense). Existing is simultaneously always present (being-there) and without any definite grounds for presence, since there is no reason for its taking place. Being(s) is singular plural because there is never "one" sense. Sense is always senses. Always "more than one" even in its singularity.

The thinking/perceiving entity (*cogito*) also exists as a singular sense since it refers to the oneness in being oneself. Selfhood, for Nancy, concerns the factual occurrence of the singular "subject" (i.e., that the self is *oneself*<sup>20</sup>). This "subject" (this quality of being an *I*) is not the unity of an enclosed entity<sup>21</sup> acting in the world. Namely, "subject" is not an agent. Nancy defines selfhood (Nancy and Hanson 10) as a gap of space-time within the self. That is, selfhood means the "more than one" that every *one* invariably is (Nancy, *The Sense of the World* 71). It is always already outside itself (different from itself) without ever being beyond itself (more than itself). Some one is always *one*/singular despite barely being something [sans pourtant].

This argument is evident in Nancy's reflection on the title of the collection "Who comes after the subject?" (Nancy, "Un Sujet" 90; see also Cadava et al. 7)<sup>22</sup>. The sole fact that he is not interested in the conditions/causes of the subject but its consequences already shows Nancy is not concerned with foundation: Nancy attests existence, rather than found it on a sub-ject properly (as in a grounded position). It is the constant being, i.e., the constant ejection/abandonment<sup>23</sup> of the self among all things:

Presence *takes place*, that is to say it *comes into* presence. It is that which comes indefinitely to itself, never stops coming, arriving: the "subject" that is never the subject of itself. The "ipseity" of presence lies in the fact that it engenders itself *into* presence: presence to itself, in a sense, but where this "self" itself is only the *to* (the taking place, placing) of presence (Cadava et al.7).

<sup>20</sup> "The subject contains its difference from itself. The subject not only has this difference, it *is* this difference. If the subject did not differ from itself, it would not be what it is: a subject *relating* itself to itself. A=A signifies that A *in itself* is its difference from itself, and that it derives its equality, its being-equal to itself, only from this difference." (Nancy, *The Birth to Presence* 11)

<sup>21</sup> A monad, for example.

<sup>22</sup> His reflection is best understood considering Nancy's comments that he is concerned with the place the subject occupies, i.e., with its taking place in the sense previously mentioned (Cadava et al. 98).

<sup>23</sup> See "Abandoned Being" in *The Birth to Presence*, especially 46-47.

It is not a question of the subject who knows itself by grounding its truth; rather, it is the question of the subject who is itself merely by exiting<sup>24</sup>: “Being is the actuality of existence” (Cadava et al. 6).

Nancy (*The Birth to Presence* 30) compares oneness to a spasmodic convulsion in the sense that it is not a given object or a state, but it is always “contorting” itself. Being is not moving from one point to another (it has no *telos* or cause), being/existing [être à] is moving/acting without “going” anywhere. Hence, it “trembles”. Nancy often quotes the Hegelian formulation that the subject is “that which can retain in itself its own contradiction” (Derrida, “Interview with Jean-Luc Nancy” 116; Nancy, *Le Poid d’une Pensee* 24; and Cadava et al. 6). James (*The Fragmentary Demand* 102), when commenting on Nancy’s conception of subjecthood, calls Nancy’s subject a centrifugal movement of being in order to differentiate it from Heidegger’s centripetal being. In my view, James’ terminology is imprecise.

As James argues, Nancy’s conception of being<sup>25</sup> does not present the thing as “gathered” into being by a force<sup>26</sup>, but unlike his alternative description, Nancy does not think there is a center of being *from where* the movement of being occurs. Oneness is not being dispersed due to its “essential contradiction”. The singular thing is not “spinning” and taking place due to the dynamic of impossibility intrinsic to its “oneness”. Being is without an original position or conflictual/dialectical dynamic. The “heart of things” is not one point; rather, it is one that is “more than one”. Existing does not result from the interaction of two contradictory aspects; it is the mere co-extension (coincidence) of contradictory existing senses (Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* 33).

So, sense’s/being’s singularity does not concern absolute identity. For Nancy, identity/ipseity, i.e., being a specific something, concerns self-coincidence: “It is the very incidence, or the accident, or the occasion of the coincidence: [...] The existence of the thing co-incides insofar as, in the incidences, it *spaces*, opens a *continuum* (which does not exist) through the discrete quantity of a *there*, which is its very quality as thing.” (*The Birth to Presence* 187). The thing’s oneness regards the fact that all its senses take place (*incido*, in Latin, which is also the root for incident/event) *with* themselves. This is the meaning of being singular-plural. It means the occurrence of something is the happening of all its senses. Sense is about being-with/touching itself (Nancy, *Ego Sum* 83).

Something is all its senses “self-touching you” [se toucher toi] each other. Put differently, something is the fact that all its occurrences/senses take place (co-incide) and therefore are simultaneously the same – hence “self-touching” – and different (but in the most intimate sense) – hence “you”. “Se toucher toi” marks the fact that sense is both the most intimate and exterior side of the thing: it exposes sense as the outside of the thing, as sense is never the essential aspect of anything. Self-touching is always from an exterior position (Nancy, *Ego Sum* 115-116). As existing is always

<sup>24</sup> See Nancy’s comments on *excogite* (*Ego Sum* 30 and 77).

<sup>25</sup> Both physical and thinking entities (i.e., both the star and selfhood).

<sup>26</sup> As if to existence *results* from a casual force. See my argument on page 6.



taking place, the most intimate place of being is its exterior, since it *the only* place there is.

This is further emphasized by Nancy's word choice. He uses the second person singular *tu* [you] rather than he/she/it. *Tu* in French is an intimate convention of address. One should normally use the polite address *vous* to address another person until there is enough intimacy between the two so that *tu* can replace *vous*.

There is even a verb for this: *tutoyer* (which means to address in the familiar convention *tu*). With the concept of "se toucher toi", Nancy is explicitly emphasizing the fact that self-identity is at the same time touching (and hence exterior) and the most adjacent stance possible through its self-coincidence. With that, he upholds that we can only *se-tutoyer*, i.e., touch/approach existence from the most intimate exteriority.

## Difference

Following this line, in order to properly comment on *a* sense, I must elucidate how things are distinct from each other. Within the togetherness of the world, each thing is discrete and hence distinct in relation to all other things. Considering that objects are not individual realizations of any principle, one has to account for the way each object is a specific object despite being common (ordinary). In other words, if things are singular-plural, one must make explicit the way things are specific without resorting to a defining essence (without arguing that each one of them has a "special" essence).

The notion of differentiation is crucial, because the singular is not a singular example/specimen of a larger configuration. The singular does not mean "to be one object in a series of identical/indistinguishable objects", as in the repetition of the same object infinitely. There is no common measure or ground that allows such comparison. Each thing has a different "whatness" without having any essential principle that differentiates it. Things are just distinct without there being any grounds for comparing them.

Nancy uses the notion of *differance* to illustrate this point. According to him, *differance* is not an operation on existence, but the "act of being" itself. Things are *differance*. To exist is to differ from itself: "Being senses itself deferring and differing"<sup>27</sup> (*The Sense of the World* 35<sup>28</sup>); and

[...] *meaning is itself the sharing of Being*. Meaning begins where presence is not pure presence but where presence comes apart [se disjoint] in order to be itself *as* such. This "as" presupposes the distancing, spacing, and division of presence. Only the concept of "presence" contains the necessity of this division. Pure unshared presence—presence to nothing, of nothing, for nothing — is neither present nor absent. It is the simple implosion of a being that could

<sup>27</sup> In the original: "L'être se sent differant" (56).

<sup>28</sup> See also *The Sense of the World* 14.



never have *been* — an implosion without any trace. (*Being Singular Plural 2*)

For example, one might not be aware that the evening star and the morning star both refer to the “same” star despite knowing both of them<sup>29</sup>. Or a more trivial example, every superhero has a secret identity so every person knows both the superhero and its alter-ego, but the secret identity depends on the fact that people distinguish between them. These things are all different things despite being the “same” thing. They are one that is always “more than one”. It is just a self-conscience of distinguished senses as described earlier.

Considering Nancy’s previous argument that existing is the act of being, this action now gains a new dimension. There is no pure undifferentiated being to which *differance* is “applied” in order to “shape” it into singularity. It does not develop in relation to other things: it exists among other things but it does “interact”<sup>30</sup> with them. Nancy’s argument is that existing is being-*differance*. Each thing is always already one thing, not *because* it is not another (as if it acted *in order* to achieve such result), but due to the fact that being is always already this/that *singular* specific thing. This fact already implicates that it is not another. It is, therefore, always already distinguished from all other things by simply taking place.

There is no reason for all things to be discrete, things just *necessarily* are. This is the basic physical principle that two things cannot occur at the same place at the same time. Each single thing necessarily takes place (since to exist is to exist somewhere) and two things cannot occupy the same space at the same time, hence all existing things are necessarily distinct.

In fact, the relation of equality between two things is absurd. Things are themselves and therefore singular<sup>31</sup> (one specific thing) or they are in a relation of equality and therefore two separate things already. A thing is never completely equal neither to itself nor to something else. In order to argue that two discrete things are equal, one would have to defend the configuration where despite being different, they share the same essence. Equality already assumes difference and yet it argues that despite the difference, things are essentially the same (their manifestation differs but their “nature” is the same). In order to defend equality, one must ground it on a common essence between two things that are differentiated in reality. Since there is not grounding essence, equality between two things makes no sense.

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<sup>29</sup> One might argue that such person does not really know the stars if he/she is unaware that they both refer to the same star. Again, in this scenario, one never really knows the star because this counter-arguments assumes there is something essential about it beyond its sense (its taking place). But as argued before, there is never an absolute definition of something. One could argue that the star is not really a star but the planet Venus, but one has just pointed at another sense (another occurrence of the star). One would still need to define what is essential about Venus that only once you know it, you would gain authority on the subject and therefore the “confusion” in distinguishing them I described becomes impossible. Since such absolute definition is impossible, my case holds.

<sup>30</sup> As mentioned before, there is no absolute contact between things. Touching is always on the limit, since things are impenetrable. Hence there cannot be an interaction.

<sup>31</sup> That is, equal to itself by self-coincidence of self-contradictory senses. Since things are always “more than one”, they are always already discrete from themselves.

Being-*differance* means the act of existing is the constant ab-sensing of essence. Ab-sensing from essence does not mean that essence is negated in order to become specific. Ab-sensing from essence means that existence (i.e. the act of existing) happens without any essence. In this way, things do not *become* differentiated. There is no process of *becoming* discrete from other things, the thing is not the result of the dialectical interaction with the world – it is just the act of being that necessarily occurs and, by existing, it is necessarily different from every other thing, since there is no essence that could serve as a common ground for comparison. It is not a foundation of the singular existing being; rather, it is an attestation (a response in the sense posed earlier). In existence (i.e. in the act of existing), each singular being is already differentiated forming *numerous one(s)* that exist-with without any interaction between them. That is the meaning of differentiation.

On this subject, Critchley accuses Nancy of undermining otherness, since, as he sees it, Nancy argues that things are only particular examples of a universal rule. Nancy's differentiation argument would not be sufficiently "radical" and, at the end, his is a total ontological theory. He argues that Nancy's being-with is a total intersubjectivity, in the sense that being-with becomes the grounding law of existence. In that sense, there is no absolute other since the subject engulfs it.

I believe Nancy overcomes the distinction between same and other. There is no radical alterity in Nancy. All things are invariably other to themselves. One is always "more than one" as mentioned before. It is always already *with* itself. It is a "self touching you", so it invariably includes its otherness/externality. In that sense, all things are different/other, but there is no radical inconceivable difference. Alterity is the difference of being itself<sup>32</sup>. They are just touching the contradiction that they themselves are. To touch the other has the same ontological status as touching oneself. The two instances of touch are not the same thing since they are two different senses, but they are both senses.

The logic of the absolute other (the transcendental principle/the point beyond the togetherness) might mislead one into thinking Nancy presents an image where otherness is incorporated into the totality of the world. It is true that, for him, otherness is part of totality, but it is only so inasmuch as plurality/otherness is all there is to such totality. Since there is no essence or principle determining existence, there is only surprise. Put differently, there are only encounters with the other. To some extent, Nancy's otherness is extremely radical, since there is no "safe ground" from where the subject can encounter its "absolute other" and be surprised (as Critchley demands in 66). The subject is "strange" to itself and to the world. In Nancy, otherness is engulfed into totality because it is all there is<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Watkin uses a reference Nancy makes in *Being Singular Plural* 67 to Ricoeur's "Soi-meme comme un autre", in order to argue that Nancy takes this question from him. I do not wish to discuss the relation or explore Ricoeur's arguments, but I believe the reference to be very illuminating: "one appears to oneself insofar as one is already an other for oneself".

<sup>33</sup> As mentioned before, "all there is" is surprising.

## Conclusion

The relation between the elements of sense/being singular-plural do not form a whole since each element is both singular and differentiated. This means that each element of sense is just *a sense* of sense. They are not three parts to the “puzzle” of sense or the same sense through different angles; rather, they are three senses that exist together touching each other yet separate from each other. Thus, they invariably exist-with each other and their togetherness is all there is to sense, at the same time that they do not form a “complete” picture of sense. They are singular objects, distinct from each other and with each other.

As Nancy states (“Of Being-in-Common” 7), being-with is a relation without relation. It is the simple fact that things go together without any reason or factor joining them. He even gives the example of passengers on a train who are not a collective at the same time that they are undeniably together. There is nothing joining them since they are merely on the same train. There is no reason for their reunion, and one can even claim that they are barely united. It is, in fact, the absence of any link that makes the relation possible. It preserves the distinction within the plurality. This is the meaning of being-singular plural.

It is impossible to give a definitive categorization of singularity, as there is no ultimate individualizing quality one can ground uniqueness on. At the same time, every-single-thing is always already *a* thing. One can argue that, for Nancy, the singularity of being means being/existing just as the liminality of its existence (being-with)<sup>34</sup>. It is at the same a singular entity, but never an individual/independent being, since its existence (its act of being) demands touching. Being is just the “contact surface” of the untouchable touch. In simple words, there is no “the” thing, but undoubtedly there are things. Singularity/Oneness is the fact that contradictory senses self-coincide, that is, the singular thing is the plurality of senses that coincide in the same thing without ever being equal to themselves<sup>35</sup>. This is the configuration of being singular-plural.

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<sup>34</sup> That is, being just as the exposition/presentation of the thing. See the chapter “Expeausition (Skin-Show)” (*Corpus* 32-37).

<sup>35</sup> In this way, the world is one without being an absolute unity. It is simply the self-coincidence of all senses/things in their self-contradiction/difference. All things are the world but none of them are “the” world. There is no “one” thing the world *is* because there is no “the” world.

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